Children’s Independent Mobility: An International Comparison and Recommendations for Action

Appendix II: Workshop Report - ‘Children’s Independent Mobility: Lessons from international experience and challenges for policy’, 16th September 2013
Children’s Independent Mobility:  
An International Comparison and Recommendations for Action  


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Introduction

An international workshop was held at Nuffield Foundation, Bedford Square, London on the 16th of September 2013 in order to:

- Present and explore findings from the surveys of children’s independent mobility conducted in each of the 16 partner countries;
- Identify and explore the main factors that may have accounted for the variations in levels of independent mobility in different countries and settings; and
- Discuss the range of policy changes that could be made in order to enable children to have greater levels of independent mobility.

The workshop brought together researchers, policy-makers and practitioners active in delivery of transport, health and educational and children’s policy, amongst others. An introduction to PSI’s research on children’s independent mobility by Mayer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus, PSI, was followed by an overview of the international findings by Martha Bicket, Research Fellow, PSI. Snapshots of key findings and insights from individual country surveys were provided by international project partners from Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Finland. Finally, guest speakers presented on various aspects of increasing children’s independent mobility before a panel discussion was held to explore what needs to happen in order to increase children’s independent mobility.

Summaries for each of the presentations are given below and copies of the slides from presentations (when used) may be found on the Children’s Independent Mobility project web pages at: http://psi.org.uk/children_mobility.
Workshop Agenda

Children’s Independent Mobility: Lessons from international experience and challenges for policy

10am-4pm, Monday 16th September 2013

Nuffield Foundation, 28 Bedford Square, London, United Kingdom, WC1B 3JS

The aim of this workshop is to:

- Present new findings from surveys of children’s independent mobility conducted in 16 countries around the world,
- Identify and explore the main factors that account for the variations in levels of independent mobility in different countries and settings,
- Discuss the range of policy responses that can be made and challenges that need to be overcome to enable children to have greater levels of independent mobility.

The workshop will bring together researchers, policy-makers and practitioners active in delivery of transport, health and educational and children’s policy, amongst others. It will explore these themes with the aim of identifying how the low levels of children’s independent mobility now seen in many countries could be increased given the health, social and developmental benefits this could deliver to children.

9.45 Registration, tea and coffee
10.00 Chair’s welcome
10.05 Mayer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus, Policy Studies Institute – motivations and context to PSI’s research on children’s independent mobility
10.10 How does children’s independent mobility vary internationally and what factors account for these variations?
   Ben Shaw/Martha Bicket, Policy Studies Institute – overview of international findings
   International project partners – 5 minute snapshots of key additional findings and insights from individual country surveys:
• Brendan O’Keefe/Alana O’Beirne, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland – children’s independent mobility in rural and small town settings,
• Rita Cordovil, University of Lisbon, Portugal – researching community and neighbourhoods and developing child-friendly research methodologies,
• Monica Vercesi, Italy – psycho-social factors accounting for low levels of children’s independent mobility in Italy,
• Marketta Kyttä, Aalto University, Finland – accounting for high levels of children’s independent mobility in Finland.

11.30 Tea/coffee

11.50 Increasing children’s independent mobility

• Prof Roger Mackett, Centre for Transport Studies, University College London, ‘The importance of children’s mobility’,
• Rita Wapperom, Project Leader, Rotterdam, City with a future, ‘How to build a child friendly city’,
• Alice Ferguson, Managing Director, Playing Out, ‘A return to street play’.
• Daniela Renzi, Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies (ISTC), Italy ‘We go to school alone’

1.15 Lunch

2.15 What needs to happen to increase children’s independent mobility?

Panel and participant discussion: What are the challenges to be addressed in developing policy, enabling communities to act and promoting positive public debate?

• Ben Shaw, Policy Studies Institute
• Tim Gill, Rethinking Children,
• Cath Prisk, Director, Play England,

3.45 Chair’s closing comments followed by refreshments

Policy Studies Institute wishes to gratefully acknowledge the support of the Nuffield Foundation for this research and workshop and the contribution of the project’s international partners in conducting the project.
Presentation summaries

Mayer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus, Policy Studies Institute – motivations and context to PSI’s research on children’s independent mobility

- PSI’s research in this area spans four decades, which was prompted by concern about the impact of the increasing volume and speed of motor traffic on children’s lives.
- There has been a significant decline in the freedom of children to travel and play independently in England over the last few decades, which has significant implications for their physical, mental and social development.
- Children can now be likened to convicts, prisoners in their own homes.
- A much more comprehensive strategy is needed to reverse many current policies and practices that inhibit children’s ability to travel independently. In particular, focus needs to extend beyond children’s journeys to and from school, which currently only account for little more than a third of all their journeys.

Martha Bicket, Policy Studies Institute – overview of international findings

- Paper-based questionnaires distributed to children and parents in 16 countries between 2010 and 2012 in order to compare levels of children’s independent mobility across the world.
- Six questions from the adult questionnaire on the ‘licences’ that parents grant their children were used to establish a child’s level of independent mobility.
- Finland was a consistent winner across all six of the licences of children’s independent mobility. Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (ranking in 3rd to 6th place respectively) represent a strong Northern European presence at the top end of the table. Children surveyed in South Africa, Italy and Sri Lanka generally had very low proportions of children with each of the six licences in comparison with the other countries in the study.
- In several cases there were no substantial differences between boys and girls with regard to licences.
- There was some correlation between the annual variation in daylight hours and the proportion of children allowed out after dark.
- At the country level, there was no evident correlation between the overall level of independent mobility granted to children and the belief that adults in the neighbourhood look out for other people’s children.

