

Summary:

Weekday Journeys by Parents of Small Children

The subject of the report is the use of means of transport to work by parents of small children, and in particular the importance of the car to working parents of children of pre-school age. The report takes as its point of departure the problems with tight schedules experienced by working parents of small children in their domestic and working lives. The choice of cars in preference to other means of transport is regarded among other things as an outcome of pressure of time during the working week, owing to high levels of activity in different areas, at different locations and with different patterns of time spent. For parents of small children, a car is a tool used in an attempt to combine or adapt to the conflicting expectations of families, employers, and society in general.

To understand the underlying reasons why parents of small children travel as they do during the working week, one needs to know the structural, social and individual factors surrounding the planning of the journey, and the part played by time in everyday life. Long distances between homes, jobs, kindergartens, jobs, service institutions, relatives and friends, set opening hours and working hours, and people's own resources and limitations are examples of factors which influence individual journey habits. The report describes the daily lives of working parents of small children in the light of the concept of the "lifecycle squeeze", in which the conflicting expectations of families, employers and other institutions add up to daily routines marked by pressure of time.

Although parents of small children are among those who make the most frequent journeys on working days, we know little about this group's journeys or especially about its use of means of transport. Before developing measures intended to reduce the pressure of time and need to travel of working parents of small children, one needs information about the group's journeys and everyday life. We chose to study journeys to work, because they set limits to how families with small children can spend their time on working days.

The report takes up the following questions:

- How do parents of small children travel to work, and what factors influence their use of cars to work?
- How much do parents of small children travel by car compared to couples with no children?
- Have parents of small children a public transport alternative for their journeys to work?

- Are there differences between mothers and fathers in their uses of means of transport to work?
- How much does having small children affect the use of cars to work compared to such other factors as places of residence, journey lengths, access to a car, other errands, and education?

We have attempted to answer the above questions by analysing data from the travel habit survey for Oslo and Akershus 1990-91, which was a survey based on telephone interviews of a random selection of about 3,000 people. From the data, we have selected persons in employment, aged from 18 to 55, living in partnerships with or without children, and who had travelled on a weekday. On the basis of that material, we compare the use of means of transport to work of parents with small children and couples with no children.

The analysis shows that parents of small children make more use of cars to work than couples with no children. One important reason is that parents often have other errands on their journeys to and from work. Widely dispersed activities, long journeys to work and pressure of time increase the need to use a car. The need to transport children to and from a kindergarten which may lie in a different direction from work and a long way from home makes it difficult to use public transport to work. Even in town centres, parents of small children do not take public transport to work, but in such areas some parents do walk or cycle. Where their dwellings are located has less effect on the use of cars to work by parents of small children than on driving by couples without children, when we take distances, numbers of cars per household, sex, errands, and education into account. This may suggest that the quality of local public transport services has a greater effect on the use of means of transport by childless couples than on the journeys of parents of small children.

The number of cars per household is another important factor affecting the use of cars to work by parents of small children. In the same income group, more parents of small children than childless persons have two cars per household, suggesting that parents give higher priority than childless couples to obtaining a second car. If both parents are in employment, having two cars can make them more independent of each other and more flexible in meeting working life and family expectations.

We find no significant differences between mothers and fathers in their uses of means of transport. Among those without children, on the other hand, more men than women drive to work. Sex affects car use by couples without children but not by parents of small children, when we take the other variables in the model into account. More mothers of small children than childless women also have access to a car in the morning or all day. We find no differences between the men in the two types of family. Caring for small children appears to affect women's access to cars and use of cars to work.

More women than men take their children to kindergartens and day care and home again. Mothers use cars for this purpose less than fathers do. Whether this is because of longer journeys to work for fathers, for instance, or because of a more one-sided use of means of transport in that group compared to mothers, is a question we can not answer here.

In principle, being responsible for pre-school children affects the use of cars to work by women and men, but when we take places of residence, distances, numbers of cars per household, errands and education into account, this caring responsibility loses much of its significance. Applying our model, we find few differences between parents of small children and childless couples with regard to which factors influence their uses of cars to work. While place of residence and sex mean a little more to couples without children, the distance to work and the need to carry out other errands are the most important factors affecting the use of cars by parents of small children. Parents of small children do not necessarily use other means of transport to work than couples without children, unless they are carrying out errands relating to caring for their children. This means that the principal factors underlying working parents' frequent car use on working days are to be found in their everyday circumstances, with tight schedules, many activities, and errands over long distances.

In order to achieve a clearer understanding of the factors underlying the use of means of transport and the travel habits of parents of small children, we need to know more about their discussions of how to share means of transport and how to organize their journeys. The major surveys of travel habits convey general information, but lend themselves less well to studies of particular groups like parents of small children. For studies of families we need to develop alternative methods and conduct special travel habit surveys.

The «lifecycle squeeze» and high car use of families with small children are a welfare problem and an environmental problem for the families themselves and for society in general. The location in the same neighbourhoods of workplaces, dwellings, caring institutions and services, greater flexibility in working life, and longer opening hours at institutions, together with deliberate organization of transport and division of labour within families, are measures we would propose to lessen the pressure of time on families with small children and their use of cars on working days.