



# No ball games here

(or shopping, playing or talking  
to the neighbours)

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How UK streets have become no-go areas for our  
communities

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A report to mark the 80th anniversary  
of Living Streets  
August 2009

**LIVING STREETS**

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

When Living Streets, as the Pedestrians Association, was formed in 1929, our streets were very different places to today. Road casualties were high and there were no driving tests, speed limits or pedestrian crossings to ensure road safety. While some changes over the past 8 decades have been undeniably positive, many changes have had a negative impact that reaches far beyond road safety, and into the fabric of our social lives.

To mark Living Streets 80th anniversary, we commissioned new research, spanning the ways different generations have made use of our streets. By speaking to parents of 5-10 year old children who are currently aged 30-40, and asking the same questions of today's pensioners who have grown-up children themselves, we have built up a picture of how the function and feeling of our streets has changed over three generations.

The results should be a wake up call to those with power over our planning, transport and street management sectors. In particular, the results highlighted that:

- **Our streets have transformed from social hubs for the community into no go areas for children. Almost half of all children today never play out on their streets – in direct contrast to their grandparents, 47% of whom played out every single day.**
- **People's relationships with their neighbours has been decimated. A quarter of people now know less than 2 of their neighbours.**
- **Parents with young children today no longer shop locally. 67% of parents choose to do their daily shopping at supermarkets which require a car or public transport to get to.**
- **There has been a steady decline in the number of children walking to primary school. 92% of over 65s walked to primary school regularly, yet only 49% of today's children do.**

In this short report, we have explored these findings, combined with existing research, to take a comprehensive look at how the streets we live on have shifted over recent decades as centres for our social lives, as areas for local commerce, and (perhaps more importantly) places we should feel an attachment to.

We also give recommendations for action. There is hope - our streets are by no means beyond saving – but national, regional and local government, as well as individuals, need to act now with strong action to back up the fine words we are used to hearing.

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The Living Streets research was carried out in July 2009, with 1011 adults. Half were aged 30-40, with children currently aged between five and nine, and half were parents now over 65. The survey was conducted online by Opinion Matters.





# No-go streets: the loss of our extended front rooms

The immediate area outside our homes was once seen as a largely social place with children playing, open front doors and good relationships between neighbours. But our research has shown a major shift away from this situation, with almost half of today's children never playing out on their streets. This has been a dramatic change from the freedom that people now over the age of 65 enjoyed when they were children. Of this group, 47% played out on the street every day of the week and only 12% never did so. The percentage of today's parents playing out as children is also far greater than today, suggesting that changes over the past 20 years or so are to blame for the decline in neighbourhood play.

Playing freely on the street strengthens friendships, keeps children healthy and helps them to cope with risky situations, but the opportunities for children to do so have been falling rapidly. Reductions in child pedestrian casualty levels are clearly to be applauded – they have dropped by 6% since 2007 and have been falling since the 1970s<sup>1</sup>. But our findings add weight to concerns that these results are not all they seem - in particular that as a society, our reaction to high volumes of traffic, especially moving at fast speeds, is to keep children off our streets rather than make the streets themselves safer. This is depriving today's young people of a social experience clearly important to preceding generations. This fear is highlighted by Play England research from 2007, showing that 35% of parents cite traffic as one of their 'top three' barriers to street play<sup>2</sup>.

***"We played out on the street every single day except Sunday. Things have changed a lot though since then, there are no cobbles, there are cars lining the streets and it is too dangerous for children to play out like we did. I used to know every one of my neighbours, but don't know any now. I don't think it is safe for children to play out on their streets now as there is too much traffic and violence. The speed limit needs to be lowered and police should be more visible on foot."***

***Lily Chaplin, born 1924, Enfield***

However, Play England also found that a similar proportion (32%) of parents are concerned about their children falling victim to "stranger danger". The sensational way the media reports tragedies involving children gives misleading impressions about the scale of the dangers they face. While the safety of our children is obviously of primary importance, children are no more likely to be abducted today than they were 30 years ago. The impression is given that parents should be fearful, which is often a reason why people understandably make the choice to prevent their children from playing out, and are reluctant to allow them to walk short journeys.

So, the insecurities of today's parents, removed from the reality on the streets, are preventing our children from experiencing their neighbourhoods. This is demonstrated by a survey conducted in 2006 by the Children's Society<sup>3</sup>, which found that 43% of adults thought children should not be allowed out unsupervised until the age of 14 or over. An incredible 22% said children should be 16. Other research has shown that children who are driven to school themselves overestimate the risks of abduction and 'stranger danger' while underestimating the risks of traffic - a worryingly skewed perception of danger<sup>4</sup>.

