Danger from Traffic to Fear of Monkeys: children’s independent mobility in four diverse sites in Japan

RIELA PROVI DRIANDA & ISAMI KINOSHITA
Faculty of Horticulture, Chiba University, Matsudo City, Japan

ABSTRACT The study reported on in this article was based on a study of children’s independent mobility in four different areas in Japan. Interviews were given to the head principals of the sampled schools, and the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) members, and questionnaires were sent to a total of 530 children aged 7-15 years and their parents. These were conducted in order to obtain information regarding the possibilities for children to engage in independent mobility within a variety of community settings. The findings showed that many young children in Japan are allowed by their parents to travel to and from school alone. The older the children were the more they were granted many varied licenses and freedoms for independent mobility. However, a change in children’s attitudes toward the home–school journey was identified in this study. While it is a common norm in Japan that children should go to school on foot or by public transportation, the findings showed that some children have started to rely on private cars as the main transportation to travel to and return from school. In particular this was evident with children who live in small towns and rural areas. This study reveals that in a diverse geographical environment, the extent to which Japanese children can engage in independent mobility is varied. Overall, for children living in the capital city of Tokyo it appears they have more freedom to engage in independent mobility than their counterparts in suburban, small town and rural areas.

Introduction

The term ‘children’s independent mobility’ was introduced by Mayer Hillman and his colleagues in the 1990s. Their study focused on the parental barriers to children’s opportunity to move around their neighbourhood unaccompanied by an adult. He referred to providing children’s freedoms as parental licenses. Six major licenses to independent mobility were examined to understand the extent to which children could engage in independent mobility. The six licenses were: the license to cross main roads alone, to walk places other than school, to travel home from school independently, to use buses, to go out after dark, and to cycle alone on main roads. From Hillman et al’s study (1990) it was found that British children had fewer opportunities to engage in independent mobility compared to their counterparts in Germany.

In later years, following on from Hillman et al’s work, several studies were conducted to explore the issues related to children’s independent mobility in different urban settings (O’Brien et al, 2000; Prezza et al, 2001; Timperio et al, 2004; Osborne, 2008; Brown et al, 2008). In comparison with Hillman et al’s study in 1990, the study of O’Brien et al (2000) found that the number of children who walked to school in the United Kingdom has continued to fall. While in Australia, it was discovered that children did walk or cycle to school more frequently than UK children, Timperio et al (2004) discovered that the frequency of walking or cycling to local destinations other than school was found to be relatively low. In the United States, Osborne (2008) reported that the majority of American children rely on private cars as their main travel mode to school. This car dependency has been a concern to many researchers, particularly regarding its effect to children’s
Children’s Independent Mobility in Japan

personal health. It has been argued that children who spend more time inside private cars are less likely to be active, and it is believed that this behavior has a firm link to the increase in obesity among young children (Mackett et al., 2005). Mackett et al. (2005) asserted from their research study that it is better for children to walk rather than travel by car to school or other events because they consume more calories while they walk to the events and use more when they arrive. Timperio et al. (2004) also highlighted that parents who thought there was limited access to public transport options and parks and sports grounds were less likely to allow children, particularly girls, to walk or cycle in their neighborhood.

Timperio et al. (2004) argue that parental attitudes toward driving children to school are placing other children at risk of injury. But due to parental concern for children’s safety, children are less likely to be allowed to go to school and other places without supervision. Fed by the culture of fear and insecurity, many parents have decided to increase surveillance of their children by escorting and driving them everywhere, even equipping them with mobile phones (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Malone, 2007). Osborne (2008), highlighting the findings from the UK National Children’s Bureau in 2004, stated that children who were driven by their parents actually wanted to cycle to school. However, research continues to support the fact that parents feel uneasy about letting children experience independent mobility due to their perception of the risks of increased traffic volume and the weakening of social bonds among the community (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Karsten, 2005; Rooney, 2008). Beyond that, parents have also conveyed concerns about stranger danger in neighborhoods (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Johansson, 2006). In Bjorklid & Nordström’s (2007) study they revealed that even among the immigrant or newly arrived populations in the suburban area, a strong fear of stranger danger among parents was identified.

Why is Children’s Independent Mobility Necessary?

