

Children's everyday mobility, district of Santiago, Chile

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Abstract

Children's everyday mobility constitutes a relevant issue for their wellbeing, especially in urban territories with high automobility, safety issues, and planned from an adult-centric perspective. In this paper, we present a qualitative study conducted in the district of Santiago, in Santiago, Chile with two public schools, with around 35 children, most of them migrants. We conducted playful workshops and photo-elicitation. The results contribute to characterizing the mobility patterns of this group, as well as problematizing experiential aspects from children's perspectives: while they enjoy walking with others, practicing sports, playing and eating while they do so, they identify dirtiness, parental fears and traffic danger as barriers for a safe, autonomous and enjoyable mobility. Based on these results, we suggest recommendations for urban planning and public policy in different scales and realms.

Keywords

Children's mobility; independent mobility; active transport; migrant children; photo-elicitation.

Thesaurus

UNESCO Thesaurus - Social sciences.

Key points

- Children (10–13) from Central Santiago are shown to commute both accompanied by adults and independently, observing transition processes.
- While their everyday mobility is a space for meeting and wellbeing, children also identify negative aspects and risks.
- Recommendations are given for strengthening the link between children's mobility and their wellbeing.

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Movilidad cotidiana de niñas y niños, comuna de Santiago, Chile

Resumen

La movilidad cotidiana de las niñas, niños y adolescentes constituye un problema relevante para su bienestar, especialmente en territorios urbanos con alta motorización, inseguridad y planificados adultocéntricamente. En este artículo presentamos un estudio cualitativo realizado en Santiago, Chile, que contó con la participación de dos escuelas públicas, con alrededor de 35 niñas, niños y adolescentes, en su mayoría de origen migrante. Se realizaron talleres lúdicos y foto-elicitación. Los resultados contribuyen a caracterizar los patrones de movilidad de este grupo, así como a problematizar aspectos experienciales desde la perspectiva de niñas, niños y adolescentes: mientras disfrutan de caminar junto a otras/os, hacer deporte, jugar y comer mientras lo hacen, identifican la suciedad, miedos parentales y peligros del tráfico vehicular como obstáculos para una movilidad segura, autónoma y disfrutada. En base a estos resultados, proponemos recomendaciones en materia de planificación urbana y política pública aplicables a diferentes escalas y dimensiones.

Palabras clave

Movilidad de la niñez; movilidad autónoma; transporte activo; niñez migrante; foto-elicitación.

Mobilidade diária das crianças, comuna de Santiago, Santiago, Chile

Resumo

A mobilidade diária de crianças e adolescentes constitui um desafio significativo para seu bem-estar, especialmente em áreas urbanas com alta motorização, insegurança e planejamento centrado no adulto. Neste artigo, apresentamos um estudo qualitativo realizado em Santiago, Chile, com a participação de duas escolas públicas e aproximadamente 35 crianças e adolescentes, a maioria de origem migrante. Foram realizadas técnicas lúdicas e fotoelicitação. Os resultados contribuem para caracterizar os padrões de mobilidade desse grupo e para problematizar aspectos experienciais da perspectiva das crianças e adolescentes: embora gostem de caminhar ao lado de outras pessoas, praticar esportes, brincar e comer enquanto o fazem, identificam a sujeira, os medos dos pais e os perigos do trânsito como obstáculos para uma mobilidade segura, autônoma e prazerosa. Com base nesses resultados, propomos recomendações para o planejamento urbano e políticas públicas aplicáveis a diferentes escalas e dimensões.

Mobilidade infantil; mobilidade autônoma; transporte ativo; crianças migrantes; fotoelicitação.

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Introducción

More than one billion of the world's children and adolescents live in cities (UNICEF, 2025), including 87.4% in the case of Chile (UNICEF, 2020).

However, in their designs and dynamics, cities have not been planned nor are they inhabited with consideration for the specific needs and interests of children and adolescents as a priority (UNICEF, 2023). Thus, urban children face a range of problems regarding the territories they occupy, as the result of adult-centered urban planning and the intersectional categories—apart from age—that shape their experiences. Although in recent decades different studies and urban interventions have sought to focus on this problem (Brown et al., 2019), they have tended to concentrate on specific places predetermined for use by children, such as schools, daycares, plazas and parks. This sidelines the spaces that children and adolescents occupy when traveling between these places, thus ignoring the key role everyday mobility plays in accessing meaningful places for children and adolescents, as well as being an experience that introduces factors facilitating and impeding children's wellbeing.

This phenomenon has been addressed internationally by the field of children's mobility, whether at the intersection of public health and traffic studies, or by social studies of childhood and children's geographies developed particularly in the Global North. From there, diverse studies have observed important changes in children's mobility patterns and experiences in the last few decades, including a significant decrease in their independent mobility (i.e., unaccompanied by adults) and a decrease in active transport (understood as forms of travel that involve an energy cost to the individuals, such as walking or cycling), which, overall, has been associated with problems for health, wellbeing and sustainability.

