

The lived experience of transport limitations in Melbourne's growth areas

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1. Introduction

In Australia's large cities transport infrastructure and services are unevenly distributed. Public transport, in terms of both provision and frequency of service, is concentrated in inner, and to some extent middle, suburbs. In recent years the provision of infrastructure for active transport in new suburbs has improved, but destinations that are at a walkable distance are scarce and cycling is viewed by many as unsafe. Along with other factors, including differing land use patterns and densities, this means that residents in outer areas have little choice but to rely predominantly on private motor vehicle travel, exacerbating a range of disparities which already exist across the metropolitan areas of major cities.

This paper reports on the lived experience of residents in two of Melbourne's growth suburbs in relation to transport, access and mobility, against the background of Melbourne's current strategic plan promoting local living and the notion of a 20-minute neighbourhood. The findings are drawn from a survey and interviews of residents which were undertaken for a three-year project on the early delivery of equitable and healthy transport options in new suburbs.

2. Literature review

The growing divide between inner and outer suburbs in Australia's largest cities, caused in part by the lower availability of infrastructure and services such as health and community infrastructure, employment, and public transport in the outer suburbs, has been the focus of a number of investigations (VCOSS 2014; Randolph & Tice 2017). The attraction of seemingly more affordable living on the urban fringe promised by lower land and housing prices, and the consequent implications on mobility and car dependence, has been highlighted in several studies (Dodson & Sipe 2008, Currie et al. 2009, Saberi et al. 2017). This car dependence is not only problematic because of the financial burden to households. Car travel also leads to negative impacts on the environment and society overall, through air and noise pollution, contribution to a sedentary lifestyle and traffic incidents (Badland et al. 2017; Armstrong et al. 2015; OECD 2014).

There has been some recent exploration of what this situation actually means for the residents of those suburbs (Smith et al. 2021; Nicholls et al. 2018; Andrews et al. 2018; Johnson et al. 2017), and the degree to which transport is considered when buying a home. These studies show that the transport situation is often of secondary importance to considerations of affordability, house size and safety when purchasing a house in the outer suburbs. Some have found however, that residents would be interested in local or closer employment opportunities, once they have experienced long commutes (Nicholls et al. 2018; Johnson et al. 2017). Our study adds to this research, by exploring attitudes to, and experiences with, different transport modes and local shopping or town centres in more detail. Furthermore, we aim to understand changes over time by building on earlier work (Nicholls et al. 2018).

3. Research context

The introduction of the 20-minute neighbourhood concept in Melbourne's current strategic plan, *Plan Melbourne 2017-2050*, provides an important framework for the provision of transport in Melbourne's suburbs. The concept is "all about 'living locally' - giving people the ability to meet most of their everyday needs within a 20-minute return walk from home, with access to safe cycling and local transport options" (DELWP 2021, n.p.). However, the focus lies on non-work trips, as it is seen as unlikely that the higher order jobs found in the CBD will disperse to other areas. Achieving a 20-minute neighbourhood in outer suburbs is likely to prove to be a considerable challenge with their generally low(er) density and few opportunities for employment.

4. Methods

This paper is based on the results of a resident survey on transport and wellbeing and follow-up interviews with 30 of the survey respondents in two case study areas, located in the west (Allura) and south-east (Selandra Rise) of Melbourne. They are two master-planned estates where construction started in 2011/12 and which were mostly built when the survey was undertaken in 2019. The survey was administered between April and June 2019 as an online and paper survey. Overall, 352 valid survey responses were received. The response rate was 13%, with 48% of respondents from Allura, 46% from Selandra Rise and 6 % from "other" suburbs in proximity. 53% of respondents were female, 46% male and 1% non-binary. Respondents were between 19 and 89 years old. Longitudinal data could be used for Selandra Rise where previous surveys had been undertaken (Nicholls et al. 2018). At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be interested in participating in follow-up interviews. Fifteen interviews in each estate were conducted between October and December 2019. The interviews were undertaken as semi-structured face-to-face interviews and took 50 minutes on average. The interviewees were aged between 21 and 75; 47% were female and 53% were male. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using qualitative content analysis and the software NVivo. Analysis was undertaken according to major themes, such as travel to work, active transport, public transport, health and wellbeing, accessibility and affordability.

