



Lay summary

Barriers and Facilitators to Cycling to School for Children in the UK: A Systematic Review

Paul Boland, Rebecca Nowland, Kennedy Dominic Tellis, Mags Adams, Joanne Westwood, Deborah Crook, Cath Larkins, Julie Ridley (University of Lancashire, UK)

✉ Paul Boland: pboland2@lancashire.ac.uk

OVERVIEW

- We explored the factors that affect children cycling to and from school in the UK.
- We found that personal, social and environmental barriers link together and make it hard for children to cycle to school in the UK.
- We concluded that children want to cycle to school and parents, schools, policy makers and members of the public need to work together to make this possible.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/ats.1553>

[Access the full article here.](#)

Steer has supported the publication of this lay summary, which provides an overview of key findings from an academic article published in the peer-reviewed, open access journal, Active Travel Studies. Lay summaries are available in English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic.

steer

www.activetravelstudies.org

**UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER
PRESS**

In the UK, only 3% of children cycle to school which is significantly less than in other European countries. But there is evidence that children do want to cycle to school. In recent years, the UK government and other countries are making efforts to promote cycling to school. In the UK, for example, there has been increased investment in infrastructure and initiatives such as the Bikeability cycle training scheme. So, it is vital to understand what efforts are likely to work. Policymakers need to better understand the barriers and the facilitators, so that they can develop effective interventions that enable this method of active transport.

What did we do?

We conducted a systematic review of what has been written about cycling to school among children from primary and secondary schools within England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To coincide with changes in UK legislation to promote cycling, we looked for research published from 2010 onwards. We included all academic articles, and reports from organisations such as Cycling UK and the Department for Transport, that reported barriers and facilitators to children cycling to school.

To think through our findings, we used the capabilities approach (CA) theory. This helped us see the connections between the resources people have and the personal, social, environmental conditions around them. In CA, these conditions are called conversion factors, because they allow people to convert having a resource into an achievement. For example, converting having a bicycle into being able to ride it to school. CA helps

us see the connections between personal skills, attitudes and physical attributes and social norms and behaviours, public policies and economic conditions. CA also helps link personal and social factors to environmental factors, like infrastructure, climate and pollution.

What did we find?

We found 16 relevant articles and reports. Within these, we found personal, social and environmental issues, and links between these.

Personal Issues

We found personal barriers and facilitators to children cycling to school in the articles we reviewed. Boys were more likely to cycle to school than girls. This may be because girls feel discouraged if their friends do not also cycle. Age played a role, as cycling to school reduced between primary and secondary school. There may be social pressure to fit in as cycling was not seen as “cool”. Some children lack confidence or training. Practical challenges, such as having to carry heavy bags to school or not actually owning a cycle or the necessary equipment such as a cycle lock, are also a barrier, particularly for those living in deprived areas.

Social Issues

We found social issues related to attitudes, peer pressure and schools. Parental attitudes influenced whether their child cycled to school. Road safety, a lack of cycle paths, their confidence in their child’s ability to cycle to school and a fear of

having their bike stolen affected these attitudes. Encouragement from friends and family increased the likelihood of a child cycling to school. Schools were reported as both creating barriers and encouraging. Some schools discouraged children from cycling to school due to a fear of being sued as a result of cycle theft, and concerns around road safety. Whereas some schools had travel plans in place and encouraged children to cycle to school.

Environmental Issues

Unsurprisingly, cycling infrastructure was central. Some children, parents and school staff thought that roads are unsafe, connections to cycle paths were missing and some road vehicles caused obstructions. But some schools help improve infrastructure, for example by providing secure cycle storage, changing facilities and showers. The area where children live and the distance from school were also important. Children who live far from school are less likely to cycle. Children living in poorer areas, who are less likely to own a cycle, also have less access to safe routes.

Links between personal, social and environmental factors

Thinking with CA, we saw that some personal issues relate to resources – not owning a cycle or lock. Parental attitudes towards cycling and wider attitudes about gender and the “coolness” of cycling were important. Attitudes and behaviours were influenced by social factors. For example, school schemes can encourage parental and peer awareness of the benefits of cycling. School

support for the creation of safe cycling routes and infrastructure within schools was also important. Economic and political factors also really matter. For example, we saw that funding and political support is needed to make cycles available to children and parents who do not have these, to pay for awareness-raising sessions, and to provide safe routes in deprived areas.

Why is this important?

Cycling to school is not just about having access to a cycle or dedicated cycle lanes. It's about a mix of personal, social and environmental factors. For instance, a child may want to cycle to school, but if their parents are worried, their friends think it is uncool, and there is no safe route in their area, the chances are that the child won't do it.

The capabilities approach helped show us how children's options about cycling are limited by social attitudes and the economic and political choices of other people.

Conclusion

Our research shows that children do want to cycle to school and believe it is good for their health, the environment, and independence. To allow this to happen, children need support from parents, schools and policymakers. By building on the facilitators and understanding the barriers, we can create a future where cycling to school is safe and accessible to all children.

***Steer**, a global consultancy specialising in the critical services and infrastructure that make our world work, has supported the creation of this summary. Our aim is to empower active travel practitioners by making academic research more accessible. For more information, visit www.steergroup.com.*