Considering the important and often ignored link between everyday mobility and children's wellbeing, the downward trend in children's independent mobility in the Global North, and the lack of research in this area in the Latin American context (and especially in Chile), this study attempts to understand the practices and experiences of

everyday mobility for children in the second cycle of basic education (10 to 14 years old) in the city of Santiago. We worked specifically in the Central district of Santiago, focusing on understanding how, with whom and to where children and adolescents move in this territory, as well as the primary characteristics and problems associated with their everyday mobility practices and experiences. Based on these questions, we discuss our findings in relation to the problem observed internationally in terms of independent mobility, its connection to active/passive transport and the social nature of children's and adolescents' mobility. Below we present the principal theoretical and empirical debates in the field of children's mobility.

Children's mobility

The main topics addressed in the field of children's mobility studies include the decrease in or postponement of their independent mobility, understood as the travel of children and adolescents unaccompanied by adults (Dodd et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2015). In turn, this phenomenon has been linked to a reduction in active transport practices such as walking, cycling or skateboarding, and an increase in the motorization of family mobility practices, related to an increase in physical inactivity (Schoeppe et al., 2013), as well as a greater risk for becoming overweight or obese.

Physical inactivity has been identified as one of the primary risk factors for mortality worldwide, and less than 20% of children in the world reach the physical activity levels recommended by the World Health Organization (Marzi & Reimers, 2018). In this respect, Chile is one of the countries with the worst rating for physical activity among children and adolescents (Chile Actívale, 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). At the international level, different studies have shown that children and adolescents who walk or bike to school independently from their parents or other adults are significantly more physically active than their peers who arrive by motor vehicle (Cooper et al., 2005; Marques et al., 2014; Schoeppe et al., 2013).

However, multiple factors have now been identified as limiting active transport and independent mobility, including the growing urbanization and motorization of cities, perceptions of insecurity, an increase in recreational activities organized and supervised by adults, and the increase in distances traveled (Marzi & Reimers, 2018). At the same time, the decrease in independent mobility is a problem because it limits opportunities for children and adolescents to develop physically, socially and mentally, while restric-

ting the spaces within which they can interact with others, face social situations and develop playful, social and sports-based activities.

The focus on children's and adolescents' experience of mobilities has contributed to understanding them as a set of interdependent practices and experiences that involve children and adolescents as well as their families and other adults, peers, animals, technological mobility systems and devices, and urban and mobile infrastructures (Christensen & Cortés-Morales, 2016; Mikkelsen & Christensen, 2009; Nansen et al., 2014). Mobility appears here as a primarily social practice in which children enjoy the company of others, and where family relationships go beyond the physical co-presence of parents; these have been extended, for example, through mobile information and communication technologies (Fyhri & Hjorthol, 2009; Fyhri et al., 2011; Strandell, 2014) or also mediated by technologies that enable joint mobility (Clement & Waitt, 2018; Orrmalm, 2020; Whittle, 2018, 2021).

Studies conducted in different places around the world show that, when they travel independently, children and adolescents prefer busy streets, where they find commercial, social and cultural activity. These are spaces that facilitate the transition towards independent mobility but also present greater risks in terms of traffic accidents or health problems stemming from environmental pollution in areas with greater vehicular traffic (Olsen et al., 2019). The above must be understood in contexts of socioeconomic and territorial inequality (Leventhal, 2018; Mackett & Thoreau, 2015; Smith et al., 2019), where the intersectional conditions of families and territories link different patterns, experiences and meanings of children's mobility (Al-Mosaind, 2019; Kemp et al., 2025; Murray, 2009; Murray & Cortés-Morales 2019; O'Brian et al., 2001; Peach et al. 2025; Porter et al., 2010).

Children's mobility in Latin America, Chile and Santiago

Urban areas in Latin America are characterized by problems of road safety¹, citizen security and environmental pollution (WHO, 2018), as well as deep socioeconomic inequality. In this scenario, although children's mobility studies are scarce, this is a problem that is crystallizing. Recent studies have focused on understanding the factors that affect children's active/passive mobility patterns, especially on their commutes between home

¹ Traffic accidents are the main cause of death for children and adolescents between five and fourteen years old in the region. The majority of children who die from car accidents are pedestrians or, in the case of Chile, car passengers (WHO, 2018).

and school, rather than on the problem of the independent nature of children's and adolescents' travel in relation to adults. In this sense, diverse studies have identified the main factors affecting family decisions about what kind of transport children and adolescents use, including the distance between home and school, the perception of insecurity and parental concerns, intersectional categories (such as gender and socioeconomic status), and characteristics of the urban environment (Hermida et al., 2021; Huertas-Delgado et al., 2018, Orellana et al., 2024, Palma et al., 2019, Pinillos-Patiño et al., 2022).

