Children's Geographies, 2013
Vol. 11, No. 2, 215–229, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.779839

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

New Zealand parents' understandings of the intergenerational decline in children's independent outdoor play and active travel

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Children's independent mobility and physical activity levels are declining in Western countries. In the past 20 years New Zealand children's active travel (walking and cycling) has dropped on average from 130 to 72 minutes per week, and those travelling by car to school have increased from 31% to 58%. This paper describes parents' understandings of why 9–11-year-old primary school children in suburban Auckland are less likely to walk to school and play unsupervised outdoors than they were as children. Data gathered in focus groups show understandings range from proximate neighbourhood explanations to downstream impacts of a neoliberal policy context.

Keywords: children; independent mobility; neighbourhood; parenting practices; New Zealand

Introduction

Across a wide range of western countries, the phenomenon of declining physical activity and independent mobility (unsupervised travel and outdoor play) has been reported (e.g. Carver, Timperio, and Crawford 2008; Fyhri et al. 2011; Gaster 1991; Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Wen et al. 2009). A combination of heightened parental concerns about children's well-being (e.g. 'stranger-danger' and traffic safety concerns), loss of variety of outdoor spaces, high rates of car ownership and a fundamental shift in the structuring and routines of urban life have been identified as contributing to the decline in both active travel and outdoor play (Fyhri et al. 2011; Gaster 1991; Mitchell, Kearns, and Collins 2007). Safety-conscious parenting practices such as chauffeuring children between activities and supervising their outdoor play (Karsten 2005; Mackett et al. 2007) in tandem with a growth in the appeal of indoor activities (e.g. computers, videogames) have been identified as complicit in the change in children's engagement with the outdoors and a consequent reduction in independent mobility (Biddle et al. 2009; Wen et al. 2009).

In New Zealand, the foregoing trends are clearly evident. The time children spend engaged in active travel (i.e. walking and cycling) has almost halved from a mean of 130 to 72 minutes per week over the past two decades. During the same period, the numbers of children who usually travel by car to school increased from 31% to 58% (MoT 2012). In tandem with this trend, the public open spaces in neighbourhood as well as private play environments are becoming fewer or at least more restrictive in character.

Intergenerational studies of play behaviours confirm a progressive increase in the age children are allowed to play outdoors alone, a decline in time engaged in outdoor and unstructured play, increased participation in structured, supervised and indoor activities, and more parental rules and

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restrictions on children's spatial freedoms (Gaster 1991; Karsten 2005). Too easily, such changes are attributed to the cumulative effects of individual attitudes and actions. Rather, social, cultural and structural explanations warrant attention. Australian research has suggested strong cultural expectations that have given rise to the 'back seat generation'. Dowling (2000), for instance, sees driving children between even local destinations as linked to the performance of 'good mothering'.

This 'performance' perspective builds on earlier work which identified parenting as a process not only shaped by personal preference but also shaped by social networks (Dyck 1990). As Barker (2011, 414) argues, such processes influence the development of cultures of parenting that are 'local and spatially variable'.

Auckland, our study context, is the largest city in New Zealand and estimated to have a 2012 population of 1.5 million, or almost one-third of the nation's population (Auckland Council 2012). Although it is a large and spatially diverse city, we can nonetheless speculate that there are generically distinctive 'Auckland' parenting styles, especially relative to other parts of New Zealand. Research has shown, for instance, that while Auckland parents increasingly transport their children by car, they also often express concern at their children's lack of physical activity and freedom to roam (Bean, Kearns, and Collins 2008). The net effect of such trends is reduced independent mobility that potentially impacts negatively on children's current and future health and well-being (Brown et al. 2008; Kelty, Giles-Corti, and Zubrick 2008).

Macro-level socio-demographic and economic influences such as the increasing participation of women in the workforce have also fuelled change, precipitating shifts in child-rearing practices (Pont et al. 2009). The trend for both parents being employed within two-parent families, along with the increase in the proportion of one parent families, has contributed to 'time scarcity' (Strazdins and Loughrey 2008) and the tendency for parents to drive children to even relatively nearby destinations in the course of 'trip-chaining'.

Urban design is complicit also. Since the 1960s urban planning in New Zealand has been auto centric, resulting in low density suburbanisation, poor public transport networks and increased distances between home and destinations of daily life (Witten, Abrahamse, and Stuart 2011). Increasing rates of car ownership has been a societal response to these changes as a way to compress time-space and also cope with 'time scarcity' (Freeman and Tranter 2011). Commonly, contemporary children's leisure and educational destinations are spatially dispersed through, for example, participation in formal extra-curricular activities (Clements 2004; Witten et al. 2009). A Dunedin study highlighted that many participants aged 9–11 years participated in more than one activity per day, often located outside their neighbourhood (Freeman and Quigg 2009). The net result is that they are 'chauffeured' to a range of urban destinations as the immediate neighbourhood rarely satisfies parental aspirations for their children's leisure and education (Fyhri et al. 2011; Karsten 2009).

