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SCHOOL RUN - THINK PIECE

# HOW THE SCHOOL RUN CONTRIBUTES TO THE MOTHERHOOD PENALTY — AND WHY REBUILDING THE VILLAGE MATTERS

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# IT TAKES A VILLAGE, *LET'S REBUILD IT*

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# A NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER

The work Elizabeth and Débora have done here matters enormously. The finding that **70% of UK parents believe parenting is harder today** than a generation ago is not just a statistic, I see it is a warning light.

In sustainability, we know **the biggest burdens are often the least visible**: poorly counted, outside the main system, and carried by someone else. We call that Scope 3.

**The school run is family life's Scope 3**: hidden in plain sight, unglamorous, and overwhelmingly shouldered by mothers.

At a time when families feel stretched and society feels increasingly fragmented, **the power of connection and unity should be tapped into.**



**AURIANE CIRASUOLO**

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## 01

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The school run is a twice-daily task for millions of parents, yet its impact extends far beyond the logistical challenge of getting children to and from school.*

This paper explores how the school run contributes to the **motherhood penalty** — the economic disadvantages borne by mothers due to disproportionate caregiving responsibilities.

Women spend significantly more time on school-related childcare than men, often sacrificing career opportunities, reducing work hours, or leaving the workforce entirely. The school run also adds to the invisible mental load that mothers carry and reduces wellbeing, with many mothers experiencing disrupted work routines, exhaustion, and **“mum guilt”**.

**Social isolation compounds these challenges.** Despite the old adage that “it takes a village,” many parents lack supportive networks due to geographic distance, busy schedules, and cultural hesitancy to ask for help. The school run’s demands often fall on isolated individuals, increasing stress and limiting opportunities for cooperation such as carpooling.





This paper advocates for reimagining the school run based on principles of a **'sharing economy'** — a community-driven approach that turns solo trips into shared journeys.

**United Parents** offers an innovative platform that connects families from the same schools to share transport safely and conveniently, reducing time burdens and supporting social connections.

Encouraging parents to both seek and offer support, and build a culture of reciprocal aid, can help reduce the motherhood penalty and create a **better experience for families**.



# INTRODUCTION

**If you've ever felt overwhelmed by the school run, you're not alone.**

For many parents, **it's one of the most stressful parts of the day.** A 2022 survey by Clean Cities Campaign found UK parents are twice as likely to find the school run stressful as commuting to work, and three times as stressful compared to a work meeting.

But it's not just about traffic jams or running late. **The school run is a juggling act that affects family life, work, and wellbeing, especially for mums.** It's a hidden challenge that shapes how parents manage their time, careers, and energy every day for years.

In this piece we explore how the school run contributes to what's known as the motherhood penalty: the economic and social costs many mothers face due to caregiving demands. We'll look at the systemic nature of this challenge, its impact on mothers, and how community-driven solutions like United Parents can help to lighten the load.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Over 130 parents from England, Wales and Northern Ireland were surveyed to study their school run and openness to sharing car trips. Dozens of parents and school representatives were also interviewed.







# CHAPTER 1



## 03

# THE 'MOTHERHOOD PENALTY'

*On average, women in the UK spend 2-3 times as much time as men providing routine childcare, including school transportation.*

According to the **ONS**, women's average monthly pay falls by 42% five years after the birth of their first child, equating to **an average loss of £65,618 in earnings**. Further reductions are incurred with additional children, adding to a loss of more than £100,000 for a mother of three. **The reason is that the bulk of childcare responsibilities still fall on women.**

**For many, caregiving responsibilities mean having to make significant compromises in their careers.**

**Research** shows that mothers are far more likely than fathers to reduce work hours, take lower-paid or part-time roles, or leave the workforce entirely to accommodate childcare needs. This contributes to the persistent gender disparity in pay and limits career advancement for many women.

In the UK, fewer than 75% of mothers are employed during the first nine years of parenthood, a 2021 **IFS analysis** found. Among those who work after having children, women's average weekly hours of paid work fall by more than 10 hours below their pre-birth level.



