

A Questionnaire Survey: Children and the Car-dominated Society in Japan.

(Abridged edition)

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People Before Cars

(The group disputing the car-dominated society in Japan)

We are all living in a society that highly depends on cars.

Although life is made more convenient and comfortable by cars, there are many problems such as traffic accidents, environmental pollution, a decrease in play space, physical deterioration of children, and so on. A more grievous problem is that more than 60 000 children aged less than 15 are killed or injured each year in Japan by traffic accidents, mainly as pedestrians or cyclists.

Children are generally at much higher risk in traffic accidents than adults because of their physical and mental immaturity. Furthermore, they have no way to express their terrible situation and so they still remain in unprivileged minority in the current society highly dominated by the car.

This questionnaire was conducted to clarify the perceived problems of primary school children, teachers of kindergarten/childcare-center or primary school, and their parents. By focusing on the traffic environment of children, we expected to reveal one of the most important issues, plight situation of children in the car-dominated society, which always tends to be concealed behind the convenience of cars.



While most people use, or have no choice but to use, cars in daily life, they seem to take problems of car-dominated society pretty seriously. Many people were willing to respond to our questionnaire.

We hope this report will help you think about the society in which citizen's lives, and healthy growth and development of children, can be really secured. Eventually we wish a more desirable society for everyone.



About Us

The group, *People Before Cars*, belongs to a grass-roots movement and was founded in 1995 in order to give priority to pedestrians over cars to make our roads safer for pedestrians, to make our residential areas quieter and free from exhaust gas, to promote cycling and public transport, and to decrease car travel and increase free spaces or streets for playing and meeting.

We disputed a lot of detrimental effects of a car-dominated society from both ethical and pragmatic viewpoints. From the beginning, we have been focusing on this issue in the context of children's safety.

We have done a lot of activities to dispute the current car-dominated society, including photo exhibitions, petitions, and publicizing. (Cf. a booklet: "*Children and the Car-dominated Society*", issued in 1998)

METHOD

We conducted a questionnaire survey during 5 months from January through May of 2002 to clarify the perceptions of children, parents, and teachers toward the current car-dominated environment. A total number of 1,421 respondents was obtained from 23 prefectures all over Japan. Of those, 460 were children and 961 were adults. For more detail, breakdown and categorization of respondents is as follows:

Of total respondents: n = 1,421

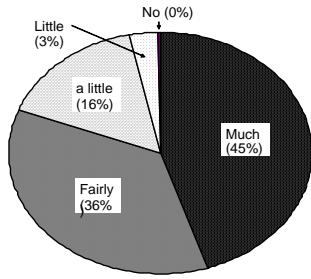
Adults: n = 961

- A. Teachers for preschoolers (kindergarten/childcare-center): n = 207,
- B. Teachers for primary school children (mainly for the lower graders): n = 133,
- C. Parents of preschool- or school-children: n = 532,
- C'. Parents and teachers of disabled children: n = 89,

Children: n = 460

- D. Primary school children: n = 437,
- D'. Disabled children: n = 23.

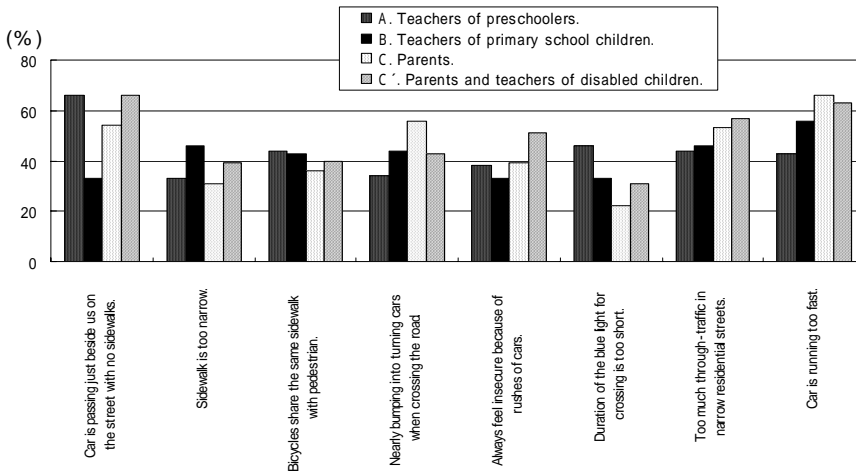
The questionnaire consisted of 16 items to be answered. We present here the most important findings.