Regarding gender, lower active mobility has been observed in girls, which is attributed to parental concerns and the perception of insecurity in public spaces due to sexual harassment and violence (Orellana et al., 2024). Along these same lines, Hernández (2021) notes that street harassment—normalized and frequent—is a barrier that adolescents mention as relevant to their independent mobility in Mexico.

In terms of socioeconomic levels, this is a topic pending exploration in Latin America (Orellana et al., 2024). While research in the Global North has observed that active, independent mobility seems to increase with children's and adolescents' social class (Mitra et al., 2014, Ruiz-Hermosa, 2021 in Orellana et al., 2024), in the Global South, an opposite phenomenon seems to be the case, where children and adolescents from poorer families are those who most walk (as noted by Humberto et al., 2020), comparing the mobilities of children and adolescents at public and private schools in Sao Paulo; something that the authors associate with the lack of available private motorized transport or of government subsidies.

In this same vein, Tuñón (2024) documents that 60% of children and adolescents in urban areas of Argentina travel to school on foot or by bicycle. Considering that in the region, school absenteeism is a problem significantly affecting access to education, the home-school commute takes on a particularly meaningful nature, not only in terms of how these trips are made, but also for why they are often not made at all (Viego & Gayone, 2023). Regarding immobilities, studies have also been conducted on how the pandemic affected children's mobility in the region (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021).

It bears mentioning that the majority of children's and adolescents' mobility studies in Latin America are quantitative studies focused on the active/passive nature of the mobility, based primarily on parental perceptions (in the line of studies begun by Hillman et al., 1990), where a lack was identified of qualitative studies focused on the perspective and experiences of children and adolescents and on mobilities understood as

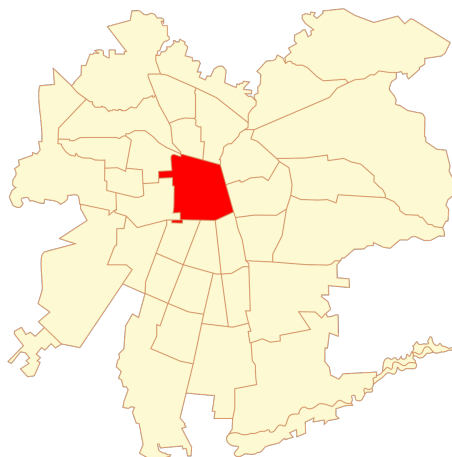
more than the home–school commute, along the lines of the study on which this article is based.

Having discussed the main topics developed in this field in Latin America, we now turn to focus on the context of the city of Santiago, where although everyday mobility is a source of risk, it is also a key factor for reducing the impact of residential and school socioeconomic segregation (Córdoba-Calquín et al., 2017), both strongly present in this territory (Observatorio Niñez, 2024).

The district of Santiago, where this study was conducted, is located in the city center (Figure 1) and is one of the smallest in the country. However, it has the highest population density nationally (17,586 inhabitants per square kilometer; Secretaría Comunal de Planificación, 2014), with the vast majority of the population living in apartments (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2017). It is geographically positioned as an area of high economic activity and movements from other districts in the Metropolitan Region (Secretaría Comunal de Planificación, 2014, p. 6).

Figure 1

Location of the district of Santiago in the center of the city of Santiago



Note. District of Santiago by Osmar Valdebenito, 2007. Creative Commons License Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 Generic, via Wikimedia Commons.

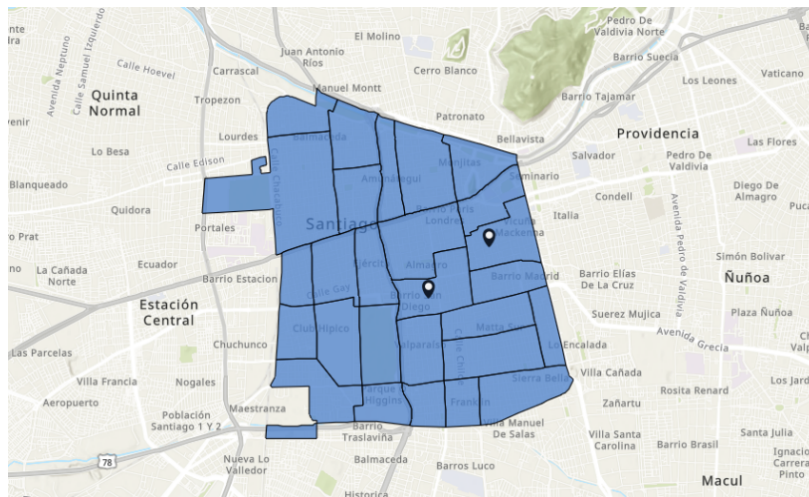
Since 2002, it has experienced high growth of its immigrant population, mainly of Latin American and Caribbean origin. This has occurred in the context of a growing immigrant population nationally, which increased from 1% of the national population in 2006 to 9% in 2022 (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2023). In this group, 57.4%

live in the Metropolitan Region, of whom 24% have settled in the district of Santiago, where this study took place (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2017). The concentration of the migrant population in certain areas has to do with various factors such as the real estate market, connectivity, the presence of productive activities, and the existence of support networks (Margarit & Galaz, 2018), as well as with the length of residence in the place, where greater segregation is observed in initial stages (Razmilic, 2019).

