

# Children's independent mobility and travel to school

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This short research article reports on results associated with children's independent mobility and travel to and from school from the breaktime and social life in schools project, funded by the Nuffield foundation. The data provide insights into travel to and from school, the use of cycles, public transport and roads and opportunities to meet with friends outside of school. When combined with earlier data collected by Hillman and colleagues in 1990 the results provide a longitudinal sketch of children's changing travel experiences and freedoms over 16 to 35 years.

## Background

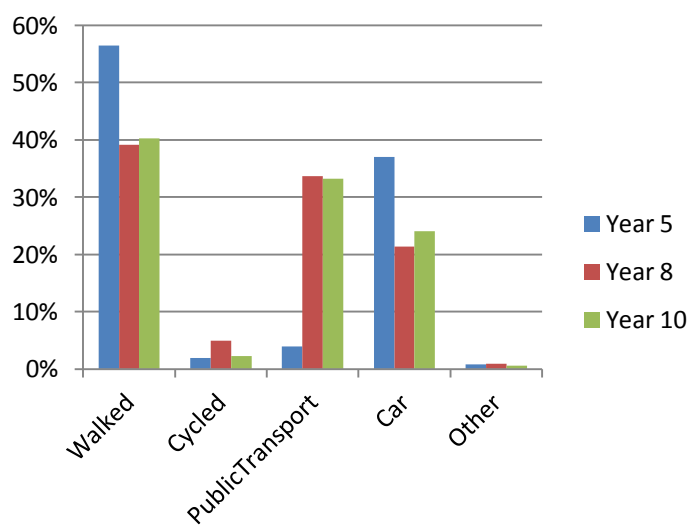
Over the past half century there have been major changes to children's social lives in and out of school. Research carried out in 1990 suggests a marked decline in their independence of movement and choice of activities, and a corresponding increase in journeys accompanied by adults, and being driven to school (Hillman et al., 1990). This has been accompanied by a widespread sense of danger from traffic and abduction, fuelled by cases widely reported in the media (Gill, 2007). Anecdotal reports suggest a corresponding reduction in opportunities for informal peer contact and social interaction outside of school. Recent educational policies allowing greater parental choice in the selection of 'out of catchment' schools imply that children may be travelling longer distances to get to school. Campaigns to encourage cycling and walking to school and to reduce car use for the 'school run' are widespread, yet data on their effects are limited. However there has been relatively little recent research documenting how children travel to and from school and the extent to which they can roam relatively freely to meet with friends.

## The research

The Social Life In and Outside of School questionnaire was completed by 536 Year 5 pupils from 11 primary schools, 431 Year 8 students and 377 Year 10 students from 8 secondary schools (1344 pupils in total). Approximately equal numbers of males and females completed questionnaires within each age group and questionnaires were received from schools across all parts of England. Questionnaires were completed in June 2006 and were similar to the questions asked in 1990 and 1971 as reported by Hillman et al. (1990) thus enabling longitudinal comparisons.

## What was the main way that you travelled to school this morning?

The majority of students walked to school or came by car or public transport. Less than 3% of pupils overall cycled to school. There were some differences across the age groups in the form of transport used to travel to school. This may be due to the increased autonomy that secondary school students have. A third of secondary school students used public transport to go to school and just less than a quarter travelled to school by car. For the majority of students at all levels, however, walking was the main way to get to school. There were also gender differences with boys slightly more likely than girls to cycle and walk to school. Girls were more likely than boys to travel by car or public transport.



	Primary school		Lower secondary		Upper secondary	
	10yrs 1990	Year 5 2006	13yrs 1990	Year 8 2006	15 yrs 1990	Year 10 2006
<b>Walk</b>	77%	56.4%	51%	39.1%	56%	40.2%
<b>Cycle</b>	2%	1.9%	3%	4.9%	0%	2.2%
<b>Public Transport</b>	3%	3.9%	41%	33.7%	29%	33.2%
<b>Car</b>	19%	37.0%	5%	21.3%	15%	24.0%
<b>Other</b>	0%	0.8%	0%	0.9%	0%	0.6%

**Note:** 1990 data come from Hillman et al. (1990)

DFT results 1990: 5-10yr olds: Walk 62%; Cycle 1%, public Trans 8%, Car 27%, Other 1%

DFT results 2001: 5-10yr olds: Walk 54%; Cycle 1%, Public Transp. 6%, Car 39%, Other 1%

