



SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH AT CReSP

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How can we give children back their right to the city?

A RESEARCH PROJECT THAT IS LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELDS

The School of Public Health of Université de Montréal (ESPUM) and the Centre d'écologie urbaine have been combining their expertise for several years to make Quebec's cities more fun and child-friendly. From this collaboration emerged the research-intervention initiative "**Levelling the Playing Fields**," which aims to create urban environments where children can move about, play, and explore their surroundings freely and safely. In short, to restore children's right to the city.

Today's cities leave little room for children to play and get around on their own. The heavy presence of cars contributes to this reality and increases the vulnerability of young children. According to recent data from the Société d'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ), 1,749 children — pedestrians and cyclists aged 5 to 12 — were involved in collisions between 2017 and 2023.

As a result, many parents choose to drive their children to school, to friends' homes, or to activities. However, this choice contributes to increased traffic and a sense of insecurity around schools and residential neighborhoods. Levelling the Playing Fields aims to reverse this trend by offering concrete solutions that allow children to fully enjoy their neighborhood with confidence: "**school streets**" and "**play streets**."

Since 2021, the Levelling the Playing Fields team has carried out a series of pilot projects involving school streets and play streets in several Montréal boroughs, with the aim of understanding whether these initiatives are feasible in North America and studying their effects on children and their environment. The result of an exemplary collaboration between academic, municipal, school, and community partners, this initiative has had positive impacts on health and has brought about sustainable systemic transformations. Today, the research program is expanding across Canada by joining **the National Active School Streets Initiative**, which aims to establish school streets throughout Canada.

This project was made possible thanks to the support of:



SUMMARY

A **play street** is a residential street that is temporarily closed to motor vehicle traffic for the benefit of children, families, and residents. Closed for at least 60 minutes a day, once or several times a week, it allows children to play freely near their homes and fosters a sense of community.

A **school street** is a street located near an elementary school that is closed to motor vehicle traffic for the benefit of children, families, and residents. The closure takes place during student arrival and departure times (15 to 90 minutes), ideally every day of the week and throughout the school year.

When the layout allows, the closure may be permanent. The school street encourages active travel, reduces congestion, and improves safety around schools.

The success of these initiatives depends on the involvement of all local stakeholders. The experiences of implementing this project have helped identify several best practices: prioritizing neighborhoods where needs are greatest, initiating consultation at least one year before implementation, planning a stretch of at least 50 m to provide a truly welcoming space, targeting the main school entrances, and working in partnership with municipalities, schools, community organizations, and emergency services.

Elected officials and professionals in urban planning, engineering, architecture, and public safety play a key role in ensuring children's right to the city. Progress is possible, but it requires ongoing commitment, training, and tailored support.

By placing children's right to the city at the heart of all decisions, municipalities can create more active, vibrant, and safer environments for the entire community.

Background

LITTLE SPACE FOR CHILDREN IN CITIES

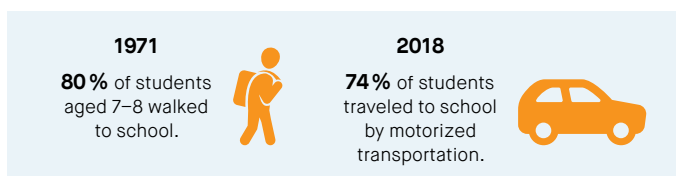
In the 20th century, it was normal and natural to play in the street. That is no longer the case today:

- There are more cars, and they are larger.
- Cities are increasingly designed to meet the needs of adults, particularly their motorized travel.
- The idea that streets are built primarily for car traffic is widely accepted.
- Children's play is limited to specific locations (e.g., parks and schoolyards) and is now heavily supervised by adults.

Overall, cities lack stimulating spaces and places where children can play and move around, which limits their opportunities to be physically active. Furthermore, the built environments around them are becoming less safe. This reality has a direct impact on children's health and well-being.