1 - Department for Transport (2007), 'Child Road Safety Strategy',

2 - [http://www.playengland.org.uk/Page.asp?originx\\_5589tx\\_93461909704922t80w\\_20077305256b](http://www.playengland.org.uk/Page.asp?originx_5589tx_93461909704922t80w_20077305256b) (accessed 5th august 2009)

3 - Children's Society (2006)

[http://www.childrengsociety.org.uk/whats\\_happening/media\\_office/latest\\_news/Response\\_to\\_the\\_Conservatives\\_Childhood\\_Review\\_5912\\_news.html](http://www.childrengsociety.org.uk/whats_happening/media_office/latest_news/Response_to_the_Conservatives_Childhood_Review_5912_news.html)

4 - Alton et al (2007) 'Relationship between walking levels and perceptions of the local neighbourhood environment', University of Birmingham, UK

5 - Question 24 of Place Survey: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/placesurveymanual0809>



Playing out on the streets is an excellent way for children to get to know their neighbourhood and to become part of the community. But other aspects of the prevailing consensus work against this happening. Where children do congregate on our streets, the assumption is often that they are engaging in some form of “anti social behaviour”. Whilst in unusual cases this is true, a charge of guilty until proved innocent seems to have emerged in our mindset. Even Government, through its ‘Place Survey’ for local residents<sup>5</sup>, has legitimised the perception of ‘teenagers hanging around on the streets’ as an indicator of something that supposedly makes a community feel unsafe.

The move away from our streets functioning as social spaces does not just affect the young in our society. Our research has shown a dramatic drop in relationships between neighbours, within the space of two generations. For people currently over the age of 65, 72% stated that when they had a young family they knew at least five of their neighbours well enough to have a conversation with. For parents with a young family today, the situation has changed completely - over a quarter know fewer than two of their neighbours. This creates a picture of fractured communities, where networks binding neighbourhoods together have been eroded.

But why has this happened? One cause seems to be the increase in traffic levels on residential streets. Research conducted at the University of the West of England suggest that residents on busy streets have less than one quarter the number of local friends compared to those living on similar streets with little traffic. The study ‘Driven to Excess’<sup>5</sup> looked at three streets in north Bristol with light, medium and heavy traffic. It found that as motor traffic levels increased, the number of social relationships between residents sharply decreased, with quality of life severely impaired for residents living with heavy traffic flows. “Traffic is like a mountain range, cutting you off” said one resident of the heavy traffic street, Muller Road, where over 20,000 cars drive by every day.

**Taken together, the new and existing research shows our social use of streets has deteriorated over recent years through a shift in society’s perceptions of danger, and a steady increase in the priority given to motor traffic over people and their social needs. There is a crisis brewing: children are being denied the opportunity to learn about navigating risk, and we’re making them unhealthy by denying them the freedom to get active in an enjoyable and natural way beside their front doorstep.**

<sup>5</sup> - Joshua Hart MSc (2008), University of Western England, ‘Driven to Excess’

# Getting from A to B: how we got out of the walking habit

The shift away from walking towards driving to get to our local schools, shops and local amenities did not happen overnight. Rather it has been a gradual process over the last 80 years, accelerated by a huge increase in car ownership and planning decisions placing community facilities outside of walking range.

In the past, it was common for people to shop locally, keeping business (and their profits) within their local communities, yet with the arrival of large supermarket chains, the number of local shops has declined and so too has footfall at local stores.

Changes in the design of our towns and cities have contributed to this process. Before the Second World War, most housing was designed with pedestrians in mind. We lived in more densely populated streets, with streets planned to connect with each other in the most foot-efficient way. As car ownership rose, sprawling house estates sprang up. Typified by dead ends and high-fenced back gardens backing onto desolate access roads: walking anywhere locally became a chore rather than a pleasant stroll. Alongside this, planning guidance allowed a major shift away from town centres to out of town supermarkets and commercial parks, which ripped the heart from many of our towns. It is no surprise that local businesses failed to flourish in conditions such as these.

Our research has highlighted the effect of this shift on the behaviour of families over three generations. Of those who are over the age of 65, 68% shopped locally when they had a young family, with 20% choosing local specialist stores such as butchers and hardware stores to buy their groceries. In the space of a generation this number has decreased dramatically, with 67% of parents of young children now choosing to shop at larger shops beyond walking distance from their homes. Only 2% of 30-40 year olds use local specialist shops to fill their cupboards.

Mirroring the decline in walking to the shops, we have also seen a dramatic decrease in the number of primary school children walking to school. An enormous 92% of pensioners we talked to walked to primary school when they were children. Of those aged between 30 and 40, 86% walked to school, but this number has since plummeted. Government figures show that fewer than half (49%) of primary school children walk to school<sup>1</sup>.