Many researchers have agreed that the restriction of children’s independent mobility would influence the development of children’s physical, social, cognitive and emotional competencies (Kyttä, 2004; Karsten & Van Vliet, 2006). In addition, Malone (2007) argues that over-protecting children by driving them everywhere by car is reducing children’s opportunities to build the resilience and skills critical to be competent and independent environmental users. The study by Ehsan & Taniguchi (2007) supports this argument with the finding that a longer home-school distance weakens children’s spatial knowledge. One nine-year-old child in Rooney’s (2008) study expressed her experience being driven in car: ‘When you’re in a car you just go straight past, I never noticed the flowers on the hedge when I was just driving past’.

Tonucci (2005) asserted that the restriction of children’s independent mobility contributes to children losing the opportunity to learn about autonomy, the capacity to govern oneself without external guidance. Karsten & Van Vliet (2006) added that not only did the limitation to children’s mobility influence the children, but also the parents and the city where children live would bear the consequences. An example of this is given by Tranter (2008), who argues that the increase of children’s travelling by car contributes to a significant proportion of car traffic in the morning peak time and creates major parking/drop-off problems for schools and local residents. As a consequence some countries have been trying to reduce the traffic volume and improve traffic safety around the children’s living area by encouraging children to walk to school (Kingham & Ussher, 2008; Rooney, 2008; Selman, 2008). Such programs as the walking school bus provide examples of ways that schools and communities are trying to manage these issues. Rooney (2008) asserted that the walking school bus can contribute to children’s development of community as it allows them to access people and places they are usually denied. In addition, it helps parents build trust of their society and their children’s competence by acting as scaffolding.

While there have been many reports about the situation as well as the initiatives to increase children’s independent mobility, we have identified a limited number of studies reporting on evidence of children’s independent mobility from East Asian countries. The study reported on this article tries to contribute to the knowledge of children’s independent mobility in the context of Japan, a country where children from elementary school onward are required to travel to and return from school on foot. In the article we will provide some initial insights regarding the extent to which Japanese children are allowed to engage in independent mobility in their own
neighborhoods. After a description of the research methodology, we will present the general findings about Japanese children’s independent mobility, and then follow this with specific issues of children’s independent mobility found within four diverse localities that we sampled.

**Methodology**

This study was conducted as a part of an international collaborative study on children’s independent mobility coordinated by the Policy Studies Institute at the University of Westminster. This study aims to investigate children’s independent mobility in the following settings: (i) inner city, (ii) suburban area, (iii) small town, and (iv) rural area. For that purpose, we carried out research in three prefectures in Japan, namely Tokyo, Chiba, and Shizuoka (see Figure 1). To represent the inner city, we selected Shinagawa, which is located in the Tokyo Metropolis – the capital city area. Shinagawa is home to many Japanese large corporation headquarters and technology centers such as Sony, JTB Corporation, Namco Bandai holdings and so on. With an area of 22.72 km², this city was inhabited by 365,412 people in 2010, with a density of 16,083.3 people per km² (Shinagawa City Official Homepage, 2010). To represent the suburban area, we selected Matsudo, a city which was developed as a major suburban area for the Tokyo Metropolis. With a total area of 61.33 km², this city was home to 485,545 inhabitants in 2010 (Matsudo City Official Homepage, 2010) and has a density of 7920 people per km², making it one of the biggest ‘bed town’ cities in the greater Tokyo metropolitan area. To represent the small town, we selected Shimoda. This city is located in the Shizuoka Prefecture, about two hours from Tokyo by super express train. With a total area of 104.7 km², this city had a population of 25,054 in 2010 with a density of 242 people per km² (Shimoda City Official Homepage, 2010). Shimoda has a strong historical background since it was the landing area of Commodore Perry, an American who opened communications between Japan and western countries for the first time. This city is famous for its tourism, in particular its hot springs and beach. The next region is Minami Izu, a small town with the population of 9637 inhabitants in 2010. This area was selected to represent the rural areas. Located in the hinterland of Shimoda City, this area has a density of 87.1 people per km² and a total area of 110.58 km² (Minami Izu Town Official Homepage, 2010). This area is famous for its hot spring industry as well as fishing and farming activities.
To obtain the respondents for this study, we contacted several public schools in the case-study areas. Due to the small population in Minami Izu, more schools were contacted to increase the number of respondents. In total, five elementary schools (one in Shinagawa City, one in Matsudo City, one in Shimoda City and two in Minami Izu) and five junior high schools (one in Shinagawa City, one in Matsudo City, one in Shimoda City and two in Minami Izu) participated in the study. The ethical issues surrounding the research were negotiated with the head principal and teachers from each school. From the negotiation, it was agreed that every set of questionnaires must be accompanied by an introductory letter outlining how the data will be used in the future and how to contact the researcher if the respondents have any objections or questions. As we translated the questionnaires from English (the original version) to Japanese, we had the questionnaires checked by the schools and revised the language used in the questions according to their corrections. Some questions that schools thought were inappropriate were eliminated, such as the questions about whether children have learning or physical disabilities. The questionnaires were distributed after we received approval from the schools regarding the content and language of the final questionnaires. In the first stage, we distributed around 800 questionnaires to children aged 7-15 years, and their parents. There were 530 valid questionnaires retrieved from all schools. We did a quantitative analysis to understand the responses of parents and children regarding children’s licenses for independent mobility. As there were several interesting issues revealed from the parents’ and children’s answers, we visited each region to conduct interviews with head principals, teachers, and some PTA members to obtain further information. To understand the locality, we also did a field observation and interviewed the local people as well as the local government staff.
Profile of Respondents