Since the 1980s, the neoliberal 'turn' in New Zealand society has seen a raft of policy changes that have added to a complex and potent mix of influences on urban children's lives (Crompton 2002; Larner 2000). Deregulation of used car imports is one example. This change contributed to a threefold increase in car ownership rates from 220 to 677 per 1000 between 1961 and 2011 (MoT 2011), exacerbating car-reliance, traffic congestion and a momentum towards urban sprawl.

The neoliberal policy context is also implicated in such developments as the casualisation of employment (Lambert and Webster 2010), increasing income inequalities, and decreasing rates of home ownership, all of which impact on children, particularly those from low income families (Johnson 2012). As parents seek out stability and opportunity, frequent residential moves invariably serve to loosen the bonds between families, schools and neighbourhood networks. A further complication has been the relaxation of school zones in larger New Zealand cities and the popularity of private schools, which are invariably located outside children's own neighbourhoods

(Lewis 2004). These trends which exacerbated the use of car travel have been identified as likely drivers of a decline in children's independent mobility (Fyhri et al. 2011).

Much of the foregoing literature surmises the influences that shape the lives of parents and children. In this paper, we present and analyse parents' understandings of why 9–11-year-old children attending suburban primary schools in Auckland, New Zealand are less likely to walk or cycle to school and play unsupervised in neighbourhood spaces than they were as children. We draw on data gathered in focus groups undertaken in 2011 with parents of children in this age group to address the question: from parents' perspectives, what are the influences upon the intergenerational decline in children's independent outdoor play and active travel? In gathering parents' reflections on how their experience of childhood has changed, we acknowledge earlier explorations by Gaster (1991) and Karsten (2005) in the USA and Holland, respectively. However, we distinguish our investigation by its focus on not only parents' childhoods but also parents' assessment of their current parenting practices in light of changed urban-social contexts.

Context

Kids in the City is a study investigating children's experiences and use of their local neighbourhoods, their independent mobility and physical activity. It is a mixed methods project in which we collected experiential data from children during 'go-along' neighbourhood walks, and quantitative data on their mobility and physical activity using trip diaries, geographic positioning systems and accelerometers. The children were recruited through six state primary schools in suburban Auckland. Four of the schools were rated by the Ministry of Education as decile one, indicating that the households in the school catchment areas were in the poorest 10% of New Zealand neighbourhoods. Two schools were decile four and five, and hence representative of medium income areas. School neighbourhoods were selected to have either high or low walking access to a range of destinations (e.g. parks, schools, shops) using the Neighbourhood Destinations Accessibility Index (Witten et al. 2011). One mid and two low decile schools have favourable walking access to local amenities and the other three schools have poorer access.

In the course of the study, the parents of the 150-child participants completed a telephone survey on their neighbourhood perceptions and children's independent travel to various neighbourhood destinations. Demographic data were also collected. The parents came from diverse ethnic backgrounds with 20% Samoan, 19% Māori, 13% European, 12.5% Indian, 8.5% Niuean, 8.5% Tongan, 8% Cook Island, 5% Asian (e.g. Chinese, Taiwanese), with smaller numbers of other ethnic groups. One parent families made up 30% of the sample. Of the parents interviewed two-thirds were working or studying outside the home, 68% fulltime and 31% part-time. Of the parents with a partner, 80% of the partners were working and 9% were studying outside the home. Eighty-eight per cent of families lived in a free-standing house and 96% had access to their own outdoor garden space. With the exception of the decile four school neighbourhood, where 31% of participants lived in multi-unit dwellings, there was little variation across study neighbourhoods in housing type or garden access. Home ownership rates were low overall (23%) but varied widely between schools (75% in the decile five school, 28% in the decile four school and 13%, 13%, 5% and 4%, respectively, in the decile one school neighbourhoods). The latter figures reflect the availability of social housing in these neighbourhoods. Car ownership rates were high with almost half the households having two or more cars and only 8.5% with no car access. Time spent living at their current address ranged from a mean of 6.5 years in the decile four school sample to 8.4 years at one of the decile one schools.

