

# It's not culture, it's infrastructure

Build the infrastructure, don't blame the users

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People often refer to cultural problems around active transport in Australia. In the last month, I've heard about 'cultural' problems between pedestrians and cyclists, with suggestions that more 'tolerance' is required. I also hear about 'cultural' problems with parents dropping their children at school. These comments are sometimes made by decision makers and elected members who impact how we invest in active transport.

In my opinion, these issues are not 'cultural', they are about road safety. They are indicators our networks are not up to scratch. They are clues about where improved infrastructure is needed and about what's not working.

I say this because we've known for decades that best practice is to separate pedestrians and cyclists where possible. One, has a travel range of 3-7 km/h and the other has a range of 10-30 km/h. Obviously, there are going to be problems when volumes are anything but minimal.

I also say it because there is a long history of issues around road safety and children walking or riding to school. The 'Stop Child Murder' campaign in the Netherlands in the 1970's was one of the drivers behind their cycling infrastructure.







Despite low rates of walking and cycling to school in Australia, land transport accidents are still the highest cause of childhood accident deaths and about 35% of these deaths relate to children walking or cycling (Australia's children, Injuries - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au)). Even with our low rates of cycling, there is a significant fatality rate. I'd argue parents are making safety judgement calls on this issue, as opposed to it being a cultural problem. An article from The Conversation suggests something similar.

### SO WHAT COME'S NEXT

Finding, understanding and fixing the infrastructure obstacles that prevent kids from walking and cycling to school is essential for solving this problem. It's also essential that new solutions pass the 'parent test'. Parents are making judgement calls about whether kids can walk or ride to school. They need to be comfortable with the solutions.

Active transport problems are fine grained. A crossing in my neighbourhood was recently built 25m away from a pedestrian desire line for a range of reasons. Observing pedestrian behaviour at the site is almost comical, people don't even notice it's there. They look to where they want to go and that's where they cross the road.



This example gives us an idea of just how well we need to understand pedestrian and cyclist networks to make them effective. We basically need to know them as well as a user, which is why we need to consult the users.

**The 'Stop Child Murder' campaign in the Netherlands in the 1970's was one of the drivers behind their cycling infrastructure.**

Oldenziel et al, 2016  
*Cycling Cities: The European Experience*







Asking users very specific questions, like *where do you need better crossings or paths* yields useful results. On past projects, input from a hundred parents quickly reveals several hotspots around the school. It also reveals commonality between the types of solutions that parents favour (hint, wombats not refuges).

It's a great time for solving these problems. Heat map functionality in survey tools makes it easy to collect location data. Existing communication channels around school communities make it easy to survey parents. The solutions favoured by parents, also appear to align well with solutions that achieve Safe System objectives. Where once, engineers were bound by a list of standard treatments suited to a limited range of environments, now they are encouraged to seek out solutions that keep people safe and work to change the environment to achieve these Safe System outcomes.

In the future, we could see parental concerns about road safety collected and mapped around every school community. Road agencies could invest in fixing these barriers, and similar to the Principal Cycle Network in Queensland, the maps could be considered in local infrastructure projects, so that opportunities to overcome barriers would be considered, and addressed as part of broader infrastructure projects.

Infrastructure is obviously not the only issue we need to address, but it is an essential one. Safety is a pre-condition to walking (Methorst 2007). We can't expect to improve walking and cycling rates to school, or in other areas when it's not satisfied.

As a profession, we need to be very cautious about labelling issues as 'cultural'. *"High and increasing levels of driving children to school are not the inevitable by-product of low-density urban living in affluent countries, as some people would have you believe. Instead, they are the predictable outcome of urban planning, transportation and road safety policies that promote car use and constrain walking and cycling"* (Why aren't more kids cycling to school? (theconversation.com)). We need to concentrate on creating the pre-conditions for walking and cycling that children and parents require by making it safe.

Let's get mapping the barriers for walking and cycling to school

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