In terms of migrant children and adolescents in Chile, Córdoba-Calquín et al. (2022) have noted that the majority (57.7%) study at public institutions, especially in the Metropolitan Region and, within it, in the districts of Independencia, Santiago, Recoleta and Estación Central. What draws the authors' attention is that within these districts, migrant students are not distributed homogeneously among public institutions; rather, they seem to prefer certain schools in particular. Their concentration in certain schools does not reflect the demographic composition of their neighborhoods and instead seems to be related to family preferences that could be tied to support networks and aspects related to the wellbeing of migrant children and adolescents, such as the size of the institutions (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Approximate location of participating schools on the district of Santiago map



Note. Produced at www.arcgis.com

Based on the above, the project was guided by the following general objective: to explore the practices and experiences of everyday mobility of children and adolescents studying second basic cycle at educational institutions of the district of Santiago, iden-

tifying barriers and facilitating factors regarding active transport and wellbeing, as well as similarities and differences regarding this topic in the international context, with the goal of producing recommendations in this vein locally.

Method

The project is a small-scale, qualitative study, conducted at two schools in the district of Santiago. In addition to initial interviews with the administration of each institution, children in the second cycle of basic education (10 to 14 years old) were invited to participate in play-based workshops. This is an age range that, in the field of children's mobility internationally, is proposed as the moment at which children and adolescents begin a more independent mobility process or one in new company.

The two schools with which we worked are public institutions, with pre-basic and basic education. Both show a mid-low school performance category. Consistent with the district's demographic trends, both show a student body composed primarily of migrants from the mid-low and low socioeconomic group. In this context, although specifically observing the mobilities of migrant children in Chile was not part of the project's original objective, a large majority of the final group of participants at both schools was composed of migrant children and adolescents, mainly from Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Haiti, Bolivia and Colombia.

Our methodological design did not follow an approach using methods "friendly" to specific groups (such as children, adolescents or migrant population), but rather one that allowed us to be in sync with the communication cultures (Christensen & James, 2000) that we might find in the field work, with techniques offering diverse means of expression including written, oral, visual, and artistic (following the mosaic approach idea of Clark, 2017). The methodological sequence developed made it possible to achieve deep thematic development with the participants. They successfully took ownership of the study problem, clearly expressing aspects they consider favorable or problematic in the spaces they inhabit and in their travel through them, while also revealing their perspectives on identity-related aspects and socioeconomic differentiations, stressing intersectional categories in their mobile practices and experiences. The field work was conducted during the winter and spring of 2024, from June to October.

Instruments

Trayectopia

Work commenced using Trayectopia, a card game created by Núcleo Milenio Movilidades y Territorios (Jirón et al., 2023; Movyt, 2021) that aims to promote reflection on mobility practices and experiences. At the two schools, 16 and 24 participants, respectively, worked in groups to choose a common destination in Santiago. Individually, each participant created a character and a story about how their character arrived at the common destination. This instance made it possible to introduce the topic of everyday mobility to the participating children, as well as giving us an idea of the kind of trips that each child took.

Mobile diary workshop

Second, the mobile diary workshop was developed. These are thematic notebooks created by La Reconquista Peatonal², a non-governmental organization, and they focus on the home–school–home commuting experience. They generated reflections on daily trips, taking into account the practical matters, sensations, odors, pleasures and emotions linked to their commutes. Similarly, they enabled us to discover the mobility patterns (time, company, transport) and aspects that the children enjoy or consider difficult or disagreeable on their commutes. This second workshop was conducted with 15 students at one school and 16 students at the other, all of whom had participated in the first workshop.

In-depth interviews

The interviews focused on geographically and socially contextualizing each participant, digging deeper into topics arising in the workshops, especially as regards their practices (routes, means of transport, company, use of mobile phones or other mobile technologies, accessibility barriers), and mobility experiences (perceived risks and benefits, emotional aspects linked to mobility practices, importance of the routes). Ten in-depth interviews were conducted, with an approximate duration of one hour, in rooms provided by each school, with a total of five girls and five boys.