Auckland experienced a 6.5% population growth rate between 2006 and 2010, exceeding that of most other cities in New Zealand (Auckland Council 2012). Despite this change, Auckland

remains a very green city with numerous public open spaces. While the city's central core is intensely developed, the majority of urban Auckland features low-density residential and commercial activity. A key characteristic of the city is its growing multiculturalism. Three decades ago, there were few numerically significant cultural groups in addition to indigenous Māori, descendants of European settlers, and migrants from the Pacific Islands. Changes in immigration policy have seen Auckland emerge as New Zealand's preferred destination for over 100 nationalities. Two of the major groups contributing to the population increase (since the late 1980s) have been migrants from China and the Indian subcontinent (Friesen 2008). The proportion of Auckland residents born overseas increased from 23% in 1986 to 37% in 2006 (Statistics NZ 1997, 2007).

Methods

Parents of the *Kids in the City* participants were invited to attend a focus group discussion at their child's school and 68 parents took part. Eleven focus groups were held (two per school, with the exception of one decile one school where only one group was held). The groups of four to eight parents were each facilitated by a member of the research team. We identify the schools as letters to preserve anonymity in fidelity to the ethical agreement established between the schools and the researchers. Parents were initially asked about their play, active travel and neighbourhood experiences while they were children themselves. The discussion then turned to these aspects of their children's lives as well as parents' understandings of why their children's play and mobility behaviours differed from their own at the same age. The discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. The first two authors read and discussed all transcripts before confirming a coding frame for the data which became the basis of a thematic analysis. NVivo was used to facilitate data management.

Results

There was near universal agreement amongst our study parents that their children had less freedom to explore neighbourhood environments than they had experienced as children. Recollections of their childhoods commonly included knowing and being known by neighbours, moving freely in and out of friends' and relatives' houses and roaming outdoors in groups of mixed-aged siblings, cousins and friends, returning home when darkness fell or they were called for meals or tasks. However, for their children's lives, and in keeping with findings of research undertaken elsewhere, close monitoring and surveillance of out-of-school time was commonplace. Safety concerns were the prime drivers of these practices. At the mid-decile schools, traffic volumes and speed were the primary concern, whereas at the low-decile schools, parents talked more often about people-related fears including strangers, gangs and drunken youths. Parents who allowed their children to play or travel in public spaces without adult supervision talked about using spatial and temporal boundaries to limit where their children went and for how long. Social rules relating to whom their children could 'hang out' with, both accompanied and unaccompanied by adults, were also common. For instance, allowing a child to hang out with particular friends was, for a number of parents, conditional on first meeting the children's parents.

We now turn to the primary purpose of the paper: to provide an account of parents' understandings of why their children are less likely to walk or cycle to school and play unsupervised in neighbourhood streets and public spaces than they themselves were as children. Parents discussed a range of factors that, in their estimation, had contributed to a decline in children's independent mobility (see Figure 1). These factors, and discursive pathways linking them to a decline in neighbourhood play and active travel, will be discussed and illustrated with excerpts from the

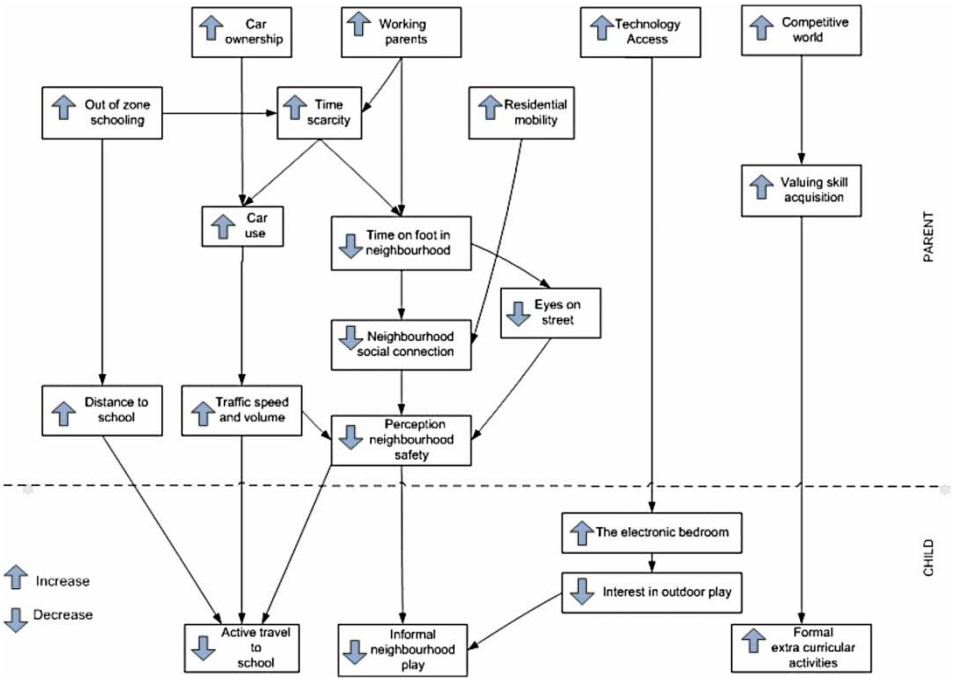

Figure 1. Factors influencing children's active travel, informal play and formal activities.

