



Improving Children's Health by Supporting their Right to the City

Response to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Children's Health

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A Play Street in Montreal (CéJM, 2021)

Presented By

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FAILURES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENT MOBILITY IN CITIES

Canada's cities are no longer supportive of children's independent mobility. Defined as "the freedom of children to travel around their neighbourhood or city without adult supervision",⁽¹⁾ independent mobility allows children to explore their environments, at their own pace, based on their own decision-making processes. It increases children's confidence, autonomy, social skills, and capacity to move around public spaces effectively.⁽²⁾ For decades, however, we have designed Canadian cities around motorists' desires, while ignoring children's needs to play and move about in their communities unsupervised. In doing so, **we have systematically excluded children from our cityscapes and eroded their right to the city.**

This erosion has become self-reinforcing. Failing to account for children's needs in designing our cities has created real dangers and anxieties for parents regarding their children's safety outside the home. These fears have led parents to increasingly limit their children from going outside and being active on their own.⁽³⁾ This is especially acute in socio-economically deprived communities known to have higher volumes of non-local motor vehicle traffic. Thus, **we have created systemic inequities in the conditions of daily living for Canadian children through our decisions to prioritize motorized traffic over children's health and well-being.** Ignoring children's needs in community design compromises their health, well-being, and independence, and has troubling implications for the future liveability of Canadian cities.

THE IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FAILURES

Independent mobility is critical to children's health, well-being, and autonomy. As a determinant of outdoor free play and active transportation (e.g., walking or biking to places),⁽⁴⁾ greater independent mobility provides access to a larger range of destinations without adult accompaniment, leading to increased levels of physical activity and general well-being.⁽⁵⁾ Children who are allowed to walk without an adult also spend more time and play more with friends outdoors,⁽⁶⁾ and spend less time engaged in sedentary activities.⁽⁷⁾

Automobile-focused city design has, over time, corresponded with declines in children's independent mobility, and by extension outdoor free play and active transport. Children's roaming ranges - how far and how often children move within a geographic area - have dramatically shrunk over successive generations, making visible the exclusion of children from cityscapes (Figure 1). A landmark UK-based study observed that the percentage of 7 and 8-year-olds allowed to walk home from school on their own decreased from 80% in 1971 to 9% in 1990.⁽¹⁾ A more recent international study of 16 countries found that most children under 11 years are not allowed to move freely about in their local area.⁽⁸⁾

These trends are also prevalent in Canada. For instance, national representative data on the active school travel levels of Canadian children and youth collected in 2000 and in 2010 indicates a significant increase in the proportion who relied solely on motorized transportation over the last decade.⁽⁹⁾ **These declines in independent mobility, outdoor free play and active transportation harm children’s cognitive and social development, mental health, physical activity levels, body weight, and metabolic health.** Furthermore, depriving today’s children of opportunities to build their independence reinforces our society’s automobile dependency, which threatens the future liveability and climate resiliency of our cities.⁽¹⁰⁾

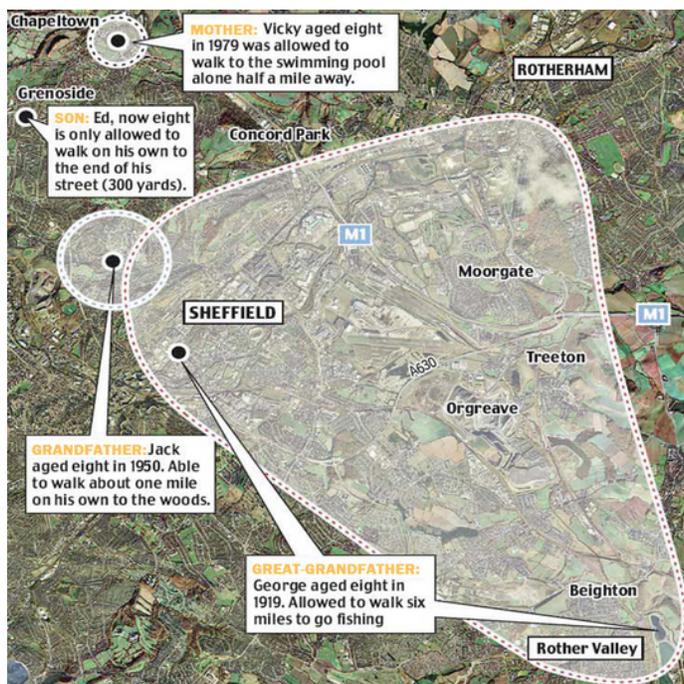


Figure 1: Four Generations of independent mobility (The Daily Mail, 2007)