“*I know very few mothers who haven't made a compromise or made a full, complete transition.*”

Louise Webster  
Founder  
*Beyond The School Run*





03

## AND THE SCHOOL RUN

As children reach school age, a major factor driving these compromises is **fitting work around school drop-off and pick-up times**. Sam, an executive coach and mother of two, has seen this firsthand:

*“Compromises come up a lot, like maybe not taking a more senior role, or taking a role that's a less good fit because it offers the flexibility to finish at three or even earlier.”*

Particularly for parents of younger children, **school hours can be so limiting** that they rule out certain opportunities altogether. Louise says:

*“The stage at which kids are little and they're finishing at noon or 1pm, it actually stops you and it certainly did for me from even considering certain options, because it's just not even going to be possible.”*



# THE 'DEFAULT TO MOM' BIAS

School runs can be **“a real point of contention”**, says Helena, a mindset coach and mother of three who chose to step out of traditional employment into freelancing.

*“A huge part of that was so that I could be flexible around the children's schedule because my husband works very demanding traditional hours.”*

While this has been positive and worked well for her family, she notes it was *“also kind of the only choice”*.

Sam says patterns around the share of caregiving responsibilities are **often set during the first year of a child's life**, when it's most common for mothers, especially those in heterosexual partnerships, to take more parental leave than their partner.

*“It's very easy to pick up a lot of the logistics in the first year of your child's life [...] if you're the one filling in the form, of course you write down your own phone number and that sets the precedent for then how things go on.”*

The **'default to mum' bias** is also reinforced by external institutions; for example, **some schools** only allow **one primary contact per child**.

A **2025 study** found that schools are more **likely to contact mothers** than fathers even when both parents say they are available.







Beyond the time spent getting children from home to school and back, **the school run is embedded in a far more complex effort of ongoing planning and coordination** that keeps family life running smoothly.

As Sam states, the school run involves *“all the associated stuff, like have they got everything they need?”*

This includes ensuring children arrive at school with clean uniforms, completed homework and signed permission slips, and at the end of the school day, *“bumping into other parents, like ‘have you replied for that birthday invite?’”* and checking for important letters in school bags.

**This mental load overwhelmingly falls on mothers.**

**71%** of mothers handle all household cognitive tasks

Single parents, whether mothers or fathers, carry the full mental load alone.

04

## THE MENTAL LOAD



## THE COMMON THEME HEARD

How the school run requires a

# ‘SWITCHING OF HATS’

from work mode to parent mode

“That constant shift can often be very disruptive because it's hard to then focus [...] Maybe you've just started work and then you do the school run, or coordinating meetings, you're sort of thinking: 'Will I be able to get to an important event and get back in time for pickup?'”

~ Louise

“It's like you're literally going straight from your meeting to the school run and you're always a bit late or always on the fly [...] For your nervous system that is very stressful and not very sustainable.”

~ Helena

“That feeling of being pulled in a million different directions [...] it's the pull between work, kids, and then everything else in life. Lots of the women that I work with say, 'I never feel that I'm enough in any of those roles.' So, it's not only the kind of exhausting feeling of running from one thing to the next, it's the kind of underlying self-criticism that comes up with that as well.”

~ Helena

That back-and-forth, happening twice every day, divides attention and drains energy. A 2019 study found that working mothers are up to **40% more stressed** than women with no children. Likewise, mothers are more affected by the school year than fathers, spending less time on sleep, eating, exercise and free time as they take on school runs and educational support on top of regular family life and work.







## MUM GUILT

The emotional toll of the juggle and balancing these competing expectations leads to what many know as **‘mum guilt’**.

Mothers feel torn: if they choose to work, they worry about leaving their children; if they choose to be at home, they feel guilty for not being at work. Helena explains that this guilt **stems from social conditioning** and the ideal of ‘having it all’. Millennial women are fortunate to be able to work and build careers to a much greater extent than their mothers’ generation, *“but we are also still expected to pick up the slack with the mothering and the domestic tasks”*.

Although marriages have become more equal, women continue to pick up a **heavier load of childgiving** responsibilities than men. An analysis by the Pew Research Centre found that women often still do more childcare than their husbands even when they are the higher earner. Mothers today **spend twice as much time** caring for their children than they did in the 1950s, while also working more.

“

There's a huge issue with expectation versus reality.







**HOW THE SCHOOL RUN CONTRIBUTES TO THE  
MOTHERHOOD PENALTY**

## **CHAPTER 2**

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# THE MISSING VILLAGE

*The age-old adage states that 'it takes a village', but it is increasingly difficult to establish a supportive network as a parent.*

While a recent survey suggests the average parent can rely on about five people for support, troublingly, **one in ten parents** report having **no support network at all**.