Photo-elicitation

Photo-elicitation proposes a visual alternative for expression, focusing on non-discursive aspects that are often left out of solely interview-based approaches (Luttrell, 2020; Varvantakis & Nolas, 2021; Varvantakis & Nolas, 2019). Disposable cameras were

² <https://www.lareconquistapeatonal.org/diariosmoviles>

given to those participating in the in-depth interviews so that they could create a photographic record of what was relevant to them in relation to their everyday mobilities. The photos were printed and a non-structured interview was conducted on the images. At the end of the interview, they selected between four and six photos to put on individual postcards, which we designed and printed to give as a gift at the conclusion of field work.

Data from the field work was organized in physical and digital folders (Drive and ATLAS.ti), by school and by methodological structure. The material was analyzed by different team members using a grounded theory approach, generating codes leading to the thematic categories presented in the following section.

Ethical considerations

The research took its ethical framework from the ethical guidelines of the ERIC charter (UNICEF, 2022). For each child's participation, a signed informed consent form was required of the parents or tutors, along with an informed agreement from the children.

Results

Mobility practices

Forms of transport, interdependencies and accompaniment

Through the interviews and diaries, we were able to identify that most of the participants lived near the school they attended, at distances they considered walkable (from 5 to 40 minutes walking distance). While in the morning some were accompanied on public transport or walking (by their mothers or grandmothers) or driven by car (by fathers/step-fathers), in the afternoon the majority walked, since the adults were not available at that time to pick them up. In this context, walking was the main form of transport used by this group, combined with the use of public transportation (subway or bus). However, in general, public transportation was associated more with weekend recreational outings, when families would travel to locations outside the district. Most of the participants indicated they preferred walking over being driven by car or on public transportation: on the one hand, because the walk was a moment of interaction with loved ones, and on the other, because public transportation was associated with standing and feelings of claustrophobia.

In answer to the question about with whom and with what objects/items they traveled (in diaries and interviews, as well as through the stories created in Trayectopia), we observed three main kinds of company: family, friends and pets. As a fourth point, it was observed

that cell phones were used sporadically to communicate with their loved ones or for playing, but not as a tool during the commute.

In terms of accompaniment, as mentioned above, a difference was observed between the commutes to and from school. In the morning, the trip coincided with parents leaving for work; therefore, it was possible to accompany them. In some cases, however, making this trip together meant arriving at school very early—including before the doors opened—so that the adults could arrive at work on time. These children had to wait in the street, unaccompanied by their parent (a situation they highlighted as negative, since they were out in the cold and sometimes felt afraid, especially in the wintertime).

In the afternoon, on the other hand, it was common for the children and adolescents to return home without adult accompaniment, and frequently older siblings would pick up the youngest children. In these situations, the families had to sign a special permission form, and the children had a card that authorized them to leave without an adult. This fact was mentioned as a concern by the principals of the institutions, recalling the problem of migrant parenthood observed by Calquín et al. (2022).

We also observed the existence of "intermediate" arrangements, in which groups of children would walk together with a non-family adult who offered an informal mobile childcare service. For example, Isidora and Gabriela would go home in the afternoon with a schoolmate's grandmother, accompanying a group of eight children who shared in the arrangement. Likewise, other participants told of walking home accompanied by friends, without adults, and this was one of the most enjoyable aspects of their everyday mobilities. The trip would take on a different meaning when made together, since it became a space for play or conversation, playing at ringing doorbells, singing, talking or sharing a snack, as shown in Figure 3.

Another kind of company that appears in the narratives involves dogs. Most of the participants had one and were responsible for their walks; this was one of the primary motives for starting to walk around the neighborhood unaccompanied by an adult. Pet walking was a way to become familiar with the inhabited territories, their neighbors (human and otherwise) and the streets. Jimena, a 14-year-old girl, told us:

Jimena: Yes, like I walk (Jim) and they're either going out or coming back and I greet them and I see their dog and my dog sees their dog.

Interviewer: Do you greet the people who are walking the dogs?

Jimena: Both of them, of course. More so the dogs than the people. Oh, little doggie. And they come over. (Jimena interview, Figure 4)

Figure 3

Isidora and Gabriela illustrate the moment of sharing candy with their friends from the walk



Note. Photo taken by Isidora and Gabriela in the photo-elicitation exercise.

At the same time, going out with their dogs gave them a greater sense of security than if they went out alone, as José mentions:

Interviewer: You aren't scared?

José: [No] because Amelia is there.

Interviewer: Amelia protects you.

José: Yes, she bites them. (José and Ignacio interview)

Figure 4

Following in Jim's footsteps. Jimena takes her dog for a walk



Note. Photo taken by Jimena in the photo-elicitation exercise.

