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MICHAEL LEWYN; For the Journal-Constitution

One night not long ago, I was chatting with a middle-aged woman about the virtues and vices (mostly vices) of raising children in suburban Atlanta.

I said something like: "I wouldn't want to raise kids in Atlanta, at least not in the areas where my relatives live. When my mom was 10, she was able to take her grown-up relatives on a streetcar tour of Atlanta. But my suburban nephew and niece are going to be prisoners of their parents' cars until they are 16. They can't take buses anywhere because there are no bus routes where they live, and they can't walk to a bus stop or a shop because there are no sidewalks and nothing within walking distance."

The woman responded: "This is a different time. The world is so dangerous that you can't expect these children to walk outside." In other words, my dowager acquaintance believed that every suburb and neighborhood is chock full of child molesters, and that the only way to protect children from evildoers is to keep them locked up in their parents' houses and cars until they turn 16 --- at which point their parents will whisk them from a world of infantile helplessness to a world of auto ownership and unlimited mobility. What's wrong with this argument?

Plenty. First of all, the woman's argument requires one to believe two contradictory positions. On the one hand, America's streets are so dangerous that no one under 16 can ever be let out of the Holy Trinity of Home, Car and School. On the other hand, the same streets (and nearby expressways) are so safe that as soon as the same children turn 16, they may not only be released from the Home/Car/School bubble, but may (indeed, must, in order to free their parents from carpool work) be given a 2,000-pound metal box that they must drive at 50 or 60 mph, despite the dangers of carjackers and bad driving. Both propositions cannot be true. If children are endangered by perverts on the streets, they are even more endangered by criminals and drunken drivers on the highways.

Indeed, auto-dependent lifestyles have killed far more American children than pedophiles. In 1998, 1,772 American children were killed in auto accidents while they were passengers in cars (presumably cars being driven by their parents or their friends' parents), according to federal statistics. Another 316,000 were injured.

Each year, 100 American children are abducted and murdered by strangers, according to federal crime statistics. Only 6 percent of all sexually assaulted children are molested by strangers, and 77 percent are assaulted in their parents' home.

In other words, the only strangers most American children need to fear are strangers in cars. So Americans who "protect" their children by keeping them off the streets may well be making their lives more rather than less dangerous. Indeed, isolated suburban children may be in more danger from criminal strangers than are urban children.

Common sense suggests that a 10-year-old who is used to going outside will be far more likely to intelligently distinguish friend from foe than a 10-year-old whose experience of the world is limited to Mommy's car and the voice of the family TV.

Auto-dependent children also suffer from a more long-term danger: obesity and obesity-related diseases. As children walk less, they exercise less. And when children exercise less, they become fatter and more prone to heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other obesity-related diseases. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, "walking and bicycling by children 5-15 has dropped 40 percent between 1977 and 1995," and by an odd coincidence the "percentage of young people who are overweight has doubled since 1980."

Of children 5 to 15 who are overweight, 61 percent have one or more cardiovascular disease risk factors, and 27 percent have two or more."

So by locking children in their homes, Americans are preparing them for a lifetime of heart disease and other health problems. So to those of you who wish to isolate your children in a protective bubble, I quote the fifth century poet Rutilius Numatianus: "Because of their fear, they shun what is good. . . . Whatever their reasons, I find them strange."