

Prioritizing Transportation Equity through Complete Streets

By Jessica Ridgeway, Planner

Transportation planners and engineers are frequently asked to analyze, revise, or dissect large, multi-faceted projects that influence how we move around and access the world around us. As is expected, there are copious amounts of research completed, policies referenced, and designs consulted for each of these projects, even for seemingly small proposed plans. As planners, we look at the effects such projects will take our communities. The question then becomes – who makes up this community and how will they interact with this project? Is the user a working single mother two miles from the nearest bus stop with no access to a car, an elderly resident of an apartment building located steps from a busy highway but three towns away from the doctor’s office, or perhaps a wealthy resident of a rural town who commutes to Manhattan three times a week? Each of these identities has vastly different transportation needs. How can we, as planning professionals, build and maintain a comprehensive network that provides each unique user the same safe, convenient access to transportation as the next?

Answer: We look to the concept of Transportation Equity.

What does Equity Mean?

Equity recognizes and works to address the effects of power imbalances that exist in the form of social, economic, and political differences and generate dissimilar outcomes for individuals including health, education, and employment.

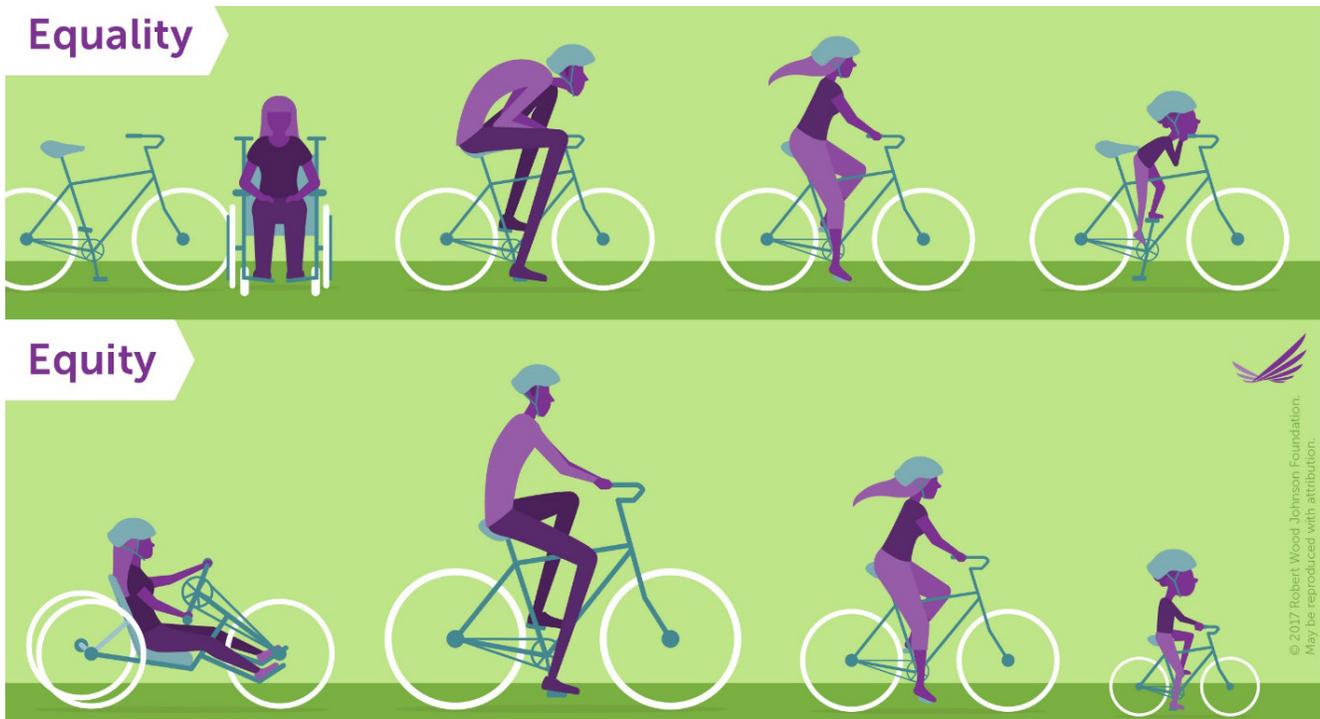
According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the proper definition of equity is as follows:

