



# THE **ACAA** **SURVEY**

**Overview of Survey Results  
Regarding the Air Travel  
Experience of Passengers  
with Disabilities**



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# Overview of Survey Results Regarding the Air Travel Experience of Passengers with Disabilities

In order to learn more about the current experience of passengers with disabilities in air travel, veterans and disability rights organizations designed and promoted an informal online survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather information to inform the fight to improve the Air Carrier Access Act and make air travel better for all people with disabilities. From October 4-December 6, 2021, over 1,260 individuals responded to the survey. Some questions were not applicable to some travelers and their responses were not included in the data to show a more accurate picture of the experience of affected travelers.



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**Over 35 years ago, President Ronald Reagan** signed the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) into law. The ACAA prohibits discrimination based on disability in air travel. Despite progress, too many travelers with disabilities still encounter significant barriers, such as damaged assistive devices, delayed assistance, and lack of seating accommodations.

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We'd like to acknowledge our survey partners:

American Council of the Blind  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation  
Cure SMA  
Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund  
Epilepsy Foundation  
Health Equity Collaborative  
Muscular Dystrophy Association  
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)  
National Federation of the Blind  
United Spinal Association

# SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS



## To Fly Or Not To Fly

Nearly 84 percent of passengers with disabilities who DO fly, travel by air at least two times a year with many indicating they would fly much more often if disability access was improved.

Nine percent of passengers with disabilities do not travel by air because of fear of bodily harm or damage to their wheelchair or assistive device, aircraft inaccessibility, and overall discomfort. If the problems air travel passengers with disabilities often encounter could be addressed, about 76 percent would fly at least a few times a year.



## Requesting Assistance

When purchasing a ticket, 92 percent of passengers with disabilities usually or always inform the airline of needed accommodations. The most common issue was the **difficulty in communicating the need for accommodations online.**



## Day of Flight Woes

More than **63 percent** of survey respondents indicated the need to use an aisle chair, with many citing such chairs were unsafe, in poor condition, and not readily available.



Of those who travel with a wheelchair or scooter, almost **70 percent reported damage to the device.** Almost 56 percent experienced delays.



Of the passengers with disabilities who used an aisle chair, the most common feeling among them was **personnel not being properly trained** to assist them.



67 percent of passengers with disabilities **wait 15 minutes or more** for help upon arrival to their destination.



## All Too Common Experiences

*"I was made to feel like a piece of luggage, so I do not fly anymore."*

*"The risk of damage to my wheelchair is too great. If I arrive at my destination and find my chair damaged, there are serious consequences to me."*

*"I missed my connecting flight because I had to be last off the first flight. I couldn't go to the restroom and was alone in the Atlanta airport for six hours, floating in urine. To top it off, I missed my sister's high school graduation."*

*"The last time I traveled by air was exceptionally inconvenient, uncomfortable, and dehumanizing."*

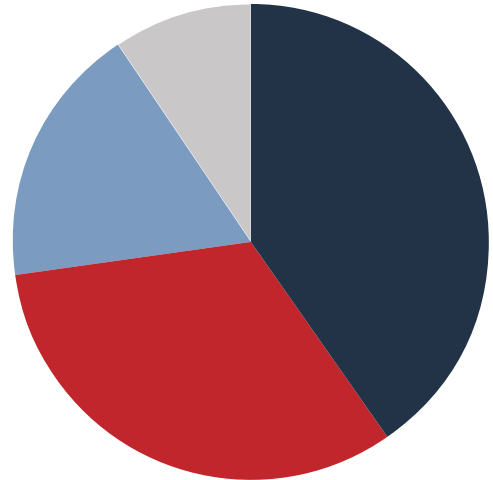
*"The aisle [chair] was extremely awkward to sit in. My feet would not stay on the platform and would drag on the floor when they pulled me."*



## Questions Generally Applicable to Passengers with Disabilities

### Q: When was the last time you traveled by air?

- Within the last 12 months  
40.37% (507 respondents)
- Within the last 12-24 months  
17.68% (222 respondents)
- More than 24 months ago  
32.56% (409 respondents)
- I don't travel by air.  
9.39% (118 respondents)



### CONCLUSION:

The overall consensus from those who no longer fly is that air travel for a person who uses a wheelchair or another assistive device is too difficult and a risk to their health due to the possibility of personal injury and damage to their wheelchair or scooter.

### Common Reasons for Not Flying

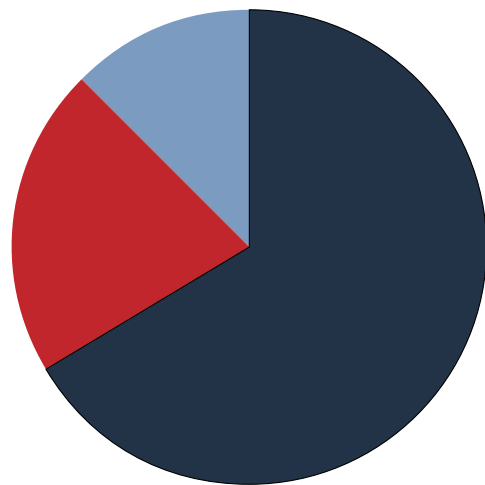
- ✈ Experience with or fear of damage to an assistive device
- ✈ Inaccessible passenger seats, aircraft doors, and lavatories
- ✈ Injury during transfers, i.e., being dropped
- ✈ Passenger seats too small or uncomfortable
- ✈ Concerns about COVID
- ✈ Rough treatment by the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA)
- ✈ Too difficult/Inconvenient
- ✈ Inability to get accommodations



## Questions: Travel Frequency and Purpose

### Q: How often do you typically travel by air?

- 1 or 2 times per year  
66.26% (756 respondents)
- 2-4 times per year  
21.30% (243 respondents)
- 5 or more times per year  
12.45% (142 respondents)

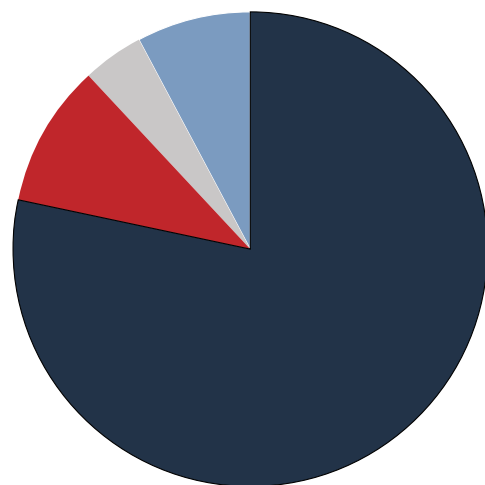


### CONCLUSION:

Almost 84 percent of respondents fly at least two times a year. Overall, the survey results show that these individuals would fly more often if disability access were improved.

### Q: What is the primary purpose of these trips?

- Personal  
78.47% (944 respondents)
- Work  
9.73% (117 respondents)
- Health Care  
4.24% (51 respondents)
- Other  
7.56% (91 respondents)



### CONCLUSION:

Of those who fly, more than 88 percent fly for personal or work reasons.