1. Most parents see the outside environment as unsafe for their children to walk around.

More than 80% of parents think their children are in danger when walking outside (Fig. A). 90% of kindergarten/childcare-center teachers feel danger when they take children out for a walk, including 40% of teachers who feel danger sometimes.

Figure A. How much danger do parents feel when their children are walking on the streets near their house or to and from school.



2. What kind of danger or insecurity exist on the streets or zebra-crossings?

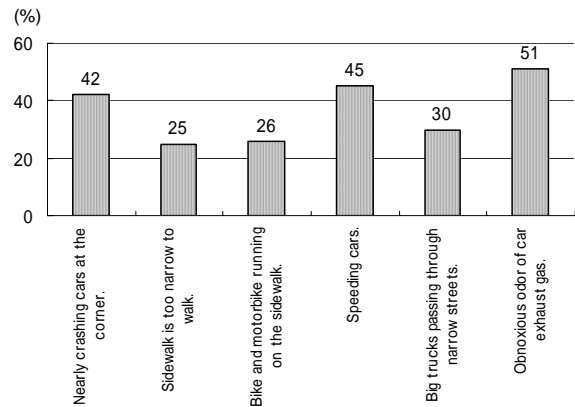
Many people pointed out a variety of danger/insecurity, such as speeding cars, too many cars, threat of turning cars at corners/intersections, and no or insufficient sidewalks, etc (Fig. B).

This means that there remains a lot of danger ubiquitously in our living space. Other important problems claimed were as such; the most dangerous conditions for walking on the snow-covered road, and too much illegal parking on the street.

3. What kind of danger do children feel when walking on the street?

For children, fear of speeding cars is ranked highest (the younger children feel more fear). The fact that so many children feel at risk around the corner to be hit by cars may result from their frequent use of bicycles, and thus reflects their lack of confidence in cycling skills. It is noteworthy that more than half of children pointed out the obnoxious odor of car exhaust gas, contrasting to that about 20% of adults pointed out so. Children are more vulnerable to such toxic gas, because they breathe at a lower level to the ground. This should be one of the biggest concerns in terms of their health (Fig. C).

Figure C. Perceived problems for children when walking on the street (multiple choices allowed)



4. Traffic accidents (or near-miss accidents) experienced.

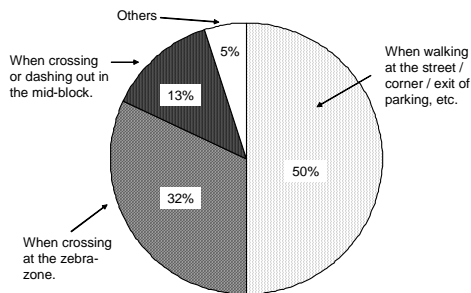


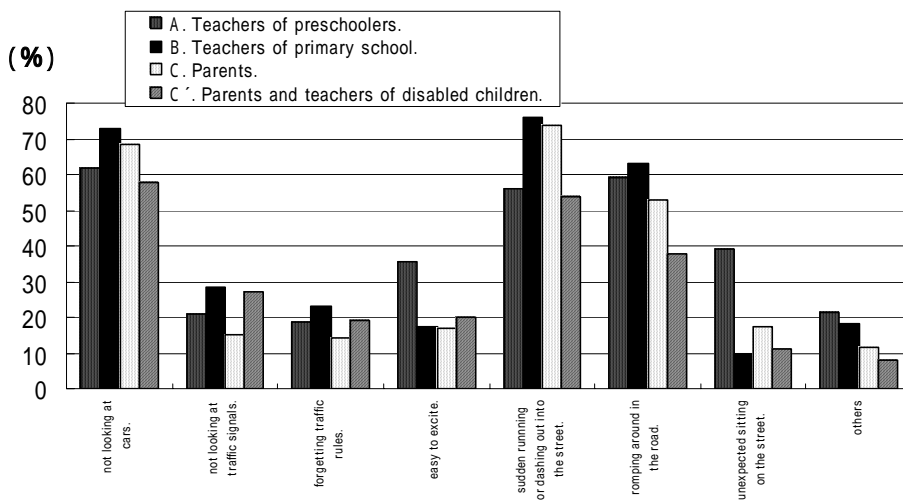
Figure D. Adults' experiences of traffic accidents / near-miss accidents.

A surprising number of adults and children have experienced traffic accident or near-miss accident. Primary school children account for majority of all cases. About a half of adult cases occurred while walking. Of those, one third were at street corners or near exits of parking lots (Fig. D).

Allegedly, 55% of their cases were caused by drivers, and 15% by street-design. Children were likely to experience such events when riding bicycles or around street corners.

