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RESIDENTIAL CHOICE AND ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Extended Abstract

This study aims to identify the constraints people with disabilities have to face when making residential choices, to understand how they make such choices and ascertain the role transport issues play in them.

Qualitative information was collected in the "Grand Lyon" area (France). The targeted population was people with all types of disabilities: physical, sensorial, psychological, mental or cognitive impairments; and several profiles: disability from birth or acquired later in life, people in work or the unemployed, several different family situations. A total of 57 disabled people were interviewed. Other interviews, aimed at collecting the experiences and opinions of people likely to be involved in disabled people's housing choice, were conducted, with members of 20 associations that provide assistance to disabled people and defend their rights and 5 associations or services responsible for housing issues.

Our results show that the residential choice process is difficult for people with disabilities, for all the steps individuals have to cross during this process: formulate and express their wishes, estimate their possibilities and compare them to the housing market, and then make a trade-off between wishes, the constraints that weigh on the household or individual, and the reality of the housing market.

Assessing their housing needs and choosing a dwelling is indeed a complex process for many disabled people. It begins right from the expression of preferences, notably for people with mental or psychological disabilities: due to decision-making difficulties they often need human support at this stage. Another possible difficulty is assessing one's own ability to live autonomously, which requires management skills, the ability to keep accounts and to cope with administrative procedures. To make a residential choice it is also necessary to have some knowledge about the housing market. People with disabilities do not always have the right contacts to enable them to find the information they need. In addition, they sometimes need to find adapted housing. But our interviewees found no place or service where information about available adapted housing was clearly recorded and accessible. Due to the constraints they have to face, some disabled people also need assistance to make trade-offs and decide on actions during the entire residential choice process. The nature and intensity of assistance vary according to the person and their ability to carry out the different stages of the choice process autonomously. The interviews revealed some general tendencies concerning the role of the caregiver according to the type of impairment. The need to have a caregiver to transcribe the person's needs can also lead to a higher level of dissatisfaction about the final choice. The greater the involvement of the caregiver, the higher this risk.

Some disabled people have internal adaptation needs for their dwellings. Our interviews showed that each type of disability generates distinct housing needs, not restricted to the dimensions for wheelchairs users or some specific tools like videophones for the hearing impaired or warning lights for the visually impaired, for example: open spaces for the visually or hearing impaired; to be able to move easily inside the dwelling, to be able to enter and leave the dwelling easily, and to be able to add fixtures and fittings that increase their independence, for people with a motor impairment; and reassuring housing for people with a mental or psychological impairment.

Specific needs in terms of location in the city were also expressed by our interviewees. They underlined the importance of access to transport, which play a crucial role when they have to choose between urban or rural location for their home. There are also shared preferences for the proximity of various elements - such as shops and family caregivers - with the closeness of public transport a priority. But the proximity of public transport is not in itself enough, because it also has to be accessible. We observed differences between transport proximity preferences according to the person's impairment.

It appeared that the residential choice of people with disabilities is a cumulative disadvantage process: a number of specific criteria have to be met in order for people with disabilities to live and move autonomously. But their housing choice is made difficult by powerful constraints that make it difficult for them to meet these needs. Housing needs are responsible not only for considerable financial costs but they also require a considerable amount of time to look for and access information. Due to economic inequalities, social barriers and geographical issues, combined with the nature or the evolution of their impairment, people with disabilities don't often have the necessary financial and social resources to deal with these constraints.

Finally, to make their housing choice, disabled people have to make a trade-off between three main needs: welfare in the home, access to the local area and access to the town. Their independence is ensured only if all three of them are satisfied, but in reality it is rarely the case, and a priority has to be given to one of these needs, depending notably on professional or family status.

In conclusion, special attention should thus be paid to information about housing and to the way support is given to disabled people for their housing choice. Their housing adaptation needs, or needs in term of location in the city, should also be taken into consideration by housing suppliers. Finally, in view of the complexity of the housing choice process for disabled people, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to choose a dwelling that guarantees their full independence, we can conclude that housing choice constitutes the primary source of inequality for access to transport. But as transport is a key means of bringing about their social participation, in most cases it plays an important role in disabled people's housing choice.

Keywords: people with disabilities, transport accessibility, residential choice, housing