THE EVOLUTION OF ACTIVE TRANSPORT

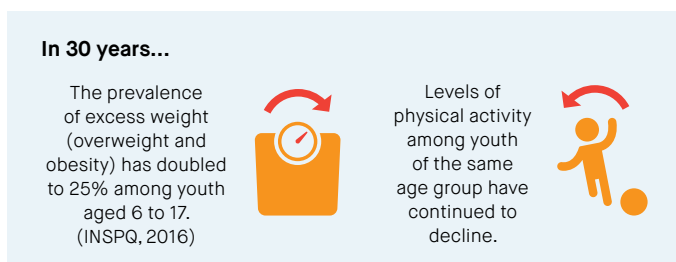
Fewer children are walking to school:



Source: Survey on the Health Behaviors of School-Aged Children, 2017–2018 (ASPC 2023)

FIGHTING OBESITY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The **Levelling the Playing Fields** project is part of the effort to combat the childhood obesity epidemic.



Playing is a right

Free play has been recognized as a child's right by the United Nations since 1989. The term "free play" refers to an activity initiated by the child spontaneously, without planning or intervention by an adult. **Its impact on the physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development of children and adolescents is widely recognized.** Through play, children use their five senses, which allows them, among other things, to explore their environment, build confidence, form bonds, and experiment.

Promoting children's well-being and health

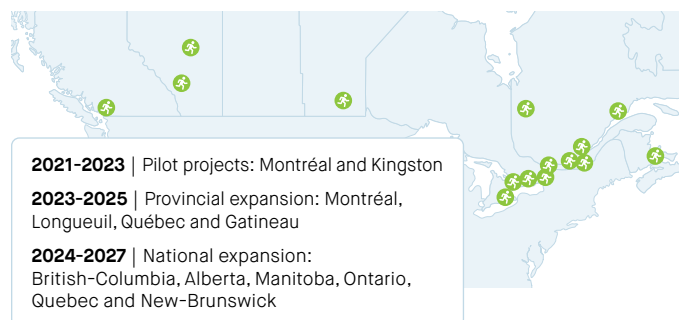
School streets and **play streets** are models of urban transformation inspired by initiatives that have proven successful internationally. They aim to create a welcoming and safe environment to **encourage children's independent and active mobility, as well as free play**. While school streets are located near schools, play streets provide children with spaces and opportunities to play freely near their homes in high-density residential neighborhoods.

THE EUROPEAN EXAMPLE

Whether it's the Speelstraat (or play streets) in Ghent and Brussels in Belgium, the "Playing Out" movement and "School Streets" in the United Kingdom, or the "Rue aux enfants, rue pour tous" program and the **more than 300 school streets established throughout France**, these inspiring examples are well documented.



THE EXTENT OF SCHOOL STREETS IN CANADA



PROJECTS IN THE GREATER MONTRÉAL AREA



A history of the initiative in Quebec

November 2021–February 2022	December 2021–March 2022	July 2022–June 2023	2022–2023 School Year	2024–2025 School Year
Project				
1st play street pilot project Birnam Street	1st school street pilot project Marie-Rivier Elementary School	2nd play street pilot project Sacré-Cœur Avenue	2nd school street pilot project Saint-Benoît Elementary School	Local expansion of school streets Guillaume-Couture and Saint-Clément Elementary Schools
Borough				
Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc-Extension	Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc-Extension	Ahuntsic–Cartierville	Ahuntsic–Cartierville	Mercier–Hochelaga–Maisonneuve
Partner(s)				
Borough and Afrique au féminin (local non-profit) \$ CIHR (research)	Borough, school, CSSDM and Centre Lasallien (local non-profit) \$ CIHR (research)	Borough \$ CIHR (research)	Borough, school, CSSDM and Solon (local non-profit) \$ CIHR (research)	Borough, schools, CSSDM and L'Anonyme (local non-profit) \$ MSSS, MEIE and Desjardins
Description of the intervention				
Duration: 4 months ■ Nov.-déc.: 2 hours on Thursday and Sunday afternoons ■ Dec.-feb: 2 hours on Sunday afternoons	Duration: 4 months ■ Every Friday morning and afternoon ■ 17 days of school streets, for a total of 34 closures	Duration: 11 months ■ 2 hours every Sunday	Duration: 10 months ■ Every Friday morning and afternoon ■ 30 days of school street, for a total of 60 closures ■ A first in Quebec over the course of a full school year	Duration: 7 months ■ Every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, morning and afternoon ■ 47 days of school streets, for a total of 93 closures ■ A first in Quebec with this level of intensity (3 days/week)
Objectives				
Same objectives from 2021 to 2023: ■ Assessment of the feasibility of the initiative in Quebec ■ Analysis of the impact on traffic near the school ■ Measurement of changes (active transportation and children's independent mobility) ■ Assessment of user and stakeholder satisfaction levels				Expansion to another neighborhood ■ Analysis of the impact on traffic near the school ■ Measurement of changes (active transportation and children's independent mobility) ■ Assessment of the level of satisfaction among users and stakeholders

