

Sidewalk Murals: Moving Towards Active School Travel

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Course

GLOB HTH 711: Scholarly Paper

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Local students creating sidewalk murals
Photo credit: Daily School Route, 2023



Overview

Only 35% of children between the ages of five to 17 years old meet the daily 60-minute physical activity recommendation set by the Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines.^{1,2} This statistic is concerning as sedentary behaviour is a catalyst for developing several chronic diseases.³ In Hamilton, Canada, the Daily School Route (DSR) is aspiring to motivate 100% of students to actively travel to and from school by implementing an active transportation system for children.⁴ Active travel could involve walking, cycling, or pushing a wheelchair.

In February 2023, the DSR embarked on an initiative to support social change through parent and student engagement complemented by a street activation project. Most notably, sidewalk murals were identified as the primary street activation method given their consistent success across the world. The goal of my project was to highlight how sidewalk murals can increase active school travel in Hamilton to positively influence child physical, cognitive, and social development.^{5,6,7}

Objectives

1. Understand the diverse benefits of active school travel for children
2. Highlight how sidewalk murals lead successful behavioural changes within communities
3. Identify the next steps to help advance DSR's initiative

Reporting

To understand the benefits of active school travel for children, I consolidated literature from various academic disciplines like physiology, psychology, urban sociology, and from public policies. Key findings highlight that the mitigation of chronic illnesses through aerobic activity can further influence a child's self-efficacy and can lead to policy changes. Therefore, one seamless way to integrate aerobic activity within a child's lifestyle is to formally support the practice of active travel to school. If a student walks or cycles to/from school for 15 minutes each day, it facilitates meeting 30 minutes out of the recommended 60-minute physical activity guideline during the academic year.²

To explore tangible solutions to drive this social change within Western countries, I highlighted how sidewalk murals support successful behavioural changes in communities. When analyzing their implementation across Europe, USA, and Canada, successful initiatives focused upon improving perceived and actual road safety. Mitigating the barriers related to the built environment, implementing social support networks, decreasing commute distance, and monitoring road traffic are key factors of sidewalk murals that allow active school travel to thrive in a community.

To support the progression of DSR's initiative, I synthesized the key literature findings and wrote an evidence-based report to advise their next steps. I collaborated with community members and city stakeholders to begin implementing sidewalk murals around schools in Hamilton. Following their implementation, the impact can be measured by observing driving behaviour around the sidewalk mural, the number of students walking or cycling to school, and collecting survey data about perceived safety while commuting to school.

Collaborators

Thank you to Dr. Kate Whalen for her guidance and unwavering support throughout the exploration of my research question, and to Daniel Chong for sharing his expertise about Daily School Route's impact within the community.