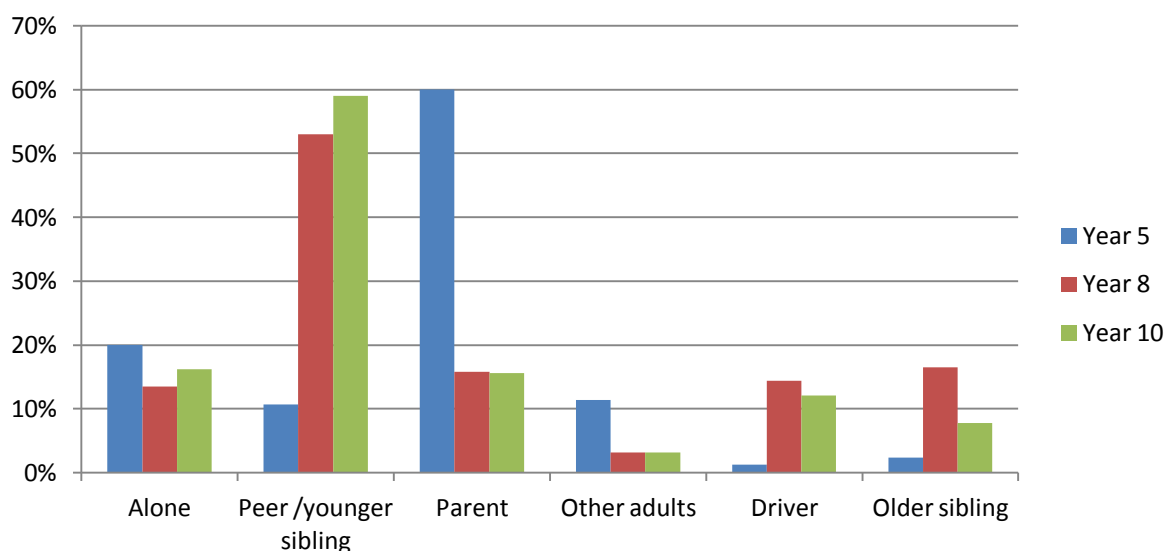
DFT results 1990: 11-16yr olds: Walk 48%; Cycle 5%, Public Transp. 31%, Car 14%, Other 3%

DFT results 2001: 11-16yr olds: Walk 43%; Cycle 2%, Public Transp. 33%, Car 18%, Other 2%

Comparison of the 1990 data with the 2006 results clearly shows a decline in walking to school and use of public transport among Year 8s and substantial increase in car use. Bicycle use has remained relatively constant. The use of public transport by Year 5 and Year 10 children has increased slightly.

### Did you travel to school with someone else?

Primary and secondary school students were equally likely to travel to school with someone else, only about 20% of primary pupils and 15% of secondary students went alone. However, girls were more likely to travel with an adult than boys. Year 5 pupils were far more likely to be accompanied by a parent and/or other adult. Secondary school pupils were most likely to travel with a peer or sibling.



Figures in the above graph show that 1 in 5 Year 5 children travelled to school entirely alone. A comparison between the 2006 data with that reported by Hillman et al. from their 1990 survey and an earlier survey conducted in 1971, shows how primary and to some extent secondary school pupils now are much less likely to travel to school without an adult or older sibling. Girls were less likely than boys to travel alone to school in Year 5 but also interestingly in Year 10, but not Year 8.

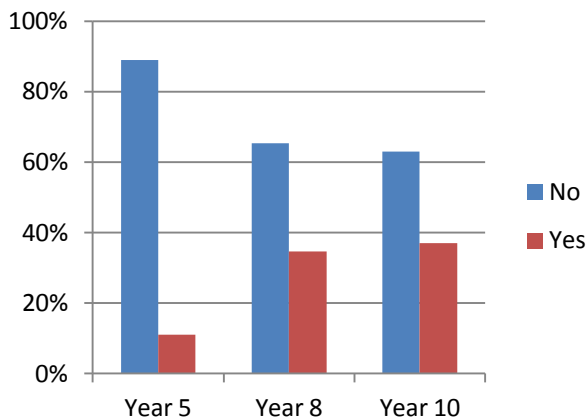
	Travel to school alone*		
	1971	1990	2006
<b>Year 5</b>	93%	55%	28%
<b>Year 8</b>		67%	53%
<b>Year 10</b>		71%	64%

**Note:** \*all figures include the possibility of travelling with a peer or younger child. 1971 and 1990 data come from Hillman et al. (1990).

