

PROJECT:

Southeast ADA Center Community Participation Research Project

INVESTIGATORS:

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SPONSOR:

National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR)

BACKGROUND:

One of the goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is to remove barriers to and promote equal participation in communities for individuals with disabilities. Despite almost two decades of ADA-related efforts, research indicates that although some improvements have been made, barriers remain. As a result, persons with disabilities experience participation disparities in multiple life domains and feel isolated from their communities.

As part of a NIDRR five-year grant award to the Southeast ADA Center, a project of BBI, this study sought to more fully understand the nature of persistent barriers in local government facilities and services. Using participatory action research—a research approach that brings academic researchers and people with disabilities together—researchers with and without diverse disabilities attempted to complete activities at five Title II entities. Title II of the ADA covers public entities, which include State and local governments and any of their departments and agencies.

Specifically, the research team surveyed ADA Title II public entities—City Hall, Civic Center, Park, Public Library, and Police Station—in 12 communities to document first-hand experiences with programmatic and physical accessibility from the perspectives of individuals with and without diverse disabilities. Researchers assessed 48 of the 60 facilities using the ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal.

Among all 48 facilities, two entities were free of accessibility concerns. The team found another 12 entities to have accessibility problems on 5 percent or less of the checklist items. Access to goods and services as well as rest rooms presented the greatest number of access barriers. The most common areas of barriers to accessibility were availability of signage to accessible entrances and bathrooms, accessible features of stairs, enforcement of parking procedures, the slopes of ramp rises and the height of counters. Parks appear to present the greatest number of access barriers, followed often by civic centers.

IMPACT:

By design, this research is poised to make a difference. First, involving diverse researchers with disabilities led to more relevant research focus and data collection strategies. Moreover, many of these researchers reported learning a great deal about their rights under the ADA and about the stubborn obstacles that challenge people with disabilities as they seek to participate in community life. Lastly, the findings reveal the unevenness of access for persons with specific types of disabilities, and point to areas in need of targeted improvement to achieve the goals of the ADA.