5. Analysis

Our interviews demonstrate clearly the dilemmas faced by new home buyers. On the one hand residents were keen to access housing at affordable price points and valued having the larger houses, open spaces and relaxed and quiet atmosphere that new suburbs could provide. They also liked the sense of a cohort of having neighbours in similar life situations to their own. However, what they disliked most about their suburb was the amount of traffic, and at one of our case study sites, Allura, the lack of local shops and services due to the delayed arrival of a planned town centre. Most residents indicated they had expected some traffic, but not to the extent that it actually occurred. More than two thirds of survey respondents (69%) stated that their travel times were longer than they expected before moving to their suburb.

"[What I] like about it is the more space. There's more to go around, to keep you free. You can walk, and there are new parks, and the grounds for the kids that we can go for. That's good. The bad part is definitely traffic." (DE)

Both areas we investigated had some local public transport. Allura had two bus services on its boundary at the time of the research, so that some residents were at a walkable distance, while others had to walk about 2-3 km to their nearest bus stop. In Selandra Rise a bus service going

from the suburb to a train station and larger shopping centre was introduced in 2014 (Delbosch et al. 2016) and there were two further bus routes on the boundary at the time of the survey and interviews. When looking at the experience of ‘local living’, differences can be seen between the two case studies, as Selandra Rise has a local shopping centre with a supermarket and some cafés and take-aways (built around 2016), while the shopping centre for Allura has not yet been built.

These differences have an impact on travel behaviour, satisfaction with accessibility and shopping habits. For Allura, about half (52%) of the residents were dissatisfied with the access to fresh food shops in their neighbourhood. Nearly half, (42%) of respondents who experienced travel restrictions stated that this made it difficult to go grocery shopping.

Interviewees in Selandra Rise walked to the supermarket, to top up their weekly shop and buy fresh food.

“(We) don't need (a) car we just... a two-minute walk and we have Woolies.” (BK)

“It's so close (...) if we need something we can just jump up and grab it and it's not like we have to drive somewhere and then go back.” (CM)

In contrast, at Allura residents tend to do one large weekly shop by car as the shops are further away. Interviewees reported that this means that they buy less fresh food.

“I find I do one weekly shop at the weekend. If I get home from work and I was to pop to the shops, it could take half an hour to get 5 km away.” (BM)

“I think I'd go more often [if there were local shops]. Yeah, just to get more fresh fruit and veg. I probably don't because I'm like, ‘Is this going to last the full week?’” (BM)

Interviewees in Allura expressed disappointment about the town centre not having been built.

“Well, it's a bit of a pain that the shops aren't open up there, because it would've been good to have shops (...), which was promised three years ago. (...) So I could go from school, walk to the shop, pick up your bread and milk, and then walk home.” (KI)

The shopping centre in Selandra Rise was also built about four years after the first residents moved in and comparison with earlier research shows that satisfaction has changed accordingly. While in 2012 only 39% of respondents were satisfied with their access to fresh food shops, this has changed to 78% of respondents being satisfied seven years later in 2019.

The existence of other local destinations is also appreciated.

“So for me, it's proximity to the school. And also towards the supermarkets (...) All of them are in walkable distance from me. (...) And again, the other facilities like medical centres and all. They're probably a two-minute drive. So that's why I really like that.” (BK)

There is a difference between walking and cycling for leisure and as a means of transport for residents. A greater proportion were walking for leisure, due to the provision of open space and recreational paths, as one resident confirmed:

“Yeah, we definitely walk a lot more as a family because we've got nice parks and playgrounds and stuff, and we've got dogs so we walk every weekend and just locally as well.” (OZ)

Walking for transport is predominantly for trips to the shops and school. Only very few interviewees cycled for transport, and then usually to the train station. Generally, foot and cycle paths within the estate are appreciated and seen as well used, whereas connections to outside the estate are seen more critically.