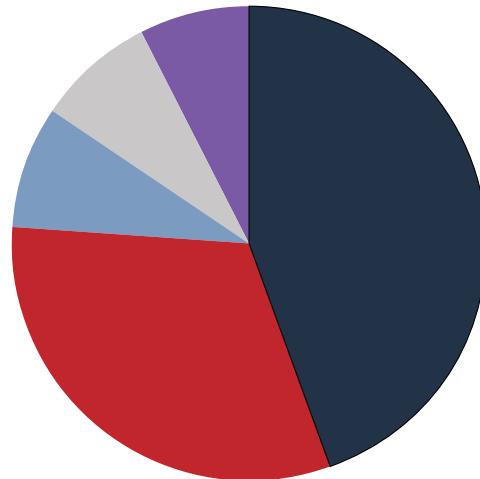
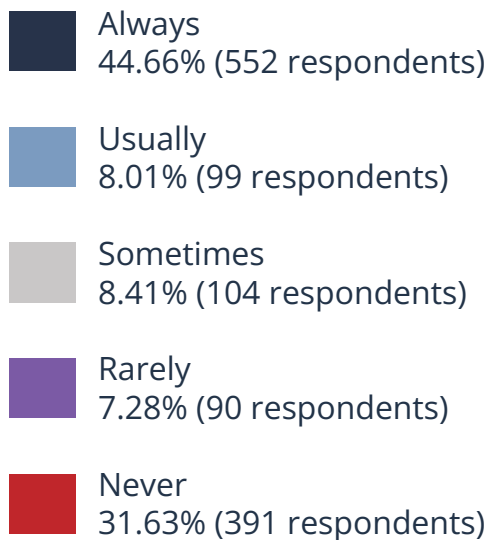
#### Common Reasons for Flying

- ✈ Athletic events
- ✈ Family events/ visits
- ✈ Business trips
- ✈ Vacations



## Question: Travel Support & Assistance

**Q:** For these trips, do you typically travel with a support professional or assistant?



### CONCLUSION:

Sixty-one percent of respondents at least sometimes fly with an additional person for support.

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### Quotes from travelers



*"I am tired of getting dropped when transferring from my chair to the transfer chair on an airplane"*

*"I have had damage to my chairs, inadequate room for service dog, trying to board me when all the Able Bodied are being boarded at the same time, refusal of flight attendants to help put bag in the overhead claiming union will not allow them to assist. Have many times viewed as untrained baggage handlers have tried to force and at times injure those like Quads as they manhandle the disabled passenger."*

*"I can no longer safely transfer from my power wheelchair to a passenger seat. I am age 65 with age related health issues in addition to my physical disability. I haven't traveled since approximately 2005 and that experience was physically painful. I had difficult layovers, too. Bottom line I gave up air travel and haven't visited my family in my hometown in 10 years!"*

*"Not having access to the toilet, I have to dehydrate myself so that my bladder is empty. It's dangerous and unhealthy but it's the only way when a flight of 3 hours turns into 6 hours being stuck in my seat."*



## Question: Avoidance of Air Travel

**Q:** Have you avoided air travel because of concerns about any of the following? Select all that apply.

Potential damage to your wheelchair.  
73.79% (763 respondents)

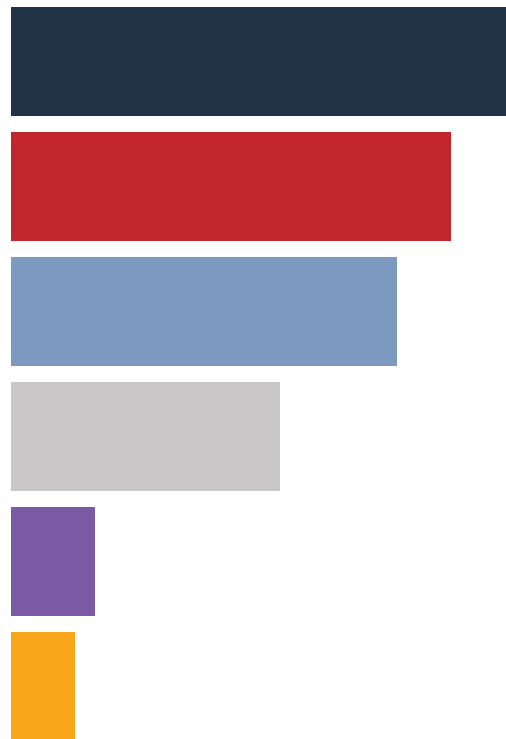
Being able to use the aircraft's lavatory (restroom).  
62.57% (647 respondents)

Your personal safety in transferring from your wheelchair to an aisle chair and into an aircraft seat.  
54.06% (559 respondents)

Issues related to your need for personal care, your personal care aide and/or traveling companion.  
36.17% (374 respondents)

Issues related to your need for effective communications.  
12.38% (128 respondents)

Issues related to your service animal.  
9.09% (94 respondents)



## CONCLUSION:

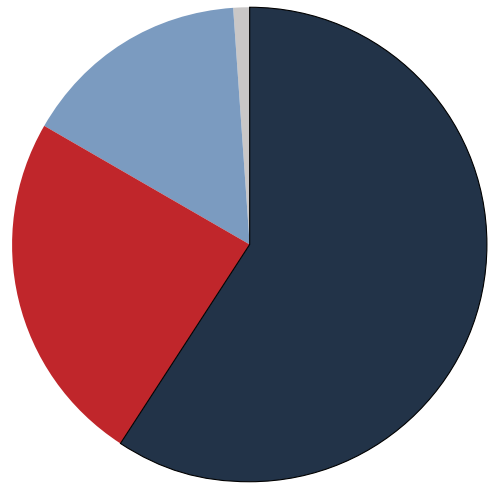
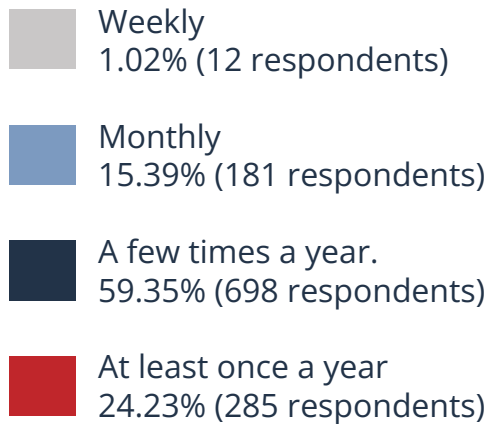
Of the 1,034 respondents, many were overwhelmingly concerned with physical barriers that they would face during a flight. Specifically, fear for personal safety in making a transfer from a personal assistive device to airline aisle chair when boarding and deplaning, lack of access to the lavatory, and damage to the passenger's personal wheelchair or other assistive device. However, additional comments focused on problems with personnel seating accommodations and the anxiety of flying during the COVID pandemic.

### Common Responses for Avoiding Air Travel

- ✈ Fear of wheelchair damage/actual damage
- ✈ Fear of COVID and mask requirements
- ✈ Inaccessible lavatories
- ✈ Uncomfortable seating
- ✈ Bad experiences with TSA
- ✈ Being dropped while transferring
- ✈ Recent service dog rule changes
- ✈ Issues getting assistance inside the airport
- ✈ Missed connecting flights because of untimely deplaning due to disability

## Questions: Airplane Lavatories

**Q:** If these concerns could be resolved, how often do you think you would typically travel by air?

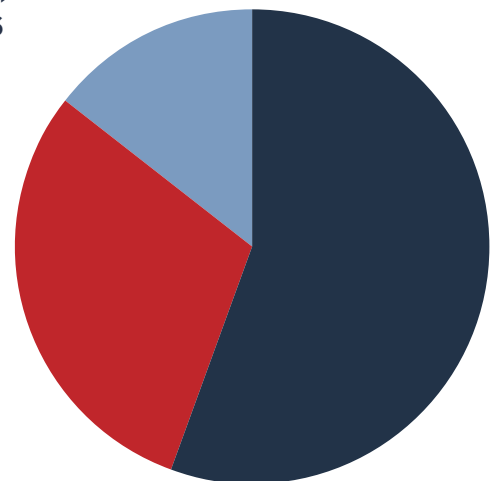
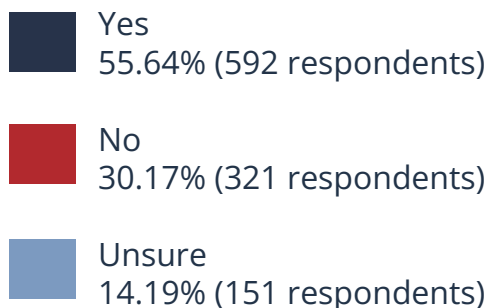


### CONCLUSION:

If the concerns could be addressed, about 76 percent of individuals would fly at least a few times of year.

