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Editorial

Children's active transport

The importance of physical activity in children's health and well-being is demonstrated by the publication of 22 articles focusing on children's active travel behaviours over the past three years in the Journal of Transport and Health. However, most of these articles have focused on the UK, USA and Australia; some of the papers in this volume address this limitation by expanding the evidence to other countries, in different contexts, and using some innovative methods. This is particularly important, given declines in active travel by children recorded in most countries, ranging from Brazil (de Sá et al., 2015) to Finland (Kyttä et al., 2015), although not all countries have yet been affected, e.g. Albania (Pojani and Boussauw, 2014).

Mitra et al. (2017) classify activity-transportation lifestyles in relation to a range of objective measures of physical activity and identify four types for children in Canada: Artists, Readers, Homebound and Athletes. Their analysis concludes that these lifestyle behaviours can be explained by socio-economic factors and residential location, thus providing evidence of the influence of social-ecological correlates on children's physical activity levels for future interventions. Along similar lines, but in a very different context, Mehdizadeh et al. (2017) focus on the school trip and the role of perceived walking time to school (PWTS) as a potential barrier to children's active school travel in Iran. Controlling for a range of socio-economic variables, parental attitudes towards safety, and social/cultural norms, they conclude that PWTS is the most important barrier for children's active travel. Woods and Nelson (2014) had previously shown that adolescents who walk estimate walking time to school accurately, but PWTS by adolescent car passengers was substantially overestimated.

In countries with low cycling participation, such as Iran, the walking time to school also has the potential to influence school choice. Mandic et al. (2017) investigate the implications of school choice for active transport to school for children in New Zealand. Despite the absence of school zoning policies, more than half the participants in their study attended the nearest school. They report that school proximity to home is important for school choice, but negative peer feedback may also deter from choosing the nearest school. Taking a longitudinal perspective, Lau et al. (2017) examine how temporal variations in school travel mode may affect physical activity. They conclude that adolescents switching from active to passive transportation modes had a significant drop in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), further emphasising the importance of active transport to school for children's daily physical activity. However, Schoeppe et al. (2015) had previously shown an association between active travel to non-school destinations and overall physical activity levels, but no association between active commuting to school and physical activity levels.

Distance to school is a key factor in many countries, as different as Ireland (Murtagh et al., 2016) and China (Zhang et al., 2017) but, the other important factor that influences school transport behaviours is road safety of children. Parental perceptions of road traffic danger have a strong influence on whether children are allowed to walk to school (Rothman et al., 2015). Hwang et al. (2017) focus on the potential effect of the actual built environment on pedestrian traffic injuries of children in Texas. Emphasising that school-aged children are one of the most vulnerable groups to traffic injury, they look at how neighbourhood characteristics affect child pedestrian crashes around schools. They conclude that a range of built environment features (e.g. missing sidewalks, crosswalk density and quality) may hinder child pedestrian safety, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged children.

All these papers in this issue confirm the importance of location and proximity to school (Lee et al., 2017), alongside support of the built environment (Yu and Zhu, 2016), for encouraging children's active transport habits, albeit in different cultural contexts. The question then remains to what extent school-level policies influence children and young people's travel patterns, with their importance not only for physical activity but also for social interaction (Waygood et al., 2017). Hollein et al. (2017) conclude that schools promoting walking and cycling report higher levels of active transport to/from school in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, as with numerous previous studies around the world (such as Pizarro et al., 2016), such associations are weaker for girls, pointing towards the need for gender-sensitive approaches, which are also needed in those countries where boys tend to walk less than girls (Hatamzadeh et al., 2017). The importance of adults' travel behaviours as role models should also not be underestimated in this context (Elias et al., 2015; Scheiner, 2016).

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