Turning the Wheel on Active Transportation: Shifts in Policymaking and Planning for Cycling and Pedestrian Facilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Large Canadian Regions

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Policy Challenge

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some municipalities reallocated road space for bicycle lanes, closed major roads on selected days, and/or designated local streets as slow/quiet streets.

Fast implementation of active transportation infrastructure disrupted status-quo in transportation policy making, at least in the short term.

Our knowledge related to the planning and political processes behind the COVID-19 street reallocations in North America is limited.

To fill this gap, our study examined *how* the pandemic-time active transportation infrastructure emerged in the prevailing policy context. We explored two research questions:

1) What were the enabling factors that opened a window of opportunity for changes to planning and policy related to the reallocation of road space?

2) What were the influencing factors that shaped the initiatives related to the reallocation of road space in favour of active transportation?

Scope of Study

Using the framework of critical junctures, a qualitative approach was taken to analyze the permissive conditions (RQ1) and productive conditions (RQ2) behind the street reallocation initiatives at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (spring-summer 2020).

The study covers Canada's 3 largest urban regions:

- The Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area
- The Metro Montréal region
- The Metro Vancouver area

The study area was further refined to include only those municipalities within these regions that reallocated street space.

Photo: City News (Photographer: Rene Johnston)

Photo: City of Vancouver

Photo: Montréal Gazette (Photographer: Dave Sidaway)

Toronto Metropolitan University

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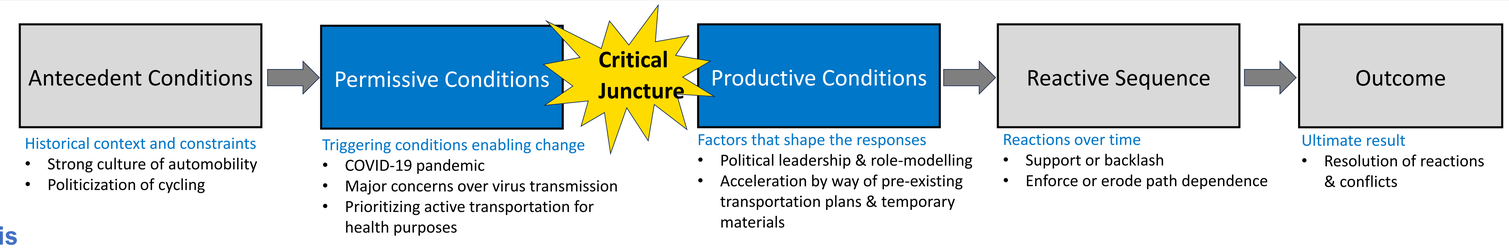
CRSH SSHRC Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Critical Junctures Framework

Critical Juncture:
infrequent, abrupt, non-incremental change



Data Collection and Analysis

We interviewed 22 municipal employees who were directly involved with the decision-making, planning, and/or implementation of street reallocation.

Participants represented the cities/towns of:

- **GTHA:** Toronto, Markham, Mississauga, Brampton, Hamilton, and Waterloo – city and region
- **Metro Vancouver:** Vancouver, New Westminster, City of North Vancouver, District of North Vancouver
- **Metro Montréal:** Ville de Montréal, Côte-des-Neiges - Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG), Plateau-Mont-Royal, Ville Marie, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve

Interviews were hosted on Zoom and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

We asked participants about:

- Motivations
- Decision-making processes
- Evaluation

We used the approach of thematic analysis to identify patterns and divergences across our interview data.

Findings

Permissive Conditions

Major Concerns Around Public Health

Addressing health concerns related to COVID-19 virus transmission was a key policy priority.

Active transportation was viewed as a way of enhancing physical and mental health.

Prioritization of Active Transportation

Several participants cited the pandemic as an opportunity to advance the active transportation agenda because it was a time of crisis and uncertainty, with many referring to decision-making as being under an "emergency" mode of operations.

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Paper # TRBAM-24-00918

Productive Conditions

Learning from Other Cities

Many participants described the advantage of learning from and connecting with other cities to determine their response.

Especially in the GTHA, we heard that neighbouring cities' actions pressured their own.

Achieving Political Support

Across the study areas, we heard that political support was a key driver of street reallocations.

In some GTHA municipalities in particular, the role of council champions was integral, while the diminished role of politicians in Toronto was mentioned as a key factor.

Fast-Tracking Plans

Many participants in the GTHA and metro Vancouver area explained capitalizing on pre-existing transportation plans to develop their responses.

In contrast, the metro Montréal area participants expressed relying on localized knowledge instead.

Providing Direction & Delegating Authority

We heard that Council's interest in developing an active transportation response is what prompted action, but the decisions of which actions to take were largely up to the transportation departments.

Expediting Timelines

Participants repeatedly expressed that installing the street reallocations was the top priority, over all the details.

Timelines were condensed from months or years to just days or weeks.

Using Quick-Build Solutions

Across the study areas, participants pointed to using temporary materials, including construction barrels, bollards, paint, signage, and concrete curbs, to quickly reallocate road space.

This finding aligns with the emergent tolerance for experimentation described in the early days of the pandemic

Implications

This research identified some important lessons from the pandemic and how to be prepared to act on future opportunities to advance active transportation:

- Urgency and immediacy prompted action & is key to future planning and policymaking
- Expedited timelines are unsustainable in the long-term due to resource constraints and a return to balancing pre-pandemic operations
- Post-pandemic evolution of active transportation may be influenced by the actions of other cities, as it was during the pandemic
- Preparation is key to enable quick responses. Materials and planning tools should be ready in case of future opportunities, and should include findings from community engagement