Survey Shows the Majority of People with Mobility Disabilities May Not Be Living in Accessible Homes

People with mobility disabilities have difficulty standing, walking, or climbing stairs. Mobility aids, such as wheelchairs and scooters, allow people with mobility disabilities to get around and be more active in their communities. However, some people may be living in homes that do not meet their needs. Home features like stairs and narrow doorways make homes less accessible for mobility aid users. Living in an inaccessible home can make it harder for people with mobility disabilities to live, work, and participate in their communities.

In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers at Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC:Rural) in collaboration with the Rehabilitation Research Training Center on Community Living looked at publicly available housing data to see how many people with mobility disabilities are living in homes with accessibility problems, what kinds of problems are most common, and which types of homes are likely to have problems. The researchers looked at data from the 2011 American Housing Survey, which included 65,085 households representing about 57 million homes throughout the US. Survey respondents reported whether or not they had a mobility disability and whether or not they used mobility aids. They also reported on features of their homes, including whether or not there were steps at the entrance, whether the kitchen and bathroom were wheelchair accessible, and if there were bedrooms or bathrooms on the ground floor. The survey also asked whether respondents were renting or owning their home and the year when the home was built.

The researchers found that most of the homes in the data set lacked critical accessibility features. Among the approximately 1,000 respondents, representing 1 million households nationwide with individuals with mobility disabilities:
• about 44% of homeowners and 54% of renters said their homes had at least one step at the entrance, and about a quarter of them included an entire flight of internal stairs with no working elevator;
• about 40% of the homes lacked accessible bathrooms and kitchens;
• more than 70% of homes did not have extra-wide hallways; and
• up to 24% of multi-story homes did not have a bedroom or bathroom on the ground floor.

The researchers found older homes were less accessible than newer homes. The most common accessibility problems differed between renters and homeowners. Renters were more likely to encounter stairs leading to their home entrance, while homeowners were more likely to live in multi-story homes with upstairs bedrooms and bathrooms but no elevator or lift. Not surprisingly, larger and older apartment buildings, as well as those located in metropolitan areas, were more likely to have steps at the entrance.

The authors noted that home accessibility problems can have several adverse effects on the independence and participation of residents with mobility disabilities. The presence of steps can make it very difficult for people using mobility aids to enter and leave their own homes without assistance. As a result, people with mobility disabilities may not be able to go out into their communities as often as they would like. In turn, this can increase the risk of unemployment, poor access to healthcare services, and social isolation. Steps and the absence of bathroom grab bars can also increase the risk of falls and other accidents. Lack of accessible bathrooms can lead to health problems from unsanitary conditions if people cannot bathe or toilet properly. When people with mobility disabilities live in multi-story homes, they may be forced to live in a downstairs common room if they cannot access the bedrooms or bathrooms upstairs. According to the authors, the prevalence of home accessibility problems may explain why a majority of fair housing complaints are disability-related. The authors noted that even people who do live in accessible housing may be negatively affected if they cannot visit their neighbors, family members, or friends, as homes without people with mobility disabilities are even more likely to have accessibility problems.
The authors noted that, in order to participate in the community, a person must first be able to leave the home. When people with mobility disabilities live in homes with internal stairs, steps to the front door, or other access barriers, full participation in society may not be possible. Future research could investigate the health effects of living in inaccessible housing and the impacts on older adults, as well as the impact of social policies that promote universal design in home building. Efforts to make homes more accessible may allow more people to engage in community activities, find employment, and safely “age in place” in their own homes.

To learn more:
The Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Universal Design (UD) and the Built Environment offers courses, publications, and other resources on creating inclusive, usable spaces, from homes to public buildings. Visit their UD eWorld at http://udeworld.com/


The Access Board is an independent federal agency that promotes equality for people with disabilities through leadership in accessible design and the development of accessibility guidelines and standards. https://www.access-board.gov/the-board

The Ecology of Participation website created by the RTC:Rural includes rapid research results about how personal and environmental factors influence how people with disabilities participate in their communities http://www.ecologyofparticipation.com.

The American Housing Survey (AHS) is conducted every two years by the Census Bureau. It is the most comprehensive national housing survey in the US. Learn more about the AHS, the methodology, and interesting snapshots of housing in the US at http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs.html

To learn more about this study
homes that facilitate community participation? Community Development, 47(1), 63-74. This article is available from the NARIC Collection under Accession Number J73546.

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