Table I shows the profile of the child respondents by gender, age group and area of residence. In this study, 35.1% of the child respondents were aged 7-8 years, 30.4% were aged 10-12 years, and 34.5% were aged 13-15 years. There were no nine-year-old respondents in our current study.

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girls</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10-12 years</td>
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<td>Minami Izu Town</td>
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<td>34.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>530</td>
<td>100</td>
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Table I. Demographic characteristics, child respondents.

Table II shows the profile of the parent respondents by gender, age group, work status, car ownership and area of residence. The majority of parent respondents were females aged between 30 and 44 years and most of them were in employment. Table II also shows that the majority of the parent respondents have at least one car in their household.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>530</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Demographic characteristics, parent respondents.
General Findings about Children’s Independent Mobility in Japan

Parental Permission

Our results showed that other than travelling home from school, the young children in Japan were less likely than older children to be allowed by their parents to do a number of things alone. Figure 2 shows that young children were less likely to be allowed to go out alone after dark, to cycle on main roads, to ride local transportation, and to travel to places other than school without being accompanied by a trusted adult. It seems that parents are more likely to allow children to go out unsupervised when they reach the age of 10 and older. Similar to children in Prezza et al’s (2001) study, our study also confirms that older children were granted more freedom to engage in independent mobility. However, as shown in Figure 2, there is an exception for children aged 13-15 years. Compared to children from the lower age groups, children age 13 years were less likely to be allowed to travel home from school alone and to cross main roads alone than children from the lower age groups. At the same time, children aged 15 years were less likely to be allowed to go out alone after dark, to cross main roads alone and to travel to places other than school than children aged 14 years.

Figure 2. Parental licenses granted to children aged 7-15 years.

Figure 3 shows data for parental reasons behind their restriction of children’s independent activity after dark. The majority of parents associated darkness with the words *abunai* or *kiken* (which means ‘dangerous’ in Japanese) in their response. Some parents gave a simple answer such as outside darkness and the inadequate street lighting at night, while to some parents, darkness is associated with the increased risk of encountering a traffic accident as well as stranger danger. Some parents also said that children have no necessity to go out after dark because they need to study at home after their evening outdoor play. Another reason was that outdoor play at night is often associated with children’s bad behavior. Other parents perceived that their children are still very young to be allowed to go out alone after dark. Some also stated that returning home before dark is a home rule that should be obeyed by children.
Travel Mode and Coupling

Figure 4 shows that approximately 71% of children went to school on foot and around 18.9% of them travelled by car. Our results showed that only a few children use local buses/trains or cycle to school. However, when children were asked about how they would like to be able to travel to and from school, the percentage of children who wanted to walk to and from school decreased to 48.1%. Meanwhile, the percentage of children who wanted to travel by car decreased slightly to around 15%. On the contrary, the percentage of children who wanted to be able to cycle to and from school increased to nearly 22%.
Figure 5 illustrates that around 37% of children went to school with children of the same age, around 30% of children went to school alone and almost 13% of them were accompanied by their parents. Meanwhile, in the case of school to home journey, more than 50% children travelled home with children of the same age, with only 7.7% accompanied by their parents. This finding signifies that in general, Japanese children do not rely on their parents to travel to or from school.

