



*Friendly*streets

Project Summary: Mapping for Friendly Streets

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Bailey Chenier

Hannah Feldman

Teresa Rogalinski

Sustainability 3S03, McMaster University

Overview

On November 4, 2019, Friendly Streets visited Lake Avenue elementary school to learn about the ways in which children feel safe and unsafe in the Centennial (Riverdale) neighbourhood. After running a total of 9 workshops and 1 walking audit, with nearly 200 students across grades 4 to 8, we were able to gain an understanding about how children travel in the area. This report provides an overview of our discussions, pulling themes showcasing the children's perceptions regarding (1) what makes a neighbourhood safe and unsafe, friendly and unfriendly, (2) where and how children regularly travel, (3) obstacles children face in traveling, and (4) their suggested improvements to make walking and biking more accessible in the Centennial (Riverdale) neighbourhood.

Workshop Summary

Part 1: (un)friendly and (un)safe

Each workshop began with a discussion around what makes a neighbourhood feel friendly and safe. Overarching themes centered around people, security, and infrastructure. First, many students touched on the fact that having more people on the streets makes it a friendlier street. More specifically, it mattered what type of person was milling in an area; people using drugs or alcohol – typically in dark areas that encouraged riskier behaviour – were associated with an unsafe and unfriendly area. Being alone was seen as dangerous: according to a grade five student, “when you are alone, you feel unsafe. On the other hand, as one grade four student shared, “good people make it safe. Being with friends makes me feel safer walking in my neighbourhood.” A second theme stemmed from the fact that many children mentioned their desire for increased security cameras and police in the neighbourhood. In this sense, stricter surveillance and security presence was thought to make a neighbourhood safer. To complicate this idea, however, one child raised concerns that police presence made them feel unsafe, due to a fear that police might arrest residents in their building (“I am worried about people getting arrested”). Third, children discussed how infrastructure shapes neighbourhood friendliness. Crossing guards, bike paths, streetlights, or “fun stuff” in the neighbourhood, were mentioned examples where infrastructure made an area friendlier. Flooding, traffic, construction dust, and crack sidewalks were mentioned as elements that contributed to an unsafe neighbourhood.

Part 2: Travel Methods and Travel Destinations

Walking was the most common method of transportation; as one student shared, “we all walk to school.” The general consensus was that walking was the easiest way to get around the neighbourhood.

Children also tended to walk within the local area. There were four main geographic areas, each with unique popular destinations and varying frequency with which children would visit. First, the Riverdale West neighbourhood was the most popular hub for travel. Students frequently visited the area directly surrounding the school. Children spent much of their time at school, in the park, on the basketball courts, in the rec centre, as well as by the corner store, pizza store, and burger king a few blocks away (in a plaza at Barton and Centennial Ave). Children even informed us about a ‘shortcut’ they take to cross from the school to the plaza. South of Delawana was more residential. Students often lived in these blocks and so would travel to their own house or their friends' houses. Warden park was another major destination in the Riverdale West, south of Delewana. Food Basics, Value Village, and Punjab Food Market were all popular stores in Riverdale West.

Another notable area was the area surrounding Eastgate mall. Many children walked to Eastgate mall. Less common, but still mentioned, were trips to the local Hamilton library, the Fortinos, Giant Tiger, and fast food chains like Popeyes, Wendy's and McDonalds in the surrounding area.

Few kids travelled regularly to the third geographic area, Riverdale East. The forested area along Lake Ave. marked a strict divide between east and west Riverdale. Still, several children lived, visited friends, or visited the other elementary school in the area east of Lake Avenue. There was also another park in Riverdale East that children occasionally visited. Fortinos, Tim Hortons, Starbucks, Dairy Queen, and the Fifties Diner were mentioned storefronts.

Finally, the fourth area encompasses all locations beyond the immediate Riverdale neighbourhood. Most notably, many children described walking to the beach by walking along Centennial to reach Wild Waterworks and Confederation Park in the very north of Hamilton.

Obstacles to walking and biking

Children expressed countless barriers to walking and cycling in the Centennial (Riverdale) area. Their experiences can be summarized into five main categories: traffic, lighting, biking, road and playground infrastructure, and environmental concerns.

In regard to traffic, many students expressed feeling unsafe by the rush of cars along major streets. The problem with too many fast cars paralleled with concerns that sidewalks were too close to the cars and that it was difficult to cross major streets. Every

workshop, in fact, touched on the difficulty crossing Centennial Avenue when walking to Eastgate mall, and many chose to J-Walk across the major road.

Improper lighting was frequently discussed as a deterrent to travelling through certain streets at night. Students gave examples of lights that didn't work, but further touched on the fact that a group of friends would choose to go out of their way to walk along major, well-lit streets rather than risk travelling through dark areas, even if the route was faster, for fear of 'scary' people that stuck to darker areas.

Third, biking posed a major barrier to transport. The largest barriers to biking were fear of their bike being stolen (as one grade eight child explained, they once had their bike "hijacked" and so they've hesitated to get a new bike), too few bike paths, or not having enough bike locks in the neighbourhood.