Similarly there has been an increase in parents accompanying their children and teenagers to school and a decline in teenagers being taken to school by an older sibling

	Travel to school with someone else in 1990 and 2006?					
	Parent		Other adults		Older sibling	
	1990	2006	1990	2006	1990	2006
<b>10yrs</b>	36%	60%	5%	11%	3%	2%
<b>13yrs</b>	4%	16%	2%	3%	26%	17%
<b>15yrs</b>	13%	16%	0%	3%	16%	8%

### Do you cycle by yourself on MAIN roads?



As can be seen in the table, patterns have changed quite dramatically since 1990. There has been a substantial decline in the independent use of bicycles by children and young people on main roads.

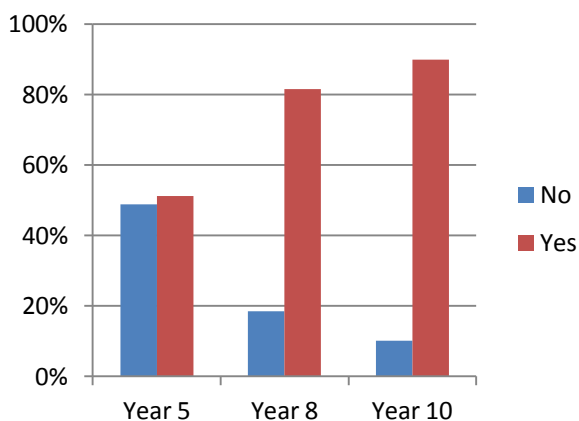
Results showed that although 40% of primary school pupils reported that they did cycle on roads, only 11% said they were allowed to cycle on **main** roads without supervision. This increased dramatically between Year 5 and 8 where just over a third of students said they cycle by themselves on main roads. This level did not change further between Year 8 and 10. Boys were far more likely to cycle unaccompanied on main roads – this was particularly the case in Year 10 where 54% of boys cycled on roads alone whilst only 22% of girls reportedly did so.

#### Cycle by yourself on main roads?

	1990	2006
<b>Year 5</b>	31%	11%
<b>Year 8</b>	77%	35%
<b>Year 10</b>	98%	37%

Note: 1990 data from Hillman et al. (1990).

### Do you cross busy roads by yourself?



Comparison with the earlier 1990 and 1971 data from Hillman et al. (1990) also show a significant decline in road crossing by children and teenagers. In fact the decline since 1990 has been greater than between 1971 and 1990. This may be due in part to significant improvements in pedestrian crossings and pavements.

In response to a question about crossing busy roads alone and without adult supervision, just over half of Year 5 pupils said that they did and this increased with age up to 82% by Year 8 and then 90% by Year 10. Boys were more likely than girls to cross busy roads alone but this difference was only evident amongst Year 5 pupils.

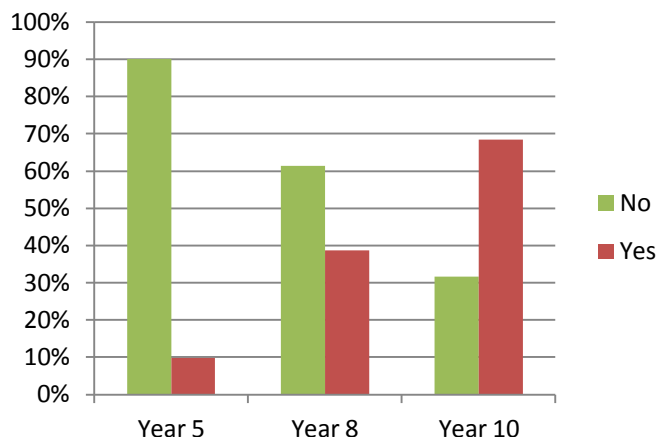
#### Do you cross busy roads alone?

	1990	2006
<b>Year 5</b>	76%	51%
<b>Year 8</b>	97%	82%
<b>Year 10</b>	100%	90%

Note: 1971 average for 9-11 year olds was 82.5%

## Do you travel on public transport by yourself?

Independent travel on public transport (including buses, trains and the underground) also increased with age. Only 10% of Year 5 pupils suggested that they travel alone on public transport. The percentage reporting that they travelled alone on public transport then increased dramatically, with nearly 40% of Year 8 students and then three quarters of Year 10 students indicating that they did. Surprisingly there were no gender differences in travelling on public transport alone.



