

Summary:

Welfare impacts of car costs on the daily activities of families with children

The welfare effects of car costs on the everyday activities of families with children have attracted little attention. Not much is known about the adjustments that families make in their daily lives or about how they plan activities. The questions addressed in this project are:

- What impacts do variations in car costs have on families in different income brackets and styles of living?
- Which families and which activities will be most affected by increased car costs?

We have tried to answer these questions based on data from national Norwegian Travel Surveys (1992 and 2005) and from five focus groups in three different areas -- Oslo (large city), Fredrikstad (middle-sized town) and Elverum (small town).

Transport and welfare

Daily living and travelling can be seen in a welfare perspective, with transport from one place to another regarded as a tool that satisfies needs in different welfare arenas. In combining welfare, social activities and car use/mobility, we use the terminology of Erik Allardt, whose welfare concepts – “having, loving and being” -- can be related to the purpose of the trip. For “having”, in relation to income, education, employment, etc., we make the connection with commuting and shopping trips; for “loving”, in relation to friendship and social relations, with trips related to visits; and for “being”, in relation to leisure activities, personal development and self-realization, with leisure trips. Access to transport resources contributes to the satisfying of needs in these three welfare arenas and travel activity is an indication of participation in the arenas. In families, children’s leisure activities and related trips are given high priority and belong within the two welfare dimensions “having” and “loving”.

Ballet at Smestad and karate at Kjelsås

A large majority of Norwegian children in the age group 6-12 years take part in some sort of organized leisure activity. Football is the most popular among both girls and boys and in urban and rural areas. There is training several times a week and regular matches for every age level. In most cases, parents transport their

children and many enthusiastic supporters, but especially the younger children. It is not a duty: “We are a group of enthusiastic parents and there are a lot of away matches ... We would rather watch them than the European Cup on television” (father from Elverum).

It is not just football that counts. It is not unusual for the children to test out several different activities before they settle on what they like best (often two or three leisure activities), and this can be anything from “ballet at Smestad to karate at Kjelsås”, as a mother in Oslo has stated.

An active family is a successful family

The activities of most families are limited by the time it takes to get to the venue and by available transport resources. Most parents want their children to decide for themselves which activities to take part in, almost independently of where they take place. “If my daughter wants to go to a ballet school, and there is no school in the vicinity, we have to find a place somewhere else. That is what I think” (father in Oslo). “Our opinion is that it is of value to let our daughter and later our son try as many activities as possible to find out what they like, and then for them to choose a couple to take part in” (father in Elverum).

Parents want their children to participate in “meaningful” activities in the same way as grown-ups do. “... the youngest boy – we have actually thrown him into an activity. Can’t you start with something – please – he was a homebody” (mother in Fredrikstad). “With my daughter it was ballet from four years of age. That’s the way – she had to participate in something” (mother in Oslo).

Discussions and statements from focus groups indicate the strong norm that children should participate in organized leisure activities, regardless of the effort involved in getting there. It is an aspect of being a good mother or father to see to this type of activity. It is also satisfying for the family.

The car is the norm

A large majority of parents claim that a car is a necessity for managing the everyday lives of their children. One mother puts it this way: “For the time being I don’t have the need (for a car). But I can see that when the children start with handball or football, I will have to have a car. It’s also about economy and environment. But first of all because I don’t need one (now). I manage all right without” (lonely mother in Oslo without a car).

The statement reflects the deeply rooted opinion that a car is needed if there are children in the family. This mother lived centrally in the city to avoid being dependent on a car.

Another mother says: “I think it would have been very sad not to have had the possibility to support the children without a car. As a young teenager (12 years) I think parents should drive them instead of sending them by bus” (mother in Fredrikstad).

In some families, the parents want their children to cycle and to get to their activities themselves. “In our house we say that if you can get there by bike, then

the bike is what you use. Otherwise you have to play in the garden. We have insisted on this, so they are not spoiled by being taken by car” (father in Fredrikstad).

In sparsely populated areas, the problem is a lack of cycle lanes. Parents are reluctant to let their children out onto the roads without regulated pavements and/or cycle pathways.

The car: a significant item on the budget, but limited knowledge about the costs

Transport costs constitute about one-fifth of the total consumption budget of households; in perspective, food and drink about 11 percent and housing about 25 percent.

Everybody knows that it is expensive to own a car(s), but because it feels necessary (only 3 percent of families in Norway do not have a car) many parents give the impression that they would rather not know what it really costs. A not unusual reaction on the question of car costs is: “I don’t want to know what it costs. It probably costs more than I think” (mother in Oslo). “... quite consciously I haven’t done that calculation. I only see the bills arrive, shake my head, smile a little and pretend it is fun to pay” (father in Fredrikstad).

Some are worried about finding out that they don’t have the means to run a car. “Most of us believe that what you don’t see you don’t think about. If I began to calculate, perhaps I would find out that I could not afford the car and have to sell it. But, like a lot of other things, the costs don’t show that much” (mother in Elverum).

Very few parents have a full picture of the costs of car ownership. Most have an idea of the approximate fuel costs – at least of what it costs to fill up the fuel tank or how much fuel they use per month. They might also have an idea about some of the other costs, such as insurance and maintenance, but not of all the costs. Annual tax and other taxes are not perceived as very important, but many believe that taxes prevent a change to more environmentally friendly cars.

What happens if car costs increase?

Our calculations based on the Norwegian passenger transport model show that an increase in fuel prices will have only a minor effect on the total number of trips of families with children. Compared to other households, the reduction is smaller. The increase has most effect on shopping and service trips.

Just like an increase in fuel prices, any increase in road tolls, for example the toll cordon (in Oslo), has only a minor effect on the car use of families with children on any trip.

An increase has to be significant (and large) if it is to affect people’s travel patterns. It is easier to habituate to small changes: “I don’t want to think about it. If the price changed from kr 13 to kr 30 I would be shocked, but when it changes gradually you don’t waste time thinking about it” (mother in Fredrikstad).

Reduced fuel costs need not necessarily affect a family's activities and travel patterns. Adjustments can be made, such as a smaller car or a car with less emission, bicycling on shorter trips, doing the shopping in the local vicinity or using public transport. The parents also discussed adjustments such as changing their job or where they lived.

Parents could not agree on how important the car was compared to other types of consumption. However, they all agreed that a reduction in car use as a consequence of increased costs should not have any detrimental effect on their children or their activities.

Further research

Both the statistical analysis and the results from the focus groups show that the car is part and parcel of the everyday lives of families with children. This study is one of a few addressing the relationship between transport costs and the activities of families with children. The statistical basis is national travel surveys carried out for other purposes, but providing a good backdrop for our study. However, they lack data on people's attitudes and on the strategies people choose in their everyday lives.

The focus groups have revealed several interesting phenomena and the relations between them. They emphasize, for example, the children's freedom of choice of leisure activities independently of location; the norms related to parenthood and family life at a child's activity level; a knowledge of car costs; strategies in everyday life regarding planning of activities and relation to the social organization of activities, to mention but a few.

This knowledge can be used as the basis for quantitative surveys of everyday strategies in families -- their activities and balancing of finances economically. A quantitative study has to focus on the normative conditions and structural context for the actions and behaviour of families. It would be interesting to get respondents to concretize the limits they put on themselves in relation to consumption in the area of transport and to list their priorities in terms of activities. In addition, with a large sample there is the possibility to differentiate better between families in different income groups and from different areas than in this study.

The study documented in this report is based on data from Norway. A more solid basis for the conclusions would be a corresponding study done in other countries.