While the participants connected walking their dogs and the existence of more dogs in the neighborhood to positive aspects like going out without adults and feeling safe, they also mentioned problems related to irresponsible pet ownership and the large number of dogs in the district. Dog waste was a characteristic factor that emerged as an unpleasant and ever-present aspect of their everyday trips:

There are streets where people walk their dogs and it smells like poop. At least on the street that we use to get to the park, that's where they poop. But normally people are clean and throw out the trash, the poop in the bag. (Gabriela and Isidora interview)

Finally, in terms of mobile phone use, this appeared to a marginal extent on the trips. Its visibility was particularly linked to long-distance communication with family members, including grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and parents. In this sense, we observed family support networks and ties that connect with different parts of the world, sustained through virtual mobilities.

Activities, destinations and reasons for travel

Apart from school, the participants' daily trips were mainly to sports- and shopping-related recreational spaces, family recreational spaces, religious spaces and informal work spaces. We were able to access these spatialities primarily through photo-elicitation and thanks to the destinations chosen in Trayectopia.

Within the sports-related recreational spaces, mention was made of parks, plazas, sports fields and gyms. Plazas mainly appeared as a stopping point along the way to another destination, where the children go if the accompanying adult has time or if they have permission to go alone or with friends; as such, they are places for play and non-organized sports activities. They also appear as a destination for walking pets. Parks (understood as green spaces larger than plazas) are a weekend destination, with family or friends.

Sports fields can be municipal public spaces, in the neighborhood, or something more ambiguous between public and private spaces. There, free or paid sports activities take place; these may be spontaneous (as, for example, going to play basketball at the corner court) or organized, such as the soccer classes of "la Vinotinto" (nickname for the Venezuelan national team) in another district of Santiago (Figure 5), where two participants trained along with other Venezuelan children:

Interviewer: Hey, what team is your jersey from?

José: La Vinotinto.

Interviewer: And where is it from?

José: Well, it's really from Venezuela, but it's here in Chile and has six sites. Florida, which is here, in Viña, Independencia, Raulí, Talca and San Miguel. (José photo-elicitation)

Figure 5

La Vinotinto in Santiago: José portrays the field where he trains



Note. Photo taken by José in the photo-elicitation exercise.

In terms of recreational-commercial spaces, stores and shopping malls, fast food, Chinese mall and department stores surfaced. They named fast food chains where children and adolescents go after school with friends, without necessarily buying food, as mentioned by Jimena in regard to a KFC branch shown in her photos: «It's comfortable to be there... Most of all I like places where I can hang out, where I can stay to do what I want. For example, you can go sit there without buying" (Jimena interview).

Neighborhood stores also stand out as an initial destination for independent trips, nearby places with service from relatively familiar people and where the participants would go to buy items of personal or family interest and, additionally, to find food products from their countries of origin.

Visits to family members in the city also appeared as a frequent destination for trips. Another destination involved religious spaces or churches, relevant as social networks and moral frameworks. They appeared as a family destination on Sundays, but they led to specific activities for children and adolescents, such as Sunday school, Scouting groups or youth groups that some attended.

Finally, informal family workspaces, such as street selling or open-air markets, were mentioned as spaces where children and adolescents provided company and assistance to their mothers (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Diana's mother's market stall



Note. Photo taken by Diana in the photo-elicitation exercise.

As we have seen here, it is clear that children's everyday mobilities allow them access to activities and social interactions at their destinations. It is perhaps less obvious that their mobilities are themselves activities or social interactions in movement. Especially during trips taken as pedestrians, children and adolescents refer to conversations with their mothers, siblings or friends as one of their favorite aspects of their trips:

Interviewer: And what do you like about your trips?

Daniela: That wherever I go, my mom is there. Instead of mother and daughter, we're friends and there's a lot of laughter between us. We gossip... we laugh a lot. (Daniela photo-elicitation)

It is about a relational and communicational space, valued as such. The stories reinforce the idea that mobility itself enables the creation and maintenance of bonds and relational identities such as becoming a daughter, mother, friend, etc., in movement (Cortés-Morales, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that, for all those routes walked, children's mobility is per se a kind of non-organized physical activity. This is intensified when the trips are

made together with peers and turn into playing, such as running away after ringing doorbells, jumping, etc. Some girls talked about singing together on the way, an activity that they mix with conversing and playing.

Experiences of mobility

Perceptions of risk and mobility tactics

The participants' stories of mobility interlace their own perceptions of risk with those of others, especially of their mothers, families and the media, both in terms of crime or strangers and regarding vehicle traffic. They also mentioned the tactics by which they address, avoid or reduce those risks.