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**Q:** If you are unable to use the lavatory on an airplane because of a disability-related issue, is that reason enough for you to not fly unless absolutely necessary?

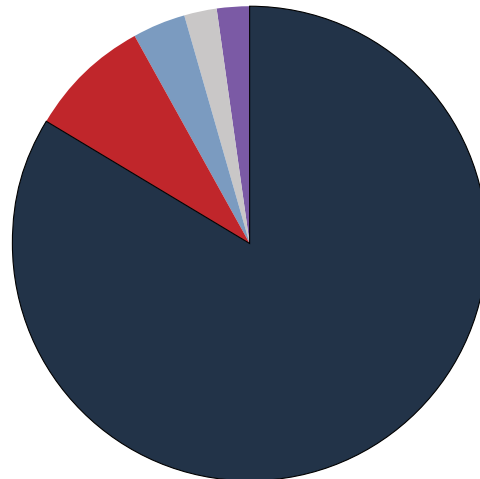
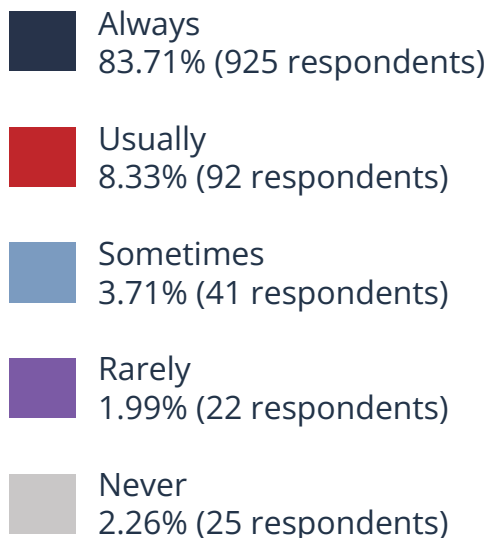


### CONCLUSION:

For those unable to use the lavatory, almost 56 percent cited this as a reason enough not to fly unless absolutely necessary.

## Question: Problems Arranging Accommodations

**Q:** When you purchase your ticket, do you let the airline know about any needed accommodations?



### CONCLUSION:

Of those needing accommodations, when purchasing a ticket, 92 percent usually or always inform the airline of needed accommodations. The most common issue was that travelers have difficulty indicating the accommodations needed when booking online.

### Common Problems Seeking Accommodations

- ✈ When booking online, there is no option to put in accommodations needed
- ✈ It is difficult to describe what accommodations are needed
- ✈ Not able to figure out how to provide information before arriving

### Quotes from travelers

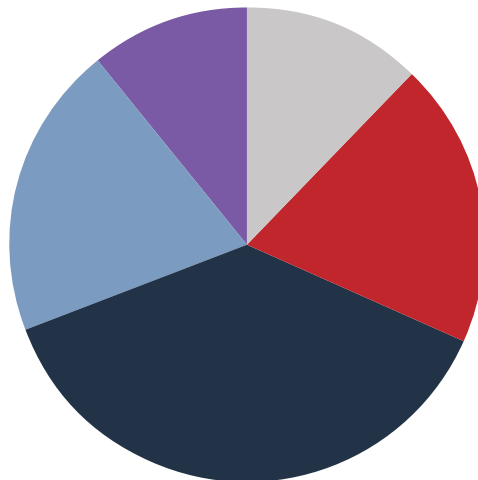
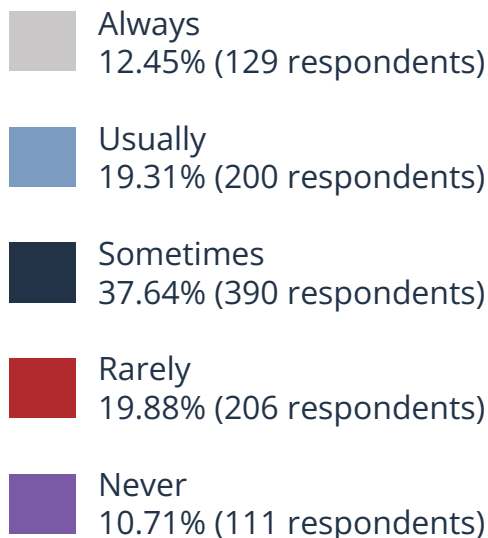


*"I stopped traveling by air, because the transferring to and sitting in airline seating is too hard on my body."*

*"I have to travel, no choice. I'm not in a wheelchair but do need a wheelchair to get from one gate to another. Airports are too big for me to walk. Very hard finding a transporter and they always assume I'm faking it because I don't use any assistive device – yet."*

## Questions: Seating Accommodations

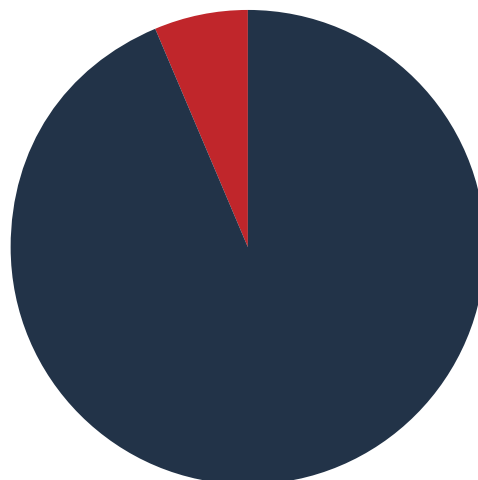
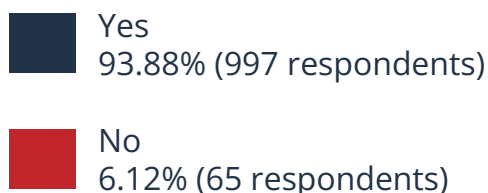
**Q:** Do you have trouble receiving any needed seating accommodations such as bulkhead, lowered aisle armrest, aisle seat, etc.?



### CONCLUSION:

Of those needing accommodations, 69 percent at least sometimes have trouble receiving the accommodations. Almost 32 percent usually or always have trouble receiving the needed accommodations.