focus group discussions. In the following sections, the decile one schools are identified as A, B, C and D, respectively, and the decile 4/5 schools by letters E and F.

Working parents – time scarcity – less time in the neighbourhood

Busier lives and fewer neighbourly contacts were common starting points for discussion as parents reflected on how family life had changed since they were children. More constrained economic conditions meant that parents in two-parent households were often both in paid work and juggling scarce time resources to meet expectations and commitments at home, work and within their extended families. Coping with competing demands was also a common concern in one-parent households. Employment usually took parents out of the neighbourhood by day and could extend into the evenings or overnight for those engaged in shift work. An uncertain job market contributed to a sense that opportunities for changing stressful aspects of daily lives were slim. It was not uncommon for parents to describe feeling locked into a cycle of unrelenting stressors as portrayed in the following account:

> . . . things have got very expensive now and um . . . work is, you know, it's very risky. People don't have enough job. Don't have full-time job . . .. If you don't work then you can't pay your mortgage, you can't pay your rent, you can't survive . . .. nowadays you have to do your work – outside work and then run after the kids. It becomes just too much and by the time you are finished with it you are just knackered . . .. you are so tired and you don't even have time . . . you say, 'Oh, Ok. I can't be bothered now. Next day'. (School D)

Parents working longer hours frequently used formal or informal after-school care for their children. They were aware that these arrangements often reduced their children's opportunity to walk home with friends and to play locally after school. Working away from home also

made it difficult for parents to support informal home and neighbourhood-based play arrangements. Many of the pressures experienced by parents and families were attributed to wider societal trends, particularly relating to employment. The following example relates to hours of work:

> The worker expectation has grown so much. I mean, back in the day. You know, you're talking late nights with just Thursday, Friday night. You know Saturday used to be a half day. Sunday used to be closed. (School D)

Parents also talked about coming under intense pressure from their children to purchase consumer goods – 'the pressure is very strong. Everything they see on TV is what they want' – a pressure their own parents were less likely to have faced.

Social connection – neighbourhood safety – residential mobility

Not knowing people in their neighbourhood was considered to be a downstream consequence of busier lives and time scarcity. The invisibility of children was also frequently mentioned – '[Y]ou hear them but you never see them'. The most common explanation parents gave for the apparent disappearance of people, including children, from neighbourhood streets was women's participation in paid work. Fewer women at home or out and about in the neighbourhood during the day was linked to parents' talk of declining neighbourhood-based relationships and exchanges and a general loss of 'eyes on the street'.

> . . . maybe more people are working these days, cause, you know, things are more expensive so where back then the mothers would, you know, most of them stay at home and if you were walking down the street and you should be at school then, you know, then mum would ring you. (School B)

This quote also alludes to the loss of neighbourhood-level surveillance of children's activities.

While not directly associated with trends in women's working lives, it was noted that 'people aren't having children like they used to', reducing the chance of playmates of a similar age living in the street. Smaller family size was also implicated in the decline in children's independent mobility in the comment below.

> if anyone was going swimming we all went swimming together we [were] taught to stay together we were taught to look after one another. (School E)

Participants implied that when they were young, older siblings cared for younger ones and a group of children playing together contributed a sense of safety in numbers. Parents were now reluctant to let their children out to play in empty streets and, in particular, streets not peopled with familiar faces. However, opportunities to meet and develop relationships with neighbours and neighbouring families, with the exception of relatives, were deemed by many parents to be rare. The parent quoted below talked of valuing neighbourhood relationships while at the same time noting that they were not always easy to establish.

> you know, one of our neighbours' kids are exactly the same age but it took us five years to meet them . . .. a whole five years when they were kind of babies to five year olds and we didn't even know about each other. So . . . it does take a long time. (School E)

While not the case in this circumstance, residential mobility was often identified as a reason that parents and children were not getting to know neighbours.