Noun: equity;
/ˈɛkwədē/

1. Justice according to natural law or right
Specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism

Simply put: people have diverse barriers to living a healthy, fulfilled life. We need to understand how these barriers (and opportunities) affect different groups, and appropriately craft our approaches, policies, and programs with those needs in mind.

It is also worth noting that there are many other components of equity, including gender, immigration status, religion, homelessness, and more, but for the purpose of this article, we are looking at equity as it relates to race, culture, ethnicity, and income.



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Why Should Transportation Address Social and Demographic Inequities?

Transportation is essential for daily life.

Whether we walk, roll, bike, drive, or take transit, most of us must travel to meet our everyday needs. We rely on transportation to purchase food, get to school and work, access recreational opportunities, visit friends and family, reach essential health care and government services, and anything else we need to do. The underlying goal of transportation equity is that all geographic areas and populations within a community have fair access to facilities (sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.) at the same quantity and quality.

“Equity in transportation seeks fairness in mobility and accessibility.”

Pursuing Equity in Pedestrian and Bicycle Planning
U.S. Department of Transportation

Facilitating social and economic opportunities based on the needs of the different populations being served is a core component of transportation equity, and ensures access to reliable, convenient and affordable transportation options. It should be emphasized that equity does not mean allocating the same amount of resources to all people. The previous graphic by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation illustrates the difference between equality and equity; simply giving a bicycle to each person without taking into account their individual ability, size, or needs is not an equitable solution. An equitable solution considers the unique circumstances impacting each person’s needs and uses this information to determine the appropriate amount and type of resource to allocate to different communities or people in order to more effectively serve everyone.

Who are the most Vulnerable Populations?

Numerous studies have identified inequities in active transportation around the country, finding infrastructure for walking and biking is less likely to be installed and maintained in low-income communities and neighborhoods. An equitable transportation system allows all people to have safe, convenient access to employment centers, education facilities, food and shopping, health care, and

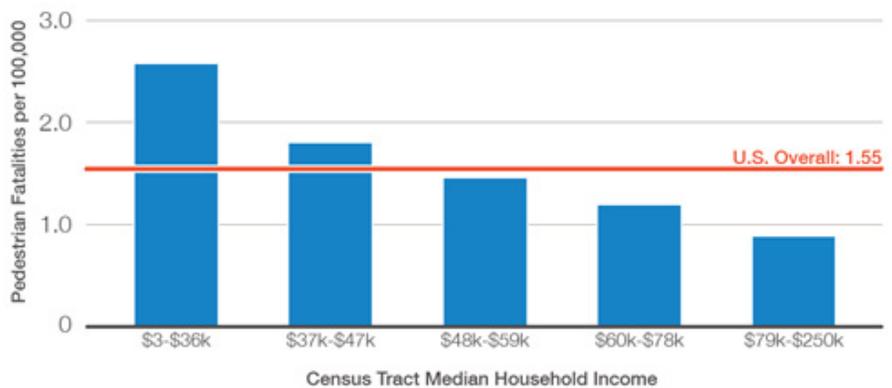
recreational opportunities. How can we make sure “all people” are accounted for? How can we make sure that their needs are being met and their concerns addressed?

In a report recently released by Smart Growth America, *Dangerous by Design*, people over the age of 50, people of color, and those walking in communities with lower median household incomes are struck and killed by drivers at much higher rates than other race, age and income groups. Individuals over the age of 50, particularly age 75 and older, are at a higher risk of fatality while walking. Drivers strike and kill people of color, especially Black or African American and American Indian or Alaska Native people, at higher rates compared to White, Non-Hispanic, and Asian or Pacific Islander people.