The Issues of Children’s Independent Mobility within Different Localities

In this section, we explore the issues of children’s independent mobility in the local context. In our analysis, we classified children into three groups, children aged 7-8 years, 10-12 years, and 13-15 years.

Shinagawa City, Tokyo Metropolis: the capital city

Our findings identified that parents in Shinagawa have greater confidence to let children engage in independent mobility than parents from other regions. Figure 6 shows that the youngest group of children (7-8 years) were already granted licenses to travel alone to and from school and to go out alone after dark. Figure 6 also shows that 100% children age 10-12 years in Shinagawa were allowed by parents to travel home from school alone and more than 90% children were allowed to cross the main roads and to cycle the main roads alone. The findings show that when going to places other than school that are within walking distance, 93.1% children aged 13-15 years were allowed to go alone.

Our findings also indicate that the young children in Shinagawa have a low concern about the risk of getting involved in a traffic accident even though they live in a big city with high traffic volumes. From our interviews with school staff, it was revealed that the school community has initiated many activities to improve children’s safety during home–school travel. For example, to reduce children’s risk of encountering traffic accidents or stranger dangers, school staff have asked for the cooperation of the local residents and parents to monitor children’s home–school travel during the morning and evening. According to the head principal, many parents of the school children work in the governmental institutions within Tokyo. With their strong educational background and level of public awareness, the head principal felt that these parents were cooperative and sought to participate in many school events, particularly the activities related to the improvement of children’s well-being in the neighborhood. By holding many neighbourhood-
scale events as well as publishing a regular school bulletin, the school had been working hard to strengthen the communication among local residents.

![Graph showing parental licenses granted to children aged 7-15 years in the capital city.](image)

Figure 6. Parental licenses granted to children aged 7-15 years in the capital city.

In addition to the school’s activities, it was found that the local government had also been working on the issue of children’s home–school safety. The local government distributes free safety devices to the elementary school children in the locality so that parents and children’s guardians can track children’s whereabouts. These safety devices, which are called ‘mamoruchi’, are equipped with a crime prevention buzzer and GPS technology (see Figure 7).

![Image of the 'mamoruchi' safety device.](image)

Figure 7. The ‘mamoruchi’ safety device.

If children find themselves in trouble, they can pull the device’s string to attract people’s attention. Once pulled the safety center automatically contacts the child through the mamoruchi to ascertain the problem and track the child’s whereabouts with GPS technology. The staff at the center ask for the child’s identity and match them with the information registered in the center database. Guardians of children in trouble are notified and other volunteers who live near the reported scene will go to help the child. The mamoruchi device can be upgraded to a child’s private mobile phone.
with an additional service fee. However, this phone can only be used by children to contact their parents’ number. The safety devices are returned to the provider when children graduate from elementary school or move to other localities. According to the mamoruchi center database, the mamoruchi has supported one elementary school girl who had found herself in danger. The girl had been followed by a stranger who had tried to break into her house. Fortunately, she had the mamoruchi device hanging on her necklace. She pulled the string and right away, the device made a loud sound. The stranger immediately ran away after hearing the voice of mamoruchi center staff coming from the device. Learning from this case, the local government strongly advises young children to carry mamoruchi when going outdoors.

**Matsudo: the suburban area**

The research results from the suburban area illustrate that children are more restricted than children who live in the capital city (see Figure 8). Young children were less likely to be allowed by parents to cross and cycle on the main roads alone. Furthermore, no children aged 7-8 years were allowed to go out alone after dark. It appears that many parents were very worried about the risk of their children being injured in a traffic accident when crossing a road. Parental anxiety regarding traffic safety and their decision to equip children with mobile phones to ease their anxiety is expressed by a parent in this way:

I am very worried about the risk of traffic accident because you know here ... the streets are quite narrow ... I give my child a mobile phone so we will able to contact each other when something goes wrong. (Mrs A, a member of elementary school PTA, Matsudo)

Other than traffic safety, both parents and children expressed a concern about the issue of stranger danger. Nevertheless, even though the results showed that children are less likely to be independent than their counterparts in the capital city, our interviews revealed that the suburban parents actually wanted children to learn to be independent as soon as possible:

