

Children's Independent Mobility in England and Germany, 1971-2010



Policy Studies Institute

Children's independent mobility- or the freedom of children to get about in their local neighbourhood without adult supervision- has been shown to be important to their wellbeing and development. Yet a new study shows that children have far less independent mobility now than they did in the past. Findings from *Children's Independent Mobility: A Comparative Study in England and Germany (1971-2010)*, include:

- **Overall, there has been a huge reduction in the independent mobility of primary school children in England since 1971.** There has been a smaller decrease in the percentage of English secondary school children being granted some of the measures, or 'licences', of independent mobility.
- **English primary school children had less independent mobility than their German peers in 1990 and this remains the case in 2010.** German primary school children were granted all the licences of independent mobility¹ in greater proportions and at earlier ages than their English counterparts. In particular, far more children in England than in Germany were accompanied to and from school by a parent or other adult on the day of the surveys in both 1990 and 2010.
- **Far more English children were accompanied by an adult on the journey home from school in 2010 than in 1971.** In 1971, 86 per cent of the parents of primary school children surveyed said that their children were allowed to travel home from school alone. By 1990, this had dropped markedly to 35 per cent, and there was a further drop to 25 per cent being allowed to do so in 2010.
- **In 2010, more English children were accompanied on journeys to destinations other than school than in previous years.** The average number of weekend journeys undertaken by primary school children in England remained unchanged between 1990 and 2010. However there was a marked increase in adult accompaniment on these journeys, with 62 per cent of the journeys in 2010 being accompanied, compared to 41 per cent in 1971.

Why is children's independent mobility important?

There is a growing body of evidence from a variety of disciplines that a loss of independent mobility has adverse effects on children's well-being and development. The potential benefits of greater levels of independent mobility can be summarised as:

- **Greater level of physical activity among children:** recent studies have shown that children expend more calories in activities outside the home than those in home-based or indoor after-school clubs. In the context of concerns about consequent obesity levels in the UK, this is an important finding and hence there are likely to be benefits to be gained from removing barriers to children going outside, with a lack of independent mobility being one important barrier.
- **Higher levels of sociability and improved mental wellbeing:** various studies document the importance of children's independent mobility in facilitating higher levels of outside-play and social interaction. The reported follow-on effects of this include children having greater confidence and improved social skills from greater experience, and also wider community benefits such as closer neighbourhood relations, a stronger sense of community, and less fear of crime. Reduced likelihood of feelings of loneliness during adolescence is a further outcome cited.
- **Intrinsic value of children's play and independence:** in addition to the benefits that improving children's independent mobility may bring, it is worthwhile considering the intrinsic value in children's play and independence, and that children might therefore be expected to have a right to a safe outdoor environment in which to enjoy it. Enabling independent mobility would also seem to be an important element of delivering the rights of children to rest, leisure and play set out in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*.

Implications for policy

The study has documented an overall marked decline in children's independent mobility over time. The literature reviewed during the study has shown the existence of the benefits to children associated with greater independent mobility. This would suggest a pressing need for policy action to address the factors that account for the decline.

The literature reviewed also showed that levels of independent mobility are the result of a complex interaction of factors related to the child, their parents, the nature of the external physical environment and the social and cultural norms affecting choices. As such, areas for policy interventions include transport, planning, health, policing, social and education policy.

It is clear that a key focus of policy should be addressing the dominance of traffic in both urban and rural settings, and the decline in the perceived protection afforded by having pedestrians out and about in the community so that parents can feel more confident in letting their children out alone.

Background to this study and methodology

In 1990, Policy Studies Institute (PSI) published the seminal report *One False Move... A Study of Children's Independent Mobility*, which revealed a startling reduction in children's independent mobility between its first surveys in 1971 and 1990. Twenty years on, PSI, in conjunction with partners at Oxford Brookes University and Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany, repeated the earlier surveys to examine the changes in children's independent mobility over nearly 40 years in England and over 20 years in Germany.

Similar questionnaires in 1971, 1990 and 2010 were used in the surveys of children aged 7-15 years old in England and Germany as part of the school day.² A second questionnaire was given to a parent or guardian to ascertain their attitudes and concerns on the subject. The children and their parents were surveyed in five areas in both England and Germany, chosen to give a cross-sectional snapshot of each country. In England, children and parents were surveyed in Islington (London), Nottingham, Stevenage, Winchester and rural Oxfordshire. In Germany, the surveys were carried out in comparable locations in Köln Innenstadt, Witten, Köln Chorweiler, Wuppertal-Langerfeld and Bochum although it should be noted the areas were not randomly selected.

Acknowledgements and further details

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The full report, on which this briefing is based, contains details of the research methodology, research findings, a literature review on children's independent mobility, and implications for policy. It is available from the Policy Studies Institute website: www.psi.org.uk

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¹Six licences of independent mobility were investigated: the permission for children, when unaccompanied by adults, to: cross main roads, travel to places other than school within walking distance, travel home from school, go out after dark, cycle on main roads, and use buses.

²In 1971, only 7-11 year olds and their parents in England were surveyed; no comparable study was conducted in Germany.