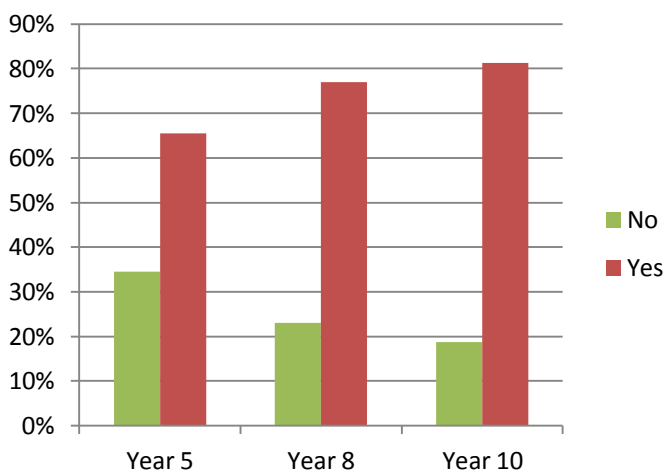
### Travel on public transport alone?

	1990	2006
<b>Year 5</b>	32%	10%
<b>Year 8</b>	89%	39%
<b>Year 10</b>	93%	68%

Note: 1971 average for 9-11 year olds was 66%

As is evident from the table there has also been a decline since 1990 and 1971 (figures from Hillman et al.) in the independent use of public transport by children and teenagers.

## Do you walk or cycle to a friends' house on your own?



A third of Year 5 pupils reported that they do not travel to a friend's house on their own. This decreased by Year 8 and then reduced further at Year 10. However, it was surprising that nearly 20% of Year 10 students suggested that they would not travel to a friend's house on their own. These figures may reflect difficulties associated with living in a rural location or the possibility that students live a long way from school friends as much as whether children are afforded the freedom or not. Equivalent figures are not available from the 1990 research data. Boys and girls were no less likely to travel to a friend's house alone but boys were slightly more likely to do this in Year 10 alone

## Social life outside of school?

One of the main sets of questions on the questionnaire focused on children's social life outside of school and in particular the extent to which children were able to socialise with friends outside of a school context. Results showed that the majority, nearly three quarters, were able to meet with friends a few times a week or more. However, over a quarter of children and young people reported that they rarely met with friends outside of school. This serves to highlight the importance of school and school breaktimes for children's social life and important opportunities for social development.

	Every night	A few times per week	Once per week	Less than once per week
<b>Year 5</b>	18%	45%	11%	26%
<b>Year 8</b>	15%	46%	10%	29%
<b>Year 10</b>	20%	48%	4%	27%
<b>Overall</b>	18%	46%	9%	27%

## Implications

This research set out to examine children's mobility and social life outside of school; to look at the freedoms that children have to explore the world themselves and to meet with friends and peers. Our findings represent a useful snapshot of modern day life and the state of play in children's lives at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By asking the same questions of children as were asked by researchers in 1990 and for some questions in 1971 we can examine the overall trends over 35 years. So what do our findings tell us?

First and foremost, the dominance of the car and road traffic has continued unabated, to affect children's lives. In 1990 cars and traffic were widespread and one might have been excused in thinking that the effect of the car could not get any greater but even since then, more children are travelling to school by car at the expense of walking and taking public transport. The numbers of children and young people cycling on roads and main roads has more than halved since 1990 and the numbers of children and young people crossing busy roads on their own has also declined. Increased reliance on the car may also explain reduced independent use of public transport with many parents preferring to ferry their children and teenagers around than require them to travel on public transport alone. The car is often more convenient than other forms of transport. Yet parents are also anxious about their children using the streets and moving around the local community unsupervised (Gill, 2007; Layard & Dunn, 2009). Traffic has substantially increased in most areas of the UK and children have been pushed off the streets. Even relatively quiet, traffic free streets may discourage children from playing because of concerns about damage to parked cars. It is telling about a society that prioritises cars more than the social, physical and recreational life of our children.

Findings also show that children and young people are more likely than they ever have been to be accompanied by adults to school. Children, in Year 5 particularly, are much less likely to make their own way to school (either alone or with same age peers) than they were in 1990 or 1971. Even students in Years 8 and 10 are less likely to make their own way to school as they were in 1990. The increase in accompaniment to school by parents may be as much about the increased convenience and reliance on the car as the main form of travel to and from school as it is about fears for the safety of our children.

