

The Curb Cut Effect Explained

What is a curb cut?

A curb cut is a small ramp that can be found at most intersections, between the sidewalk and the street. You wouldn't know it by looking at it, but this feature in most urban centers has redefined accessibility as we know it.

Berkeley, California

Led by disability activist Ed Roberts, a group called the Rolling Quads demanded curb cuts on main roads, taking to the streets and using sledgehammers to smash curbs and build their own ramps, forcing the city into action.

1968

1945

Kalamazoo, Michigan

The city installed curb cuts at four downtown corners as a pilot project to help disabled veterans.

1980

Denver, Colorado

Activists staged a protest demanding curb cuts, blocking traffic until city officials gave in.

1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act

The passing of the ADA was a landmark event due to its unprecedented reach, mandating access and accommodation in all public spaces. This helped establish curb cuts as the commonplace feature we know today.

Unexpected ripple effect

Surprisingly, the **benefits of curb cuts extended to everyone**, not just people in wheelchairs or those with limited mobility:



Transforming Accessibility in Higher Education

Like the curb cuts that ended up making mobility easier for so many people, accommodations in schools that were originally designed for students with disabilities **benefit the entire university community**.

A prime example

Transcription and captioning

These services enable accessibility for students who are deaf or hard of hearing

The curb cut effect in action...

99% of all students reported that they found closed captions to be helpful

Only 7% of those students were deaf or hard of hearing



The class average for an Introduction to Psychology course with captions was **7.18% higher**



Providing captions **more than doubles** retention and comprehension levels



Students who used captioned video achieved a **full GPA point increase** compared to students who did not

Greater Impact

Beyond the world of higher education, there are many examples of the curb cut effect that have profoundly impacted our lives for the better:



Seat belt legislation

Initially adopted to protect young children, these laws have saved an estimated 317,000 lives since 1975



Smoking laws

Smoking has largely been banished in public spaces and tobacco consumption has been cut in half since the 1960s

For more information click here

Sources

<https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/curb-cuts/>
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https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect
Robson, G. D. (2004). *The Closed Captioning Handbook*. Amsterdam: Focal Press.

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