PRINCIPAL RESULTS

SATISFACTION

- An average of 21 children play in the play street each week.
- 88% of residents support the play street.
- Children and parents from neighboring streets are in favor of the play street.

COMMUNITY

- Involvement of 25 volunteers in the project.
- Socialization opportunities for adults (parents and neighbors).
- Outdoor fun street activities that help immigrants families get used to winter.

ACTIVE TRANSPORT*

- - 17% cars.
- + 20% children walking to school.

SATISFACTION

- 70% of residents and 76% of parents report that the street is safer on school street days.
- 85% of parents are satisfied with the school street.
- Children, parents and residents appreciate how quiet the street is on school street days.

COMMUNITY

- Involvement of teenagers as volunteers.
- Social opportunities for adults (parents and neighbors).

SATISFACTION

- A pleasant or very pleasant experience for 59% of residents.
- A safer street for 92% of residents.
- An average of 20 children playing in the play street each week.
- More vigorous physical activity among children.

COMMUNITY

- A place where young children can meet, helping them adjust to school.
- Parents feel more comfortable leaving their older children home alone (since they know the neighborhood better).
- Children feel more comfortable asking for help from adults who are present but are not their parents.

ACTIVE TRANSPORT*

- - 12% children traveling by car.
- + 11% children who use active transportation.

SATISFACTION

- Fewer perceived delays at school, because children arrive earlier to play.
- Children taking more space for themselves near the school.

COMMUNITY

- Parents and grandparents leading the relaunching of the school street after the initial run.
- Building intergenerational connections and organizing activities with the RPA in front of the school.

ACTIVE TRANSPORT*

- + 10% 5th and 6th graders walking to school (Saint-Clément).
- Transport habits: + bicycles and scooters.
- + children walking by themselves to school.

SATISFACTION

- Resident satisfaction rate: 82%.
- Many positive impacts:
 - a greater sense of freedom and independence for children,
 - a safe and stimulating space for play,
 - a smooth transition between school and home.

CSSDM: Montréal School Service Center (Centre de services scolaire de Montréal)

CIHR: Canadian Institutes of Health Research

MEIE: Ministry of Economy, Innovation and Energy (ministère de l'Économie, de l'Innovation et de l'Énergie)

MSSS: Ministry of Health and Social Services (ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux)

RPA: Private Seniors' Residence (résidence privée pour aînés)

* Comparison between days of school street and non-school street days



A focus on the Levelling the Playing Fields project

Since 2021, the research team has been collecting data to gain a better understanding of the impact of play streets and school streets within communities, with the ultimate goal of promoting their implementation across the country.

Data collection was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups with various populations (children, parents, residents, and key informants).



Testimonials collected during the school street events held in the Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve borough.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Establish a cross-sectoral committee to coordinate school streets and play streets (municipality, school, public safety, public works).
- Ensure clear communication with parents and the neighborhood before the implementation.
- Work with local organizations to foster community support and participation.
- Maintain volunteer engagement by:
 - Maintaining a pool of volunteers three times larger than what is needed to ensure rotation.
 - Recruiting through parent committees, the neighborhood, organizations, and school and neighborhood events.

