

Summary:

Do children walk?

An evaluation of the “Active way to school” project (2002-2005)

The current report describes a questionnaire survey on children's journey to school. The survey was commissioned by the Public Road Authorities in Norway. In 2002 a similar study was carried out. The two studies together serve to evaluate the project “Active way to school”, aimed at decreasing car dependency for children on their school journeys.

In the 2005 survey 7500 primary school pupils (6, 8 and 12 years old) from a representative sample of schools from all of Norway answered the questionnaire. Data were gathered both in February and May 2002. The children filled in the questionnaire at home, in cooperation with their parents. In 2002 the number of respondents was 6900.

Travel mode to school

The study shows that there have been few changes in school children's travel behaviour since 2002. 43 percent of children walk to school, 12 percent use bicycle, 18 percent use public transport (mostly school bus) and 25 percent are driven in private cars. There are quite significant seasonal differences, fewer children walk and cycle during winter. There are also considerable age differences, 39 percent of the children aged 6 years being driven in private cars, as opposed to 16 percent among 12-year-olds.

Many parents drive their children to school even at fairly short distances, especially the younger children. As many as 24 percent of the children are driven to school in a private car even when the travel distance is as low as 0.5 to 1 kilometre (0.3 to 0.6 miles).

How children experience the journey to school

When asked about how they ideally would travel to school, the children's favourite travel mode was walking to school with other children.

The children and their parents were also asked about their experience of the journey to school. Most of the children (51 percent) consider their journey to school as safe. However, more children viewed their school trip as unsafe in 2005 than in 2002.

Differences between urban and rural areas

Fewer children walk and cycle in rural and semi-urban areas than in urban areas. However, if we control for travel distance, this difference disappears. The children living in urban areas are also exposed to more challenging and complex traffic environments than are children outside the cities, even if we control for travel distance. Children living in semi-urban areas are even less exposed to complex traffic environments than children living in rural areas.

Effect of the project “Active way to school”

We evaluated the effect of the project by comparing schools that had bought educational material through the web site. There were no significant effects on children's knowledge about traffic safety as a result of the project.

By and large, there have been few changes in children's travel behaviour since 2002, even if there is a slight increase in the number of smaller children walking to school. When we control for a number of potential variables that might influence travel behaviour, we find no significant effect of the project on walking and cycling. This fits well with the responses given by the school staff concerning the project's effect on their effort to change travel behaviour and improve knowledge.

How can we increase walking and cycling?

When asked about the reasons for being driven to school, children of different ages gave different answers. Most commonly, the children cited lack of time and riding with someone going the same way as important reasons.

A multivariate logistic regression analysis shows that the two main explanatory factors behind walking and cycling are distance to school and the children's age. Further, the traffic situation and the amount of traffic to which children are exposed on their way to school gives significant contributions to the model. Still, parents with a higher degree of anxiety for their children are less likely to let them walk or cycle, even under equal traffic conditions. This implies that any measure aimed at increasing walking and cycling by improving traffic safety only will have an effect when the parents start feeling safer about their children's school journey.

Some of the schools had carried out campaigns individually, aimed at increasing walking and cycling to school. These campaigns were effective. According to the multiple regression analysis children at these schools had a 50 percent higher probability of walking to school.