> New people come in. Two, three years move out. How are we going to make new, good neighbours? (School F)

Interestingly, both residential mobility and immobility were depicted as outcomes of economic hardship which had consequences for children's independent mobility. On the one hand, financial constraints could restrict a household to a neighbourhood because 'economically you cannot afford to live elsewhere' but, on the other hand, housing costs could fuel residential mobility. A family feeling disgruntled with their neighbourhood environment may limit their children's exposure to local people and places by keeping them indoors (Popay et al. 2003), whereas the family moving often is less likely to build the neighbourhood connections seen as a precursor to children being given licence to move unsupervised within the neighbourhood.

Parental levels of comfort with their children playing at other children's homes and staying for 'sleep overs' was frequently discussed. A few parents never allowed their children to visit or stay overnight at a friend's home but more often visits were contingent on parents first meeting a friend's parent. For some, cross-household visits were only sanctioned when the friend's family were from the same ethnic or religious group and a parent was confident that behavioural expectations (e.g. swearing, alcohol use) and parenting practices (e.g. discipline) would be in keeping with those in their own household. Friction between parents was noted over the varying licences they gave their children. Several parents recounted instances when they had allowed their child and a visiting friend to go unaccompanied to a local shop or shopping mall, but had later faced disapproval from the friend's parent.

Car ownership – car use – traffic

Busier lives were seen as contributing to more car travel and streets that were less safe for children. Yet a car was considered essential to meet family and work commitments by most parents and convenience and safety were the main reasons parents gave for driving children to school and other destinations. Some groups of parents talked about connections between their own transport behaviours, congested and unsafe streets and a general decline in children's active travel. For example:

> So it's more convenient for us to drop them off . . . So we're actually adding to the traffic flow. (School E)

While most parents thought adults generally looked out for children an alternative discourse with respect to declining safety on neighbourhood streets related to rogue behaviour by members of a society too focused on their own interests to care about the well-being of others.

> Yeah, no one cares anymore. You know, it's like, 'I want to get to my destination and I don't care if you're going to cut me off or you're in my way, I'm going to get there no matter what. (School B)

The benefits of walking were also acknowledged if destinations were within walking distance but what constitutes 'walking distance' was not specified.

> But if it was within walking distance, yes, I would have let them do it because I think that builds more, they get more confident and they get, and I feel those kids are more like, more mature as well. (School F)

While links were made between parents' driving practices and an overall decline in children's street safety, parents did not comment on associations between car dependency, urban design and distance to school.

A competitive world

Moving to the right-hand side of Figure 1, several groups of parents alluded to the neoliberalised world of contemporary New Zealand, talking about the job market being more competitive than in the past and how, as parents, they needed to prepare their children for it. While play was seen as learning and an important aspect of childhood for many parents, there was a secondary discourse that considered 'play' to be a distraction from the business of acquiring skills that would equip children to compete for jobs in the future.

> . . . the world is so competitive we just can't let them muck around, you have to give them skills now that is what I believe, and after school they have to do some more other things whatever it might be but they have to be skilful . . . the world is so fast and God knows what it is going to be after ten or fifteen years when they are on their own . . .. if you just let them all go out and play and do whatever they like they would be nowhere when they have to face the world . . . (School E)

Loosely linked to this notion of urgency regarding skill-development, parents at the mid-decile schools spoke about the practice of sending children to out-of-zone schools. The implication of this choice was that parents were choosing an out-of-zone school because it was 'better' than the local school.

> These days parents tend to look further out of their communities for schools. They look for better schools . . .. So, your kids don't all go to the same school. (School E)

The downsides of out-of-zone schooling identified by parents have relevance to children's independent mobility. The practice was seen as limiting the potential for neighbourhood-based friendship networks, and, with fewer children attending the local school, it was suggested that children might have fewer friends or older children to walk alongside on the route to school. Clearly, these processes were decreasing the possibility of 'safety in numbers' for parents. Also, the distance to school for children attending out-of-zone schools would be longer meaning active travel would be even less likely than to a neighbourhood school.

Attending after-school sports, academic and cultural activities and classes was relatively common for children, especially in the mid-decile schools. Parents valued these activities as their children gained new skills, but they also felt reassured knowing their children were in a safe and supervised environment while not in their care. The costs of out-of-school activities were prohibitive for some families and the parent below contrasts fee-based classes on offer today with her recollection of the availability of school-based activities in the past.

> I have got one in gymnastics but all that it is really expensive and we have got four kids . . .. I would like to put them all into different groups during the week but that is so expensive and I remember when I was a school you didn't have to go outside of the school for groups everything you could do it, it was all within the school you know rugby and anything you did, you have to go outside now, it is all different. (School C)

After-school care programmes offer a range of homework, social and physical activities but sports training and language and numeracy classes were more commonly provided by membership-based clubs and private tuition companies.

