

Some 70 percent of schoolchildren don't walk to school

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Days when schoolchildren walked to neighbourhood schools are long gone. A new study by a team of researchers led by Paul Lewis, a professor of Urban Planning at the Université de Montréal, shows that only 30 percent of children attending elementary school reach school on foot or by bicycle.

The study was conducted from 2006 to 2008 in the central neighbourhoods and suburbs of two target regions: Montreal, the biggest metropolitan area of Quebec, and Trois-Rivières, a medium-sized city. The parents of 1495 children attending 67 schools were surveyed for this investigation.

"The primary goal of the study was to identify the obstacles to why elementary pupils do not walk and bicycle to school and aren't physical activity for the recommended 60 minutes per day," says Dr. Lewis, who conducted this study with eight colleagues from the Group de recherche Ville et mobilité (City and mobility research group).

The research team began their investigation by consulting past studies on the subject. According to Kino-Québec, in 1971, about 80 percent of Canadian children aged 7 and 8 walked to school. The Ville et mobilité study conducted in 2008 revealed that the number of children who regularly walk or bicycle to school in the morning is around 30 percent of all children in the Montreal and Trois-Rivières regions. What's more, 80 percent of those who walk to school travel less than 600 meters.

"The decrease in walking and bicycling in Western societies is the consequence of a general trend towards sedentary lifestyles," Dr. Lewis says. "This decline is explained by urban sprawl, greater distance to travel to more activities and modern schedules featuring tighter time-management."

The survey confirms the strongly dissuasive effect of home to school distance, which is due to the proliferation of special-purpose public schools and the strong presence of private schools. Indeed, attending neighbourhood schools is no longer the norm and kids travel farther for their education.

Another fundamental causes of the decline is how the majority of parents surveyed travel by car and do not set a good example for their children. "Even when the school is 300 meters away, some parents drive their children because it is on their way or they are leaving at the same time," stresses Dr. Lewis. "Parents fear for their children's safety in high urbanized environments. Safety takes precedence over health."

Although the study did not establish an action plan, the research team nonetheless has recommendations to encourage walking and bicycling by schoolchildren:

- Education boards should promote physical activity and walking should be factored when deciding to close or open a school or when designating schools with special programs.
- Existing urban frameworks must be radically altered to make them safer for children and adults: school zones should be made safer and planning measures should focus on entire urban environments to improve safety conditions where people are likely to circulate.
- It is imperative to restore spaces sacrificed for motorized traffic to

pedestrians and cyclists.

-- Public transit must be bolstered and speed limits should be stricter for motorists.

-- Mothers and fathers should set an example for their children by having at least one parent walk or use public transit to commute.

-- More parents need to be convinced of the importance of walking for daily energy expenditure, whether kids do it alone or accompanied, which would foster greater autonomy in kids.

Source: University of Montreal

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