5. Problems about children's behaviors on the street.

Figure E. Perceived problems for adults about children's behaviour on the street.(multiple choices allowed).



Children are prone to run or dash out into the street, play around, and not pay attention to cars, etc. Toddlers often sit unexpectedly on the street, and get easily excited (Fig. E). It is well known that children are so immature physically and mentally that they have unique and characteristic behavioral patterns. They are usually egocentric, easily distracted or attracted by something curious, emotionally unstable, and difficult to inhibit impulsion. The result of this question indicates that such tendency in children can hardly be controlled through road safety education, so we have to continue to improve traffic environment and restrict car use.

6. Children are much affected by the car-dominated society.

Many adults think that the car-dominated environment significantly affects their children physically and psychosocially. Physical deterioration, increased stress, and lacking opportunities to forge friendships and communicate with others were ranked high. Especially parents of disabled children have strong feelings about this. These phenomena may also be associated with the ubiquitously disseminated TV set or video games, declining birth rates and resultant decrease in the number of younger population, and highly competitive educational system in Japan. Anyway, the more convenient, the more artificial, and the less communicative our lives become, the more seriously our children's physical and mental development are affected.

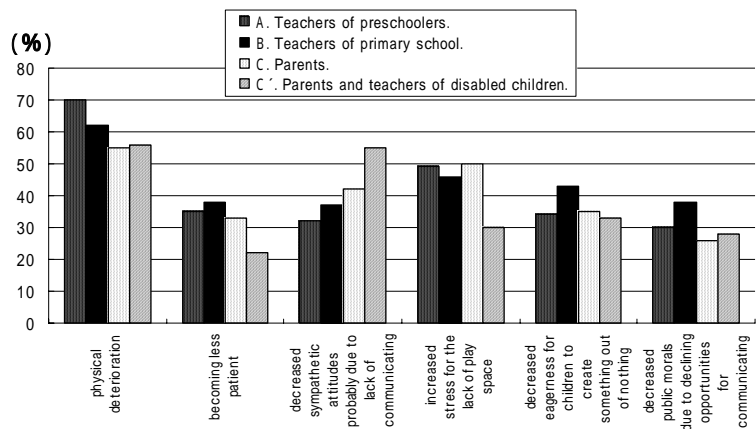
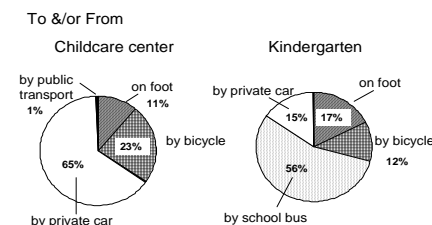


Figure F. For adults, physical or psychosocial changes of children which seem to be affected by the car-dominated society (multiple choices allowed).

7. How do preschoolers go to the kindergarten/childcare-center?

Figure G. How the kindergarten kids go to and from schools.



Only less than 20% of preschool children go to their kindergarten/childcare-center on foot, despite that many adults are concerned about losing the opportunity for children to walk (Fig. G). About 40% of the parents use their own cars for taking their kids to and/or from kindergarten/childcare-center at least once a day. People who live in rural areas use private cars more often. This may result from scarcity of available public transport system in such areas.

8. Where do your children usually play?

The places children play most frequently are inside their houses, followed by playgrounds. Vacant lots or rice fields, which used to be the most popular place to play, are getting less common. This reflects the loss of nearby natural space to play in (Fig. H).