Road and playground structure encompassed a wide range of reported obstructions, all of which centred on the fact that local infrastructure was below the standard that children felt necessary. For example, several students mentioned that sidewalk tiles were uneven, causing trips and falls. Path maintenance was also mentioned; for instance, the one path to cross from Riverdale West to Riverdale East is very steep and hard to use when it is snowy or rainy. In addition, others mentioned paths being too narrow for both walkers and bikers, or for people to pass parents with strollers. Finally, many children mentioned their concerns that playground equipment was not up to standard. Specifics varied, but frequently referenced the basketball courts, soccer field, or ripped cage by the cricket fence. Another concern was the large amount of garbage outside the school. With the closest garbage bin located at the community centre, a fair walk away, children shared how litter often riddled the area around the school, forming large garbage "tornadoes" when it was windy.

Finally, countless children expressed their frustration that snow and rain posed particular barriers to walking and cycling. These environmental concerns are difficult to summarize but ranged from hindered travel due to sidewalks not being shovelled after it snowed, to annoyance that the park was always muddy.

Suggested Improvements

Children offered countless varied and imaginative suggestions to make the Centennial (Riverdale) neighbourhood friendlier.

First, many children touched on suggestions that would improve the area around the school. First, in terms of biking, several children suggested that bike lanes – for instance, a bike lane along Lake Ave. – would make it easier to bike to school and around the neighbourhood. Other children expressed that they would like more places to lock their bike around the school. Second, children suggested that replacing the soccer and basketball nets, as well as adding benches and water fountains would improve the area



around the school. On a different note, a couple students across the grades discussed how creating an art mural behind the school or around the portable classrooms would really add to the area. Finally, many children – addressing the concern about muddy fields around the school – suggested paving areas, adding more blacktops, or even inserting waterproof grass to combat mud.

One common theme proposed in children's interventions centered on increasing or creating more green space in the neighbourhood. All workshops expressed the desire to plant more trees – for instance, more trees by the playground, around Colcret and Berkindale, along Centennial, or as one kid stated, just "more trees everywhere." Other children wanted to have bigger parks and more parks (on a larger-scale, for instance, there was the suggestion to convert an empty parking lot by Eastgate mall into green space). One child shared an idea for a nature trail in Warden park. Other interventions touched on desires for more features within existing green space (such as a gazebo).

Another theme among recommendations related to interventions to increase protection from traffic. One student said, "maybe we can have fences so no one can fall in the road?" Their comment touches on the perceived danger from pedestrians being close to the road, and several other children also came up with solutions to this concern. Some expressed a need for more crossing guards around the school, at Queenston and Lake Ave., Queenston and Centennial, and at Eastgate mall. Others discussed adding more stop signs, especially near the school. Some traffic concerns were maintenance-based, such as a few students who asked for particular traffic lights to be repaired.

Another theme touched on improvements to infrastructure and street maintenance. Adding more lights was a consistent theme across all grades, especially around Food Basics, Warden Park, the library, and Delawana near the school. Others responded to the discussion about large 'tornadoes' of garbage around the school with recommendations to pick up the garbage and add more garbage bins. Others suggested to fix uneven sidewalks and improve snow removal in the winter.

Children suggested larger-scale, and more imaginative initiatives, such as adding a movie theatre to the neighbourhood (in the Sears, for example). Other ideas included trampoline parks, skate parks, skating rinks, water parks, go-karting, and even flying cars. One child expressed their desire to bring "more charities" into the neighbourhood, illustrating the creativity behind many suggestions.

Recommendations

Based on the data collected from the workshops, we have put together several recommendations that consider the frequency, feasibility, and influence of children's obstructions and suggestions.

Tree planting in the school park

Many children discussed the concerns with mud in the park near the school. Planting trees in the park would not only work to improve the park's design (which is currently quite barren), but the increased tree density would also help to absorb extra moisture after heavy rains. With the inevitable increase in flooding as a result of climate change, planting more trees (or even adding a 'rain garden') could work to pre-emptively combat increasing water levels. Tree planting also has the opportunity to engage and educate the children at the school, as students could be involved with the tree planning and planting.

Art mural by the school

An art mural alongside the school would add vibrancy and colour to the neighbourhood. Such a project would provide an opportunity to involve Lake Avenue students; students could be involved in planning and painting a mural near the school.

Pedestrian-friendly crossing along centennial and near the school

Crossing Centennial Ave posed a frequent barrier to walking. The road favours cars, and as a result, makes children feel unsafe and encourages students to J-walk. Efforts to make crossing more pedestrian friendly would be beneficial. Second, students would appreciate having more stop signs, traffic lights, or crossing guards by the school. These steps would make walking to school easier and safer.

Bike lane and bike racks

Implementing a bike lane (for example, along Lake Avenue) might support biking activity in the neighbourhood. Adding more bike racks could also help respond to the insecurity children felt about their bike being stolen or not having an appropriate place to lock their bike. Perhaps a service to distribute bike locks at the school could be beneficial as well.



Improved street lighting

There is a need for better lighting, especially in the residential area south of Delawana. Adding more street lighting would make children feel safer for children who are walking later in the day

Path repair between Riverdale east and west

Children expressed difficulty travelling across the ravine to get from Riverdale West to Riverdale East. These issues were confounded in poor weather (snow, rain). Improving the path would work to increase walking and biking within a larger local radius.

Skate park

The Beasley neighbourhood skate park has had tremendous success for youth in the area. Further, outdoor recreational facilities have immense impact in strengthening child activity and community involvement, providing a healthy outlet for many youth. Children in the workshop repeatedly expressed a desire for more outdoor facilities, as well as their observations that a friendly street is a street with many people out and about. A skate park could encourage students to be outdoors. Of course, there are ways to descale this recommendation: benches, ledges, or rails, for example, can also be made 'skate-friendly'.