

YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING ON THE URBAN FRINGE

IS IT A TALE OF TWO CITIES?

Picture: Rhonda Milner

Are we really 'doing the best for our kids' by raising them in outer-suburban areas? Are their living standards equivalent to those of young people in the inner city?

IAN WINTER reports.

Australian cities have relentlessly expanded outwards, driven in part, by two ideals of Australian family life: the desire for home ownership of a quarter-acre block, and 'doing the best for our kids' by providing a safe, semi-rural, sub-urban environment, with fresh air and space for play. To meet these 'requirements' of Australian family life in the 1990s, families buy houses and live their lives at ever-increasing distances from the Central Business District. Whilst the advantages of home ownership have long been celebrated by Australian families, are we really 'doing the best for our kids' by raising them in

outer-urban living environments? This article examines the access of 12–19 year olds living on the urban fringes of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide in 1991–92 to education, employment, entertainment and leisure, and compares their situation with that of their inner-city counterparts.

The data for this paper are drawn from the AIFS Australian Living Standards Study, commissioned by the Commonwealth Government. The study documents the living standards of Australian families with a child aged under 20 years of age, living in a range of inner, middle and outer metropolitan and rural areas. The analysis for

this article is based on 12–19 year olds living in the then Local Government Areas of Berwick and Werribee in Victoria, Campbelltown and Penrith in New South Wales and Elizabeth/Munno Para in South Australia as outer-urban areas, in comparison with 12–19 year olds living in the Cities of Melbourne and South Sydney, as inner-urban areas.

Getting an Education

Young people aged 12–19 require good access to high quality secondary and post-secondary education facilities. We can assess students' ease of physical access to education by examining how young people get to educational centres, and how long it takes them to get there. The educational quality students experience can be examined through their evaluations of the quality of the education they receive there.

Most secondary school students at the urban fringe always get to school by bus (26 per cent), on foot (20 per cent) and by car (12

per cent). For those in the inner-city the pattern is on foot (24 per cent), by bus (14 per cent) and by tram or ferry (12 per cent). The median time taken to get to school, regardless of the mode of transport, is 20 minutes in both the urban fringe and inner-city, and more secondary students take 10 minutes or less to get to school in the urban fringe than in the inner-city. Secondary school students on the urban fringe are just as likely always to walk to school and just as likely never to walk to school as inner-city secondary school students. Of those who walk to school at the urban fringe, 37 per cent walk more than half a kilometre compared with 44 per cent in the inner-city. While differing proportions of urban fringe and inner-city secondary school students get to school using different modes of transportation, the accessibility to school is little different between the urban fringe and inner-city.

What then of transport to post-secondary education, be it university, Technical and Further Education, Council of Adult Education or a business school? Those in post-secondary education on the urban fringe are more likely than their inner-city counterparts always to use a car or motorcycle to gain access to their place of post-secondary study, and they take substantially longer to get there than those in the inner-city.

The median travel time to an education centre for post-secondary students on the urban fringe is 40 minutes, compared with just 23 minutes in the inner-city. Furthermore, 37 per cent of urban fringe post-secondary students travel for 30–60 minutes and 20 per cent more than 60 minutes to get to their place of study. Correspondingly, 22 per cent of urban fringe post-secondary students are dissatisfied with the ease with which they can get to their place of study compared with 8 per cent in the inner-city. The obvious difficulties urban fringe young people experience in travelling to post-secondary study confirm the results of earlier studies that have identified a lack of further education and training opportunities for urban fringe young people (Karapetkos and Macleod 1992; Wilson and Apps 1992).

Young people living on the urban fringe are not disadvantaged in terms of their physical access to secondary school but are less well off compared with those in the inner-city in getting to post-secondary educational facilities.

Young people were asked to assess the quality of education services available to them. Patterns of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with a wide range of secondary school-related factors differ little across the urban fringe and inner-city. Overall, satisfaction is quite high. Well over half are generally satisfied and the proportions dissatisfied are typically less than 10 per cent, a finding that runs counter to that of Daniel and Cornwall (1993), who found a majority of the 725 urban fringe young people they interviewed to be dissatisfied with their education experience. For example, those satisfied with the 'school as a whole' total 68 per cent on the urban fringe and 70 per cent in the inner-city, whilst only 5 per cent are dissatisfied in both the urban fringe and inner-city areas. The factor with which most urban fringe school students were satisfied was the

size of their school; in the inner-city it was the academic results of the school. The factor that attracted the highest proportions of dissatisfied students both in the urban fringe and inner-city was the 'use of facilities before and after school'. Urban fringe secondary school students, thus, appear to be as satisfied as those in the inner-city with the quality of education they are receiving.