“Within the estate, it's fine. You can walk pretty much everywhere. But the moment you go down to [the boundary], that's when it's a problem.” (RT)

There have also been comments that there are no destinations to walk or cycle to and that the paths are not going anywhere.

So where do I walk to? That's the question. What do I walk for? The nearest Woolies is 3.5 kilometres away.” (KS)

“The paths here, yeah, they're great paths, but they don't lead anywhere. (...) So they advertise five kilometres of cycle paths, but where do they go?” (KM)

The streets outside of the estate are experienced as very busy and therefore dangerous for walking and cycling.

“I mean, I can't even get over to the café over the road with the pram. So I don't do the footpaths. (...) It's just too dangerous.” (SB)

For local public transport options, the difference in services available corresponded with differences in satisfaction. In Allura 68% of respondents were dissatisfied with public transport access in the area compared to 38% in Selandra Rise. Not surprisingly, more people in Selandra Rise took the bus to access the train station. 21% of train users almost always or mostly took the bus to the station, compared to 10% in Allura. However, these are still low proportions and there were still frustrations in both case studies with low frequency and unreliability of buses.

“I gave up, it was frustrating, because waiting and waiting and the train constantly not (...) That's why a lot of people don't use it, because it's too unreliable. It's too infrequent and it's unreliable.” (HH)

Similarly, it is acknowledged that living in the suburb without a car would be difficult.

“I would say anyone that didn't have a car would be hard pushed to live here at all, really.” (NB)

Finally, the importance of local living can also be seen in responses to the question whether priorities for a home or neighbourhood had changed, as interviewees saw the following as more important now: travel times, access to shops and other services, and public transport offer.

“I've said to people before, when we first built a house, it was what you want your house to look like (...) but now it's access to shops, and what's around me.” (TD)

“I think I definitely want to be walking distance to a shopping centre, a café. (...) If I was in walking distance to that I'd be really happy, and a train station. Whereas, I do feel that we are in no-man's land here.” (BM)

6. Conclusions

The resident interviews and survey show that residents in new suburbs, perhaps unsurprisingly, care about their local environment and amenity and value the opportunity for local living. They tend to use active transport, predominantly walking to access the shops where this is possible. While not all residents will walk or cycle and many car trips are unavoidable at present, there is considerable opportunity for increasing active transport trips and with this physical activity by delivering town centres as early as possible in new suburbs. It seems obvious but residents will walk more if there are useful and valuable destinations. Furthermore, if these are provided early in the life time of a suburb they can decrease the need for car ownership, improve the

quality of life for residents who cannot drive or do not have access to a car and support community development.

The study has shown that the notion that residents who move to new suburbs are not expecting or wanting greater transport options is not true. The experience of new residents was often one of disappointment at the impact that transport limitations had on their lifestyles and amenity. The study highlighted that nearby destinations are an important prerequisite for residents to take up walking for transport, supporting the significance of offering a greater range of land uses and services in order to realise the concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood. While walking for leisure is accepted and adopted in new suburbs, active *transport* is done to a lesser extent due to the lack of destinations, disconnected pathways and safety concerns. While a large part of residents will still need and want to travel to destinations outside the surrounding area, particularly for work, there is a prospect for greater local living, and with this more walking and cycling, with their environmental and health benefits. The early provision of some destinations – like a community hub, a café or some (smaller) shops – together with a network of foot and cycle paths helps to create habits from the beginning and supports the creation of social networks.

The research was undertaken before the coronavirus pandemic. The lockdown measures and the increase in people working from home have led to an even stronger appreciation and increased significance of local living, and a consequential need to improve both the timing and overall provision of infrastructure and services. From a transport perspective this opens up windows of opportunities for facilitating and encouraging a higher use of active transport modes by ensuring that those local destinations can be easily accessed on foot or by bicycle. This includes the provision of transport infrastructure, such as paths and crossings, as well as an earlier delivery of destinations in growth suburbs.

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