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Driven Mad

How the waste and inefficiency of neoliberalism attacks our children's health

Deregulation, the government and the newspapers assure us, saves money and time and reduces frustration. That's the theory. But, as I see every day, it doesn't quite work like this.

My youngest daughter's school has been trying to protect its children from the toxic cloud in which they work and play. The teachers **know how much damage** traffic pollution does to **their lungs**, hearts and **brains**. They know that it **reduces their cognitive development**, their **ability to concentrate** and their **capacity for exercise**. They know it's a minor miracle that no one has yet been crushed by the cars jostling to get as close as possible to the school gates. But thanks to the government's refusal to legislate, there is little they can do. Far from freeing us from effort, the absence of regulation wastes everybody's time.

At my suggestion, the school invited **the charity Living Streets** to come in and enthuse the children about walking or cycling to school. I attended the first assembly at which one of their organisers spoke. She was lively, funny and captivating. With the help of a giant puppet and the promise of badges if they joined in, the children went wild for her, and for the cause. The school, led by its committed headteacher, has done everything it can to support the scheme.

For a few weeks, it worked. Everyone noticed the difference. No longer were cars mounting the pavement – and almost mounting each other – outside the gates. The children were using their legs, families were talking to each other on the way. But the cars have crept back in, and now, though the clever and catchy programme continues, we're almost back where we started: school begins and ends under a cloud.

Some of the drivers are the people who were elbowing in before; others occupy the space vacated by those who respect the scheme. *Living Streets* will keep returning, but, now that the first flush of enthusiasm has abated, sustaining the programme will be harder.

Aside from the damage to our children's health, it's the redundancy of it all that gets to me. The government could solve much of this problem at a stroke, with a duty on councils to impose the kind of parking ban around schools at arrival and departure times that **parts of Edinburgh** and **Solihull now use**. Technologies such as numberplate recognition cameras and rising bollards (both of which allow residents and drivers with a disability card to pass, while excluding others) can make enforcement automatic.

Without this intervention, headteachers all over the country have to take on the issue one car at a time. Add up their efforts and you're likely to find that this pointless replication runs into hundreds – perhaps thousands – of times the public labour that government action would require. If there is one group of people whose time is both stretched and socially valuable, it is headteachers.

Some schools have lobbied their councils for traffic restriction orders, generally without success. But why should we have to fight the same battle borough by borough for our children's health? Why should their lung capacity be subject to a postcode lottery?

The lack of regulation also creates social tension. When I have gently asked other parents not to park in front of the school gates – making the passage difficult and dangerous for other families, and pumping pollution straight into our children's faces – the outcome is rarely positive. Last month a lollipop lady employed by a school in Colchester to protect the children from traffic resigned because of **the threats and abuse she received** from a few parents. Despite her uniform, she could exercise only moral power, which simply bounces off some people. *"Our children are now yet again at risk when crossing the road,"* the headteacher remarked.

I've begun to realise that getting as close to the gates as possible is not just about minimising the need to walk. It's also about being seen in your new car. The bigger it is, the greater the incentive to be seen. This could explain why some parents drive 100 metres to the school every morning. By the time they find a parking place, they could have walked back and forth three times.

Self-regulation works well in a commons – **a resource controlled and managed by a community**. But the streets are not a commons. They are a state asset, that is treated as **a free for all**. When the state owns a resource but won't control it, the community has neither the right nor the power to regulate its use. All that is left is voluntarism. The efforts of those who try to defend the common good are undermined by free riders. Without regulation, the most selfish and anti-social people dominate.

The government's efforts are pathetic. Its **cycling and walking investment strategy** is based on this rousing vision: *"we want more people to have access to safe, attractive routes for cycling and walking by 2040."*

Yes, 2040. They bailed out the banks in hours. But our children's health can wait until they have children of their own. It intends to **halve its feeble investment** in cycling and walking between now and 2021.

When I have raised this issue on social media I've been told *"well it's your fault for living in a posh part of London."*

But I don't live in London, and the school has one of the poorest catchments in the county. Personal contract purchase for cars has helped to universalise this issue (as well as **threatening another sub-prime crisis**). Almost every school gate is now shrouded in pollution.

Air pollution **disproportionately affects poorer communities**, exposing their children to yet another disadvantage, as their lungs and brains are stunted. **One study suggests** that 38 million people here – **59% of the population** – are immersed in pollution above the legal limit. Only those who can afford to live in villages and the leafy suburbs escape.

The state's failure to regulate has not delivered freedom. It has delivered waste and inefficiency, helplessness and frustration, a loss of trust in each other, and of belief in our democratic power to improve our lives. Far from releasing us, it has snarled us up in traffic. And it leaves a massive public health issue unaddressed, at whose scale we can only begin to guess. Our children choke on the government's refusal to govern.

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