

## PREFACE

Everyone has a school travel story. Even before I started collecting data, as soon as I shared the topic of my research with friends and acquaintances, they would regale me with stories about how they themselves got to school or how arduous it can be to get their own children to and from school.

I heard astonishing stories, such as the one my neighbor told me about how he would sometimes catch a ride in an open car of a freight train as it rolled past his home in western Pennsylvania to get to school in the 1950s. I heard inspiring stories, such as the one a member of Boulder’s Housing Advisory Board told me about how he and his wife moved to central Boulder from the city’s southern edge to make it easier for the children in their blended family to get themselves to and from school and their after-school activities independently by walking, bicycling, or taking the bus. And I heard heart-wrenching stories, such as the one a mother of a child with autism spectrum disorder told me about how she has to be available at a moment’s notice to go pick up her son, who was bused to a special program in a neighboring town, because teachers often couldn’t manage his behavior and because the district doesn’t provide bus service outside of the standard drop-off and pick-up times.

But mostly, I heard stories about what a time-intensive chore transporting children to and from school can be. A man I met at the 2022 Transportation Research Board conference in Washington, D.C., spent more than 20 minutes telling me about his family’s elaborate carpool arrangement for their five children who all attended different schools. At the end of his story, he rolled his eyes and sighed, “I’m Uber for half the day.”

Traveling to and from schools has become a fraught topic in our society, but as I embarked on this research during the 2020-2021 school year, all the frantic planning, preparing, and negotiating that often characterizes school trips in the United States transformed into a different kind of anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic closed public schools and forced families to accommodate their children’s learning at home, invest in private small-group learning pods, or effectively unschool their children, surrendering to an unstructured school year. Across the United States, an estimated 230,000 students simply went missing from the public school system (Toness & Lurye, 2023). Four years later, the effects of pandemic school closures are still rippling through society in the form of low test scores and impacts on young people’s mental health (Mervosh et al., 2024).

One of the activities my then-second grader enjoyed during that challenging learn-from-home year was watching the German documentary television series, *The Most Dangerous Ways to School*. There was something fascinating to both of us about watching children as young as 5 years old hike over jagged peaks, row canoes across giant lakes, and cut through dense jungles in remote areas around the globe to get to schools in various states of repair just so they could eat a nutritious meal and learn enough to help lift their families out of poverty.

Here in Boulder County, Colorado, no one is sending their children out to trek in handmade sandals over mountain passes to attend one-room schools. But to the families of students in this primarily suburban county, making the trip to and from school can feel just as stressful, for a wide variety of reasons, most of which have to do with the challenges of time management and the dangers of vehicle traffic. Arterial roads in Boulder or Longmont might not be deep canyons surrounded by jagged peaks, but it can feel just as frightening to cross them on

foot or by bike – and, statistically, doing so is probably more dangerous. In the year 2022 alone, 35 people died in traffic crashes on streets in Boulder County (Boulder County, 2023).

Parents are acutely aware of the real dangers of what has been called “motornormativity” (Walker et al., 2022; Frohlich & Collins, 2023): the prioritization of automobile throughput and planning for motorized vehicles over creating places that are safe and efficient for people walking, bicycling, scootering, or using wheelchairs and other mobility devices. But parents and caregivers of children also tend to *perceive* more dangers than those that are verifiably real in many cases. Perception of danger leads parents to limit young people’s independent mobility, which reinforces motornormativity. That same perception of danger also leads many people, parents included, to use increasingly large vehicles to protect themselves and their family members from other drivers, as Angie Schmitt documents in her 2020 book, *Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America*. It’s a vicious cycle.

During my research, I heard parent after parent bemoan the loss of independence in their children’s lives. They would reflect longingly on their own free-range childhoods, then describe how they needed to control and monitor their children’s movements for various reasons – primarily fears for their children’s safety. Almost all the adults I interviewed, transportation professionals and community members alike, remembered getting themselves to school independently, but most now drive their children to school. My own commitment to fostering my then-9-year-old son’s independence was a major factor in where I chose to live after my divorce in the summer of 2022. By the good fortune of an amicable separation, sufficient equity in a high-value single-family home, and the availability of a two-bedroom unit in an adjacent multi-family development, I was able to buy a condo one street away from the house my ex-husband kept. That meant my son could walk between our homes, maintain his friendships in the neighborhood, and, significantly, continue walking to and from school every day. In the parlance of the Phase 2 findings of this study, we are “active and comfortable,” which, I discovered, is a rare and cherished experience.

As a transportation professional and a highly engaged member of my community (I sit on Boulder’s Transportation Advisory Board, facilitate an active local walking community, and work for the city’s transportation management organization, which is housed in the local chamber of commerce), I came into this research with quite a bit of knowledge and experience, and with enormous privilege. I wanted to learn with and from people whose situations are very different from my own while also looking more closely at how professionals like me can partner with our communities with intention and understanding. I hope this study brings to light more of the “whys,” “hows,” “whens,” and “why nots” of school and weekday travel by students and caregivers, opening new avenues to collaboration and problem solving in transportation demand management and beyond.