I don’t want my child to rely on me all the time. It is not that I want to keep him all the time with me ... My reason to assist him now is to give training, for example, how to cross the busy streets, how to do this thing and that. When he has mastered the skills, he will be able to travel alone safely. (Mrs A, a member of elementary school PTA, Matsudo)

![Graph](image-url)  
**Figure 8.** Parental licenses granted to children aged 7-15 years in the Japanese suburban area.
Parents of the suburban children were also less likely to state that they believe adults in their neighborhood looked out for others' children. Similarly, they also expressed uncertainty as to whether the young people and adults in the neighborhood were troublesome and threatening to children's personal safety while playing outdoors. This finding is significant as many residents of this suburban area had been working hard through community workshops to promote positive relationships among residents as well as to increase children's safety in the neighborhood. The schools and PTA members have also been engaging in routine patrols, and at the end of semester, they completed evaluations to update the issues in the locality. In addition, every year the schools and local community hold an event to introduce children to their local neighbors. This community event has been conducted for 13 years with the active involvement of the local traditional clan families. However, since many new residents in this neighborhood are families commuting to central Tokyo, it appears that they have less interest in community events. According to the head principal of the junior high school, most parents say they have no time to take part either in the PTA activity or the local community event because of their busy work life. Therefore, it has been a challenge for the community to involve such newcomer families in the children's participatory event. The head of the PTA of the suburban elementary school expressed a similar sentiment when discussing the new families:

It seems that the fathers were not keen to be involved in any kind of school activities. Many of them thought it is mother's business ... so many of them may not really know about what we have been doing to protect children's safety. (Mrs B, the head of elementary school PTA, Matsudo)

In response, a parents' group for fathers (in Japanese called 'Oyaji no Kai') was organized at the school to increase male parents' support in school and local community events.

Shimoda: the small town

Of all the sites, the parents from the small town of Shimoda conveyed the lowest amount of confidence to let small children engage in independent mobility (see Figure 9). The findings showed that parents of 7-8-year-old children were less likely to allow children to travel alone from home to school and to cross the main roads alone.

![Figure 9. Parental licenses granted to children aged 7-15 years in Japanese small town.](image-url)
Children’s Independent Mobility in Japan

Similar to suburban children, no children aged 7-8 years were allowed to go out alone after dark. However, the findings showed that the 10-12-year-old children were more likely to be allowed to travel home from school alone and to cross the main roads alone than children from the lower age group. Surprisingly, the independent mobility of the oldest group of children (13-15-year-olds) in this small town seems to be more restricted than the 10-12-year-old children. While in the capital city more than 90% of children age around 15 years usually travel to places other than school alone, in this small town only 50% of children were able to travel alone. Furthermore, findings showed that the 13-15-year-old children in this small town were less likely to be allowed to go out after dark and they also faced more restrictions on cycling on the main roads than children from the capital city and the suburban area.

Our findings also revealed that many children from the small town felt unsafe to be in their own neighborhood. Most of them expressed a concern about traffic safety while some children expressed a fear of strangers. This fear of strangers could have been triggered by an incident that had happened six years ago. At this time a second-grade girl from the local elementary school met a stranger who tried to bring her to the road tunnel. After this incident, the teacher and local community organized a safety management committee to conduct a patrol and neighborhood surveillance. When asked about which other things children worry about while independently mobile, some children mentioned their fear of meeting wild monkeys and wild boars in the neighborhood. As one 13-year-old boy put it, 'I don't know what to do if I meet a wild boar or monkey!'

Figure 10. Japanese children are starting to rely on car travel for school journeys.

Similar to the finding of Skar & Krogh (2010), it appears that children in this small town were not keen to confront wild nature even though they live very near to it. Based on our interviews at the school, we found out that some wild boars often appear at the back of the school gates. According to the local people, the wild boars, especially the big one, are very aggressive and will attack anyone they see. As this town is located near to the monkey preservation area, some wild monkeys were reported to have been seen and disturbed local residents’ farms and houses. By observing traffic flow at the school gate in the mornings and afternoons it was evident that the small town children, from the youngest up to the oldest children, have started to rely on cars as their main travel mode to school, as Figure 10 illustrates. The head principal at the school also supported this when he stated:

Actually, I am against the parental attitudes toward driving children to school. In the past, all of us walked to school ... even though we have to walk through the mountain ... river and paddy
field. Today’s children are being too spoiled … they can’t stand coldness, rainy days … (Mr X, the head principal of junior high school, Shimoda Town).