**Q:** Are you typically offered the opportunity to preboard? seat, etc.?





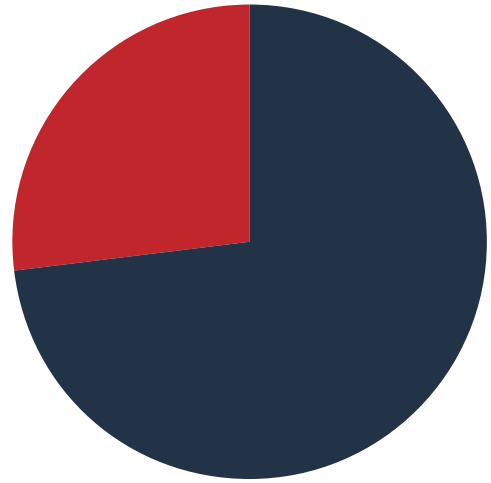
### CONCLUSION:

Of those who need to preboard, a large majority (about 94 percent) are given the opportunity to do so.

## Question: Assistance with Luggage

**Q:** When picking up your baggage, do you generally have any problems in getting assistance to find your luggage?

-  I don't have difficulties finding my luggage.  
73.21% (533 respondents)
-  I often have difficulties finding my luggage.  
26.79% (195 respondents)



### CONCLUSION:

A majority of survey respondents said they do not face challenges in finding or retrieving their luggage, but about 27 percent often have difficulties.

### Common Responses

- ✈ Moved or misplaced baggage
- ✈ Lack or limited assistance of staff
- ✈ Inaccessible luggage carousel

### Quotes from travelers



*"There is no one to assist me, I have to get someone to call someone to get the assistance to me and it take a really long time at least 15-20 minutes."*

*"Because we are the last ones off and the time it takes to transfer him to an aisle chair to his chair then we find our way to luggage the carousel is empty and I have to figure out myself where is our luggage. It's a nightmare."*

*"Unclaimed baggage was placed in a large pile of luggage ... as a wheelchair user I'm not able to climb to the top or the back and extract it then I have to go and seek help."*



*"So often our luggage arrives in one area & medical equipment arrives in a separate area that's sometimes far away."*

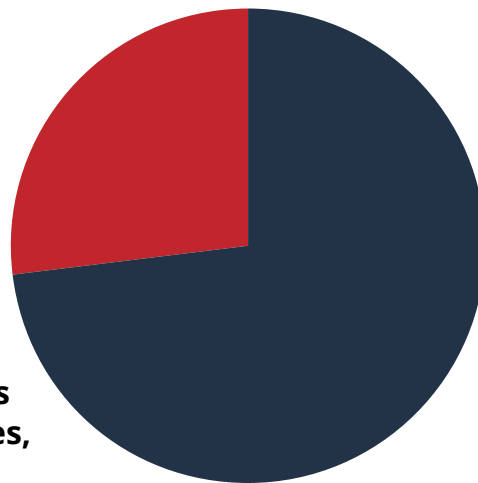
*"In a wheelchair it is often impossible to retrieve luggage from a carousel. Usually have to depend on help from other passengers"*

*"I am blind and have found that it is difficult to describe the bag in a way that the helper can find it. I generally try not to check a bag for this reason."*

## Question: Airport Ground Transportation

### Q: What experiences have you had when asking for guidance or assistance to taxi, rideshare, or shuttle locations at the airport?

-  I don't have any trouble receiving help to find the locations.  
68.46% (432 respondents)
-  I regularly encounter resistance in being escorted to the proper location.  
31.54% (199 respondents)



### CONCLUSION:

Of those who need assistance, almost 32 percent regularly encounter resistance in being escorted. This is a significant problem for some travelers with disabilities, which fell into three general categories: limited or lack of staff assistance, limited or lack of staff knowledge of accessible ground transportation options and locations, and limited accessible transportation options.

### Common Responses

- ✈ Lack of or limited assistance
- ✈ Lack of or limited staff knowledge of accessible ground transportation options and locations
- ✈ Lack of accessible transportation options

### Quotes from travelers



*"Nobody seems to know how to obtain accessible transportation from the airport."*

*"I am usually not offered assistance beyond escorting me to baggage claim, to include taking me to a transportation location, unless I am using the military wounded warrior escort service."*

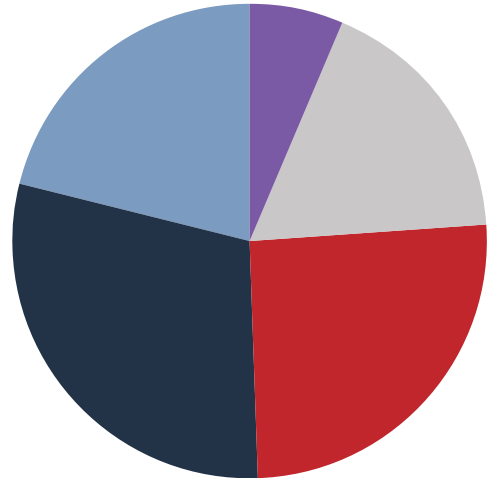
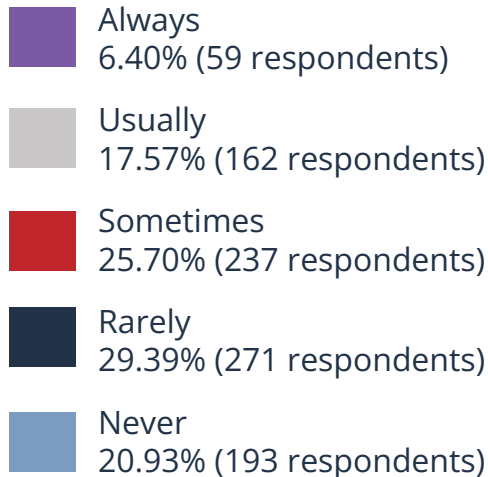
*"Generally being told the guides only work within the airport and cannot guide to pick up locations that aren't immediately outside the baggage claim area. Ride share and other pick up services are frequently well away from the baggage claim area."*

*"Although I am able and prefer to use a typical taxi, I have been directed to other areas and forced to wait for an accessible taxi that I do not need on multiple occasions. I would have been in a typical taxi in 5-10 minutes and have waited 30-60 minutes for an accessible taxi."*

*"The taxis, rideshare or shuttle vehicles are not wheelchair accessible. So I have been stuck at certain airports for hours until I can find accessible transportation."*

## Questions: Passengers who use Guide or Wheelchair Assistance

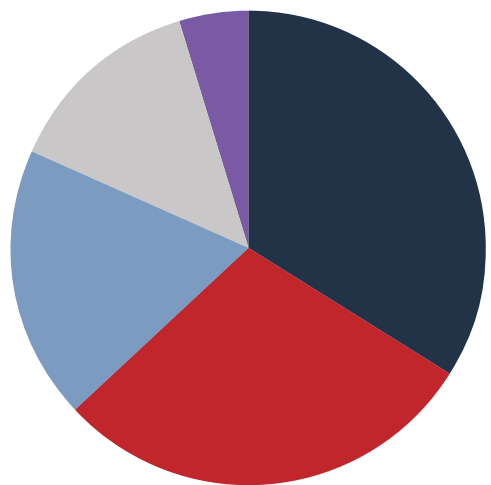
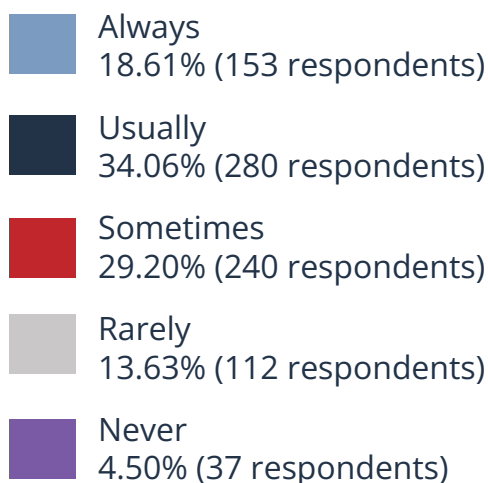
**Q:** When you are dropped off at the curb at the airport, is there generally any assistance available to help you enter the building and find the appropriate check-in counter?



