

Urban sprawl contributes to housing crisis, exacerbates childhood adversities

August 14 2023, by Hulya Gilbert and Ian Woodcock



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Amid Australia's housing crisis, land-supply slogans are once again dominating discussions about the solutions. [Governments](#) and [private developers](#) often blame housing crises on lack of land for new housing. Their solution? Rezone farmland for housing on the suburban fringe.

Earlier this year, the South Australian government announced the state's [largest ever release of land for housing](#). Some 23,700 houses are to be built on the fringe of Adelaide. SA Premier Peter Malinauskas has even [said urban sprawl](#) "is not a dirty word".

Support for the creation of fringe suburbs, while still business as usual in Australia, reflects outdated views. [[Evidence](#)] of the need to halt urban sprawl is now overwhelming. The [spruiking](#) of these greenfield developments as affordable and good for young families with children is at odds with their experiences of these developments.

What life is actually like on the suburban fringe

Greenfield developments are often attractive to young families due to the perception of affordable housing and promises of local schools, childcare, shops and public transport. However, these neighborhoods rarely live up to such expectations. Instead, they often entrench disadvantage due to the neglect of transport costs when assessing how affordable suburban housing is.

Families in [Truganina](#) and [Tarneit](#) in Melbourne's west exemplify the daily struggles of outer suburban life. Nearly a decade after moving in, the promises of local schools and public transport had failed to materialize.

Likewise, in the outer suburbs of [Western Sydney](#), [Brisbane](#) and [Adelaide](#), families with children struggle to get to the services they need without a car. In South Australia, the [Thrive by Five](#) alliance cites transport as the [second-biggest barrier](#) (after attendance costs) to early learning.

These suburbs all provide stark reminders to governments of the problems associated with the suburban sprawl they have encouraged.

Suburban sprawl and car dependence go hand in hand

The defining feature of suburban sprawl is car dependence. It's linked with most of the social and economic downsides of sprawl. Continuing with such developments signals an acceptance of car dependence and the growing social and economic burdens it imposes on future generations.

Life on the fringe without a private car is particularly difficult for families with children due to their [complex travel patterns](#). For example, trip chaining between children's schools, extra-curricular activities and parents' workplaces is common.

The harmful impacts of these car-centric suburbs disproportionately affect children.

To start with, road deaths are the [leading cause of death](#) for children and young adults globally. It's easily one of the most underestimated issues in our world.



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Concerns for children's safety in car-dominated neighborhoods and other accessibility issues make the private car "a must use tool" in outer suburbs. We know the rest: the vicious cycle of car dependence and more and more driving.

So suburban sprawl leads to more high-speed roads, longer distances between centers of daily activity and more time in cars. All these factors [increase the risk](#) of road deaths and injuries.

Car-dependent neighborhoods [deprive children of opportunities](#) essential for their health and well-being. They miss out on [physical activity](#), unstructured play, [social interaction](#) and developing social networks. In addition, traffic [noise](#) and [air pollution](#) expose them to a wide range of environmental and health problems.

Having a backyard doesn't meet all children's needs

What does a truly child-friendly neighborhood look like? It allows for safe and convenient active travel—walking, cycling and "[wheeling](#)" (using mobility devices)—as well as public transport, to conduct daily activities. Child-friendliness is [embedded in the everyday places](#), in streets, parks, square and [public transport](#).

But all too often children's play opportunities are reduced to the tiny backyards that are now common in fringe suburbs. These suburban restrictions are at odds with globally recognized [principles of child-friendliness](#). Backyards alone cannot make up for the lack of access to child care, schools, shops, recreation and health services.

How can we develop better planning policies to create neighborhoods that properly meet families' needs? Some policies already exist, such as [15-minute](#) or [20-minute neighborhoods](#), to reduce private car use for daily activities. But these policies get sidelined when governments promote suburban sprawl and build more freeways.

These governments should not dismiss the suitability of higher-density living in well-serviced neighborhoods for families with children. Yes, some densification policies have been [blind to the needs](#) of children and their families. However, when done well, high-density settings can be [wonderful communities](#) for such families.

With [careful planning](#), many more families could be housed in established areas without having to significantly increase building heights.

Car-centric planning has failed families

Car-centric planning dates back to the 1950s. Since then, Australian suburban fringe development has largely failed to create child-friendly neighborhoods. Given the [pro-sprawl political advocacy](#), the prospects of Adelaide's largest ever greenfield development being good for children are rather poor, despite some [encouraging steps](#) by the government to ensure the new suburbs get adequate infrastructure.

Using aspirations of families with children to justify suburban sprawl is exploitative and misleading. It's an approach that ignores the real-life challenges residents experience and distracts from government's responsibility for proper planning.

If governments are serious about the needs of families with children, they could start by acknowledging [children's needs and rights](#) to be able to get to their daily destinations without a car. To deliver neighborhoods that make this possible, governments need to be bold and decisive in their planning.

Suburban sprawl and car dependence go hand in hand. Our politicians must commit to urban planning where cars are no longer privileged. Otherwise we deny our [children](#) basic rights to learn, play and socialize safely in their own neighborhoods.

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