

Social position-based transport-related social exclusion: a literature framework

This presentation interprets transport-related social exclusion (TRSE) through the lens of the capabilities approach and, drawing on the TRSE research literature, foregrounds exclusion mechanisms rooted in social position. In this perspective, accessibility is not reduced to infrastructure provision, network coverage, or average travel-time savings. Instead, it is conceptualised as a capability: a real freedom to reach valued activities, services, and social relations, and to do so in ways that are safe, intelligible, affordable, and socially legitimate. The capabilities framing therefore shifts attention from whether transport exists “in principle” to whether individuals can convert available spatial and transport resources into everyday participation. This conversion is not neutral: it is shaped by social norms, institutional practices, and status-based constraints that can make public space and public transport more usable for some groups than for others.

Within this framework, TRSE occurs when “spatial resources” and “individual conversion functions” interact in a broader political, social, and economic environment in ways that persistently narrow a person’s capability set, potentially reaching a threshold of “accessibility poverty.” Spatial resources refer to the opportunities and constraints produced by land-use patterns (where housing, employment, education, healthcare, retail, and social life are located) and by the transport system (network design, service levels, fares, governance), including its temporal organisation (service spans, headways, transfer coordination, reliability, and waiting time). Individual conversion functions capture how personal and household circumstances shape the transformation of those resources into achieved access: skills, perceptions, embodied capacities, cognitive load, knowledge of the system, language competence, and time constraints structured by work schedules, school routines, and care responsibilities. The wider environment matters because it conditions both resources and conversions—through welfare regimes, labour-market arrangements, migration governance, policing practices, gender norms, housing markets, and the digitalisation of mobility services. Accessibility poverty, in this sense, does not require complete immobility: people can still move while remaining excluded if the travel required is too expensive, too time-intensive, too risky, too uncertain, or too socially costly to sustain routine participation.

To make these mechanisms analytically visible, the presentation works with a ten-dimensional understanding of TRSE (based on Luz & Portugal 2022). The ten dimensions are not isolated categories but overlapping pathways through which capability deprivation is produced and reproduced over time: (1) exclusion from services and facilities, (2) geographical exclusion, (3) spatial exclusion, (4) physical and cognitive exclusion, (5) time-based exclusion, (6) fear-, prejudice-, and emotion-based exclusion, (7) information exclusion, (8) economic exclusion, (9) digital divide-based exclusion, and (10) social position-based exclusion. Exclusion from services/facilities captures the inability to reach essential or valued destinations (jobs, schools, health services, leisure) under everyday constraints. Geographical exclusion highlights structural disadvantage created by peripheral location, long distances, or weak connectivity. Spatial exclusion focuses on barriers within space itself – fragmented urban form, hostile pedestrian environments, unsafe crossings, restricted areas, or uneven distribution of safe routes and public space. Physical and cognitive exclusion addresses constraints related to disability, health status, mobility impairment, neurodiversity, and cognitive burden (including complex transfers and difficult wayfinding). Time-based exclusion centres on temporal mismatches: limited service hours, infrequent headways, poor coordination across routes, unreliable operations, and incompatibility with everyday schedules. Fear/prejudice/emotion-based exclusion captures how anxiety, anticipated harassment, past victimisation, and hostile encounters constrain route choice, time-of-day decisions, and willingness to travel. Information exclusion refers to the lack of accessible, understandable, and trustworthy information about routes, fares, disruptions, and rules. Economic exclusion covers affordability barriers, including fares, transfer costs, penalties, and the broader costs of travel (especially time). Digital divide-based exclusion highlights growing dependence on apps, online platforms, QR ticketing, and digital

identities. Finally, social position-based exclusion describes mobility restrictions generated by social control, censure, stigma, or status-based constraints tied to attributes such as gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, or other socially marked positions.

The presentation places particular emphasis on social position-based exclusion, understood as the prevention or restriction of movement in public spaces because individuals are monitored, judged, sanctioned, or rendered “out of place” due to their social position. This mechanism often operates through everyday interactions (harassment, verbal abuse, intimidation), institutional practices (discriminatory enforcement, surveillance, exclusionary rules), and cultural expectations (norms about who belongs in particular spaces, at particular times, or using particular modes). From a capabilities standpoint, social position becomes a powerful conversion constraint: even when spatial resources exist, the effective capability to use them may be curtailed by anticipated stigma, heightened enforcement risk, or the emotional labour required to manage visibility and safety. Importantly, social position-based exclusion also amplifies other TRSE dimensions. A timetable that is merely inconvenient for one group can become practically unusable for another if late-evening travel is experienced as unsafe; a fare system that is complex but manageable for fluent speakers can become exclusionary for those navigating language barriers; a digital ticketing system can become punitive when individuals lack devices or fear interactions with officials.

