



Greatest Risk in School Travel Is Not on School Buses

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WASHINGTON -- Children are at far more risk traveling to and from school in private passenger vehicles -- especially if a teen-age driver is involved -- than in school buses, says a new report from the National Academies' Transportation Research Board. Bicycling and walking also place students at greater risk than traveling by school bus. National data assessing the risk of different modes of school transportation need to be made available to help parents, students, and officials at the state and local levels make more informed decisions regarding safety, said the committee that wrote the report.

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"Each state, school district, and private school must assess its own situation and circumstances," said committee chair H. Douglas Robertson, director, Highway Safety Research Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. "The goal is to improve the safety of all children traveling to and from school, and to provide information to communities so that they can make informed choices that balance their needs and resources."

Every year, about 800 school-age children are killed in motor vehicle crashes during normal school travel hours -- weekday mornings and afternoons during school months -- accounting for about 14 percent of the 5,600 child deaths that occur on the nation's roadways. Of these 800 deaths, only about 2 percent are school-bus related, while 74 percent occur in private passenger vehicles and 22 percent are the result of pedestrian or bicycle accidents. More than half of all deaths of children between age 5 and 18 occur during normal school travel hours when a teen-ager is driving.

When students are injured or killed in crashes involving school buses, the link to school travel seems obvious, but when such casualties occur while traveling to and from school by other modes of transportation, the association is often not made. Congress asked the National Research Council to study the safety issues posed by all travel modes so that an accurate comparison could be made.

The report considered six transportation modes. In assessing buses, the committee looked at school buses as well as public transit buses and motor coach services. Passenger vehicles were divided into two categories, those driven by individuals 19 or older and those driven by operators under 19 years of age, mostly students. Data on pedestrians and bicyclists traveling to and from school also were examined.

The dramatic difference in risk across transportation modes at the national level suggests that more can be done to manage and reduce those dangers, the committee said. School districts should facilitate travel by safer modes while working to improve others that are less safe. For example, walking and bicycling could be made safer by improving sidewalks and protection at street crossings as well as building more bike paths. A dialogue among parents, schools, and other relevant organizations also needs to be established, encouraging collaboration to promote safe practices for students using all modes.

To help identify the risks of school travel, the committee developed a risk-management framework. This framework should be included among the tools used to make decisions on locations of schools, changes in the amount of student parking provided, or changes in the area serviced by school buses. For example, increasing the distance that students must live from school to qualify for school-bus service may save money but it also shifts children to travel modes that are less safe. Alternatively, providing school-bus service for middle school children attending after-school activities could reduce the risk of injury and fatality significantly. These examples, however, are based on national averages and do not reflect the variations that exist on a local or school-district level.

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