A COLLABORATIVE WORK MODEL

The Levelling the Playing Fields initiative is based on collaboration among municipal, educational, community, and scientific sectors. Researchers and practitioners work together at every stage: ideation, funding, implementation, evaluation and sharing of lessons learned.

At Saint-Benoît elementary school, many organizations and key individuals helped set up and implement the school street: the school administration, teachers, the student council, parents, community partners and the borough. Even the STM contributed to the initiative's success by temporarily relocating a bus stop during school street hours.

HOW MUCH DOES A SCHOOL STREET COST?

It is difficult to provide an exact estimate. Costs vary depending on the duration, frequency, setup, equipment, and method of supervision.

- Costs for a temporary school street: supervisors, coordination, training, equipment, and communications. Costs are reduced with volunteers.
- Costs for a permanent school street: coordination, communications, design, consultation, and infrastructure improvements.

Research findings on the Saint-Benoît School Street (2023)

The school street increases safety and the sense of security.

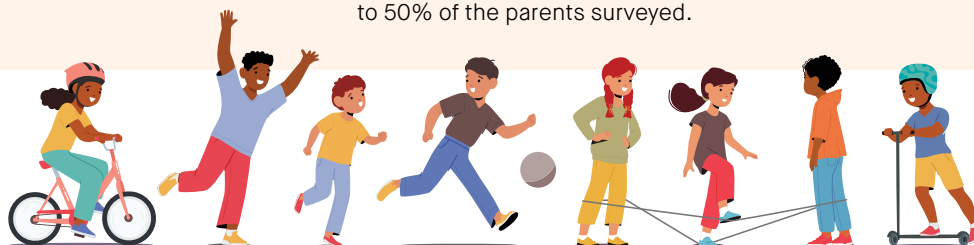
- Reduction in problematic behaviour by drivers.
- Children's safety on the way to school: Improved or remained the same, according to 67% of parents surveyed.
- Residents' safety: Improved, according to 87% of neighbors surveyed.

School street days increase active transportation.

- Increased walking, biking, and scooter use for transportation to school on school street days.
- A 12% decrease of car-based children dropoffs on school street days.

The school street builds connections.

- A bridge between students, parents, the school and the community.
- Play among children of different ages that fosters independence and mutual support.
- A place for both children and parents to socialize, according to 50% of the parents surveyed.



Fact or myth?

The results of the Levelling the Playing Fields project highlight the positive impact of school streets in communities and help debunk certain myths.

The school street is only used on hotter days, when the weather is nice.

MYTH. Children enjoy the school street even in winter! Observations by the research team and focus group discussions revealed that children are just as enthusiastic during the cold season, particularly because they actively interact with natural elements, such as snowbanks and icicles.

The school street makes children careless and increases risky behaviour.

MYTH. The school street teaches children about safe street behaviour and does not encourage dangerous behaviour. On the contrary, it provides an opportunity to discuss safety rules and the dangers associated with motor vehicles. Even very young children clearly understand the difference between a street that is temporarily closed to traffic and one that is not.

Closing a street to traffic inevitably causes congestion elsewhere.

MYTH. According to observations, there has been no significant shift in traffic volume to neighboring streets. In the first few days after a school street starts, some adjustment is necessary. However, the data show that traffic around schools has decreased over time. In fact, parents – who account for a significant portion of the vehicles around schools in the morning – have changed their habits following the implementation of a school street.

A school street is still relevant even if there is a park or a schoolyard nearby.

FACT. Children have the same right to the city and public spaces as adults. That said, the school street meets several needs:

- It provides children with a space and time for free play near the school.
- It makes the area around the school safer during the times when the risk of accidents is highest (when students arrive and leave).

The school street, the schoolyard, and the park each play distinct roles in children's lives.

The school streets benefit the entire community, not just children.

FACT. While children are at the heart of the project, the school street benefits the entire community:

- It reduces noise and traffic.
- It fosters social and intergenerational connections.
- It transforms the street into a shared living space.

It is difficult to gain social acceptance for school streets.