The electronic bedroom

Still on the right-hand side of Figure 1, children's access to, and use of, technology was a source of tension for many parents. Technology was seen to have advantages but also drawbacks. On the

plus side, parents admired their children's competency with technology, and their fingertip access to knowledge. Good skills in this area were considered crucial to their children's future employment prospects.

> And in a car plant these days you hardly see any people whereas you used to see two hundred . . .. They've just got robots doing all the work . . . if you look at any company you see machines doing the work that ten people used to do. So that is the future for them so they have to embrace it and become familiar with it. (School F)

However, parents also complained that it was hard to extract children from their electronic bedrooms and time absorbed in virtual entertainment was at the cost of outdoor play. Technology sufficed for entertainment.

> . . . access to so much technology now they've got their entertainment sitting right there on the couch, it's in front of them. (School B)

Several parents suggested that their children seemed to have lost the ability to play imaginatively outdoors and compared their children's experiences to their own largely pre-technology childhoods when 'back then, you had to use your imagination otherwise you'd be bored all day'.

> Like if I asked Connie to go outside and play, she'd be like, she'd stand out there and be like, 'What do you want me to do?' You know, like they've got no imagination cause it's, everything's, yeah, like technology. (School B)

Time spent in supervised outdoor activities, particularly sporting activities, was often positioned as counterbalancing sedentary time spent in front of a computer screen. Accounts of unstructured play offsetting online time like the following were rare:

> . . . him and his friends they ride their bikes like mad and then they sit down and they play it [playstation] and then they go out and they ride their bikes. So, they're either kind of really going for it or they're really still . . . that's kind of cool. (School E)

Reflecting on the freedoms of childhood, several parents contrasted the loss of freedom to roam with new freedoms acquired through technology such as access to money through ATMs and access to friends online. A number of examples are given in the excerpt below:

> look at the freedom that they have on the internet, on their cell phones, on everything . . . they've got more freedom . . . It's a different type of freedom . . .. It's not just physical freedom. (School D)

While parents commonly voiced concern over the length of time their children spent using technology, many also felt disempowered to limit their access to it. For some, electronic entertainment gave rise to further parenting tensions as children absorbed in technology could allow their parents valued 'down time' after a working day.

Discussion

Consistent with travel and physical activity survey data, our study parents described substantial intergenerational changes in children's play and mobility-related behaviours. Despite the parents' childhood locations varying widely by country and across urban, village and rural settings, compared to their children's lives in suburban Auckland, their childhoods were generally depicted as a

time of greater spatial freedom, safer neighbourhoods and communities in which 'everyone knew everyone'. Although these descriptions may suggest nostalgic memories of childhood, not all the parents' childhood recollections were positive; some parents worked from an early age, had few material resources and recalled the experience of being on the receiving end of harsh discipline. Hence, there was diversity in participants' particular experiences, but commonalities in their general recollection of greater spatial freedoms.

In each of the study neighbourhoods, unique local places, people, incidents and hearsay were identified as having a bearing on the spatial freedoms children were permitted. Rather than focus on these neighbourhood-specific factors, this paper has drawn on the parents' musings on wider social and environmental changes that have influenced changing play and active travel practices. Further, the group-dynamic context for data collection encouraged the identification of common ground across difference among diverse participants.

As gatekeepers of their children's mobility behaviours, parents' understandings of how a decline in children's physical activity and independent mobility has come about may suggest avenues for research and interventions directed at reversing the trend. In this context, the importance of parenting practices lies in the mediating role they are likely to have on any hypothesised pathway between environmental or policy interventions and change in children's mobility behaviours. Of particular interest are situations in which a parent's understandings align with, and depart from, other forms of evidence on drivers of the generational shift in children's mobility patterns.

As research evidence is accumulating of positive associations between the built environment and adults' physical activity, a number of studies have also investigated these relationships for children. Although results have been inconsistent, there is some evidence of associations between children's active travel to school and street connectivity, dwelling density and distance to school (Frank et al. 2007; Giles-Corti et al. 2011). Associations between traffic speed and volume and walking or cycling to school have also been reported (Giles-Corti et al. 2009). Of these, traffic concerns and distance to school were consistent with parental discourse on barriers to active travel, but distance to other amenities, unless they were within sight of home, and structural, less immediately visible aspects of streets and neighbourhood design were not discussed. For example, connections were not made in parents' talk between car use, urban design and distance to school. While interventions in these areas may promote changing practices without explicit links being made between them by parents, public discourse more informed and accepting of relationships between dwelling density, distance to destinations and active travel may temper community resistance to more compact urban form and rally support for neighbourhood design that reduces distance to school.