Walking is the easiest way of travelling in an environmentally friendly and healthy way. It offers independence and flexibility, and the more children walk, the more confident and responsible they become. By walking to school, children get to know their local area, feel part of the community and recognise faces on their streets. As it stands, nearly one in five cars on the road at peak times of the day is on the school run<sup>2</sup>. This increased reliance on cars as a mode of transport to get children to school also reduces a child's physical activity, increases local congestion and can cause a decline in local air quality.

***"I walked to school myself as a child with my parents. I feel it's good quality time with the child, as well as promoting a healthy lifestyle for both of us. At the moment there are no local parks, shopping facilities or any safe outdoor areas so we generally drive everywhere - so I think it's very important to walk to school."***

***Lynda Downes, parent, Glasgow, 2009***

1 - Department for Transport (2008), 'National Travel Survey',

2 - Department for Transport, Personal Travel Factsheet (2008)



Walking to school from an early age helps to increase child road safety. Childhood today is increasingly being marked by shrinking freedoms and growing adult supervision. A 2007 survey concluded that “a perception that the outside world is both a more dangerous place for children and a less protected one is having a profound effect on the way that parents are bringing up their children.”<sup>3</sup>

By driving children to primary school, and then expecting them immediately to cope on their own on their way to secondary school, parents are denying crucial road safety education to their children. Figures from the Department for Transport reveal that child pedestrian collisions on the walk to school peak at about twelve years of age. Twenty-five ten year olds were killed or seriously injured while walking to and from school in 2007, whereas for twelve year olds the figure leapt to eighty-eight – more than a three-fold increase.<sup>4</sup>

Our own research from 2008 found that children who walk to school are actively engaged with their local community, have wider social networks, and have greater spatial awareness and road sense. For example the children surveyed were asked to draw maps of their route to and from school. Tellingly, those travelling by car provided detailed drawings of the areas around their homes and school but frequently complained that they could not remember the “middle bit” of the journey. The walkers’ maps included much more detail, including pavements, crossings, and shops, showing that they paid far more attention to their surroundings when they were allowed to interact with their local environment.<sup>5</sup>

**The move away from walking short journeys has had a profound impact on our streets. It creates a vicious circle where natural surveillance and positive community interactions are reduced and traffic levels increased, making the choice to walk around neighbourhoods even less attractive.**

3 - Willets, D (2007) 'More Ball Games – The Childhood Review', Conservative Party

4 - Department for Transport (2008) Road Casualties in Great Britain 2007

5 - Living Streets (2008) Backseat Children



# The crisis of confidence in our streets

Over the past 80 years we have seen an explosive increase in the number of motor cars (from 2 million in 1934 to over 28 million today), which has had a huge impact on our streets and how they are used. When asked what the most noticeable changes were on our streets, the majority of the research respondents highlighted the increase in volume of traffic, with almost one in three describing their street as 'busy'. Combined with other factors, some negative perceptions of local streets around the UK came out of the research - a shocking one in ten adults described their street as dangerous; and others commented that it was dirty, noisy and unfriendly.

Unsurprisingly, those over the age of 65 noticed more dramatic changes on their streets since they were children, when compared with those 30-40 years old. For the older generation, 79% reported that there were fewer local shops and 77% highlighted less contact with neighbours, compared with 51% and 62% respectively.

***"Things have definitely changed over the years, no one seems to have their doors open as much and people seem far less sociable in general. I think the trust has gone, people are nervous about new neighbours. Although I feel safe where I live, I am cautious at night as people hang around on the streets and the pavements are uneven."***

***Elsie Harrison, born 1922, Billingham***

The impact of noisy, unfriendly streets touches on far more aspects of our lives than might be imagined at first glance. The picture built up by Living Streets' research – of a steep decline in social interactions and daily walking journeys - can affect both our physical and mental health.

According to the Mental Health Foundation, "friendship is good for a person's mental health because it can form one of the foundations of our ability to cope with problems that life throws at us"<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile a study in 2004 showed that men who walked less than a quarter of a mile each day were almost twice as likely to develop dementia as men who walked more than two miles. Walking is linked to better cognitive function (such as thinking, learning, remembering and judging things) amongst older men and women. Not only that, but physical activity can alter mood and prevent depressive symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

**Although the Living Streets research seems to be painting a bleak picture, there is cause to be hopeful. Many respondents agreed that the particular street they are bringing their children up on is safe, attractive and enjoyable and over half of all respondents said they felt part of a community in their local area. It is clear that people still feel affection for their streets; it's now up to us to take decisive action to ensure this is not lost.**

1 - <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/friendship-and-mental-health/faqs/> accessed 23rd July 2009

2 - University Of Virginia Health System (2004). Walking May Protect Elderly Men From Dementia, New Study By U. Va. Researcher Shows. ScienceDaily. Accessed 23rd July 2009, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2004/09/040922071021.htm>

# So what do we do? Next steps for action

Our new research, combined with a wealth of information already in the public domain, shows that we are at a crisis point on UK streets. Whilst some changes have been undeniably positive over the last eight decades, our streets have been allowed to drift into misuse. This must not be allowed to continue unchallenged. Living Streets has a series of key policy calls that have the potential to revolutionise our neighbourhood life, and bring our streets back into the centre of community living – which is where they belong.