FACT AND MYTH. Social acceptance is not always a given, but it can be built. Clear communication with the neighborhood, partnerships with well-established community organizations, and concrete responses to concerns (backed by research data) go a long way toward gaining public support. In fact, well-informed residents are generally in favor of school streets, as they help reduce dangerous driving behaviours and create a calmer, safer environment.

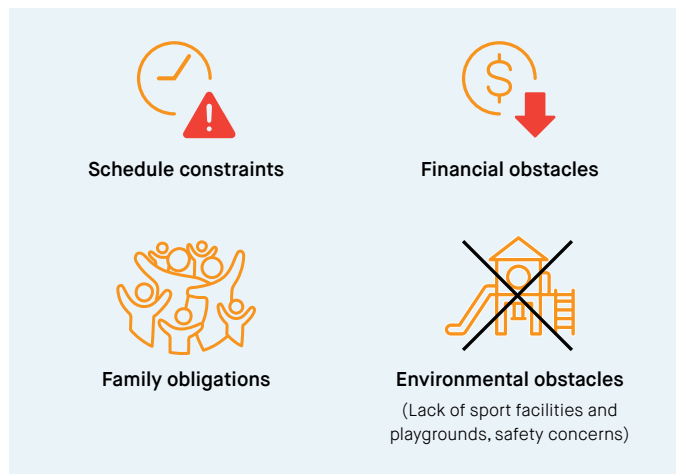
Rethinking interventions in light of social inequities

The research component of Levelling the Playing Fields reveals that children do not often play freely – on average, once or twice a week – and do not actively and independently travel to places that are within walking distance, regardless of the socioeconomic conditions of their neighborhood or city of residence. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted limitations on children's participation in unstructured physical activities and active mobility.

AN EVEN LOWER PARTICIPATION RATE IN DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOODS

The results also show lower levels of free play and active, independent mobility among children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, a finding that is consistent with those of previous studies.

In fact, some studies show that children and their parents living in disadvantaged neighborhoods face multiple barriers that prevent them from engaging in unstructured physical activities, including:



Those barriers must be taken into account when selecting the locations for interventions and designing them. It is therefore essential to implement strategies and changes based on the specific needs and characteristics of each community to more effectively promote children's independence and physical activity.

Policies and practices should aim to create environments that encourage children's independent mobility, active transportation, and free play. By considering the connections between these three activities, it is possible to develop strategies that address various aspects of children's well-being.

Available resources

The Levelling the Playing Fields **toolkit** is designed to support and equip the school community (parent groups, school administrators, school professionals, etc.) in implementing a school street project.

Various tools are available (in French only), including:

- Sample letters for contacting municipal or borough elected officials;
- Sample letters for mobilizing a group of parent volunteers;
- Flyers to notify the neighborhood about the event;
- A guide to ensure the smooth launch of the school street;
- Practical information on permit and insurance applications.

In short, a collection of useful information to successfully implement a school street and allow children to move freely and safely!



To download the toolkit:
changerlesreglesdujeu.ca/fr/boite-a-outils

AVENUES FOR ACTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Continuing education is at the heart of change, as it helps shift mindsets and, ultimately, restore children to their rightful place within communities. Various target groups could be made aware of the issues facing children in the city:

- **Elected officials and municipal professionals**, to ensure that children's needs are incorporated into urban planning, transportation, and services. Police, fire, and emergency services can also be trained in the protection and well-being of young people.
- **Future professionals**, to integrate the role of children in urban settings into engineering, urban planning, and architecture curricula, and to make free play, active transportation, independent mobility, and child safety ongoing concerns for these designers.
- **Local organizations**, since they are often key partners in implementing interventions.

Going beyond the boundaries of research and intervention

As the initiative takes on a Canada-wide scope, the research team is exploring new avenues of inquiry.

Engage children from the very outset of projects

So far, children have been consulted through focus groups before and after the interventions, but they could play a greater role as primary stakeholders. Since focus groups are generally designed to meet the needs of adults, we should find playful ways to involve young people, particularly in choosing the street and its design, as well as in data collection.