The head principal mentioned several possibilities regarding parental reasons for driving children to school, one being the problem of public transport. According to the principal there has been less public transport operating in the morning, so if children want to go to school earlier to attend club activities they rely on parents to drive them. Furthermore, recent residential developments where many children and new families are living are located on the town’s outskirts, with little or no public transport access. Another reason could be the junior high school’s new location on a hillside above the main town; it takes quite a lot of energy and time for children to reach the school. According to the head principal, today’s parents are also very concerned about children’s health, with parents picking the children up when the weather is rainy or snowy or driving children to and from school if they think that children are not in good health.

Izu: the rural area

Compared to the small town and suburban children, the young children who live in the rural area were granted more licenses to travel home from school alone (see Figure 11). In addition, it was found that children aged 7-8 years in this region were granted more licenses to cross main roads alone, to cycle on the main roads alone, to travel to places other than school, and to ride local buses/trains than children who live in suburban and the small town areas. The young children of the rural area were also granted the most licenses to ride on local public transportation alone compared with children from other regions. Around 73% of the 10-12-year-old children were allowed to ride on local public transportation alone while in the other research sites the percentage of children who were granted this license was normally lower than 50%. However, compared to other regions, there are fewer parents of the 13-15 year-olds who allowed children to travel home from school alone.

Figure 11. Parental licenses granted to children aged 7-15 years in Japanese rural areas.

Most children perceived that their neighborhood was not very safe. Findings showed that there are two major concerns of safety, the most concern being related to traffic safety and the second the issue of stranger danger. Even though the traffic in this area is not as busy as in the capital city, because of the low density of the town the speed of vehicles is seen to be faster. Additionally, the
streets in this area tend to be darker at night than the other more populated areas due to inadequate street lighting. This might explain why children feel less safe to walk alone in this area particularly after dark. Related to the issue of stranger danger, the head principal explained that due to the low population and also the low population density in this region, there were fewer people on the streets even during the daytime (see Figure 12). Children may be afraid that no one could immediately help them if they were in trouble. Based on our observation, we found that the numbers of ‘kodomo 110’ [1] in the rural area are quite few and their locations are sometimes quite far away from each other. There are more ‘kodomo 110’ in Shinagawa’s neighborhood and they are located nearer to each other than they are in the other regions. For children’s safety, at one of the two elementary schools in our research, children come to school in groups. Each group, which consists of younger and older students, picks a meeting point in the neighborhood, and they all walk to school together. The elder children have the role of taking care of the younger children during their home–school travel. Along with that, the people from the community also try to protect children’s safety by conducting a neighborhood patrol, like the residents in the small town were doing.

Interestingly, the rural area children have a lower concern about the appearance of wild animals in their neighborhood than their counterparts in the small town. This is very interesting as the wild boars and monkeys were also reported to be seen in this rural area, but why do rural children have less fear about this? Does this signify that the rural area children are more used to the wild animals than the small town children?

![Figure 12. Fewer opportunities for surveillance in the rural area due to a lack of population.](image)

**Conclusions**

Our study identifies the contribution of Japanese school policy, which encourages children to travel independently to and from school, to the opportunity for children to engage in independent mobility. With this policy, even the youngest children aged seven are able to travel to school without being accompanied by their parents. Moreover it appears that in Japan, schools are taking the responsibility for children’s home–school travel activity, such as managing the home–school routes as well as ensuring children’s safety. However, we notice that like many parents in other countries, Japanese parents are also worried about the issues of traffic and stranger danger. But rather than driving children to school, the Japanese parents chose to help schools by improving children’s safety during their home–school travel, for instance by participating in the routine patrol activity. Even though it was discovered that children who live far away from the big city have started to rely on private cars, we recognize that parents’ reasons to drive children to school were
not really related to their concern about the issues of traffic or stranger danger. It appears that children were being driven to school due to inconvenient transportation in the locality, the geographical problem, and parents’ concerns about children’s health. Other than travelling to and from school alone, generally many Japanese children were granted the license to ride on local public transportation and to cross the main roads alone.

