

Project Brief - May 2014

Making Choices That Change Lives



Exploring Housing Location Choices and School Transportation

Sustainable Cities Initiative



THE ISSUE

Today children increasingly get to school by private vehicle, but some wish to create an opportunity for walking or biking.

THE RESEARCH

Do parents consider school travel options when deciding where to live? Why or why not?

THE IMPLICATIONS

We need to devote more resources to changing parents' attitudes and preferences for walkable and bikeable routes to school.

Image by flickr.com/photos/sfbike/

The Issue

Parents driving their children to school has increased rapidly over the past several decades. In fact, nationwide surveys show that 65% of children are now driven to schools in private automobiles, compared with 18% in 1969. Increased reliance on private automobiles in school travel has raised concerns about negative impacts on both children's health and the environment. Many federal, state and local programs and policies now focus on increasing the rate of children walking or biking to school.

Children's ability to walk or bike to school depends largely on where they live. Surprisingly, we know very little about how school travel affects families' choices about where to live. This project took a comprehensive approach by examining relationships between transportation to school, neighborhood walkability and where families choose to live.

The Research

Yizhao Yang, assistant professor at the University of Oregon, investigated whether or not, and to what degree, parents explicitly consider school travel options when deciding where to live. In addition, her project examined if parents considered active school commuting during their housing hunt.

To explore these issues, the project team conducted surveys, focus groups and interviews in Eugene, Oregon. The survey findings showed a significant difference in preference for active school commuting and how kids actually got to school.

Why doesn't your child walk or bike to school?

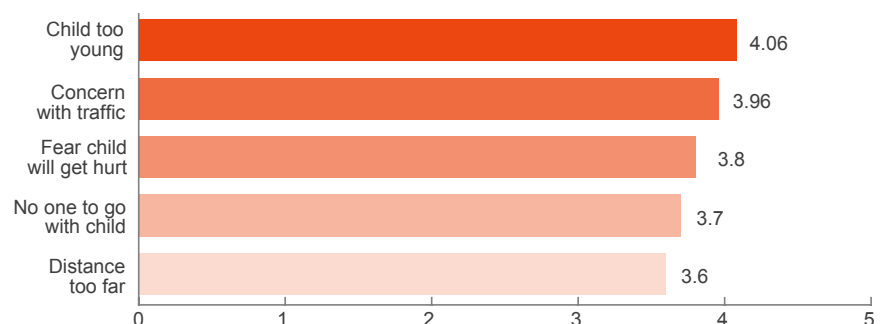


Image: Common reasons parents don't let children walk or bike to school.

Interested in learning more about SCI Research? Visit the website at sci.uoregon.edu/research

More About the Research

Overall, only 15% of parents surveyed reported that their child walks or bikes to school at least three days a week, while about 70% said that they preferred their child to walk or bike to school.

The majority of parents in the survey considered school transportation in their housing search, and their intention to use active commuting at this early stage impacted their child's later travel behavior. If parents thought about active transportation options when house-hunting, their child was five times more likely to walk or bike to school. Environmental characteristics such as the distance between home and school, and neighborhood safety significantly affect active commuting.

In the interviews and focus groups, parents reported very limited housing options in the community. In choosing a home location, school travel was less of a priority than affordability, neighborhood appearance and recreational opportunities.

The Implications

Currently, little coordination exists between community land-use planning and school planning. Eugene's current plan focuses on redevelopment and infill development but neighborhoods are prioritized for development based on their location to commercial services, not schools.

This study shows that active commuting preference influences later travel behavior through residential location choice. It also shows that there are limits to what changes can be made by environment-based strategies to improve school travel behavior.

Today, most Safe Routes to School programs devote the majority of resources to improving physical infrastructure, which impacts walkability. Yet the influence of walkability on travel patterns is limited when compared to home-school distance and parental preference.

Allowing more children to live close to their schools could greatly impact school travel behavior. School siting policies have required schools to be located close to residential neighborhoods. While this study supports such policies, it also shows that parents' choice of residence is affected by the configuration of housing opportunities and land uses in the entire community. As a result, we need better collaboration between community land-use planning and school planning. We also need to invest more resources in changing parent attitude and preference for active school commuting.

How Does your child usually get to school?

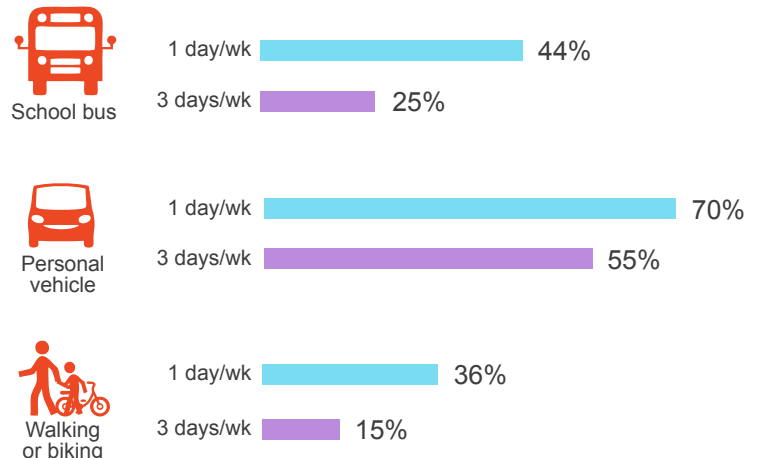


Image: Parents reported how frequently their children get to school by bus, car, or active transportation.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Researcher: Yizhao Yang, PhD
yizhao@uoregon.edu

Partners: Eugene School District 4J
Department of Planning, Public Policy and Management
University of Oregon

Co-Investigator: Marc Schlossberg, PhD

Completed: January 2010

Online: www.otrec.us/project/184