Based on their own experiences with strangers, participants emphasized the presence of people who use alcohol or drugs in public spaces. While their stories do not mention situations of danger or violent encounters, these are situations that make them uncomfortable or frighten them, and which they judged to be inappropriate activities when conducted in these spaces. In the words of Isidora:

I think that people can drink, but not all the time, not always, because it is bad for you and you act... it makes people act violently. So, I feel like it's not that they can't do that, but it's that behavior. (Isidora and Gabriela interview)

One fear that appeared in the children's stories are the crimes committed in public spaces, and the risk of falling victim to them. In light of their own experience or that of their peers, the theft of a cell phone leads to them preferring not to bring one to school, or if they do bring one, never using it on the commute. Perhaps as a tactic to minimize this perception, some participants played down the insecurity of their neighborhoods, comparing them to places where they lived previously or where their families are from. However, the possibility of being a kidnapping victim appeared as the main fear of their families when granting permission to travel unaccompanied by adults. In the participants' stories, protection strategies appear, such as not talking to strangers, as well as strategies for handling different types of problems (with the intent to avoid conflicts along the way) and routes agreed on with their families.

In terms of risks associated with vehicle traffic, these appeared in the participants' responses as related to specific places—such as intersections that were on their routes—more than an abstract or widespread topic:

There was an accident with a baby, a grandmother who was in the car (...) and a car from here, like it (...) backed up, it went over there and then backed up again (...) and I guess there was no traffic light. At any rate it's dangerous to cross there because (...) there were several accidents that I saw and it was like really shocking because I was walking there and then the car flipped over like this. (Diana photo-elicitation)

In this way, some of their routes were designed to avoid intersections they considered dangerous or to seek crosswalks or stop lights when the streets had very high traffic, although that might mean walking a few more blocks. The participants were cautious and alert in terms of crossing streets and, at least in their stories, they did not seem to want to defy pedestrian norms to shorten distances:

Always around the same time that I'm at a corner, the stop light is green and I say, I don't have to hurry because it's going to turn red, I have to wait again, wait. Well, and whenever I wait, sometimes like when it turns green I stay there a few more seconds waiting for all the cars to stop and for everything to stop so I can cross. Because it's like I'm afraid that suddenly as soon as it turns green, a car might cross that didn't stop and keeps going. (Ji-mena photo-elicitation)

The perceived risks are addressed using tactics that enable the children and adolescents to feel more confident or to handle them in a way that won't involve interrupting their mobilities and their desire to travel in the company of their friends. In general, the participants indicated that they know their possible routes well, along with the risks that each entails. The children's territorial knowledge is understood as the basic tactic for addressing the challenges of their everyday mobilities, as well as presenting themselves to their families as subjects capable of a certain level of independence in their movements. Further, a certain acceptance of the risks as part of living and traveling was revealed:

So, it's like living life in fear. My mom says: "You know that, sorry, it's just that I'm afraid they will grab you. I know I'm overprotective, but that's why." The other day I told her: "But mom, I mean, I don't want to live my life in fear. If you're going to live in fear, it's better not to be alive." I mean, no, but, I mean, like why are you always going to be afraid? You're not going to have a good time. (Gabriela and Isidora interview)

On this point, the children and adolescents distinguished between their perceptions and those of their parents, indicating, for example, that they are ready to travel inde-

pendently, but their mothers aren't; this is a distinction that resonates with prior discussions regarding the risks perceived by parents and children in other contexts (Pain, 2016).

Perceptions of surroundings

One of the aspects that the children and adolescents enjoyed on their walks was the possibility of enjoying the landscape, meeting up and conversing with their friends, playing or going to the plaza. In addition, they mentioned sensory elements such as smelling flowers (in the case of the girls), listening to birds, smelling the wet earth in the park or greeting dogs. On the other hand, there are elements of the landscape that are unpleasant—especially for the girls—such as trash, bad smells, excrement and sidewalks in poor condition, aspects that they associated with municipal neglect, irresponsible pet ownership and the large number of people who are homeless. Several mentioned disgust as the main feeling they had when walking through certain areas, and as a response to their sensory perceptions, avoiding some corners and streets, or changing their routes.

Discussion

Independent mobility, active transport and mobility as social activity

As we mentioned in the introduction to this article, the main problems observed internationally in the field of children's mobility include the decrease in active transport, frequently associated with less independent mobility and a lower number of opportunities for children's social interaction on their routes (Dodd et al., 2021; Marzi & Reimers 2018; Orellana et al. 2024).

The results of our study are similar to those observed in other Latin American contexts as regards children and adolescents in public schools traveling to school mainly as pedestrians (Humberto et al., 2020), calling into question the universality of the problems identified in the context of the Global North regarding children's mobility (Orellana et al., 2024). This seems to be based on the short distance between home and school, as well as the possibility of independent mobility towards which most of the participants were transitioning.

It is important to emphasize that, in general, the independent routes appeared as a process in which accompanied commutes were combined (e.g., in the morning, with independent itineraries on leaving school). It is also important to highlight that even among those who enjoy traveling alone or with peers, the trips accompanied by their

families are appreciated and enjoyable. However, in some cases, traveling alone was not a choice, but rather the only option when no adult could accompany them (e.g., when leaving school), a limitation that the children and adolescents understood as the result of their parents' working hours.