- ***A people-friendly traffic speed of 20 mph***

The immense amount of traffic is not going to disappear overnight. So we need to ensure that it is travelling at a people-friendly speed. We believe that limiting speed to 20 mph helps create an environment in which pedestrians feel confident about crossing the road, children can play outside their homes and it is quiet enough to hold a conversation. A study from the Commission for Integrated Transport in 2001 found that where cities have 20 mph speed limits covering between 65% and 85% of the street network, they are transformed “from being noisy, polluted places into vibrant, people-centred environments.”

**Specifically, we call for:**

1. The standard default speed limit on “restricted roads” in built-up areas of the UK to be reduced from 30 to 20 mph;
2. The DfT’s Road Safety Strategy and Scottish Road Safety Strategy, and any related speed limit guidance, to be clear in stating that 20 mph is one of the most significant actions to improve road safety and general quality of life in all built-up areas – not merely targeted areas around schools, markets or residential streets;
3. All local authorities to implement authority-wide 20 mph default limits in all built-up areas, in advance of or alongside any moves by national governments to implement the first two points.

- ***Less traffic***

In the longer term we need to be moving towards a society in which walking is the natural choice for short journeys, including the school run – which would remove much of the traffic in our residential streets. That’s why we run the national Walk to School and Walking Works campaigns, in which we spread the word that it’s easy, fun, healthy, and good for the environment to walk more as part of your daily routine.

Decision-makers have to play a part too. We want to see all local authorities use the forthcoming “third round” of local transport plans to mainstream walking as the mode of transport for all local journeys of two miles or less, and to acknowledge the vital importance of walking in linking public transport modes.

- ***Make it easier to have fun***

Street parties are a wonderful way to become more engaged with your neighbours. However many highway authorities demand that expensive public liability insurance (which can cost thousands of pounds) be secured prior to any events taking place, as well as many other bureaucratic hoops that applicants have to jump through. This is totally unnecessary for small scale residential street parties: we want to see ‘party pooper’ barriers such as these removed. Specifically, the Advice on temporary Traffic Regulation Orders under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 (16A) for small street parties must be amended. For example, currently it recommends that costly advertisements are placed in local newspapers to advertise the minor road closures – sometimes landing residents with an unrealistic bill of up to £2000.



- ***Better designed streets***

We want walking and cycling to become more attractive through urban design. For example, pedestrianised zones can help to revitalise retail areas, and measures such as “filtered permeability” make it easier to get from A to B on foot or by bike. Car free days and car free zones can inspire people to rethink their towns and cities, discovering that walking around and enjoying your community is a great thing to do.

The Manual for Streets, published in 2007, is welcome government guidance for new-build residential streets. Among other things, it recommends a design speed of 20 mph (many streets since the 1950s have been designed with 30 mph or greater in mind), and high density walkable neighbourhoods where essential shops and services are all within a ten minute walk of peoples’ homes.

We believe that schemes which use naked streets principles have great potential to make our streets safer and more people-friendly, by changing the behaviour of all road users for the better. The naked streets concept, also known as “shared space”, is a very promising approach to both pedestrian safety and improving the vitality of an area. The principles of Naked Streets work by placing greater importance on how drivers make decisions about their behaviour, rather than being conditioned by engineering into believing they are kings of the road. It’s a significant departure from attempts to control behaviour through interventions like road humps, or engineering pedestrians out of our streetscape through subways or guardrail. It results in pedestrians being built back into their environment, which can only be a good thing.

Therefore we want to see the principles in the MfS, and Designing Streets in Scotland, extended to apply to all streets, and its recommendations used when redesigning existing streets too. Additionally, we need to work to encourage greater use of naked streets principles throughout our villages, towns and cities.

***Together, we can bring our streets back to life***



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# Living Streets is the national charity that stands up for pedestrians.

With our supporters we work to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets, where people want to walk. We work with professionals and politicians to make sure every community can enjoy vibrant streets and public spaces

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## Join our Community for Change

To find out more about Living Streets local groups near you, or to become a supporter and help our work continue, see [www.livingstreets.org.uk](http://www.livingstreets.org.uk) or telephone 020 7377 4900.

Want to find out more?

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[www.livingstreets.org.uk](http://www.livingstreets.org.uk)