Location choice and excess travel:  
The case of the Dutch-speaking primary school system in Belgium

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This study is an empirical analysis of the home-school distances in the Dutch-speaking primary school system in Belgium. We start from the hypothesis that the specific locations of both schools and residences largely determine everyday distances to be covered by pupils. Moreover, it is known that there is also an important link between the home-school distance and the travel mode choice. Thus, shorter home-school distances are associated with a higher degree of sustainability in children’s mobility.

To this end, we differentiate both school locations and residential locations depending on the degree of urbanization, and we evaluate the distance travelled based on an area-covering data source that links the residence of all pupils with the address of the (Dutch-language) schools they attend. In this way, the catchment area of the individual schools is mapped. By correlating the size of the school with the home-school distance, it is also possible to evaluate whether the school system is sufficiently dense and area covering.

Then we examine the extent to which students visit the school that is closest to their residence. From the excess commuting literature we know that the increase of wealth and widespread car ownership means that personal preferences have gained importance in destination choice processes over time, with longer trips as a result. An initial analysis seems to confirm that also in the school commute, a significant degree of excess mobility occurs. While the median home-school distance covered in practice amounts to 1.4 km, the median distance that a pupil would have to cover when consistently attending the school that is closest to home would be only 0.7 km, a trip that could be done easily on foot by most children.