On a fairly positive note a majority of Year 5, 10 and 12 students are able to walk or cycle to a friends' house on their own. The numbers of children and young people not able to do this are, however, also quite high with about approximately a quarter not being able to travel to a friend's house on their own. Similarly the figures pertaining to children's opportunities to meet with peers and friends outside of a school environment show positives and negatives. Well over half of children and young people do meet with friends a few times a week or more outside of school. However over a quarter cannot meet with friends regularly (i.e. at least once a week). The figure remains relatively constant across the three age groups which suggests that there may be more to this finding than parental restrictions on autonomy due to concerns about their children's safety. This could be due to not living near to friends and peers, levels of homework, after school education (see Ireson & Rushforth, 2011) or simply about relaxing with family. Alternatively young people may be increasingly using electronic means to connect with peers and friends rather than meeting directly with them. However further research is required to examine this in greater depth.

Gender differences were evident with boys being more likely than girls to travel to school without an adult and to either walk or cycle to school. Girls were more likely to be driven to school. While the levels of crossing of busy roads and use of public transport did not differ for boys and girls at Years 8 and 10, boys were more likely than girls to report being allowed to cross busy roads in Year 5. Some of the gender differences, notably independent travel to school, cycle usage and travel to a friends' house seemed to decline around Year 8 but then appear again later in adolescence (in Year 10) with girls less likely to do these things. This pattern may reflect increased autonomy for girls in Year 8 but then a desire to be taken to school or not to cycle on roads during Year 10.

### **General discussion**

The arguments relating to recent changes in our risk averse society are well rehearsed elsewhere (see Gill, 2007) as are discussions about opportunities and licenses or freedoms for children to travel and move about outside of the home independently and free from adult constraints and surveillance (Hillman, 1990). However the situation in the UK is increasingly complex as there are now educational policies that encourage parents to be more selective in their choice of school. This may mean that families live further away from schools and away from the school community, and peers and friends. Families and young people may thus become more dependent on the car to get children to and from school. There are also new perceived threats on our streets in addition to 'stranger danger' such as bullying and other types of incidents instigated by peers and other young people. Parents are understandably anxious about allowing children to travel outside of the home and to meet with friends unsupervised – a recent survey of parents indicates that nearly half of them constrain their children's opportunities for going out because of fear of strangers, and 46% because of concerns about traffic (Play England, 2012).

Much of children's time outside of school is increasingly spent under the guidance or surveillance of adults. There has been an increase in after school and outside school clubs and also breakfast clubs, all of which are organised and supervised by adults. There is research that suggests that time spent in the company of adults and family has markedly increased since the 1970s (Gill, 2007), though this still appears to be less in the UK than Spain or Sweden and especially for children in lower income families (UNICEF & Ipsos-Mori, 2011). Many parents feel a pressure to ensure that their children attend after school clubs and tutoring in order to keep them occupied and to do the best for their children.

These data come at a time when there is ongoing concern about sedentary lifestyles, particularly amongst children and where modern life has seen an increase in home entertainment and social media and computer based social interaction and networking. There are questions about the knock on effects of this changing lifestyle which may function to encourage children and young people to stay at home outside of school hours, further reducing the autonomy of our young, and reducing opportunities for face to face interaction and activity with peers.

The positive consequence of this reduced independence is that traffic accidents involving children on their way to and from school appear to have declined (e.g. Dunning, et al., 2007) and in all likelihood explained by the increased use of the car and adult supervision to and from school. But in order to find their place in life, to become independent adults, to develop and sustain important relationships with peers and friends, children need opportunities to explore the world outside of the family and home and need to have the freedom to do this. There are few occasions left in childhood where children are able to freely meet with peers, to socialise and engage in playful activity of their own choosing relatively free of adult control. Within communities there have been fairly successful campaigns to reclaim the streets for children in urban areas and for the development of play spaces. But equally there is a need for places that are at least perceived to be 'safer' than the street or local playground where children can go to socialise and to engage in playful activity. Schools are the one place where virtually *all* children can meet with peers and develop friendships. Though even here opportunities are being eroded with the abolition of some break times and reductions in the length of lunchtimes so that there is little more than time to eat (Blatchford & Baines, 2006).

Other commentators and organizations focus on the importance of provision for play and social facilities in local communities and on streets, within local parks and in urban spaces. These are important but inevitably will not provide for the needs of all children and parents are unlikely to allow children to attend these places alone. Families who live next to main roads, on terraced streets or highly built up areas with little additional usable space will have limited access to play spaces. However virtually all communities have one school with a playground and play facilities within walking distance. A greater effort could be made to locate primary and secondary schools at the heart of the community and to provide opportunities for children to use school playgrounds and playing fields out of school hours to enable them to socialise, play and explore the world relatively freely with adult support and monitoring, not control.

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