### CONCLUSION:

When dropped off at the curb, 76 percent of individuals who need assistance, sometimes, rarely, or never receive assistance.

**Q:** If you specify ahead of time that you will need guide or wheelchair assistance at the check-in counter, through security, and to your gate, does this generally make it easier to receive assistance?



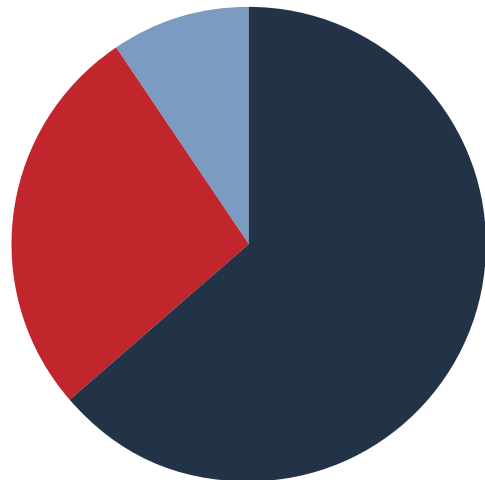
### CONCLUSION:

Even when specifying ahead of time that they need assistance, 47 percent said it only sometimes, rarely, or even never makes it easier to receive the assistance.

## Question: Passengers who use Wheelchair Assistance

**Q:** If you request assistance to your gate, how often do you generally have to wait before assistance arrives to escort you to your gate?

- Less than 5 minutes  
10.72% (80 respondents)
- Less than 10 minutes  
30.70% (229 respondents)
- More than 10 minutes  
58.60% (437 respondents)



### CONCLUSION:

Of those who request assistance, almost 59 percent have to wait more than 10 minutes for assistance. This resulted in several travelers missing their connecting flight, others were left aboard. Passengers report feeling “forgotten.”

### Common Responses

- ✈ Missing connecting flights
- ✈ Feeling forgotten
- ✈ Significant wait times

### Quotes from travelers



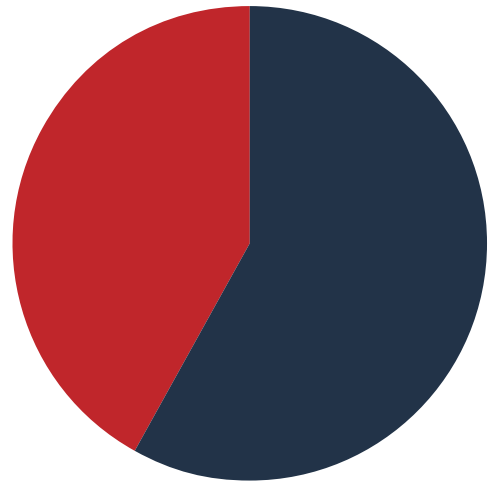
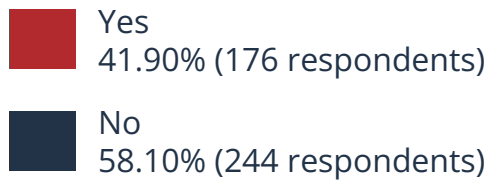
*“Sometimes assistance takes so long to arrive it feels as one has been forgotten.”*

*“Yes. I once missed a departure flight because my incoming flight landed at the exact same time as my outgoing connection was scheduled to depart. The gate attendant refused to even make eye contact or acknowledge me for over 10 minutes and I missed my flight. I could have made it if she would have told them I was coming and gotten me a ride to the gate quickly. It turned into a nightmare of having to stay the night and then take a ridiculous series of connections to get to my destination.”*



## Questions: Passengers who use Wheelchair Assistance

**Q:** If you request assistance at the airport, have you been asked to use a wheelchair even when you did not need one to accommodate your disability?

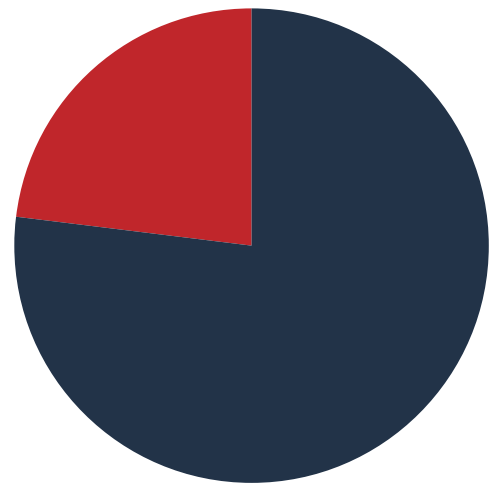
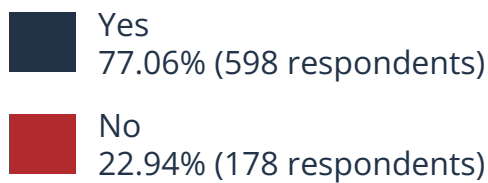


### CONCLUSION:

Nearly 42 percent of individuals who did not need wheelchairs were still asked to use one.

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**Q:** If you are assisted to your gate, does the gate agent remember to find you when it is time to board the flight?





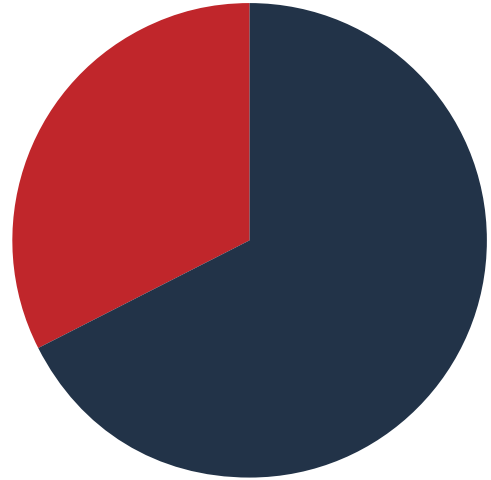
### CONCLUSION:

Almost 23 percent of respondents are not assisted by the agent when it is time to board.

## Questions: Passengers who use Wheelchair Assistance

**Q:** If needed, are you able to get further assistance when waiting at the gate if you need help locating a restroom or other services while you are waiting for your flight?




-  Yes  
67.67% (473 respondents)
-  No  
32.33% (226 respondents)

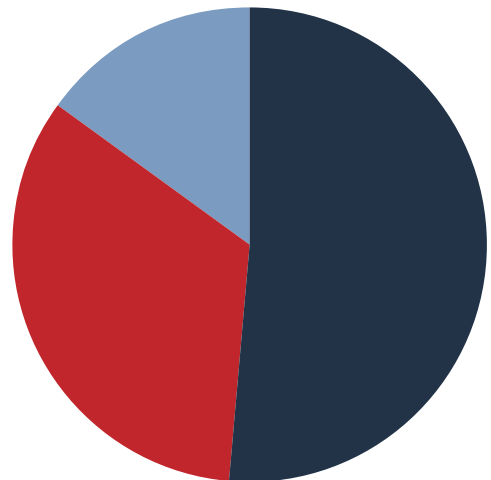


### CONCLUSION:

Although most individuals are able to receive assistance while waiting at the gate, about 32 percent reported that they do not.