The similarity in the assessed quality of secondary schooling across the urban fringe and inner-city areas does not hold for post-secondary education. More urban fringe than inner-city post-secondary students would prefer to be doing a different course of study of training from their current one. Only 19 per cent of those on the urban fringe and 6 per cent in the inner-city identified transport problems as the reason why they were not studying their preferred post-secondary course. The stronger preference for an alternative course of study or training is perhaps reflective, then, of more restricted post-secondary options on the urban fringe.

Urban fringe young people enjoy equivalent access to and quality of secondary schooling but have more difficulty getting to post-secondary educational facilities and are more likely to be discontented with the courses they get access to.

Getting a Job

Young people, in accordance with the rest of the community, expect to have access to gainful employment. Part-time employment is important to many young people as a means of support during the years of education. For those who have left the education system, gaining access to full-time employment is not only a means to financial independence but also an important part of developing a sense of personal worth. We can again examine the differences in the employment experiences of urban fringe and inner-city young people by comparing the ease of access to employment and how young people assess their employment experience.

The patterns of transport use between home and work differ greatly between urban fringe and inner-city young people who have left school. Eighty-three per cent at the urban fringe never walk to work compared with 47 per cent in the inner-city. Over half (55 per cent) of urban fringe young people always go to work by car and if we include those who often go to work by car this figure becomes over two-thirds. Half the inner-city sample never go to work by car only and if we include the 'rarelys' this becomes over two-thirds. Most of our commuters, however, prefer to use a private mode of transport, (foot, bicycle or car) rather than public transport. All forms of public transport combined attract only 20 per cent of the 'always' traffic at the urban fringe and 24 per cent in the inner-city.

Whilst similar proportions of urban fringe and inner-city young people do not use public transport to get to work, discontent with the public transport available is more likely to be voiced amongst those at the urban fringe. Urban fringe young people are more likely to say that they do not use public transport to get to work because it takes too long, is too

unreliable, is inconvenient because of when they work, is too expensive, is inconvenient because of where they live in relation to their work and because they fear for their personal safety on public transport.

The median travel time to work for urban fringe young people and those in the inner-city is very similar (22 minutes compared to 25 minutes). Ten per cent of urban fringe young people spend more than 60 minutes travelling to work (none in the inner-city), although 64 per cent on the urban fringe travel for 30 minutes or less compared with 50 per cent in the inner-city.

Urban fringe young people do not appear to be particularly disadvantaged in terms of getting to work when compared with their inner-city counterparts, although they are likely to use different modes of transportation to get there. Ten per cent of them are spending more than an hour to do this, which none of those in the inner-city are.

The lack of employment opportunities in fringe areas is a consistent theme in studies of young people on the urban fringe (Wilson and Apps 1992; Scanlan and D'Arcy 1990) and complaints about income and social security support are rife (Daniel and Cornwall 1993).

What of the quality of employment available to urban fringe young people? In their judgement is it satisfactory, or are they more dissatisfied than their inner-city counterparts?

There is little difference in terms of the expressed satisfaction of young people with their paid employment across the urban fringe and inner-city. Treating all work-related factors as of equal importance, on eight of the nineteen work-related factors, urban fringe young people were less dissatisfied than their inner-city counterparts and on nine they were more dissatisfied. On six factors those at the urban fringe were less satisfied than those of the inner-city, and on twelve they were more satisfied.

Both at the urban fringe and inner-city, young people were more dissatisfied with the availability of fringe benefits. The factor that attracted most satisfaction at the urban fringe was how well they were coping with the tasks in their job, whereas in the inner-city it was their relationship with their workmates. Urban fringe young people thus appear to be as content as those in the inner-city with the employment they are getting access to. By locating in an urban fringe suburb, families appear not to be disadvantaging their children in terms of gaining access to a satisfying work environment.