Vulnerability may also exist in the form of health disparities. Low income children and Latino and African American children have the highest obesity rates of any population group. They also experience the most dangerous pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, which discourages walking and biking, and contributes to disproportionately high pedestrian and bicycling injury rates.

The *Dangerous by Design* Report also found in the U.S. fatalities occur while walking at much higher rates in lower-income communities compared to higher-income ones, as is shown in the chart below. A University of Illinois study reported that low-income communities are significantly less likely than higher income communities to have sidewalks, marked crosswalks, and other street designs that support slower speeds and traffic calming.

Location of Pedestrian Fatalities by Neighborhood Income



Pedestrians are more likely to be struck and killed in neighborhoods with low median household income. According to “Dangerous By Design” there are more than double the number of pedestrian deaths in neighborhoods where the household income is < \$36,000, compared to neighborhoods with an income of > \$79,000.



How can we pursue Equity in Transportation Planning?

One way in which Orange County is proactively addressing safety, affordability and barriers to access is the adoption of a Countywide Complete Streets Policy in July 2017. This policy formalizes the County's intent to develop and maintain a safe and accessible transportation network for all county residents and visitors by implementing comprehensive improvements at the county level. This includes all transportation related elements of projects involving county property, as well as public and private development projects where the OC Department of Public Works has permitting authority. Orange County Planning is also working with the Orange County Transportation Council (OCTC), the County's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), to provide education and technical assistance to municipalities interested in implementing complete streets, including a model policy, informational toolkit and technical assistance to communities. The Transportation Chapter of the OC Comprehensive Plan also provides policy recommendations to guide both County and municipal decisions that impact social equity in the transportation system.

Other strategies to implement transportation equity into your community include integrating equity into the decision making process, supporting designs that improve conditions for vulnerable populations, encouraging public outreach and engagement, and collecting quality data for analysis.

Strategy 1: Integrate equity into the decision making process

Transportation planners can encourage conversations that address which outcomes are equitable and appropriately align goals and processes to achieve those preferred outcomes. There are many existing tools available free online to assist in examining existing programs through the framework of equity and develop plans and programs that incorporate equity goals.

Toolkits

- Race Forward's Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) Toolkit
- FHWA's Performance-Based Planning and Programming Guidebook
- The Transportation and Health Tool – U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) & Centers for Disease Control (CDC)
- Equitable Development Toolkit – PolicyLink

Strategy 2: Support designs that improve conditions for vulnerable populations

Designing for vulnerable populations often benefits everyone in the community by targeting services and facilities toward populations and geographies that are disproportionately affected by health and safety burdens. If you design a pedestrian crosswalk for the average user, it may not apply to a mother pushing a stroller or an elderly person crossing the street. If you design for these vulnerable populations by increasing the cross signal timing or building pedestrian refuge islands, the average user will also reap the benefits.

Strategy 3: Encouraging public outreach and engagement

Communities often need to be empowered to participate in the transportation planning processes and have their needs heard. Implementing different public engagement approaches can help build trust and inclusivity. By respecting the culture and history of each community as well as selecting meeting locations that are accessible by various modes of transportation, planners can better understand the needs of vulnerable populations to better assist in key decision making processes.

Strategy 4: Collect quality data for analysis

Finally, the best way to garner local support from community members and decision makers alike is to provide quality data showing improvements. Good programming and policy is informed by accurate and impactful data. By collecting quality data for analysis, planners can provide testimony to a successful policy or project through data.

Transportation is a fundamental component of our daily lives. Through thoughtful collaboration and community engagement, comprehensive data collection and analysis, and revitalizing our existing plans and policies, we can better address the impacts our transportation system has on the safety, health, and quality of vulnerable populations. As we look to the future, we plan to support and learn from future initiatives to create a transportation network that allows all people to have safe, convenient access to employment centers, education facilities, food and shopping, health care, and recreational opportunities.