Several factors make it more difficult to establish a supportive network as a parent today. Many families live far from their traditional support systems; grandparents, once a vital source of childcare, often still work or live at a distance. Communities aren't as tightly knit as they once were, and, with many households being dual-income, busy work schedules leave less time to build new connections.

**70%** of UK parents believe that parenting is harder today than a generation ago

“*We still don't have the village ... it takes a village to raise a child, but we're doing this very much in isolation.*”

~ Louise

**Social media has exacerbated this sense of isolation.** Women especially are targeted with perfect, polished portrayals of motherhood from parent influencers.

“*We're literally bombarded with these images of what motherhood 'should' look like, and often that is completely unrealistic to what's actually happening in our own homes and our own lives.*”

~ Helena



## The school run reflects *THIS ISOLATION*

With hundreds of families driving to the same schools every day, **carpooling** seems like an obvious solution to share the responsibility, but it **rarely happens in practice**. Most carpool arrangements happen informally between families who already know each other, making it **difficult for newcomers, full-time workers, or those less connected to join in**.

**14%** of parents surveyed regularly share school journeys with other families

**50%** have never tried carpooling!

“*When my kids were younger, I remember I used to say to a parent, ‘should we just not share the school runs?’ But then sort of everyone was working in isolation. But I used to think, oh my God, that would just make things so much easier.*

~ Louise

“*We are all living in quite siloed ways nowadays and we all feel like we kind of need to keep it together.*

~ Helena

Perhaps the **most significant barrier** is a purely cultural one: a **hesitancy to ask for help** and not wanting to impose on others. One parent observed that people want to appear as though ‘they’ve got it all together’:

*“[...] They're smashing it. They can do the school run and get to work and all of that [...] they just think, well, that's just what I'm expected to do.”*





2/3

of parents surveyed agreed that having an easy, trusted way to coordinate shared rides to school would make a real difference

One parent captured it perfectly:

“ *If a neighbour asked for my help, I would not hesitate, and I know it goes the other way. But we won't ask: this is part of the British culture, we won't admit we need help, but this solution would help tackle this.* ”



## 06

# REBUILDING THE VILLAGE: SOLUTIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Parents say that the greatest advantages of having a 'village' are feeling **less isolated**, having **support** during challenging moments, **alleviating stress** and helping parents **develop confidence**.

Central to this is tapping into the resources already around us. One parent tells us, *"I didn't need a full-time nanny, but I did need the support and I used to really get creative about childcare."* Retirees, trusted neighbours, fellow parents — there are often people nearby who want to connect and we should nurture these networks. *"There's so much we could do within in our actual communities. So I really think the village is all there and that we create it"*.

In today's world, technology can help bring these networks to life through a 'shared economy' approach.



is built on this principle, **reimagining school transportation** as a shared resource rather than an individual burden. By pooling resources and time, parents can reduce the burden of the school run and **create flexible solutions tailored to their needs**. This kind of cooperation could only ease logistical challenges but also rebuild the social connections many parents find missing.

1 in 3

parents we surveyed said they would find a school-run carpooling solution extremely useful.





“*If you want in the village,  
you've got to be the village.*”

~ Sam Kennedy Christian

### Rebuilding the village also means paying it forward.

Community support **works best when everyone contributes**, even in small ways. One parent told us of how when her son was born, a local mums' group organised a “meal train” for her, where each member cooks an extra portion or two of a meal. *“I've then paid that forward in that group when someone else had a baby or there was someone whose partner really sadly died ... It's barely any work to contribute, but the impact on the person receiving it of getting a fortnight of dinners is amazing.”*

These **acts of kindness build resilience and connection**, creating a **safety net that lifts people up**. Sometimes, you have to seek out or start these networks yourself, but once they exist, they become a powerful force.



Equally important is **overcoming the hesitation to ask** for help. Helena reminds us that *“being able to give yourself a bit of a break and cut some slack is part of your village.”*

**Recognising** that no one can do it alone is the first step toward building a supportive, compassionate community where parents can truly thrive.





**IT TAKES A VILLAGE,**  
***LET'S REBUILD IT***



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