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Walking to School: The Experiences of Children in City Heights

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Walking is a healthy activity that should be encouraged in children, but when it comes to traveling to school in inner city neighborhoods, how do kid's safety concerns differ from those of their parents? The answers reveal that efforts to facilitate walking to promote public health often are misplaced because they fail to take into account the experiences and perceptions of the children themselves, especially in inner city neighborhoods.

A 2016 study conducted with 135 fifth-graders in the City Heights neighborhood in San

Diego found that crime, gangs, drugs and other social ills encountered on school travel routes were of greater concern for children than built-environment issues, such as broken sidewalks, fast-moving cars and inadequate traffic infrastructure.

Meanwhile, researchers, policymakers and even parents tend to focus disproportionately on elements of the built environment as barriers to walking.





ENGAGING CHILDREN/PARENTS

The children from five urban elementary schools who participated in the study were predominantly from lower-income families who were ethnic minorities including recent immigrants from Asia and Africa. Participants were subject to a range of written, verbal and visual recording methods developed to elicit children's perspectives on traveling to school. Children drew maps of their neighborhoods; highlighted their route to school on an aerial photo; and identified and discussed places they liked, disliked or felt unsafe. To assess the total time they spent outside engaged in physical exertion, children were asked to

maintain diaries of weekend activities that happened outside the home. Parents also were surveyed about perceptions and concerns they had about their children's walking to school. Finally, the research team followed up on the children's responses with field visits and on-site observations.

“Children drew maps of their neighborhoods; highlighted their route to school on an aerial photo; and identified and discussed places they liked, disliked or felt unsafe.”

FINDINGS

Walks to/from school are distinct events.

Approximately 45 percent of students walked to school, and more than 50 percent walked home from school. Overall, the trip to school was more a function of expediency and time, while the trip home was influenced more by parents' perceptions of their child's competence and preference and by the presence of social supports available in the neighborhood. While many researchers and policymakers consider school travel a single event, this finding suggests the need for strategies that target each trip separately as distinct events involving different periods of day.

Children take longer routes than assumed.

Children walked an average of .43 miles — longer than the average walking distance of $\frac{1}{4}$ mile between home and school, long considered a neighborhood planning norm — indicating they often take roundabout routes to and from school. The majority of research, which uses “as the crow flies” distance or the shortest network distance, may not reflect children's actual travel choices.

Parents, kids disagree on barriers to walking.

Parents generally viewed their neighborhoods more negatively than their children and were more concerned about traffic-related barriers to walking. Therefore, although parents' sense of their children's safety might be enhanced by policy measures focusing on completing sidewalk networks or adding traffic signals at intersections, such efforts would not necessarily address the concerns children have about walking to and from school.

Children in the study more often listed issues related to their neighborhoods' social milieu as factors that made them more or less likely to walk in a certain area. They perceived some residential streets or areas as dangerous for reasons mainly associated with gang-related activities, drugs and crime. Thus, children felt safer walking on busy commercial corridors than on quieter, residential streets. Commercial areas, many children said, offered both formal and informal surveillance, more “eyes on the street” as Jane Jacobs famously argued, adding to their sense of security. Commercial districts also provided more social and retail opportunities, such as places to buy candy, than lower-traffic areas.



Conclusions

The number of children who walk to school in the U.S. has declined in recent decades. And, although the number of walkers in City Heights is higher than the U.S. average, in general children spend too little time engaging in outdoor physical activity. In fact, fifth-graders in City Heights seem to spend less time outdoors than the minimum one-hour-per-day standard required for prisoners in the U.S.

Walking to school is a valuable opportunity for increasing the time children spend outdoors engaged in physical activity, but research and policymaking aimed at accomplishing that goal should focus more on the recommendations of the children themselves.

Planners and policymakers frequently respond to children's environmental needs by promoting the creation of parks and playgrounds — the very places that children in the study often cited as unsafe. While children long for play opportunities, they prefer the safety and security of places, such as commercial areas, where the needs of children and adults are integrated.

There is merit to maintaining a built environment with adequate traffic controls, sidewalks and infrastructure free of graffiti and trash to provide children with a sense of safety, but policymakers must shift more efforts to addressing the social concerns that children say threaten their feelings of security.

When given a chance, children are more than capable of forming and expressing their thoughts about the issues pertaining to the planning and design of their everyday surroundings.



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