**Q:** When you arrive at your destination or lay over, how long do you typically have to wait before a guide or wheelchair assistant is located to escort you to baggage or your next gate?

-  Less than 10 minutes  
33.47% (239 respondents)
-  More than 15 minutes but less than 30  
51.54% (368 respondents)
-  More than 30 minutes  
14.99% (107 respondents)

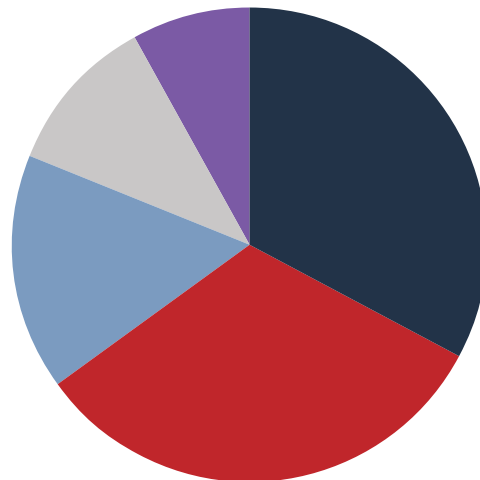
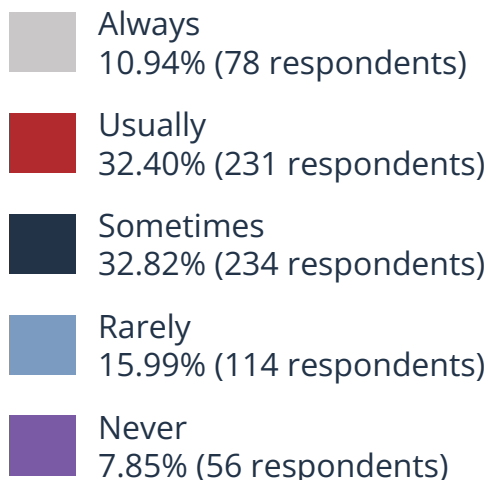


### CONCLUSION:

There are delays in receiving assistance on arrival. Only 33 percent said that they had to wait under 10 minutes, while 67 percent had to wait at least 15 minutes. This shows inconsistencies in the readiness for guide or wheelchair assistance upon arrival at the traveler's destination. Regarding layovers or connections, these uncertainties can hinder travelers in planning their travel. Delayed assistance can lead travelers to miss their connecting flights or impede on their overall itinerary.

## Questions: Passengers who use Wheelchair Assistance

**Q:** If you need guide or wheelchair assistance at your destination or transfer point, how often is the assistance waiting for you at the gate?



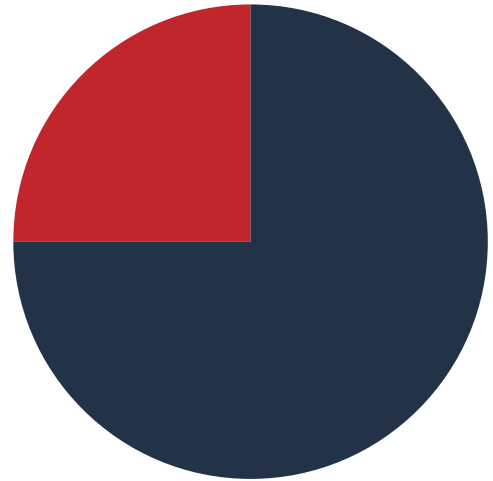
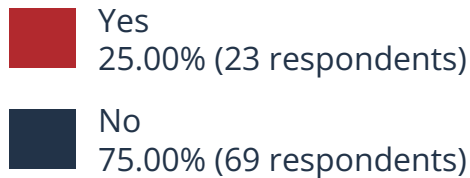
### CONCLUSION:

Of those needing assistance only about 11 percent always had assistance waiting. About 57 percent only sometimes to never had assistance waiting. This demonstrates the need for specified accountability measures on the readiness for assistance for travelers with disabilities upon their arrival at connecting airports or at their destination.



## Questions: Passengers who are Blind or Low Vision

**Q:** If you are blind or low vision and request assistance, is the individual assigned to guide you to your gate usually properly trained to guide you? Specifically, does he or she know how to take someone sighted guide?

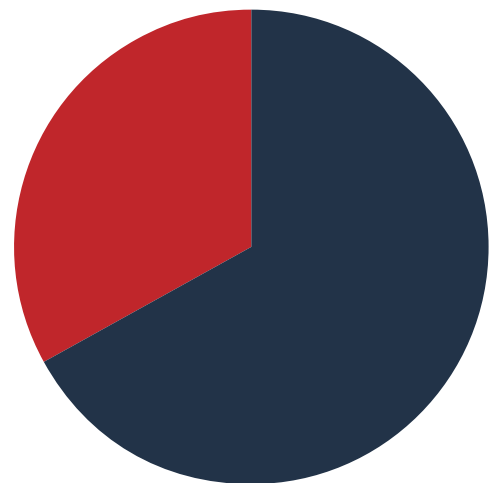
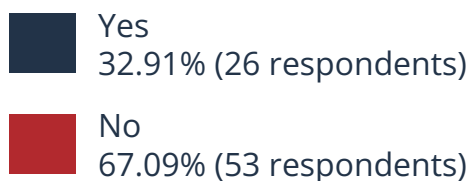


### CONCLUSION:

Of those who need assistance, 75 percent find that personnel are not properly trained to guide them.

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**Q:** Is Aira (a service that delivers instant access to visual information) or similar services available free-of-charge in your commonly used airport?

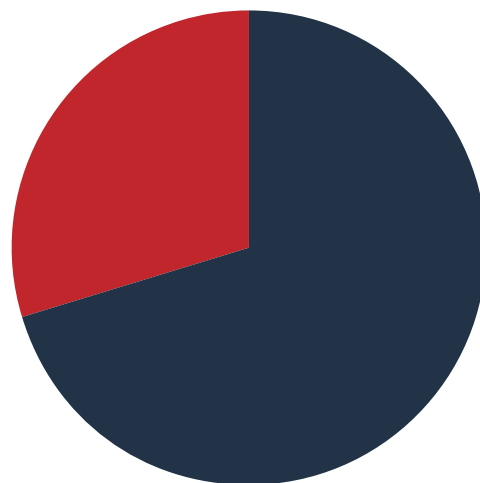
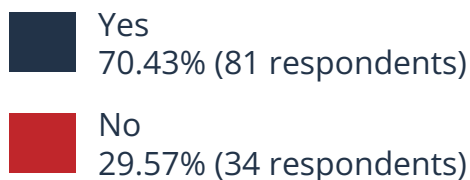


### CONCLUSION:

Of those responding, 67 percent said that Aira is not provided free-of-charge at their commonly used airport.

