

Connecting the dots between transportation and health in the context of climate change

[Green Action Centre](#) is a leading environmental non-profit that has been advancing environmental education and sustainable living in Manitoba for over 30 years.

With our history, connections, and impact over the last 30 years, Green Action Centre recognizes the important role we play in being a leader for climate action in Manitoba. After reading the dire warnings in the [United Nations' IPCC report released in 2018](#), we knew it was time to do more.

This was the reason why Green Action Centre joined forces with several other local NGO's - Climate Change Connection (CCC), Wilderness Committee Manitoba, Manitoba Energy Justice Coalition (MEJC), and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) Manitoba office - to create the Climate Action Team.

Through a collaborative project called Road to Resilience, which is supported by the Winnipeg Foundation, the Climate Action Team's goal is to foster conversations and lead people to act. We want to help people feel like there are realistic actions and solutions and increase our resilience to what's coming. Part of this work will include addressing transportation, one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in Manitoba.

Through programming, Green Action Centre advocates for both children and adults alike to transition to greener and healthier modes of transportation for their daily commutes to school and work.

With almost 80% of people in Winnipeg driving alone to work each day, we are seeing more cars on the road, heavier traffic congestion, and idling at peak times of the day. As our population continues to grow, so will congestion and emissions, unless we drastically change our behaviour and urban design.

Transitioning to sustainable transportation includes a hierarchy of options - walking, cycling, public transit, carpooling, and carsharing:

- People will only make the switch to walking and cycling if they believe that infrastructure is safe. This is why it's important to invest in measures such as traffic calming road design and separated, protected bike lanes. A study by Bike Winnipeg and CAA Manitoba from 2018 found almost half of Winnipeggers would bike daily or a few times a week if infrastructure was better.

- Investing in Winnipeg Transit and increasing ridership will be an important part of our equation to solve climate change. Studies have found that a typical household can reduce its energy consumption and emissions about 45% by shifting from vehicle to public transit.
- In areas where there is limited or no transit service, and distances are too long, carpooling becomes the only realistic option for reducing emissions. This is why Green Action Centre was excited to launch [GoManitoba](#) - a free online tool and app that connects people from across the province to find matches for carpooling. You can also find transit and cycling mentors and track your financial savings and emissions reductions.
- Peg City Car Co-op has implemented a successful carsharing program in Winnipeg, which is an important initiative to reduce our dependence on personal vehicle ownership. It starts a conversation around needing to own a vehicle, when instead, you could rely on alternative modes of transportation most of the time, and use a vehicle only when you need to.

Transitioning to sustainable transportation doesn't have to be complicated or an "all or nothing" situation. Take small steps, utilizing a range of different modes, some of the time – even just part way. Can you imagine the immediate difference we could make if everyone who drives to work tried walking, cycling, busing or carpooling just 3 times a week?

We also need to see a normalization of sustainable transportation in society. We must move away from preconceived notions, biases, and mental roadblocks that reinforce a dependency on personal vehicles. Based on our organization's experience running programs like [Commuter Challenge](#) and Bike to School month, we have found that people tend to be open to adopting new modes of transportation once they have been exposed to them. People have been pleasantly surprised by how easy and enjoyable it is, especially not having to worry about driving in traffic or parking.

It should also be noted that it's not just a matter of choosing a different way of getting around. It's a matter of improving our built environments so that walking, cycling, and public transit are the easiest, cheapest, and most desirable ways of getting around. Walkable spaces allow people to connect with their communities and enable cities to thrive. We can reduce injuries and unnecessary deaths with slower speeds and street calming interventions. If we continue to design for and prioritize vehicles over people, we are not doing our part to reduce GHG emissions and tackle the climate crisis.

Notably, the use of sustainable transportation is not just good for the environment; it also improves human health with respect to reduced air pollution and increased physical activity.

Although Winnipeg is in the low risk zone, air pollution is a serious global issue that requires global action. According to the World Health Organization, 91% of people worldwide do not breathe safe air.

A child's exposure to pollution can have life-long health effects, which is one of the many reasons why Green Action Centre advocates for students to walk and bike to school as part of our Active and Safe Routes to School Program. Currently, [we have found that the majority of students in Winnipeg are arriving to school by car](#), resulting in heavy traffic congestion, idling, and dangerous driving behaviour around schools. With so much traffic, it is not only nerve racking for students who do walk and bike to navigate their communities safely, but as documented in a study out of the University of Toronto, students are also being exposed to high levels of air pollution at drop off zones. It's not just limited to those outdoors either. Studies from the UK and the Netherlands have found that children are at an even higher risk of exposure to air pollution inside vehicles.

If we can encourage students to walk or bike to school instead of arriving by vehicle, we can significantly reduce children's exposure to air pollution.

It is well documented that both Canadian adults and children are not getting the recommended amount of physical activity they need, and that physical activity reduces many health risks. Employers can largely influence the health and wellbeing of their employees by promoting a workplace culture that encourages sustainable transportation to work. Those who walk and bike to work have reported improved concentration, stamina and memory, increased energy and positive mental health. The Public Health Agency of Canada states that work performance improves up to 15% amongst physically active people as well.

It should be noted that health benefits are not only attributed to active transportation, but are also extended to taking public transit as well. Research has found people who take public transit are less likely to be overweight, have high blood pressure, and diabetes, when compared to people who drive.

Green Action Centre's [Workplace Commuter Options Program](#) works with businesses and employers to make sustainable transportation both appealing and within reach. There are many initiatives that we help workplaces implement such as commuting surveys, employee carpooling with GoManitoba, installing secure bike parking, subsidizing Transit passes, and

much more. Efforts made by each individual workplace and employee, coupled with a built environment that supports sustainable transportation, will increase access to physical activity and improve health outcomes.

When compared to those who are driven to school, students that walk and bike are more active, getting as much as 45 additional minutes of physical activity per day. Active school travel is associated with many mental health benefits for children, as well as improved focus, problem-solving skills, and grades in school.

Our [Active and Safe Routes to School](#) program focuses on education and encouragement to improve active school travel rates and physical activity, with initiatives such as the Bicycle Education and Skills Training program in the Seven Oaks School Division that teaches on-road cycling to students during PhysEd classes and events like Walktober, Bike to School Month, and Clean Air Day where thousands of students in Manitoba try and celebrate walking and cycling to school each year.

The benefits of using sustainable transportation are endless and interconnected. The burning question is: will we change?

Our answer is yes.

We are already seeing governments, corporations, and even the media take action and working like never before to reduce emissions. We've seen a huge movement from youth, with thousands of students across the world striking and sharing their voice, including right here in Winnipeg. On Friday, Sept 27th there will be a [global climate strike](#) that is expected to be the biggest yet, and this time youth are asking businesses and adults to join them.

A lot of researchers and advocates are urging us towards collective, systemic change in order to meet our targets, which is both necessary and important, but Green Action Centre doesn't want to lose sight of how important individual actions are. As a parent, friend, family member, coworker, or consumer, you have a lot of power in changing the situation we're faced with. Although your actions may seem small in the grand scheme of things, if we all utilize our individual power, we can shape our future for the better.

No matter where you come from, or what sector you represent, we all have to do our part. Why? Because our world depends on it. Now.