

Slow Cities: Conquering Our Speed Addiction for Health and Sustainability

Paul Tranter and Rodney Tolley (2020)
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Children and young people are attracted to speed. Toddlers run, pre-schoolers love trikes and scooters, school-aged children enjoy bikes and go-carts. But, as rushed parents know, children also love to stop, chat, and observe the world.

Both human-powered speed and social lingering are incompatible with cars. In the regional Australian town of Bendigo, "50 children aged between 4 and 8 years old were given cameras and asked to take photographs during a week of their lives to illustrate places they went and activities they engaged in. Of the 50 children, at least half included a picture of driving in the back seat of the car" (Malone, 2007, p. 315). Rather than enjoying being in a "speedy" car, the children were trapped in one place.

This paradox is one of the many explored in this excellent book, the sum of two lives' work. Paul Tranter is an emeritus Associate Professor in Geography at the University of New South Wales in Canberra, where his research has focused on children's wellbeing and transport planning. Rodney Tolley has researched and written on active transport for over 40 years, including acting as the Conference Director for Walk21, an annual conference for practitioners and academics. The book itself is well balanced between research and practice, with a good emphasis on strategic action. Although most of the case studies are based in the Global North, there is an illustrative set of examples from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The book focuses on planning, but includes literature from psychology, public health, geography, history and engineering. It is syncretic and easy to read.

Slow Cities is organized under three main themes: the paradox of speed, the impacts of speed on health, and strategies to slow speed. While the book does not focus on children and youth, there is a great deal of excellent material for researchers and planners interested in that population group.

As part of the cultural shift from pedestrian-powered to car-dominated streets in the early 20th century, subsidized by the nascent automobile and gasoline industries, Boy Scouts were encouraged to hand out tickets to "jaywalkers," a new term connoting a hick who didn't understand "the rules." But at the same time, there was a 94% increase in child pedestrian fatalities in the U.S. from 1913-17 to 1918-22. The shift in blame from car drivers to pedestrians, including children playing on the street, is one of the many ironies explored in the first third of the book.

Similarly, in the section on health, there is a focus not only on the physical health costs of child obesity and inactivity, but the stress associated with "parents

rush[ing] their children from one stimulating extra-curricular activity to another, to give their own child a competitive edge in a consumerist world" (Tranter & Tolley, 2020, p. 117). Nearly two thirds of Australian parents spend more than eight hours a week driving their children to school and other activities (Ibid, p. 43), in turn endangering other children who are making their own way to school. Road engineers personally value safety over speed but design otherwise (Ibid, pp. 90-91).

Perhaps the most basic paradox explored in this book is that despite trillions of dollars spent on highways, overpasses, parking lots, and cars and trucks, traffic speeds in central cities from Toronto to Delhi have not increased in the past century (Ibid, p. 98). Tranter's previous work on effective speed has shown that walking, cycling or taking transit to most destinations is faster than driving, particularly if you take into account the time spent paying for the mode (Tranter, 2010). Of course, a true cost benefit analysis of speed would include pollution, road crashes and climate breakdown.

Part three, focusing on strategies, will be of most immediate use to practitioners. Tranter and Tolley summarize the arguments for 30 km/hour speed limits, which are not only about decreasing the kinetic force of cars in case of a collision, but also about expanding the field of vision. Lowering the speed limit must be accompanied by enforcement and traffic-calming measures. The authors reinforce research that shows that introducing uncertainty for cars through, for instance, removing barriers to crossing the street, naturally slows drivers down. They also provide case studies of the impacts of play streets (closed to motorized traffic for limited hours to provide a space for children to play) and school streets (closed to motorized traffic during morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up periods). But even more important is re-opening streets to be spaces of play for all ages. A final paradox: the true joys of speed can only be experienced in cities where cars have been tamed.

Review by Carolyn Whitzman

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References

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