

Trip to school can be dangerous

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Staff Writer

Walking or biking to school is becoming a rarity in California -- and a lack of pedestrian-friendly streets is contributing to children's poor health and higher rate of injuries, according to a statewide study released Wednesday.

Children today make about three-fourths of their trips to school in automobiles, while walking or biking there only 16 percent of the time, the report found by analyzing state Department of Transportation data.

"We have engineered our streets for speed rather than safety, designed our neighborhoods for traffic rather than children," said James Corless, state director of the Surface Transportation Policy Project, an independent group that produced the report with the Land Use Coalition and Latino Issues Forum.

Whatever path children take to school, they face danger, the report found, but riding in cars isn't a good solution to the problem.

Being inside a car during a crash is the number one accidental cause of death for youth under 18. The third leading cause of accidental death for kids is being hit by an automobile as a pedestrian, the report found. In Alameda County, 245 pedestrian children died or were injured by vehicles in 2001.

These facts and figures come to life at Garfield Elementary in Oakland.

Cars zoom by the school, located at the very busy intersection of Foothill Boulevard and 22nd Avenue. And although half of the 800 students who attend Garfield walk to school, there are no crossing guards, school bus service or stoplights for the children. There isn't even a parking lot for parents to drive into and drop off their kids.

It's no wonder Garfield had the highest number of accidents involving children among Oakland schools from 1996 to 2000, according to the city's Pedestrian Master Plan.

Eleven children were injured or killed in pedestrian accidents while going to or from the school.

"The number one issue people want to improve is safety -- not just crime, but safe streets," said **Diana Williams**, executive director of **Urban Ecology**, which is working with Garfield parents and teachers to develop safer routes to school. "Parents know it's dangerous."

Like the students at Garfield, many kids in the state don't have the option of riding a school bus.

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