Improving accessibility to play streets and school streets

These initiatives have proven to be relevant and effective, but are they universally accessible? This question arises particularly for children with special needs, as well as for residents of different ages and with diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, in the case of school streets, it is important to focus not only on the immediate vicinity of the school but also on the entire route children take to school, as to provide a safe and welcoming environment for all their trips.

Provide for permanent infrastructure

Setting up play streets and school streets with the help of volunteers requires a great deal of time as well as significant human and financial resources. This temporary approach, however, has the advantage of gradually familiarizing residents with this type of initiative. Many stakeholders, however, wonder whether it might be more sustainable to opt for permanent infrastructure, such as removable barriers that open and close according to school schedules, or areas permanently closed to traffic (see the example of [Place de l'Ange-Cornu](#) in the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough).

On this topic, you can read more in the "Réinventer la rue devant l'école" guide (in French only), published by Centre d'écologie urbaine and available on the [Levelling the Playing Fields](#) website.

Relaunch play streets

Because of their role in making school zones safer, school streets have received a great deal of attention, unlike play streets. However, these two types of initiatives serve similar goals: to provide children with opportunities and spaces that encourage them to move, explore, and play freely, safely, and independently. Play streets will also be revived to raise awareness of their value in urban life.

National Active School Streets Initiative (NASSI)

In its early days, Levelling the Playing Fields focused on Quebec and Ontario. In addition to the pilot projects in Montréal, others were launched in Kingston, creating "school streets" and "play streets". The Ontario component, led by researcher Patricia Collins of Queen's University, allowed the research team to deepen its understanding of the effects of these interventions, since Kingston differs geographically and demographically from Montréal.

Today, Levelling the Playing Fields aims to expand school streets across Canada as part of the **National Active School Streets Initiative**. Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada's Health of Canadians and Communities Fund, this program is coordinated by [Green Communities Canada](#) and implemented by [8 80 Cities](#) and the Centre for Urban Ecology. Its evaluation will be conducted by research partners at the Université de Montréal, the University of British Columbia, Queen's University, and Toronto Metropolitan University.

Launched in 2024, this initiative will run through 2027 and **calls for the establishment of about 30 school streets in six provinces**: British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick.

In conclusion

The creation of a Canada-wide movement like this national initiative is an essential first step toward mobilizing communities and demonstrating the growing interest in these infrastructure projects that promote active mobility, well-being, and child-safety.

However, to transform this momentum into lasting change, we must go further by taking concrete steps, namely:

- Incorporating school streets into public policies;
- Integrating their principles into municipal and provincial regulatory frameworks;
- And ensuring stable funding for them.

This also involves documenting their positive impacts to convince decision-makers of their benefits and to embed these practices.



ABOUT THE STUDY

OBJECTIVES

- Study the implementation and feasibility of urban initiatives such as play streets and school streets in Montréal and Kingston.
- Study the effects of play streets and school streets on children's free play, independent mobility, and active transportation.
- Study the effects of play streets and school streets on the permissions granted by parents to their children, perceptions of barriers to children's active and independent mobility, and perceptions of neighborhood safety.
- Study the satisfaction and perceptions of users and residents regarding play streets and school streets.
- Study the possibility of implementing school streets citywide in Montréal.

METHODS

- Pre- and post-intervention assessments
- Parent-Child questionnaires
- Direct observations on the street
- Hands-up surveys in the classroom
- Focus groups with children
- Individual interviews with key informants
- Door-to-door surveys with residents
- Telephone surveys with parents

Ethics certificate from the Université de Montréal's Health Research Ethics Committee: CERSES-20-043-P.

Funding: Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) 2021-2024 (PJT-175153) ; ministère de l'Économie, de l'Innovation et de l'Énergie.

To learn more about...

- Research-intervention project Levelling the Playing Fields
- National Active School Streets Initiative
- Toolkit for setting up a school street or a play street
- "Des villes à hauteur d'enfants" webinar
- Training opportunities for municipalities



Please visit the webpage of *Spotlight on the research*

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