Migrants and refugees are highlighted as groups likely to face social position-based exclusion, particularly where transport systems are embedded in environments of social control and stigma. In practice, migrants may confront simultaneous barriers: language limitations and literacy difficulties can make it harder to read and interpret public transport instructions, navigate interchanges, or follow timetables; uncertainty about fare rules and ticket validation can increase the perceived stakes of travel; and encounters with staff or enforcement personnel may be experienced as especially stressful when shaped by discriminatory assumptions. These dynamics combine social position-based exclusion with information exclusion and economic exclusion (e.g., penalties or “mistake costs”), often producing a cycle of avoidance: people may reduce travel, restrict their destinations, or rely on informal arrangements rather than engage with a system perceived as hostile or risky. Digitalisation can further intensify this vulnerability. Where real-time updates, customer support, and ticketing shift to app-based channels, those without devices, stable connectivity, digital skills, or confidence in platform systems may face compounded disadvantage, linking social position-based exclusion to the digital divide-based dimension. In capability terms, the issue is not only “lack of information” but reduced convertibility: the same network yields markedly different capability sets depending on linguistic, digital, and social positioning.

Young people are another group frequently discussed as facing accessibility disadvantage rooted in their social position. For youth, exclusion is often mediated by concerns about independence and safety when travelling unaccompanied by transit, cycling, or walking. Even where routes exist, the effective capability to travel may be constrained by parental risk assessments, local crime perceptions, harassment risks, and the quality of the built environment around stops and along walking routes. This means that youth mobility is frequently “time-gated”: young people may be permitted to travel at certain hours but not others, and may be steered away from particular routes, stations, or neighbourhoods deemed unsafe. Such constraints translate directly into participation outcomes: limited access to extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, social networks, and services that peers can reach. Youth disadvantage commonly intersects with time-based exclusion (services not aligned with school start/finish times or evening activities), fear-based exclusion (unsafe crossings, poorly lit stops, intimidating public spaces), and economic exclusion (fares exceeding disposable resources). The capabilities approach helps frame these patterns not as individual preference or “lack of motivation” but as socially structured limitations on autonomy and participation.

A key message of the presentation is that TRSE is often cumulative and intersectional. Social position-based exclusion rarely appears alone: it interacts with spatial segregation, temporal constraints, and institutional design choices, producing layered barriers that different groups experience differently. For example, migrants living in peripheral neighbourhoods may face geographical exclusion (distance), time-based exclusion (infrequent services), and information exclusion (language), while also encountering stigma and heightened surveillance in central spaces. Young people in low-income households may face economic exclusion alongside fear-based constraints and reduced autonomy. In both cases, the practical effect is a narrowed capability set: fewer destinations are realistically reachable, fewer time windows are viable, and fewer travel modes feel safe or legitimate. The presentation therefore treats the ten dimensions as a diagnostic toolkit for identifying where capability deprivation is produced—at the interface of land use, service design, temporal organisation, information systems, enforcement practices, and the everyday social experience of moving through public space.

The policy and planning implications follow directly from this diagnostic. Inclusive transport planning should not only “add supply” but actively expand accessibility as a capability, especially for those facing cumulative disadvantage across multiple TRSE dimensions. On the spatial-resource side, this includes improving service frequency and span, reducing forced trip complexity through better interchange design and coordinated timetables, ensuring safe and continuous walking/cycling access to stops, and aligning transport provision with the spatial distribution of essential services. On the conversion-function side, it requires multilingual and literacy-sensitive information design, legible wayfinding, human support at critical nodes, simplified fare and ticketing systems that reduce cognitive burden, and enforcement practices that minimise punitive impacts for minor mistakes. For migrants, this may involve accessible guidance and culturally competent customer service; for young people, safer routes, improved stop environments, and service planning aligned with school-related rhythms. Because social position-based exclusion is produced through social control and stigma, interventions must also address the social and institutional conditions that shape who can move without fear or censure.

Overall, the presentation argues that the capabilities approach strengthens a distribution-sensitive evaluation of transport systems: success should be judged by the real freedoms enabled for those most constrained by social position, not only by aggregate ridership or average speed. By integrating the ten-dimensional TRSE framework with the concept of accessibility poverty, the presentation offers a structured way to understand how mobility systems can reproduce exclusion and how targeted, capability-expanding interventions can widen genuine opportunities for participation in everyday urban life.

Reference:

Gregório Luz & Licinio Portugal (2022) Understanding transport-related social exclusion through the lens of capabilities approach, *Transport Reviews*, 42:4, 503-525, DOI: 10.1080/01441647.2021.2005183