Study Raises Airbnb Accessibility Issues

A study of a popular online vacation apartment and home rental service shows concern about accessibility for people with disabilities.

Research by the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations on Airbnb found people with disabilities were less likely to be preapproved and more likely to be rejected outright.

Airbnb is an online marketplace that allows people to rent apartments and homes in roughly 65,000 cities around the world. The San Francisco-based company doesn’t own any of the property listed on its website. It’s a broker that receives a percentage of the booking from the lister and renter.

The findings from the Rutgers study raise questions about the reach of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the accessibility of services in the sharing economy.

“People with disabilities have a history of social exclusion,” says the study’s lead researcher Mason Ameri, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow at Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations in New Brunswick, N.J. “The rise of internet-based platforms for some services threatens to perpetuate and possibly increase their exclusion. Many of the newly available services are not fully accessible and may create more opportunities for both intentional and unintentional discrimination.”

Extra Steps Needed

Ameri and a team of student volunteers created 25 Airbnb user accounts and made 3,847 lodging requests in the 48 continental United States between June 1 and Nov. 15, 2016.

For each request, a student assumed a fictitious identity and self-disclosed either blindness, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal-cord injury (SCI) or no disability.

The preapproval rate was:

- 75% for guests without disabilities
- 61% for guests with dwarfism
- 50% for guests with blindness
- 43% for guests with cerebral palsy
- 25% for guests with SCI
Even hosts who advertised their listing as “wheelchair accessible” were more likely to approve a guest without a disability (80%) than a guest with a SCI (60%).

Host responses didn’t vary significantly following Airbnb’s announcement of a new non-discrimination policy. The terms officially took effect Nov. 1, 2016, but users have been required since Sept. 8, 2016, to agree to the new policy prior to each sign-in attempt.

“Airbnb’s new policy follows the basic ideas of the ADA in prohibiting discrimination and requiring reasonable accommodations, but the policy did not seem to have an effect in its first few months,” says Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations Distinguished Professor Douglas Kruse, who oversaw the study. “Airbnb should take extra steps to educate hosts, ensure host compliance and partner with disability organizations to ensure that the needs of travelers with disabilities are well-reflected in their policies.”

**The Law Hasn’t Caught Up**

While many Airbnb hosts expressed sympathy and willingness to accommodate guests with disabilities, others reacted with insensitivity.

One host, responding to a traveler with blindness who uses a guide dog, asked, “Does the dog drive?” Another asked, “How could you see my listing if you are blind?” One host asked if a guest with SCI had a fellow traveler who could carry him up the stairs.

Researchers believe this study illuminates an area in which the law hasn’t caught up with technology. The ADA applies to businesses such as hotels and some Airbnb hosts but not to lodgings that are owner-occupied with fewer than six units available for rent.
Like ride-sharing services Uber and Lyft, Airbnb falls into a new realm of activity that blurs the lines between public and private space and could undermine the principle of equal access to goods and services.

“The growth of the so-called sharing economy can benefit many people, but it is largely an unregulated gray area,” says Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations professor Lisa Schur, who also helped manage the research. “These new platforms may allow individual hosts to avoid anti-discrimination laws, which may lead to more exclusion and discrimination against people with disabilities. We need a broader public policy discussion of how to increase accessibility and expand lodging options for travelers with disabilities.”

The study was co-authored by Cornell University assistant professor Sean Rogers and funded by the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

To read the full study, visit smlr.rutgers.edu/content/news.

This article was provided by the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

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