

Can't Get There From Here

The Declining Independent Mobility of California's Children and Youth

A Joint Project of:

Surface Transportation Policy Project and
Transportation Land Use Coalition
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ask any old-time Californian about his or her childhood, and you'll most likely hear stories about walking to school, running to a corner grocery store or bicycling over to a friend's house. Walking and biking were a part of everyday life, he or she will tell you, and kids were able to get around on their own most of the time.

How times have changed. Unlike the children of earlier generations, who as recently as the 1960s still traveled to school by foot or bike in majority numbers, today's kids depend on rides from mom or dad to get almost everywhere they need or want to go. Survey data from the California Department of Transportation — published for the first time in this report — show that California children now make about three-quarters of all their trips in automobiles, while walking and bicycling now account for just 16 percent of children's trips. National surveys confirm that driving has become the dominant mode of travel for children, even when trip distances are short.

Sprawl Reduces Children's Mobility

Much of the decline in walking and biking can be attributed to changes in land use and community design. Many of California's children

now live in sprawling, automobile-oriented neighborhoods, built in recent decades, where it is neither safe nor convenient to travel by foot or bicycle. Not only does the housing-only zoning so often found in these places separate children's homes from schools and commercial areas, but the cul-de-sacs and curvy streets that characterize many suburban and exurban communities stretch the distances of many trips beyond easy walking range.

The low-density layout of many newer communities also limits the efficiency and appeal of public transit, one of the few sources of independent mobility available to children other than walking and riding a bike.

Moreover, the landscape of subdivisions, parking lots, strip malls and wide streets that typifies California's newer communities often contains few of the amenities — such as sidewalks, crosswalks and bike lanes — that make it safer and easier to walk or ride a bike. Indeed, this design better suits the type of high-speed vehicular traffic that is most lethal for pedestrians and bicyclists. Statistics collected by the California Highway Patrol show that, in areas characterized by rapid, sprawling growth, a disproportionately high number of child pedestrians are killed and injured in traffic accidents.

Traffic Hazards Curtail Walking and Biking

Although children are taught to “look both ways” before crossing the street almost as soon as they can walk, that instruction fails to protect them from the dangers posed by fast-moving traffic, busy streets and aggressive drivers. This report finds that California’s children are disproportionately represented as victims of pedestrian-vehicle crashes, largely because they still rely more heavily than adults on walking and biking to get around and are therefore exposed more frequently to the dangers of the street.

In 2001, children were involved in more than one-third of all pedestrian-vehicle collisions in California, though they accounted for just over one-quarter of the state’s total population. As a result, pedestrian collisions now rank among the leading causes of death and hospitalized injury for children. Particularly vulnerable are minority children and children from low-income households, who make a higher percentage of their trips on foot and are more likely than other children to be hurt in pedestrian-vehicle accidents.

Faced with these numbers, many of today’s parents feel compelled to chauffeur their kids to almost all their activities, even when distances are short. Indeed, so many parents now drive their kids to school that home to school trips account for as much as 21 percent of all trips during the morning peak commute period in some California Communities.

However, this increase in child shuttling has boosted traffic levels around schools, making it even more perilous for kids to travel to class by foot or bike. In many cases, the children who still walk or bike to school come from low-income households and do not have access to car rides.

Fear of Abduction and Other Barriers

Further limiting children’s independent mobility is the fear of violent crime, which has been heightened in recent years by a series of highly publicized child abductions. As a result, many parents would rather play chauffeur than permit their children to travel around by themselves and risk the possibility that they could be abducted by strangers. But this response has its own safety drawbacks: while a total of 364 children are known to have been abducted by strangers in California between 1995 and 2000, more than 17,000 California children were killed or badly injured while riding in automobiles.

At the same time, children’s reliance on cars has been intensified by cutbacks in school bus service. Facing chronic budget shortages, school districts throughout the state have been trimming routes and raising or imposing fees for bus service. These moves help explain why California now has the nation’s lowest school bus ridership rate.

When school bus service is unavailable, some parents are left with no alternative but to drive their kids to school, particularly when schools are located far from children’s homes. And this is increasingly the case. Due largely to school siting guidelines adopted by the California Department of Education and state funding policies that discourage construction or rehabilitation of schools in existing neighborhoods, new schools are increasingly being built on undeveloped lands far from the neighborhoods where students live.

All this child-shuttling places a heavy financial burden on families, especially low-income households whose average wages have not kept up in real terms with rises in transportation expenses. In metropolitan regions of the American West, two-parent families now spend more than twice as much on children’s transportation as they do

on children's health care. Moreover, the rise of the taxi-parent has coincided with a diminished quality of life for many families, as parents and children both spend more time in cars and less time at more rewarding activities.

Lack of Transportation Options Harms Children's Health

Although traveling on foot can be deadly, not walking contributes to another type of health hazard for children. The percentage of children who are overweight and out-of-shape has reached epidemic levels in recent decades, as the amount of walking and other physical activity children engage in has tailed off. Recent surveys have found that between one-quarter and one-third of California's children are either overweight or at risk of becoming so. At the same time, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and other debilitating weight- and fitness-related diseases is soaring among the state's children.

The decline in transportation alternatives has also contributed to a dramatic rise in childhood asthma, a disease aggravated by air pollutants such as ozone and particulate matter that are largely generated by motor vehicle emissions. The number of children diagnosed with asthma has jumped 160 percent in California since 1980, and asthma attacks are now the number one cause of children's emergency hospital visits.

Policy Recommendations

Presented with this evidence, it is apparent that, as currently designed, California's transportation network is failing the state's youngest and most dependent residents. Exacerbated by recent trends in land use and neighborhood design, the dwindling availability of transporta-

tion choices has not only robbed children of the independence and mobility that previous generations enjoyed, but has also contributed to an epidemic of life-threatening health problems.

Making matters worse, transportation planners and elected officials have largely overlooked the needs of children, as evidenced by the fact that there is little available data from state officials, transit agencies and metropolitan planning organizations regarding the travel patterns and mobility needs of children.

In conclusion, this report suggests new policies and investments that can make California's cities, towns and suburbs safer and more convenient for walking, bicycling and transit — changes that would benefit both the health and mobility of children. The report's recommendations, which are covered in more detail in Chapter Five, include:

- Prioritizing Safe Walking and Bicycling Routes for Kids
- Promoting and Funding Safe Routes to Schools Programs
- Building Child-Friendly Neighborhoods
- Removing Regulatory Barriers that Discourage Neighborhood Schools
- Making School Bus Service a Higher Priority
- Prioritizing Funding for Transportation Projects that Improve Air Quality
- Collecting Better Data on Children's Travel Patterns
- Involving Youth in Transportation Decision-Making
- Providing Free and Discounted Public Transit Passes For Children

For a copy of the full report visit www.transact.org/ca/