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Adolescents' encounters with public space. Safety and mobility in relation to individual and contextual factors in Sweden.

AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

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ABSTRACT

Background: Public space, areas to which everyone has access, is especially important for adolescents. Their mobility, e.g. when travelling to school, and perceived safety and security in that environment impacts on their health, safety, and development.

Aim: The aim is to increase knowledge on adolescents' perceived safety and mobility in public space, and, with the ecological model as a framework and from a gender perspective, examine how safety and mobility relate to individual and contextual factors. Research questions concern prevalence and correlates of walking and cycling to school and of fears in the neighbourhood; as well as patterns of interrelated factors and gendered ideas regarding safety and the perception of traffic as a threat.

Material: The questions are studied in four articles, using data from two quantitative surveys and a qualitative study. During 2005/06 a survey on Adolescents' Encounter with Traffic (AEwT) was conducted among 7th grade adolescents (n=1008) in Stockholm County, Sweden; and the WHO survey Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) among a nationally representative sample of 5th, 7th and 9th graders in Sweden (n= 4144). The surveys included some identical or similar questions. In 2008/09, ten focus group discussions were conducted with 9th graders about their perception of safety in public space.

Results: Data from HBSC and AEwT showed active commuting to school – walking or cycling – to be high (62.9%) but decreasing with age whereas public transport increased. It was associated with living in an apartment or row-house; in a medium-sized city (compared to metropolitan area), and, in urban areas, with manual worker households. Data from AEwT showed that fear, reported by 60% of girls and 40% of boys, was more common among girls; adolescents living in an apartment compared to a detached house; and respondents who had or knew of scary experiences in their neighbourhood. For boys it was more common to report fear if they thought their parents were negative towards adolescent independent mobility in the evening, and for girls with one or more parents born outside Sweden. To explore interrelations between factors, patterns were sought in sociodemographic variables, and variables concerning fears, coping with fear, traffic and parent/child opinions on mobility. Five consistent and distinct clusters were identified. In clusters where girls were overrepresented, different contextual factors were found with different fears and coping strategies; in clusters more typical for boys, housing and neighbourhood factors were more determining. In the qualitative study, lone rapists, mainly a threat to girls, and gangs of adolescent boys, threatening boys with violence and girls mainly with (sexual) harassment, were described as the most prominent threats. These threats were used to construct shared ideas of gendered behaviour. Traffic, though sometimes admitted to be a major safety risk, was perceived as much more manageable.

Conclusion: A number of interacting factors influence adolescents' mobility and perceived safety in public space. Where adolescents live, and to some extent household socioeconomic status, determines the extent to which they actively commute. Boys' and girls' perception of safety in public space differs, and context seems to have different impact on boys' and girls' fears. Threats are understood through ideas of gendered behaviour. Though causality cannot be determined due to cross-sectional design, findings are based on large and diverse samples and can be assumed to be generalizable to adolescents in similar settings.