'Getting Down' and 'Chilling Out'

The opportunity to engage in enjoyable and rewarding leisure time is a key part of the valued lifestyle of Australian families. In this section we explore how young people living on the urban fringe get to entertainment and leisure venues and how satisfied they are with the venues that they access.

Young people use a range of different modes of transport to access entertainment and leisure facilities, with varying frequency. These include: walking, bicycles, private transport (own, parents', friends' or friends' parents), taxis and public transport. Urban fringe young people are less likely to walk,

more likely to be driven by their parents or their friends' parents, and far less likely to use public transport to get to entertainment and leisure venues than their inner-city counterparts. This pattern of transport use, also evident in access to education and employment, suggests a heavy reliance upon private transport by those at the urban fringe.

The fact that urban fringe young people use different modes of transportation to get to entertainment and leisure venues says little, however, about whether they are locationally disadvantaged. It is clear that they tend to use less independent modes of transport more frequently than their inner-city counterparts, but whether they are compelled or choose to rely upon these modes of transportation is not clear. If they are in fact compelled to use less independent modes of transport through lack of readily available alternatives such as walking, then one can argue that this forced dependence upon for instance, their own or friends' parents renders them locationally disadvantaged to the extent that it hinders development of independence. There is some indication that this is the perception of urban fringe young people, the study showed that urban fringe young people are twice as likely as inner-city young people to see their entertainment/leisure opportunities as very limited due to a lack of transport to and from appropriate places.

When we examine why those on the urban fringe are less likely to use public transport, it appears to have less to do with factors such as cost or frequency, and more to do with concerns about personal safety. Complaints about the frequency of public transport are more prevalent among inner-city young people. The parents of urban fringe young people are also more concerned about personal safety issues in relation to the use of public transport than their inner-city counterparts.

This perceived lack of availability and safety of transport to and from entertainment and leisure venues is further compounded by the fact that for 25 per cent of urban fringe young people there are no places of entertainment that they use within three kilometres of their homes. The comparable figure for the inner-city is 10 per cent. Twenty-eight per cent of urban fringe young people saw their entertainment and leisure opportunities as very limited because there were no good places close to home worth going to, compared with 12 per cent in the inner-city. Only 35 per cent of urban fringe young people compared with 67 per cent of inner-city young people were prepared to say there were enough entertainment and leisure venues available to them in their area. This



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suggests that there is a lack of entertainment and leisure opportunities locally available and readily accessible for young people on the urban fringe, a finding confirmed by the earlier work of Daniel and Cornwall (1993).

Conclusion

So, are we really 'doing the best for our kids' by raising them in outer-suburban areas? With regard to getting to and enjoying good quality education, employment and entertainment, key differences in the experiences of urban fringe and inner-city young people appear in relation to post-secondary education and entertainment but not secondary education nor employment.

Urban fringe young people spend more time travelling to post-secondary education, they are more likely to specify transport-related study problems and they tend to be more dissatisfied with the courses they are attending than their inner-city counterparts. In gaining access to entertainment and leisure facilities, urban fringe young people rely upon lifts from their parents and their friends' parents more so than those in the inner-city, perhaps undermining any desire for independence. There is also greater dissatisfaction with the entertainment and leisure venues that urban fringe young people gain

access to, and they are more likely to express the view that leisure opportunities are very limited because of a lack of good places to go.

It is important, however, that families do not take the responsibility nor receive the blame for these comparative disadvantages of urban fringe living, for these disadvantages reflect a failure of urban policy rather than family decision making.

One step that may improve access to good quality post-secondary education is to ensure that campuses on the urban fringe offer a wide range of courses. With the development of new university campuses amid the recent round of university amalgamations, steps should be taken to ensure that outer-suburban campuses do not become satellites of pre-eminent inner-city campuses, offering subjects from only one or two faculties rather than the full array of courses.

Access to a good range of entertainment and leisure venues for urban fringe young people could be improved through the development of more specialised forms of public transport. For example, mini-buses funded at a community level by parents relieved from 'taxi-duty' and the proprietors of entertainment venues who would benefit from increased custom, could provide a means of transportation to popular venues that make young people less reliant upon their or their friends' parents.

We can more readily ensure that our living environments provide an adequate standard of living for all if we have an urban planning process that is inclusive rather than exclusive. It is clear that young people have particular needs and for these to be appropriately met the opportunity for a greater degree of involvement by young people in policy making may be required.

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