## Questions: Passengers who are Blind or Low Vision

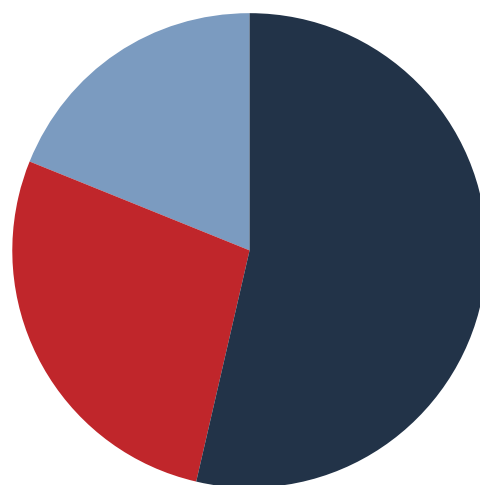
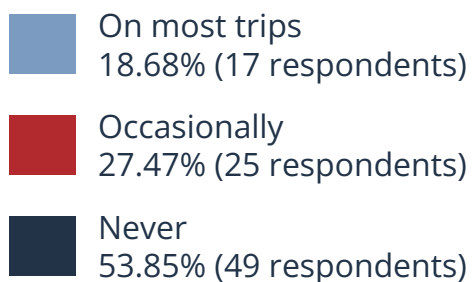
**Q:** If you are blind or low-vision, and choose to be escorted to the gate, does the guide generally help you find a seat close to the gate agent so you can find the gate agent if you have a question or to pre-board?



### CONCLUSION:

Of the individuals who choose to be escorted, almost 30 percent do not receive a seat close to a gate agent. This can lead to problems when travelers need to receive assistance from the agent.

**Q:** If you travel with a white cane, how often has the flight crew challenged or interfered with the storage of your cane near your seat?

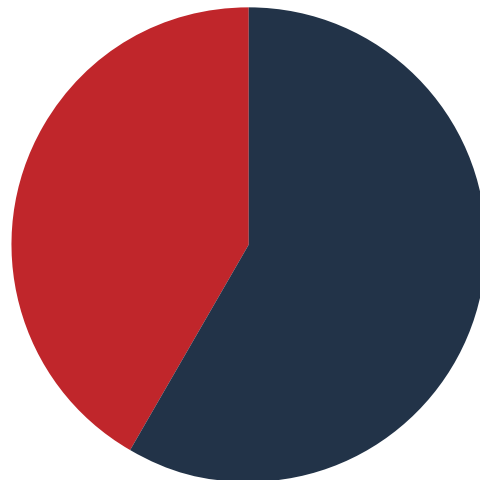
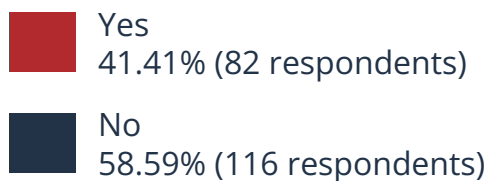


### CONCLUSION:

Overall, about 46 percent of white cane users are sometimes or usually challenged or interfered with when flying. This can cause significant complications for these travelers.

## Questions: Passengers who use Service Animals

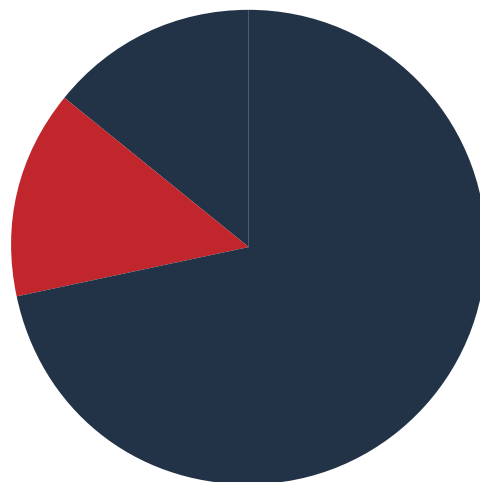
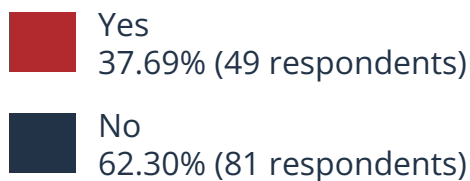
**Q:** Do airline employees or their contractors generally know where the animal relief areas are located in the airport?



### CONCLUSION:

Of the individuals who use service animals, a majority (about 59 percent) find that airline personnel or their contractors do not know where the animal relief areas are located.

**Q:** Have you experienced any problems with the new service animal attestation forms (new process that started in early 2021)?



### CONCLUSION:

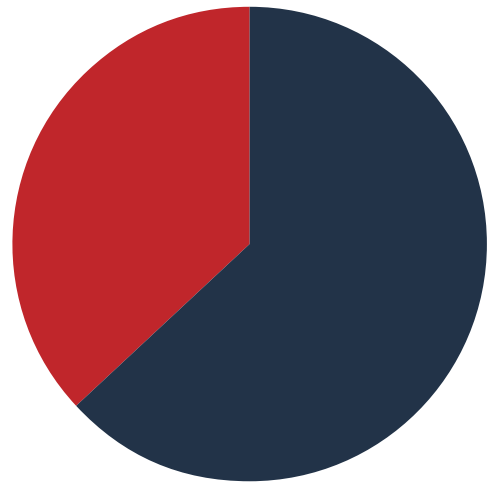
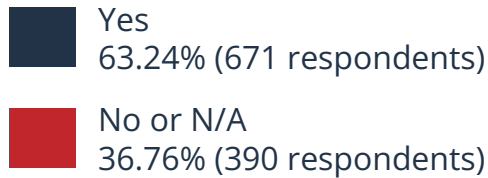
Almost 38 percent of individuals who use service animals have had issues with the new forms. A common response was that the forms were not accessible and the process was confusing. Some travelers were deterred from flying due to the new rules about emotional support animals.

### Common Concerns About New Service Animal Rules

- ✈ Forms are not accessible
- ✈ Process is unclear
- ✈ No disability access for emotional support animals
- ✈ Inconsistencies between airlines and personnel not adequately trained about new paperwork

## Questions: Passengers with Mobility Impairments

### Q: Do you need to use an aisle chair to board?



### CONCLUSION:

A significant percentage of those who responded to the survey indicated the need to use an aisle chair. Common answers from those who use aisle chairs are as follows: aisle chairs are difficult or unsafe to use, demonstrating the need to improve the dangerous process that air travelers with disabilities currently face when using an aisle chair; airline personnel provide inadequate aisle chair assistance, justifying the need for improved training for aisle chair assistance; aisle chairs are in poor condition, demonstrating a need for a regular audit of these devices; and, aisle chairs are not readily available, indicating the lack of accountability and training for providing aisle chair assistance.

### Common Concerns Regarding Aisle Chairs

- ✈️ Difficult or unsafe to use
- ✈️ Poor condition
- ✈️ Not readily available

### Quotes from travelers



*"They once dropped me on the floor and 6 attendants stood around and watched as I laid on the floor."*

*"I didn't look them over...when climbing into a human dolly with people strapping me to it...It's just overwhelming...I'm trying to do what everyone asks not assert any safety concerns...just want them to help me to the seat safely...my main concern is reminding them that I'm a person and not luggage even though they are transporting me like luggage."*

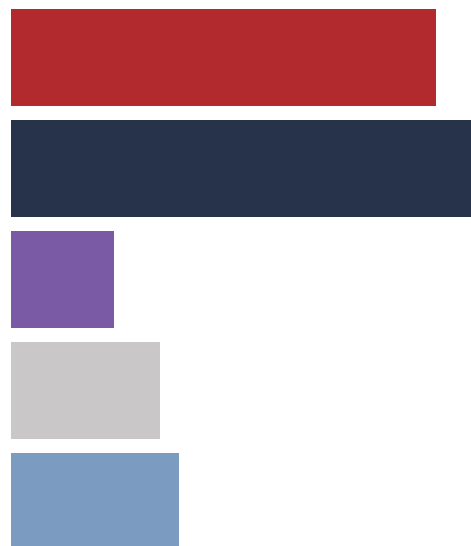
*"Yes, but it is very uncomfortable, small, hard to keep all body parts on and just simply degrading!!"*

*"I avoid this because it is terrifying and impossible to safely transfer."*

## Questions: Passengers with Mobility Impairments

**Q:** If you have received assistance in boarding or deplaning using an aisle chair, please check all that have applied.

