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# Children Need Neighborhoods Where They Can Walk and Bike

**We've lost the art of creating local infrastructure that allows young people to explore, play and lead healthier lives.**

*By*

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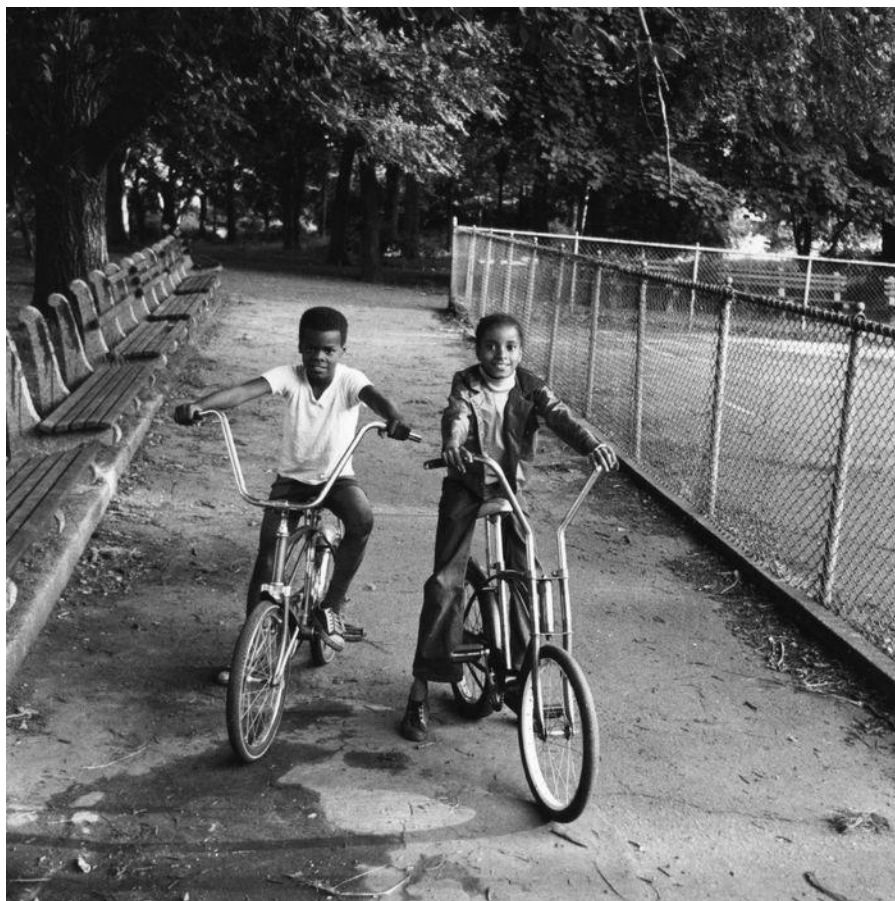
Congress, the White House and policy experts have started debating “family policy” in recent years, rattled by an epidemic of childhood anxiety and plummeting birthrates. Child-care subsidies, marriage penalties and maternity care all deserve attention, but one government action that would greatly help today’s parents is almost entirely local—and involves concrete, grass and some crosswalk paint. American cities and towns need to

reorient infrastructure to make it easier for kids to walk and bike freely around their neighborhoods.

Children today are more car-dependent than in past generations, which makes childhood less healthy and less fun, and parenthood more exhausting. In 1969, more than four in 10 American schoolchildren walked or biked to school. The Transportation Department's most recent National Household Travel Survey, in 2017, found that figure is down to only one in 10.

While Americans of all ages are less physically active today than years ago, the biggest drop-off is in walking by adolescents. Boise State kinesiologist Scott Conger compiled data from wearable devices like pedometers and Fitbits and found that today's average teenager walks 5 miles less per week than in the 1990s.

Getting chauffeured around, or sitting at home more, seems to be bad for kids' physical and mental health. Many studies have found that children living in more walkable neighborhoods experience less obesity, in part because when they are outdoors more, they are more likely to have games of pickup basketball, tag or wiffle ball. Researchers using data from a massive study of children in the 1990s found that a more sedentary childhood could be connected to a greater risk of heart disease as an adult. The study pointed specifically to the importance of "light-intensity physical activity" like walking.



Children ride bicycles in a New York City park, 1975. Today's kids walk and bike less than in earlier generations. PHOTO: BILL PRICE/FPG/ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

Too much time sitting around indoors may take an even greater toll on young people's mental health. Childhood anxiety is at record levels, with pediatrician groups and the Biden administration declaring a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. A study published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* in 2023 found that "a primary cause of the rise in mental disorders is a decline over decades in opportunities for children and teens to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults." Researchers from the University of Buffalo Medical School have suggested that "walking exercise may dampen stress-induced cardiovascular reactivity," and an Australian study found that walking and biking to school "is positively associated with children's" psychological well-being.

Today's kids roam less than in earlier generations. Overscheduling and parents' safety fears are part of the reason, but it's also true that American suburbs built in the past 30 years are less walkable and bikeable than older neighborhoods. Walkability is seen mainly as a concern for urbanites, who want to be able to stroll to a cocktail bar, grocery store or museum.

But walkability in suburban neighborhoods is a far more important issue. It requires building sidewalks, bike trails, playgrounds and crosswalks that are safely usable by kids. We know that is possible because much of the world already does it. We have decades of evidence from the U.S. and Europe about how best to calm traffic, make sidewalks more enjoyable and mix parks and playgrounds with commercial and residential properties.

Family-friendly infrastructure comes with trade-offs, of course. In Rock Creek Manor, Md., in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, parents have been lobbying to construct a sidewalk on a block where children now walk to school in the street. Some residents have objected that this would harm some trees, with one arguing that "little kids like this shouldn't be walking to school by themselves anyway."

But kids *should* be walking to school by themselves. They should be riding to the corner store with their brothers and sisters and wandering the neighborhood to make their own fun. We should choose kids over cars, and thus make our world both healthier and a little more family-friendly.

*Timothy P. Carney is a father of six and the author of the new book "Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be."*

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