



## Traffic Safety Center SETTING NEW DIRECTIONS IN TRAFFIC SAFETY Newsletter

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### What Did Your Walk to School Today Do to (or for) You?

"Active" commutes may have value, but care must be taken in promoting them for children.



TSC director David Ragland presenting the paper, "[Health Impacts of the School Commute](#)," at the session on [School Transportation Research](#) at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board (TRB) in Washington, D.C.

With children traveling to school on foot less and less and by car more and more, there is tremendous interest in encouraging a return to walking, biking and busing for the school "commute."

But there is also an obligation, noted TSC director **David Ragland** in his presentation to the School Transportation Research session at TRB: to make sure that efforts in this direction will, in fact, result in healthier children, and that policies to encourage such behavior incorporate tactics to enhance the safeness of the trip.

"Our job is to look at the overall impact and the individual impact: what is the impact of walking or biking to school, or a little broadly, mode choice on health? And what is the impact of these programs on problems such as obesity or congestion? And what is the impact on safety? "

There is no question that travel to school in the U.S. has undergone a dramatic change in recent years, Ragland explained.

Thirty-five years ago, children walked to and from school 50 percent of the time. Today, that figure is 12 percent.

In the past, children living within one mile of school made 87 percent of their trips to school on foot; now only 31 percent do.

### Different Dangers in How You Get to School

While the drop in so-called "active" school commutes is clear, useful data on the consequences that this decline has had on children's health and safety are harder to find. Studies that have been done have their limitations, but there are some findings that are broadly applicable: teen drivers present by far the most extreme threat to safety (to themselves and others), accounting for a little more than 50 percent of deaths and injuries, despite accounting for only 14 percent of the trips.

Bikes had higher fatality rates than walking (and than some forms of driving, particularly done by an adult); and walking has higher injury rates than some forms of driving, which is particularly worrisome, given the typically shorter length of walking trips.

And what effect would more walking and biking have on obesity and other conditions

associated with inadequate physical activity? While there is evidence that adults who increase their utilitarian walking experience health benefits, the findings for children are not as clear.

### Who Walks and Why?

There is also a question about whether active commuting to school will cause children to be more physically active, or whether it turns out that children more likely to take part in physical activity are also more likely to walk to school.

At the same time, however, it is important to point out the net benefits or less driving, especially in a closed system like the school commute. If more school commuters travel by foot or by bike, they will then lessen the number of cars to which pedestrians and bicyclists are exposed, reducing their chance of injury from car crashes. Additionally, evidence suggests that walking in younger years can create a greater likelihood that a person will continue walking into adulthood, resulting in a permanent shift away from driving for some trips, at least.

"When you talk about manipulation of mode share for the 'greater good,' the onus is on us to make sure we know the impact of our policies," Ragland said. "Not to just think it's a good idea, and, further, not to be hypocritical, and talk about someone else's kid walking to school.

"If you're a policymaker or an individual, you have to really struggle with these issues."

He concluded by reading from the end of the TRB paper he co-wrote, "Health Impacts of the School Commute".

*The promotion of walking to school has been approached from a number of different health, social and environmental perspectives, including traffic safety, congestion, air pollution, community building, and reduced vehicle dependence. For an individual, personal factors such as convenience, cost and appropriateness for the child must also be considered.*

"[T]he child must also be considered," Ragland repeated. "That's the bottom line of this presentation."

([see related story on safety effects of the Safe Routes to School program.](#))