Brendan O’Keefe, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland – children’s independent mobility in rural and small town settings
- Village and rural children exhibit greater spontaneity. Relative to ‘city children’, children who live in villages are:
  - 22% more likely to go for a walk or cycle,
  - 20% more likely to play sport or go swimming,
  - 29% more likely to go visiting relatives or gown-ups,
  - 54% more likely to go to a concert or nightclub,
- The village environment is perceived as safer.
- The State School Bus Scheme plays an important role in facilitating children’s travel in rural and village settings.
- The planning system needs to engage more with children and young people, building on existing good practices.

Rita Cordovil, University of Lisbon, Portugal – researching community and neighbourhoods and developing child-friendly research methodologies
- Older children in Portugal were found to have more independent mobility licenses.
- Some independent mobility licenses were granted earlier to suburban and rural children
- No gender differences were found according to parental responses
- Future studies should complement existing research in this area, for example, a new study by Lopes & Neto aims to map children’s mobility, interactions and play in the city.
**Monica Vercesi, Italy** – psycho-social factors accounting for low levels of children’s independent mobility in Italy

- Reasons which may account for the very low level of independent mobility in Italy include:
  - Lower average age of the sample of Italian children
  - Environmental factors (i.e. High car density of 1 vehicle per 1.2 inhabitant, general lack of traffic calming interventions, separated bike paths etc)
  - Psychosocial factors (i.e. parents’ hyper-protective attitudes towards their children)

- Possible reasons for the apparent shift in parental attitude are complex, but they can be organized in two different categories:
  - Demographic traits (i.e. a low percentage of children representing just 19% of the total population, a fertility rate among the lowest in Europe, and a high average birth age of mothers.)
  - The spread of the perception by parents that public spaces are dangerous (as facilitated/exaggerated by the media).

**Marketta Kyttä, Aalto University, Finland** – accounting for high levels of children’s independent mobility in Finland

- Why are mobility licences so high in Finland?
  - Supportive infrastructure
  - Short school days
  - Historical reasons. For example, full time work & inadequate day-care systems of earlier decades may have “forced” parents to rely on children’s independency and children taking care of each other
  - High degree of shared responsibility & trust

- Significant drop in mobility licences in rural settings in comparison to urban settings. Some reasons for this might include:
  - Lengthened school journeys: concentration of schools to larger units & free choice of elementary school
- Urbanizing lifestyle of families: more organized activities
- Changing models of good parenting? Parental mobility licenses more influential now than 20 years ago
- Modern lifestyle & rural settings = Bad fit?

Prof Roger Mackett, Centre for Transport Studies, University College London-
‘The importance of children’s mobility’

- Society needs to balance the protection of children against letting them develop the independence that they will need in later life.
- Fewer children are walking and going out alone in Britain which may reflect changes in parental attitudes, but also reflects the growth in children’s car use.
- Why does the decline in walking by children matter?
  - Reduction in physical activity – contributing to various long-term health conditions and obesity
  - Less opportunity to interact with the local environment and learn decision-making skills
  - Less opportunity for developing social networks
  - There is evidence that physical activity by children can influence examination performance
  - But there are risks (and perceived risks) that may affect parental attitudes and behaviour

- Perceived risks of children’s independent mobility include: traffic danger; fear of assault/molestation; convenient to accompany child; school too far away; child might not arrive on time; child might get lost; and fear of bullying. However, are these the real reasons, and are the perceptions correct?

Rita Wapperom, Project Leader, Rotterdam, City with a future- ‘How to build a child friendly city’,

- In 2006, a report named Rotterdam as the least attractive city of The Netherlands to grow up in. The project, ‘Building Blocks for a Child Friendly Rotterdam’ was initiated to improve this.
The four ‘building blocks’ include:

- Child friendly housing e.g. single family and child friendly apartments
- Public space e.g. Outdoor play areas, green play areas in the area between front door and public space
- Facilities e.g. ‘extended school’ whereby primary or a secondary schools offer additional activity programmes
- Safe traffic routes e.g. Network of Child-friendly traffic routes

Children were included in the consultation process during the planning of safe traffic routes. Rotterdam’s benchmark for child friendly neighbourhoods is that the design should allow for 7 year olds to move around independently.

Alice Ferguson, Managing Director, Playing Out - ‘A return to street play’
- The Playing Out project was started by Bristol neighbours Alice Ferguson and Amy Rose who began by just doing Playing Out sessions in their own street.
- The project facilitates the temporary closure of streets for children’s play and provides a simple, tested model which others can copy as a step towards enabling more outdoor, neighbourhood play.
- The Playing Out model is not intended to be a permanent solution, but to act as a bridge between the current situation and the long-term goal of street play being a normal, safe and positive part of urban life.
- The model has been very successful and has been rolled out in different areas of the UK.

Daniela Renzi, Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies (ISTC), Italy - ‘We go to school alone’
- The project intends to promote two fundamental aspects in the life of children: their autonomy and their participation
- Classes in participating schools study the children’s individual travel routes to school. On the basis of the analysis, meeting points are
established where the children can meet in the morning in order to travel to school together.

- The project promotes the participation of the children through a Children’s Council- a group of children that "makes suggestions" to the Mayor of the city

Presentations from the above speakers were followed by a panel and participant discussion about what needs to happen in order to increase children's independent mobility, including challenges that need to be addressed in developing policy, enabling communities to act and promoting positive public debate. Panel members included:

- **Ben Shaw, Policy Studies Institute**
- **Tim Gill, Rethinking Children,**
- **Cath Prisk, Play England,**