

(dis)Abled in Prince George
Exploring Barriers in the Downtown Core

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Imagine you've been injured and you'll be using a wheelchair for the next two months. Suddenly you become aware of the barriers to travelling around: where the curb is cut down to allow you to get off the sidewalk, which stores have steps in front of their doors, which of your friends' houses have the kitchen upstairs. And then it snows.

These are familiar problems to Jessica Blewett. A geography student at UNBC under the supervision of Dr. Neil Hanlon, she set out to learn about accessibility in Prince George. From the beginning of her project, though, she wanted the research to be *participatory* ("You can always make your research more participatory," she tells me) so she hit upon the technique of the go-along interview. Winter and summer, she and her disabled informants would travel the downtown core together, doing ordinary tasks, and talk about how barriers affected them.

Blewett had minor mobility issues herself, and realized that although mapping barriers and quantifying them provided useful information, collecting quotes and impressions painted a much more real picture of the lived experience of disability.

You can be driving your car down the road [said one participant] or riding your bike and pass your friend's house and go "oh I'm just going to whip up there and stop for coffee and park your bike and hop up the stairs and knock on the door." There's no such spontaneity with people in wheelchairs. You can't get up stairs. You can't stop by. I can't even stop by my neighbour's and drop in for a coffee because of the stairs.

Prince George, like all towns, has a lot of history tied up in its barriers. It was a resource-based town, and most of the development took place during booms, particularly between 1966 and 1979. As a result, a lot of the infrastructure – stores, hotels, theatres, sidewalks, streets – was constructed with young, able-bodied males in mind. But fast forward to the 21st century, and a lot of people have stayed, and *aged in place*, as geographers would say. "There is a large group of people in their 50s and 60s who in the coming years will be retired," says Blewett. "Many of them want to stay. They've worked here all their lives and their friends and family are here."

...when the boomers end up in wheelchairs there's going to be this big bubble of wheelchair jocks. All of the sudden the wheelchair population is doubling and tripling. The boomers are hitting their 60s and some of them end up in wheelchairs.... the next twenty years there's going to be a pretty big population of people that have accessibility problems.

And there are lots of barriers. In fact, as I talk to Blewett about the barriers in Prince George, I discover that there are plenty that I've been unaware of. Some are fairly obvious, such as a street crossing with no curbcuts at either end, or a store with a step before the front door. Others are more of a surprise, like security panels in stores being too narrow to admit a scooter, or no place to plug in a scooter to recharge. (See sidebar)

And then there's Winter. Snow and ice pile up on sidewalks and in curbscuts. Small plows designed to clear sidewalks often push a small windrow of snow across a connecting sidewalk. "In summer," Blewett says, "the challenges mainly surround moving around in the built environment and stores. In winter, however, issues are more about climatic features like howling winds and heavy snow." While she scheduled each interview with her disabled informants, it was only during winter that they had cancellations.

The jarring [of attempting to go through a snow mound] is absolutely... on a scale of 1 to 5, probably a 25. The pain, you can't contend with the pain.

This is not to suggest that Prince George is uninterested in the challenges its weather and infrastructure pose to people with disabilities. The Accessibility Advisory council reports to the city council and provides accessibility provisions to developers. "The city is actually doing really well in terms of the creation of accessibility policy," Blewett points out. "But, these policies aren't always translating to accessibility on the ground."

In a perfect world ..., a person with a disability could be way more spontaneous. But even now as a rule people with disabilities generally plan and even if it's just a simple thing like phoning ahead to a restaurant... just to make sure they have an accessible bathroom or just to make sure there's no stairs or any lips to get into the building.

The key concept here, Blewett explains, is ableism. Ableism is when people are, either directly or indirectly, discriminated against because of their ability. "It's not a well-known term in our society," she says. "It hasn't had the same sort of exposure as racism or sexism." But you may encounter it whether you are using, just to name a few assistive devices, a cane, a walker, a wheelchair, or an electric scooter.

It makes you feel pissed off. It makes you feel like you're a part of society that people don't give a shit about.

Blewett says she coined the term "(dis)Able person" in an attempt to escape "traditionally oppressive terminology, while reinforcing the idea that the (dis) is largely imposed on the able person by the disabling social, political, economic and physical conditions of our world." And she documented that there is more to barriers than struggling through the built environment. There are the emotional impacts of encountering barriers, the way health issues can be intensified by them, and the marginalization of having questions about things most people never consider. A scooter user told her:

"...I wonder... Do you drive on the sidewalk? Do you drive on the street like a car? Or do you go like you walk facing traffic... off to the side? I asked a policeman too and he didn't know"

Barriers of course also exclude (dis)Able people from all sorts of places and experiences.

"I do lots of reading, so I stay home, I sit on my porch. I have everything I need right there.... The problem is I don't meet too many people that way. I become more isolated than I already am. My isolation gets worse. I don't meet very many people. I don't have much of a social life"

“We can't generalize the experiences of (dis)Ability in Prince George,” argues Blewett. “Each person experiences mobility differently.” Nonetheless, understanding the impacts of inaccessibility and raising awareness about them are key. “One of the things I suggest is a social shift,” she says, “so that the everyday Joe is aware of ableism, and is thinking about it. Then the support and political priorities will follow.” And, she would add, while there's a lot of work to be done, there have also been some great developments to be celebrated.

So why wait for that day when you wind up using a wheelchair or scooter (either on a temporary basis, or because in the end we all get worn down by life)? Take a look at these barriers now, and maybe one day you'll can play a small part in removing one.

[SIDEBAR]

Here's just a partial list of the barriers that were recorded in Prince George. Do you notice any of these where you live?

- Snow cleared on the sidewalk, but only to the standards of the able-bodied
- Lack of awnings (Awnings protect the sidewalk. Blewett says, "If you go down the streets of Prince George in the winter, the areas with awnings are very easy to traverse, almost no snow; but, the areas without awnings are terrible.")
- Spit on the sidewalks (if you are in a manual wheelchair and spit gets on your wheels then it ends up on your hands)
- Parking in bike lanes (scooter users often travel in the bike lanes when the sidewalks are inappropriate)
- Lack of seating (for example downtown, for people using walkers and canes who often have to take breaks on their way to places)
- Short on-ramps (which don't give wheelchair users and walker users enough space to back into when opening the door and trying to get inside)
- Older curbcuts (these often direct you into the middle of an intersection, rather than into one of the crosswalks)
- Cramped/cluttered store interiors
- Residential housing (could you visit your friends and neighbours?)
- Layers of barriers (a heavy door may be easily overcome on its own, but when you add that too a short steep ramp, cold weather, snow and wind, it becomes insurmountable)
- Airlocks (two closely spaced sets of doors to get into a building)
- Large pickup trucks with low visibility (participants described scenarios where they weren't seen by taller vehicles when they were at crosswalks and the vehicle was turning right)
- Ramps too narrow (especially for those who use larger scooters)
- Doorway visibility (when an accessible doorway exists, but it is not clearly visible where it is)
- Driveways crossing a sidewalk, hence a dip and rise (can be very painful to go over for people with chronic pain.)