THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

V: The School Run Isn't Child's Play

We built a transport problem at the school gate

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Acknowledgement of Country

We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past and present – of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years, they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

V: The School Run Isn't Child's Play

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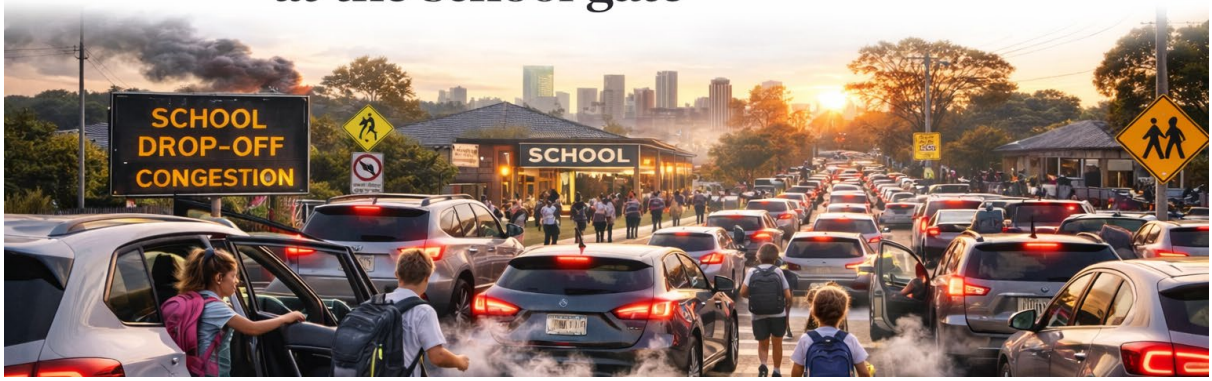

If you want to see Australia's transport dysfunction in miniature, stand outside a primary school between 8.30 and 8.45 in the morning. Cars idle in long lines. U-turns are executed with creative interpretation of road rules. Tempers rise. Engines hum. Children step cautiously between bumpers. A ten-minute drop off becomes a thirty-minute congestion event.

We treat this as normal.

It is not normal. It is policy.

School travel patterns in Australia have shifted dramatically over the past few decades. Research from the Royal Children's Hospital (2019) National Child Health Poll found that about 66 percent of primary school children are driven to school most days. Among teenagers, roughly 46 percent are driven most days. Active travel such as walking or cycling has declined significantly compared with previous generations.

The reasons are familiar. Concerns about safety. Longer distances between home and school. Bus services that are limited or inconvenient. Time pressure for working parents. Urban design that prioritises vehicle flow over pedestrian safety.

But when two thirds of primary school students are driven most days, the school run becomes more than a family choice. It becomes a structural contributor to congestion and emissions.

Transport emissions totalled about 90 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2022 and represent roughly 21 percent of Australia's total emissions. On road vehicles account for about 85

percent of transport emissions (Climate Change Authority, 2024). The school run is not the largest slice of that pie, but it is a highly visible daily pulse of traffic that compounds peak hour congestion.

The feedback loop is vicious. More cars around schools make streets feel unsafe. Feeling unsafe encourages more parents to drive. More driving increases congestion and risk. The cycle intensifies.

Meanwhile, we widen nearby roads or redesign drop off zones to accommodate the flow. We treat the symptom and entrench the cause.

The deeper issue is that school transport has been treated as a private responsibility rather than public infrastructure. Families are expected to solve it individually. When they do so by driving, we blame congestion on general traffic rather than the system that incentivised car dependence.

A different approach would begin by acknowledging that school commuting is a predictable, concentrated movement pattern. It can be planned for deliberately.

Electric school buses are one underused tool. In many regional areas, buses already serve large catchments. In urban settings, coordinated bus services for clustered schools could reduce the volume of private vehicles at the gate. Electrifying these fleets would cut local emissions and air pollution where children gather.

