



To: Neighbourhoods and City Development
From: Adrian Davis
Date: 28/01/13
Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No. 96 Declining Independent Mobility among children

Top line: The increasing domination of motor traffic is heavily implicated in the drastic decline in children independent mobility. Controlling motor traffic is important in reversing the decline and improving children's physical health and mental wellbeing.

Children's ability to get about in their local neighbourhood without adult supervision has been shown to be important to their wellbeing and development. Yet a new study shows that children have far less independent mobility now than they did in the past. Declining independent mobility may in part explain declines in physical activity in young people.¹

The new report is part of a longer term study which has assessed children's independent mobility across 40 years. In 1990, Policy Studies Institute (PSI) research revealed a startling reduction in children's independent mobility between its first surveys in 1971 and 1990. Twenty years on, the survey was repeated to examine the changes in children's independent mobility over nearly 40 years in England and over 20 years in Germany.² Similar questionnaires in 1971, 1990 and 2010 were used in the surveys of children aged 7-15 years old in England and Germany (in 1990 and 2010) as part of the school day.² A second questionnaire was given to a parent or guardian to ascertain their attitudes and concerns on the subject. Surveyed were conducted in five areas in both England and Germany, chosen to give a cross-sectional snapshot of each country from inner and outer urban to small town and rural locations.

In terms of results the researchers found that:

- There has been a huge reduction in the independent mobility of primary school children in England since 1971. There has been a smaller decrease in the percentage of English secondary school children being granted some 'licences', of independent mobility eg to travel to school or cross roads unaccompanied by an adult
- English primary school children had less independent mobility than their German peers in 1990 and this remains the case in 2010. German primary school children were granted all the licences of independent mobility in greater proportions and at earlier ages than their English counterparts.
- Far more English children were accompanied by an adult on the journey home from school in 2010 than in 1971. In 1971, 86 per cent of the parents of primary school children surveyed said that their children were allowed to travel home from school alone. By 1990, this had dropped markedly to 35 per cent, and there was a further drop to 25 per cent being allowed to do so in 2010.
- In 2010, in England there was a marked increase in adult accompaniment on non-school journeys, with 62 per cent of the journeys in 2010 being accompanied, compared to 41 per cent in 1971.

The researchers concluded that key focus of policy should be addressing the dominance of motor traffic in both urban and rural settings, and the decline in the perceived protection afforded by having pedestrians out and about in the community so that parents can feel more confident in letting their children out alone.

¹ See Essential Evidence on a page No 36 <http://www.travelwest.info/evidence>

² PSI, 2013 Children's independent mobility in England and Germany, 1971-2010. London: PSI. http://www.psi.org.uk/index.php/site/news_article/851