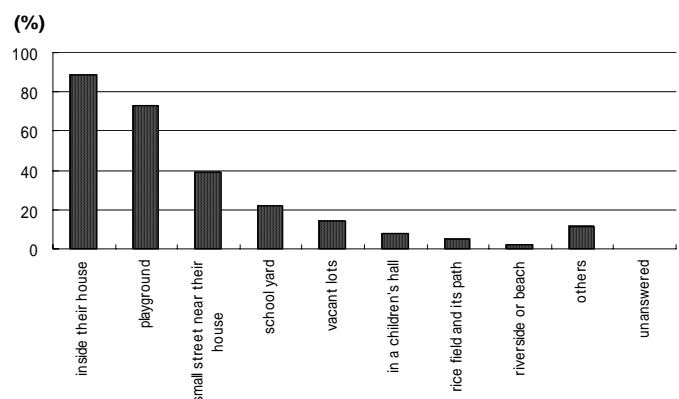
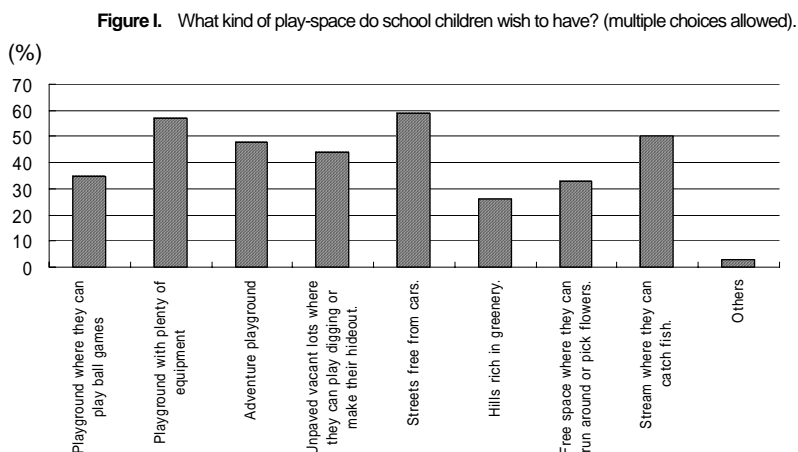


Figure H. Popular places for your children to play in (multiple choices allowed).

9. What kind of play-space do children wish to have?

The most preferable play space for school children is the streets without cars, followed by playgrounds, vacant lots, and streams (Fig. I). Streets used to be the most popular play space until decades ago.

What kind of playing do they wish to do, if they had the streets free from cars? They listed more than 70 kinds of playing, including ball games, tag, bicycling, and so on. We have to think seriously about retrieval of the nearby play space where children can play freely and safely in a group.

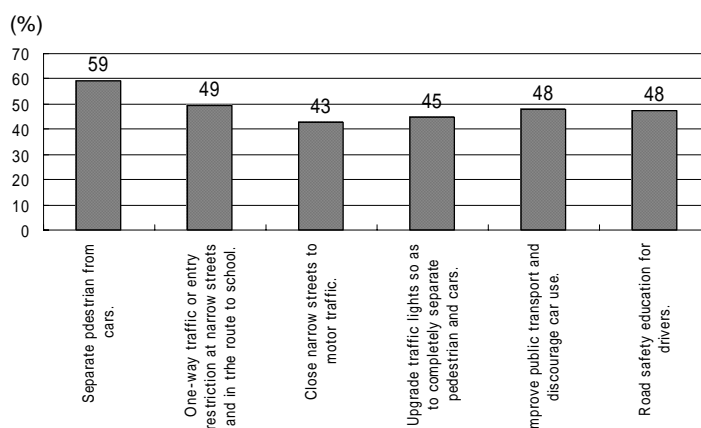


10. What kind of traffic environment do citizens envisage?

Many people want to improve traffic safety through measures such as effective control of motor traffic, drivers' education, encouraging public transport and discouraging private car use (Fig. J).

Opinions written in our questionnaire varied so much. Followings are examples: fear of being injured in a traffic accident, inactivity and the resultant diseases mainly due to sedentary life style and car-dependency, disputing the current car-dominated society, and worries about being coerced to use private car, etc. We can read between the lines with what they want. They are by no means satisfied with the current traffic environment and may begin to reconsider the present life style that is highly dependent on cars.

Figure J. Desirable measures for the safety of pedestrians and improvement of traffic environment.



Afterword

The findings of this questionnaire revealed many features of traffic environment surrounding children, in which they are at greater risk of traffic injury. Among many traffic injuries, those that happened to pedestrians or cyclists, especially to children, should be considered most irrational. It is adults that are responsible for those traffic injuries to children, and they must be prevented, because children are most vulnerable in the current traffic environment. However, current countermeasures do not seem to work well. A less effective countermeasure such as traffic safety education has long been given priority, while more fundamental measures are not taken into effect. A "traffic-calming approach" is known to be more effective to prevent injuries to vulnerable road users. Traffic safety measures are on going in a manner of "business as usual", and many children are hurt everyday.

Of course, there is some criticism on this questionnaire. Some people say this has a significant bias and has intent to describe only the dark-side of motorization. However, despite those most grievous drawbacks of car-dominated society, those issues have not been treated adequately, or even often been ignored.

Life highly dependent on cars has many problems such as adverse effects to children's development, environmental pollution, the damage to the health for all, and so on. We have to reconsider the present traffic system as a whole from both ethical and pragmatic points of view. Human lives are paramount. What is the desirable and sustainable society like?

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