Benign surveillance provided by the presence of pedestrians and watching eyes from windows overlooking the street is a mainstay of strategies to increase street safety. As Tranter and Pawson (2001) point out, the decline in pedestrian numbers as car dependency has increased has created a social trap, whereby the few children still walking do not benefit from safety in numbers. This issue was discussed by our parents and may provide an opening for shifting parenting practices towards greater support for active travel. Interventions that repopulate neighbourhood settings by day and strengthen the benevolent surveillance of children's movements are needed. In Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls' (1999) terms, what is required are strategies to bolster neighbourhood collective efficacy – a belief that local people will use their social resources to take local action. However, easy solutions are unlikely in light of the prevailing demographic trends of increasing workforce participation by parents and smaller family size, factors identified as reducing neighbourhood foot traffic.

Financial stress may not at first glance seem to have much to do with children's independent mobility and physical activity, but in our participants' worlds, the cost of living, family-unfriendly

working times and hours, an insecure job market and exposure to consumer goods clustered together and cumulatively caused both financial stress and a reduction in the time they spent with their children. This situation, in turn, limited neighbourhood social connections and parents' abilities to maintain loose surveillance of neighbourhood play and active travel. The experience of job and income stress was also seen as influencing a permissive approach to children's technology use in some families where digital fluency was seen as critical for their children's future work prospects. This permissiveness posed a dilemma for parents who were aware that their children would benefit from more outdoor play and physical activity, yet were disinclined to curtail onscreen time where it was seen as preparing them for the future.

The relationships between children's screen time (i.e. technology use), sedentary behaviour and physical activity and health-related outcomes such as quality of life, cardio-respiratory fitness and obesity are receiving considerable research attention, with evidence indicating higher screen time and sedentary behaviour is generally associated with lower levels of physical activity and more negative health outcomes (Aggio et al. 2012; Biddle et al. 2004, 2009; Gopinath et al. 2012; Lacy et al. 2012). However, suggestions of moral panic over negative outcomes of technology use have been tempered by accounts of sedentary pastimes such as reading and board games that always have been part of children's lives (Biddle et al. 2004) and studies demonstrating continuities between the virtual and more tangible aspects of children's lives (Valentine and Holloway 2002). Our parents weighed up 'pro and cons' of technology use, with access to knowledge and future job prospects considered alongside a perceived loss of imaginative and active outdoor play, as well as the minutes they gained to unwind as technology kept their children's demands at bay.

Children's enrolment in sports clubs and academic tuition served several purposes. Sports participation was at times sought out by parents to increase their children's physical activity in lieu of informal play. After-school tuition, more commonly discussed in our mid-decile school neighbourhoods, was primarily sought to boost academic skills and opportunities. Both types of engagement offered a safe, supervised setting that was highly valued by parents. Sports clubs have long been an integral part of New Zealand children's childhood (Ergler, Kearns, and Witten, forthcoming) but out-of-school tuition is a more recent phenomenon. Businesses providing maths and English language classes have grown rapidly over recent decades. The development of norms around participation in such pay-as-you-go after-school and weekend activities appears to be a response to both a general unease at children having time on their hands, and an anxiety that school will be insufficient preparation for their ultimate participation in a competitive working world. As such, these concerns appear to be sufficiently pervasive to contribute to an Auckland-style culture of parenting.

In the ethnically diverse study neighbourhoods, parents were generally cautious about their children visiting unfamiliar households where parenting practices may differ to their own. Relatives' homes and households with common ethnic or church ties were strongly favoured as environments in which parents were confident that parenting practices reflected common social and cultural histories. Church and extended family events were prominent features of the social lives of many households in these communities (Karsten 2005). Traditional practices maintained valued culturally specific behaviours while simultaneously distancing their children from undesirable behaviours they observed in others and reducing the chance of their parenting practices being exposed and criticised by the dominant cultural group. However, such distancing was seldom absolute and examples of acquiescence to local notions of good parenting were described. By way of example, a new migrant father responded to disapproval from another parent when he allowed a child to go to a shop unaccompanied by accepting such forays should cease (c.f. Dowling 2000).

The parents' observations and understandings add depth to current accounts of the drivers of children's declining independent mobility. They describe a cluster of factors – demographic, social and economic – that have, in their eyes, cohered to limit family time and curtail local social connections and experiences which, in turn, were seen as reinforcing restrictive play practices. Our study suggests that further investigation of factors such as neighbourhood social connections, job security and time scarcity is warranted.

