

Summary:

Children's everyday travel in the Oslo, Akershus and Buskerud counties of Norway

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3298 children aged 7 to 15 and their parents have been interviewed about the children's everyday travel and freedom to play in three counties of Norway. Most children still walk to school, even if the car is the most common mode of travel for leisure trips in non-urban areas. The parents' response generally coincides with that of the children, except that the parents appear more apprehensive about possible risks than the children themselves.

In 1971 and 1990 research was conducted by the Policy Studies Institute in England that contributed to the landmark study 'One False Move... A Study of Children's Independent Mobility' (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990). Forty years on from the original survey the study is repeated. The original studies were conducted in the UK and Germany. The 2010 version is conducted in 14 countries. The aim of the study is to gain further insights into the degree to which children of different ages have the freedom to travel and play outside unaccompanied by adults, and into the impacts on their well-being, health and personal development. This report describes the Norwegian part of the study.

Methodology

The study was carried out in three different Norwegian counties - Akershus, Buskerud and Oslo. All in all, 3298 children from 2nd to 10th grade (7 to 15 years of age) were interviewed. Schools were selected on the basis of their size, location and settlement characteristics. Schools were assigned to five different settlement categories inner city, suburban, large town, small town and rural. Schools were also partly chosen on the background of the participant counties' need for information.

The study was conducted over two days, Monday 8th and Tuesday 9th November, 2010. The schools received an email requesting their participation, and, when necessary were followed up through a telephone call. The email described the purpose and design of the study, and also requested the schools to choose one class at each grade for participation in the study. As an incentive, participating schools took part in a lottery for a prize of 5000 NOK (= appr. €600). Out of the 40 schools approached, 19 agreed to participate.

The study was carried out in one class at a time, where the questionnaire was completed by pupils under the supervision of a research assistant. The schools had also been asked that teachers should be present in the classroom while the questionnaire was completed.

The main study was thus conducted in the classroom. The questionnaires filled in here are referred to as the "Main questionnaire". However, two other sets of questionnaires were also filled in as part of the study. An identical set of questionnaires, referred to as "Home questionnaire" were handed out to another class at each grade, in each of the participating schools. These questionnaires, however, were not completed in the classroom, but taken home to be filled in, and returned to the teacher the following week. Yet another set of questionnaires were given to the pupils participating in the main study (only to those who received the Main questionnaire) to take home for their parents to complete. These questionnaires were also returned to the teacher, and mailed to TØI.

We were unfortunately not able to keep a unique identity number in order to identify each individual student, and to match them with their parents. There is however a code that identifies each class at each school (as presented in the table below). This identity number is used both for the parents and for the students (although this number is missing for some of the parents and some of the children in Home questionnaire). Hence, by aggregating data from each class, the average student from a class can be matched with the average parent from the same class, for whatever that is worth.

Results

A multiple regression analysis revealed that the procedure for completing the questionnaire had no influence at all on the response that the children gave. There were, however, a slight difference in age distribution between the two samples, as the response rate for the Home questionnaire was somewhat higher for secondary school children than for primary school children. However, the challenges related to this difference in sample distributions is balanced by an improved statistical power in using the combined data sets.

Most children (59 percent) walked to school on the day of the interviews. The second most common mode of travel was to be taken by car (16 percent). More children walk on the return journey (66 percent) than on the way to school.

Most children (56 percent) feel very safe when out and about in their own neighbourhood. Only seven percent feel unsafe to any degree.

Comparison with data from a study conducted in 1979 shows that for the youngest children there has been a shift from walking to increased use of car for school journeys. 4 percent of the children in the age group 7 to 9 years were taken by car in 1979, compared to 22 percent in a national study from 2005. For older children it seems like some of this shift towards more motorised travel has been countered by an increased use of bicycle. There has been virtually no change in how the children travel to school in the three counties since 2002 and 2005 (when similar studies were conducted).

Far more children (79 percent) walk to school in Oslo than in Buskerud and Akershus. And whereas walking is the most common mode of transport for leisure trips in Oslo, the car is by far the most common mode for such trips in Akershus and Buskerud.

The geographical differences are more apparent when we divide the schools between *area types*. Far more children walk in urban areas than in the countryside. The highest rate of car use is found in small towns, whereas the highest rate of school bus use is found in rural areas. There is strong and clear relationship between degree of urbanisation and perceived safety. Children in rural areas feel more safe in their neighbourhood areas than children in urban areas. The parents' concern about traffic accidents follow the same pattern, more or less. However, we see that parents in rural areas are more apprehensive than parents in small towns. In general, parents are more worried than the children themselves, something which is in line with previous research.