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## What challenges do cities face in creating better conditions for early childhood development?

*The conditions a child grows up in have lasting impacts on their health, well-being and life outcomes. Katie Beck and Marie Kaune share new findings on what cities say are the biggest challenges they face in creating child-friendly environments.*

Where a child grows up has a profound impact on their formative experiences and early childhood development. Specifically, their neighbourhood, housing and wider environmental conditions like access to public space, opportunities to play safely outdoors and proximity to services play key roles.

In the realm of **urban infrastructure and policy**, the specific needs of young children and caregivers are seldom considered and if they are, it is usually within the health or education sectors. This limited view of the needs of children in cities is further impacted by a siloed departmental structure apparent in many local governments worldwide.

With the aim of better understanding the biggest challenges cities face regarding young children and their caregivers, we analysed data from municipal teams representing over 300 cities from 75 countries. Drawing on survey responses from city teams who applied to participate in the **Urban95 Academy**, we looked at a wide sample of data including geographic regions and local governmental departments who are engaging with early childhood development in urban planning. We also asked cities to tell us their most pressing challenges when it comes to delivering child-friendly and care-centred urban spaces and policy.

## Who is engaging with early childhood development in urban planning?

We were interested in which municipal departments and which specific roles within local government were engaging with this agenda. Over a third of the cities in the sample were from Latin America (36%), with cities from Africa, Europe and Asia representing 19%, 18% and 14% respectively. Least represented were cities in the Middle East (9%), from North America (2%) and Oceania (2%).

The Urban95 Academy is an executive education leadership programme with a focus on child-friendly urban design. The programme encourages applications from senior municipal officials with decision-making power, which can explain why the highest proportion of departmental representation in the sample comes from the mayor's office including mayors or deputy mayors (26%).

Outside of the mayor's office, municipal officials who are engaging with the early childhood development agenda the most come from urban planning, design and regeneration departments (24%), development and innovation departments (12%) and mobility, transport and infrastructure departments (10%).

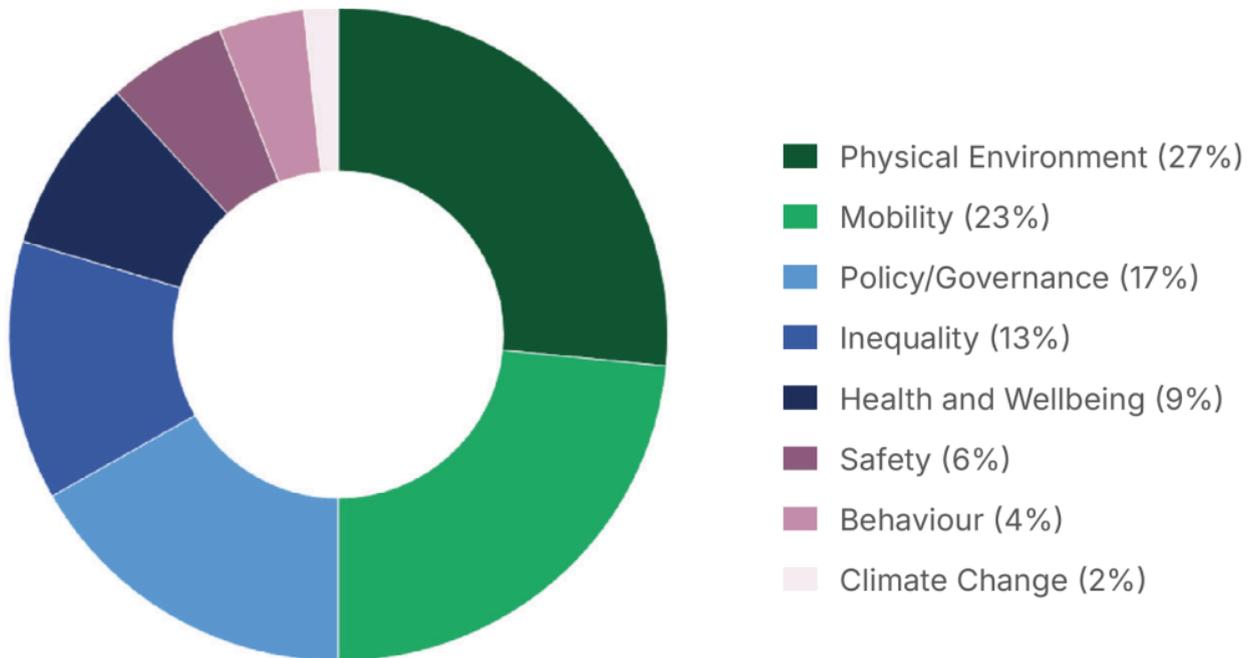
These findings demonstrate the relevance of the early childhood development agenda to departments beyond the realms of health and education, supporting the premise that creating child-friendly urban spaces requires a more holistic approach which considers the whole city, including planning, transportation and regeneration from the perspective of children's experiences and needs.

## What are the biggest challenges?

The research survey asked cities to respond to the question "What do you think the biggest challenge for babies, toddlers and caregivers is in your city?" The topic areas that cities most referenced were physical space, mobility, policy and governance, and inequality. Delving further into specifics, we analysed the most prominent challenges reported by region and found some variation in key challenges depending on geography, however, challenges related to physical environment emerged as a consistent thread among all regions.

Latin American cities reported their top three challenges to be related to the physical environment (36%), mobility (28%) and policy and governance (25%). Some of the specific challenges they reported include lack of access to adequate public and play space, unsafe roads and road traffic incidents involving children resulting in death, and lack of proximity to public services.

### Figure 1: Key global challenges



*Note: The figure shows the top four challenges city teams identified for babies, toddlers and caregivers in their city.*

African cities reported their top challenges to be related to the physical environment (25%), inequality (19%) and policy and governance (15%). Some of the specific challenges reported include lack of access to basic necessities, high levels of poverty, lack of access to healthcare and childcare, malnutrition, and lack of adequate infrastructure for young children.

European cities reported their top three challenges related to mobility (38%), the physical environment (19%) and inequality (16%). Some of the specific challenges they reported facing include car dominated infrastructure, lack of connected pedestrian infrastructure, unsafe roads and traffic accidents, lack of access to public and green space, poverty and social inequality.

Asian cities reported their top three challenges related to the physical environment (32%), mobility (22%) and policy and governance (18%). Some of the specific challenges they reported facing include exclusion of children's needs and voices in urban planning, lack of access to public space and lack of safe and inclusive public space.

## The need for a holistic, multisectoral approach

This research offers a geographically wide snapshot of how municipal governments around the world are currently engaging with the particular needs of young children and caregivers.

The findings underscore the role urban environments play in shaping the wellbeing and life outcomes of young children and their caregivers as well as the potential for positive change that exists within local government. The data reveals that while many cities face common challenges

such as inadequate public spaces, mobility issues and policy gaps, the specific impacts and priorities vary regionally, reflecting unique local contexts.

In summary, the analysis demonstrates that addressing these challenges requires a holistic, multisectoral approach that integrates urban planning, governance and social services. The insights from this study can inform future academic and practical endeavours aimed at creating child-friendly, supportive urban environments that foster healthy early childhood development.

*For more information, see the authors' accompanying [Urban95 Academy Working Paper](#).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [NadyaEugene / Shutterstock.com](#)*

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