SUPPORTING CHILDREN’S RIGHT TO THE CITY

The physical environments surrounding children’s homes, daycares and schools are critical for their independent mobility.⁽¹¹⁾ As stated in the UN General Comment 17 on Article 31 (2013), “Children need access to inclusive spaces that are free from inappropriate hazards and close to their own homes, as well as with measures to promote safe, independent mobility as their capacities evolve.”⁽¹²⁾ Historically, local streets were *the* places for children to move about, play, and socialize. Growing concerns about traffic safety for children due to increased numbers of vehicles on streets, larger sizes of vehicles, and higher speeds are often cited as the primary constraints on children’s independent mobility.⁽¹³⁾ Most importantly, these conditions undermine the rights of children to occupy and enjoy the streets in their communities without jeopardizing their safety and well-being. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal 11 states that the urban environment should be inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable for everyone.⁽¹⁴⁾ Thus, **children’s neighbourhoods should constitute critical focal points for policies targeting children’s health and well-being**⁽¹⁵⁾ and in the development of child-friendly cities.⁽¹⁶⁾ The well-being of our youngest citizens is the optimal indicator of the healthiness of a city’s environment, governance, and sustainable planning policies.⁽¹⁷⁾

Since the design of communities around automobiles is a major contributor to the troubling deficits in children’s independent mobility in Canada, altering automobile-dependent communities must become a priority for policymakers and practitioners in Canada. **Interventions that repurpose streets as public spaces are promising approaches to re-centering the needs of children and their health.** In recent years, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Canadian cities experimented with various reconfiguration options, such as Slow Streets, Quiet Streets, and Flex Streets.^(18–21) These approaches are typically designed to reduce the speed and volume of vehicular traffic to support active transportation and general street liveliness.

Reconfigurations that prioritize children, such as Play Streets and School Streets,^(22–23) involve closing streets to through-traffic in order to give streets back to children to play, socialize, and be independently mobile. Play Streets (Figure 2) offer children safe spaces to engage in outdoor free play by closing streets within their own neighbourhoods for a predetermined period every week. School Streets (Figure 3) offer children safe spaces to engage in active transport to and from school by closing streets adjacent to elementary school sites on school days.



Figure 2: Play Street in Kingston (Healey, 2021)



Figure 3: Marie Rivier School Street, Montréal (CÉUM, 2021)

Over the past few years, our team has collaborated to implement and evaluate Play and School Street interventions in Kingston, Ontario and Montreal, Quebec. Through this work, we have also engaged and helped form a community of practice on these approaches. Drawing from these experiences, we offer recommendations on how to create more child-friendly cities that support the health, well-being, and independence of today’s children and tomorrow’s adults.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COMMITTEE

- 1 Support** the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, by ensuring children have accessible space and time for outdoor play, free from adult control and management, with easy access to supportive adults when necessary.
- 2 Assist** in formalizing and funding the Canadian community of practice aimed at promoting children's right to the city.
- 3 Collaborate** with professional associations (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, CIP, CITE, Engineers Canada) to promote children's right to the city.
- 4 Identify** funding programmes that support transformations of built environments and enable children's right to the city (Investments in Infrastructure Canada, PHAC, Parks Canada, etc.).
- 5 Support** provincial and territorial governments to adjust their road legislation and thus enable municipalities to more easily enact child-friendly solutions within their jurisdictions.
- 6 Collaborate** with provincial and territorial governments to require Child Rights Impact Assessments be conducted as part of community planning and development.
- 7 Continue and expand support** to municipalities investing in public transit and active transportation infrastructure in order to reduce Canadians' dependency on automobiles.

We welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee further about our work.

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