Our findings reveal that in diverse geographical settings, the extent to which children can engage in independent mobility is varied. It is interesting to note that children who live in the capital city appear to be the holders of the most licenses for independent mobility. While modern cities are often viewed as ‘unfriendly’ places for children to grow up, this study found evidence to support the capital city’s conduciveness for children’s independent mobility in the neighborhood. We identified several factors for why children who live in the capital city were granted more licenses for independent mobility than their counterparts in other regions. First, Shinagawa, as well as other cities within the Tokyo metropolitan area, have very convenient and many alternatives for public transportation. Even though children live quite a long way from the school, they can use local trains or buses that operate intensively inside the town from the early morning to midnight. In the other regions, the number of public transport options is not as large as in the capital city. Second, Shinagawa city has a higher population density, pedestrian volume, day and night activities, and more surveillance than in the other regions. In the morning there are more people walking from home to the nearest train or bus station, and according to Colquhoun (2004) a high number of pedestrians can contribute to a lower crime risk as there are more ‘eyes on streets’ in that area. Third is the strong cooperation and communication among schools, local government, parents and local residents. The initiative of local government to give a safety device as a free service for small children who are studying in the locality seems to be effective in increasing parental confidence in letting children go outdoors without an adult. As well as an actual safety measure, the local government viewed the devices as a deterrent to criminals who might be considering acting in an inappropriate way in the public domain. Further study of the influence of the free crime prevention safety device policy on the levels of children’s independent mobility could also shed light on this presumption. In addition, Shinagawa parents may feel at ease to let children travel alone inside the neighborhood because they know that many people in the locality, such as other children’s parents, the school teachers, the neighbors, even the local government, have a strong commitment to protect children’s safety and strengthen community bonds.

From this study, we also learned that the modern city can be ‘friendly’ and supportive enough for children to engage in independent mobility as long as the city is walkable for children, has good access to public transportation and has local people and government who have a strong commitment to supporting children’s independent travel. Meanwhile, living far away from big cities does not always mean that children have more independent mobility. This study revealed that children who live in the small towns and rural areas, places which are often described as the ideal neighborhood for children to grow up as there are fewer cars and more access to nature, are facing some obstacles independent mobility due to a lack of child-friendly facilities, transportation convenience and people who want to be the eyes on streets. In addition, this study identified that wild nature is currently seen as an additional threat to children’s independent mobility in the small town. In contrast with the rural area children, the small town children were more likely to be fearful and unsure about how to deal with ‘wild nature’. This finding certainly brought up some interesting questions about how to create educational opportunities for children around safety and independence as while the schools and community provided a lot of information to children about how to stay safe from vehicles and strangers, there had been no consideration of how to support children to deal with the fear of monkeys.

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Children’s Independent Mobility in Japan

Note

[1] Kodomo 110 is a program run by the local residents, municipality and police to provide an emergency shelter for children who are in trouble. In other words, it is children’s emergency houses. These emergency houses are usually marked with a specific sign so children can easily identify them.

References


Shimoda City Official Homepage. http://www.city.shimoda.shizuoka.jp


RIELA PROVI DRIANDA is a PhD candidate at Chiba University, Japan. She received her M.Phil. in Landscape Planning and Management from Chiba University in 2009. Her master’s thesis comprises the investigation of children’s independent mobility in Japanese urban areas. Currently, she is involved in research about community design for crime prevention supported by Japanese Science and Technology. Her research interests include child-friendly built environment, children’s play environment, comics and animation as media for community education. Correspondence: Riela Provi Drianda, Doctoral Student, Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Horticulture, Chiba University, Matsudo 648, Matsudo City 271-8510, Japan (putitet@yahoo.com).

ISAMI KINOSHITA is a Professor at Chiba University, Japan. He teaches urban planning and rural planning to students of landscape architecture. He is one of the pioneers in creating the participatory method with children in the Japanese community design movement from 1980. He studied architecture at Tokyo Institute of Technology, and got his PhD degree by studying children’s playing space. His early project was the three generations’ play maps at one neighborhood in Setagaya, Tokyo, supporting adventure playground activities. Now, he is looking at children’s participation in different municipalities promoting a network of child-friendly cities in Japan. Correspondence: Professor Isami Kinoshita, Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Horticulture, Chiba University, Matsudo 648, Matsudo City 271-8510, Japan (isamikinoshita@faculty.chiba-u.jp).