School streets are another option. Temporary vehicle restrictions around school entrances during drop off and pick up times have been implemented in parts of Europe and North America. By limiting through traffic and private car access immediately outside schools, these programs prioritise walking, cycling and safer public space.

Critics will argue that Australian cities are too dispersed. Some are. But many primary schools draw heavily from nearby suburbs. Where catchments are small, active travel can be viable if infrastructure supports it.

That infrastructure must be continuous and protected. A painted line on a busy road is not a cycling network. A narrow footpath squeezed between parked cars and fast traffic does not reassure parents.

There is also a planning dimension. Selective enrolment policies and school choice frameworks can increase travel distances. When families' cross suburbs to attend preferred schools, daily car trips expand. Balancing choice with proximity has transport implications rarely discussed in education policy.

The health dimension strengthens the case for change. Active travel supports physical activity among children, with benefits for cardiovascular health, mental wellbeing and independence. When daily routines involve sitting in traffic, those benefits are lost.

Road safety statistics add urgency. Children are vulnerable road users. Congested school zones increase risk. Designing streets that reduce vehicle volume and speed near schools protects those most at risk.

None of this requires moralising about parents. Many drive because the system leaves them little alternative. Work schedules, safety concerns and fragmented infrastructure shape decisions.

But continuing to treat the school run as a private matter guarantees that congestion will remain a daily ritual.

There is a symbolic power in addressing school transport. If we cannot design safe, low emissions travel for children travelling predictable routes at predictable times, what does that say about our broader transport ambitions.

Policy change would require coordination between education departments, local councils and transport agencies. It would involve funding infrastructure upgrades, piloting school street programs, expanding bus services and communicating clearly with communities.

There will be resistance. Any change to access patterns around schools can provoke strong reactions. But experience elsewhere shows that once implemented, many communities appreciate calmer, safer environments.

The alternative is to accept the status quo. Idling engines. Frayed nerves. Streets designed for cars rather than children.

Sustainable transport is often framed as a technological challenge. In reality, it is often behavioural and spatial. The school gate reveals how deeply our systems prioritise vehicles over people.

If Australia is serious about reducing congestion and emissions while improving liveability, it should start where the next generation gathers each morning.

The school run is not a minor inconvenience. It is a daily demonstration of how policy choices ripple through communities.

Fixing it would not solve transport emissions alone. But it would signal that we are prepared to rethink habits that have become normal, even when they no longer make sense.

Children deserve streets designed for them, not traffic designed around them.

References

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Royal Children's Hospital (2019) National Child Health Poll: Travelling to school: Habits of Australian families, https://www.rchpoll.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/20190207-travelling-to-school-habits-of-australian-families.pdf.

Sustainable Transport Series

About the authors of this series

John rejoined the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies as the Neil Smith Research Chair in Sustainable Transport Futures in October 2022, after an 8-year absence. Over the course of his academic career, John has published over 300 scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings. He has also been an Associate Editor of Transportation, and Co-Editor and Chief of the Journal of Choice Modelling and Transportation Research Part A. He has also held various roles on multiple conference committees both in Australia and overseas.

Since graduating with a PhD, John has been obtained numerous grants worth over $3.4 million. These include a number of ARC discovery grants in the areas of Public Health, Transportation crowding, general economic theory related to utility separability as well as one on improving the external validity of Discrete Choice Experiments. In addition to academic grants, John has been involved in $9 million in industry-based contract research since the year 2005. Find out more about John: https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/john.rose

Andrea joined the Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies as the Neil Smith Lecturer in Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility in March 2023. Before becoming a lecturer, Andrea spent three years as visiting research scholar thanks to two scholarships, the Early.Postdoc mobility and the Postdoc mobility, awarded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Andrea holds a Master of Science in Statistics with Honors from the University of Bologna and a PhD in Economics from the University of Lugano. Over the years, Andrea has taken part in different consulting projects with several public and private institutions such as NSW Government, University of Florence, and University of Catania. Find out more about Andrea: https://profiles.sydney.edu.au/andrea.pellegrini

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