- I have felt unsafe  
64.51% (458 respondents)
- I have felt the personnel were not properly trained.  
70.28% (499 respondents)
- I have been dropped during the transfer process.  
16.34% (116 respondents)
- I have been injured or hurt.  
23.24% (165 respondents)
- I have not had any problems during the transfer process.  
25.07% (178 respondents)

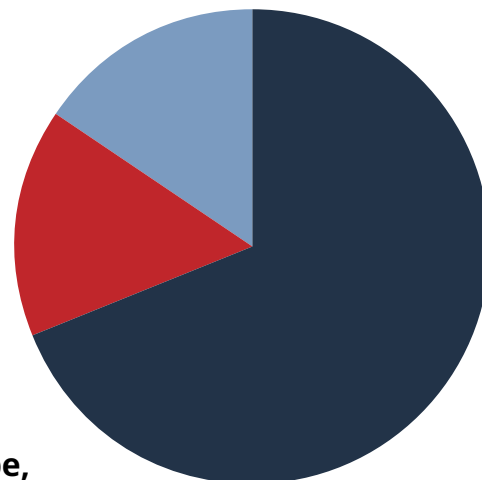


### CONCLUSION:

Of the 710 respondents who receive assistance, the most common feeling among respondents was that personnel were not properly trained to assist them with an aisle chair. This was followed by many respondents saying that they have felt unsafe using an aisle chair. Sixteen percent have been dropped and twenty-three percent injured while using the aisle chair. Only 25 percent have not had any issues with aisle chairs. Unsafe procedures and inadequately trained personnel can cause significant injuries.

**Q:** If you travel with a wheelchair or scooter, does someone typically put tags on it as to the type and condition of your chair and where it should be delivered upon arrival.

- Yes  
71.93% (615 respondents)
- No  
14.15% (121 respondents)
- Unsure  
13.92% (119 respondents)



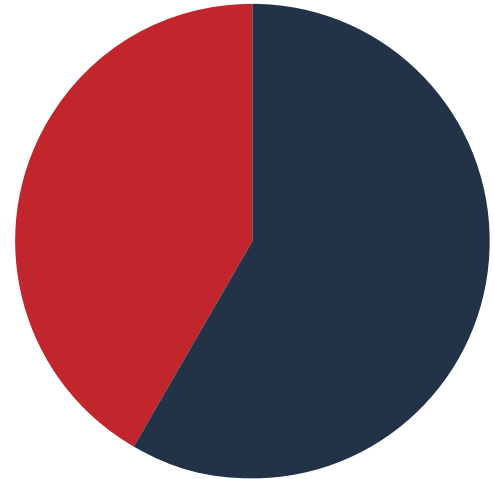
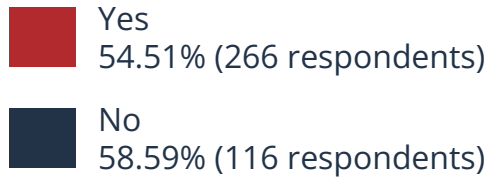
### CONCLUSION:

Most respondents (about 72%) said that someone typically tags their assistive device with information about its type, condition, and where it is to be delivered upon arrival.



## Questions: Passengers with Mobility Impairments

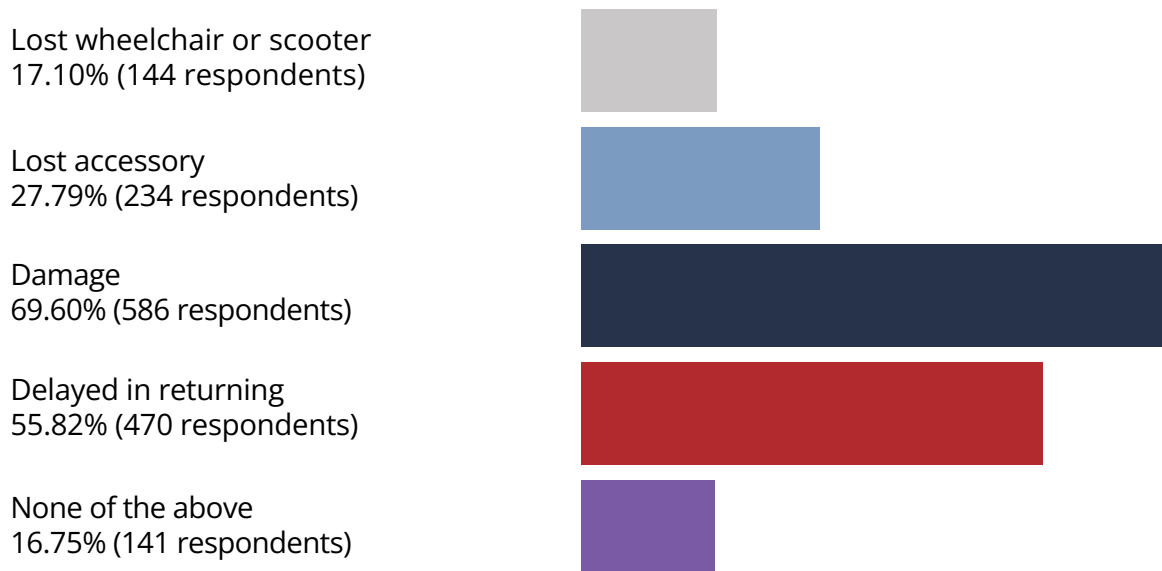
**Q:** If you typically store an assistive mobility or medical device in the cabin, have you had problems getting it stowed in the closet?



### CONCLUSION:

Of the individuals who use service animals, a majority (about 59 percent) find that airline personnel or their contractors do not know where the animal relief areas are located.

**Q:** If you travel with a wheelchair or scooter, have you had any of the following happen to it during air travel? Please check all that apply.






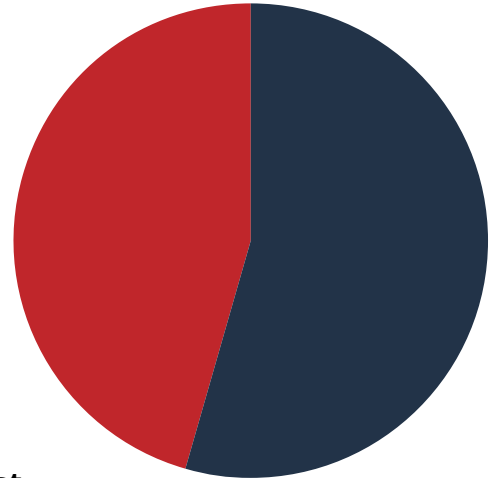
### CONCLUSION:

Of those who travel with a wheelchair or scooter, almost 70 percent reported damage to the device. Furthermore, almost 56 percent experienced delays.

## Questions: Passengers with Mobility Impairments

**Q:** If you use an aisle chair to get off the airplane, are the personnel typically there to assist you as soon as other passengers have left?

-  Yes  
42.51% (295 respondents)
-  No  
18.01% (125 respondents)
-  Sometimes  
39.48% (274 respondents)



### CONCLUSION:

Of those who use an aisle chair, about 58 percent said that personnel are only sometimes or not there to assist them when the other passengers have deplaned.





Paralyzed Veterans of America

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801 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006