Therefore, it can be said that the routes walked by children and adolescents are themselves an opportunity for non-organized physical activity; not only because of the walking per se, but also because on these routes the children enjoy casually stopping at the plaza, playing ball or running with friends as they travel. Further, the participating group showed they highly value organized physical activity and they practice it regularly.

At the same time, in harmony with emerging observations from other latitudes (Romero & Christensen, 2009; Nansen et al., 2014), it can be seen that, for children and adolescents, mobility is preferably a social practice, prioritizing the possibility of traveling in the company of others, whether adult family members, siblings, friends or animals. In turn, the results support the idea that children and adolescents prefer to travel on routes with a greater presence of people, stores, social activity (Nansen et al., 2014) and green spaces.

Situated problems and intersectional conditions

Our study shows that children from 10 to 14 years of age in Central Santiago are beginning a process of transitioning to independent mobilities; that their mobilities are mainly forms of active transport; that they do find opportunities for meeting up with others along their routes; and that, largely, they appreciate and want their families or peers to accompany their trips. In the international literature, what makes adult-accompanied mobility problematic is its connection to the restriction of active transport, the limitation of opportunities for meeting others and the ties to public space. Whereas in the case studied, the mobilities of the participating children and adolescents were problematic not due to a lack of independence (which would be defined as progressive and in process) nor because they involved a significant limitation of active transport. Instead, their problems point to intersectional and structural conditions that limit their possibilities for choosing how and with whom to travel, and which give rise to insecure and unfriendly surroundings; the latter, in turn, produce negative experiences of mobility, along with introducing risks that influence negotiations between children and their families when the former want to begin to travel in the company of peers or alone, and which, in some cases, really do jeopardize their integrity, health and wellbeing.

The intersectional conditions that we identify in this study as relevant in shaping the mobility practices and experiences of children and adolescents in Central Santiago are class, territory, migratory condition and gender. Social class and territory (understood in a context of socioeconomic residential segregation) jointly limit the possibilities of families in terms of place of residence, economic resources, materials and time. These define the ways in which the children and adolescents can travel, their access to private and public transportation, the availability of family members for their care while traveling, and access to mobile telephones/internet, among other aspects. At the same time, territory involves specific material, infrastructure and accessibility conditions.

Belonging to families of migrant origin is linked to the practices and experiences of mobility in different ways: defining the family and social networks available to families to organize children's care and travel; proposing other cities and territories as comparison points based on which they perceive and assign meaning to public space and mobilities; and activating cultures of childrearing, physical activity and mobilities that are different from local ones. Gender, as an intersectional category, manifests primarily in relation to apprehensions expressed by the children and adolescents, both their own and those of their parents, in terms of the risks their routes might present, as well as in light of the sensory perception of their surroundings while traveling.

Strengths, limitations and recommendations

The strengths of this study include having been conducted using a methodology that highlights the perspective of children as protagonists of the phenomenon in question. In this sense, our results and discussion complement the proposals generated by studies that have focused, e.g., on parental permission for children's mobility (Shaw et al., 2015). The above has enabled us to develop a broad general view of everyday mobility from a situated perspective specific to the children who live in the Central Santiago area, identifying specific forms in which the problems of their mobility, both local and more widespread, manifest.

While this situated perspective is a strength of the study and facilitates discussion of broader topics based on a specific context, it also involves a limitation as far as the corresponding results, discussion and recommendations are not directly applicable to any other social group or geographic and cultural context. This limitation in turn leads to the need to promote more studies on this topic focused on diverse groups and contexts specific to Chile and Latin America, so that we may have a more general overview

of the region, which could produce a research agenda on children's mobilities in Latin America.

In terms of recommendations for planning and public policy at different levels and sectors of government, we emphasize the following:

1. On the family and school level, we suggest holding workshops that aim to strengthen knowledge of the territory and of local urban transportation systems for children, adolescents and their families. The knowledge that children and adolescents already possess should be highlighted, emphasizing the relevance for their wellbeing and the exercise of their role as citizens.
2. On a level integrating families, schools and municipalities, we mention the need for children and adolescents to have more spaces for participation and channels of communication where their perspectives are heard, as well as spaces where they can meet up with their peers.
3. At the municipal level, one concrete way to improve the daily travel experiences of children and adolescents is related to policies focused on improving the material conditions of public spaces, which, in turn, improve the sensory experience and existence/perception of risks that children and adolescents have on their routes.

Looking towards a level that integrates local organizations with inter-level governance, we propose that children's and adolescents' wellbeing should not be understood as an exclusively private, family matter, but rather a collective and social one. Finally, turning to the intersectoral level, policies on topics such as access to educational institutions and labor flexibility should consider their implications for children's and adolescents' daily life, specifically in terms of the latter's mobility and wellbeing.

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Transparency

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Open study data

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Open research materials

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