

Territorial Justice Is People: Perceived Access to Services and the Production of Left-Behindness

This paper examines how perceived access to services structures territorial justice, wellbeing, and the emergence of left-behindness. Moving beyond approaches that either aggregate all services into a single index or rely exclusively on objective distance-based indicators, we conceptualise access as the *perceived travel time* required to reach services and distinguish between two analytically salient bundles: **basic services** (e.g., markets, primary schools, family doctors, pharmacies) and **specialised services** (e.g., high schools, universities, advanced health services, cultural venues). Using a latent class approach, we identify **four accessibility regimes** that capture how service access is experienced as a configuration rather than as independent dimensions. This typology replaces binary framings (close/far; present/absent) with graded categories of perceived distance, providing a policy-relevant framework for differentiated interventions.

Results reveal that the most favourable perceived access does not concentrate in the largest metropolitan cores, but rather in **medium-sized cities**—particularly those between roughly **50,000 and 200,000 inhabitants**—where service diversity is paired with lower everyday mobility frictions and a stronger sense of fairness. Beyond a threshold of approximately 200,000 inhabitants, perceived accessibility can deteriorate due to congestion, longer intra-urban travel times, and functional relocation of certain services away from high-rent central areas. Conversely, small towns and rural areas show systematic disadvantages, with rural territories exhibiting not only limited specialised services but also concerning gaps in basic services, deepening perceived territorial injustice.

Regional patterns further indicate that accessibility outcomes depend less on simple urban–rural composition and more on the structure of **urban networks**. Regions with well-distributed intermediate centres tend to delay the appearance of penalised classes, whereas territories dominated by a few large cores and many very small settlements display higher shares of low-access regimes. The findings challenge “single-engine” metropolitan development models and underscore the role of intermediate cities as distribution belts that underpin territorial cohesion. Finally, the paper nuances the left-behindness discourse by showing that perceived exclusion can emerge even near metropolitan areas when travel times to essential services exceed acceptable thresholds. Overall, perceived access operates as a key pathway linking territorial position to wellbeing, place attachment, and trust, reinforcing the argument that territorial justice is ultimately people-centred rather than place-centred.