By emphasising commonalities in parents' understandings of drivers of children's changing behaviours, the diversity of parents' views and the opportunities afforded and constraints placed on their children's mobility have been invariably underplayed in our paper. This is a limitation of the study. Teasing out differences in parenting practices by ethnicity and other demographic and neighbourhood characteristics will be the focus of future analyses based on parents' survey data. The mixed ethnic backgrounds of focus group participants did not enable analysis of ethnic difference within this data set. The difference noted between a primary concern for people-related safety in our decile one schools and traffic-related safety in the mid-decile schools and varying responses to valuing and balancing the time children spend physically, compared to virtually, active, also warrants further investigation. To note a study strength, asking an ethnically diverse group of parents, who were largely unknown to each other, to reflect on their childhood play and neighbourhood experiences was an effective strategy for establishing group rapport before focusing discussion on children's mobility behaviour and parenting practices.

Conclusion

Parenting practices are a response to a complex blend of family, community and cultural expectations and circumstances (Pinkster and Fortuijn 2009). In his research in New York over two decades ago, Gaster (1991) noted a decline in the supportiveness of neighbourhood environments for children's play since the 1940s. Our Auckland study indicated parallel changes. As our participants grappled with explanations as to why their children's social and spatial freedoms had diminished relative to their own childhood experience, they touched on many ways in which changing social policies had impacted on community and family life. In heeding parents' understandings, we are acknowledging that their gate keeper role in children's lives will be crucial to any reversal of the decline in children's physical activity and independent mobility. Further, the web of influences illustrated in Figure 1 cautions against a single or simple solution. Policy interventions are likely to only ever address these issues partially and it is possible that other strands of policy will undermine such attempts. We, therefore, conclude by highlighting three of these explanations: insecure employment; the diminishing role of the school as the heart of the community, and demographic change. In doing so, we are mindful that the research has been exploratory and the ideas expressed will need substantiating in future studies.

First, our participants primarily lived in lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods where the loss of secure employment, as a consequence of deregulation of the labour market and an increase in casual, short-term jobs, has hit hard. Employment uncertainty and financial pressure saw many parents holding onto jobs and working long hours irrespective of their spatial and temporal compatibility with family life. Flow-on effects were various, including levels of car reliance and trip chaining, the use of institutional after school care, and as a consequence of time scarcity, limited neighbourhood relationships.

Second, educational policy has not been immune from neoliberal tinkering. The easing of school zoning to increase parental choice in schooling, an increase in out-of zone schooling (MoE 2012), closures and mergers of schools based around arguments to increase the efficiency of capital investment in schools (Lewis 2004; Witten et al. 2003), and growth in the numbers of private schools in Auckland[1] are all likely to have contributed to an increase in the average

distance between home and school as reported elsewhere (Fyhri et al. 2011). Schools have traditionally been a focal point for New Zealand's local communities (Witten, McCreanor, and Kearns 2007) and an important site for social connections and generating social capital. In light of our parents' comments on the importance of neighbourhood connections for children's outdoor play, any decline in the 'heart of community' role of schools may diminish opportunities for independent neighbourhood play.

Third, women's participation in the workforce, and as a consequence, fewer mothers in the neighbourhood by day, and smaller families, were the major demographic changes parents linked to children's declining neighbourhood play and active travel to school. Parents also remarked on the demographic change brought about by shifts in immigration policy and new patterns of migration over the last three decades, since many of them were children. While children appeared to mix fluidly across ethnic groups during school hours, some parents felt high levels of ethnic diversity – which often cut across lines of language and religion – reduced their sense of cultural predictability around others' parenting practices and expectations and reduced children's potential neighbourhood friendship networks.

The parents whose voices we have placed at the centre of this paper speak to feelings of both nostalgia and, at times, bewilderment, as they cope with the demands of parenting in an urban world that is very different to the one(s) they knew as children. Few mentioned aspects of current planning imperatives seeking to develop more compact and child-friendly cities through restructuring the built environment (e.g. compact cities, increased street connectivity). We conclude that, in the quest to understand the changing geographies of children's lives and parenting practices, it is critically important to hold in balance a focus on individual-level coping strategies, community-level social dynamics, and society-wide policy influences. The challenge of arresting the inter-generational decline in children's independent outdoor play and active travel is complex and will require continued grappling with complexity and intervening at the levels of individuals, communities and institutions.

Note

1. Numbers of private schools in the Auckland region increased between 2000 and 2007 from 37 to 50 but dropped back to 41 by 2011 (MoE 2012).

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