


United States | Zippy-de-doo-Dad

Parents on e-bikes are transforming the school run

They're smug, snug and often faster than drivers

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A virtuous cycle PHOTOGRAPH: ANNA WATTS/NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX/EYEVINE

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SOME MEN, on getting divorced, buy a sports car. Rory Barton, a 44-year-old advertising executive from Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, went one better. On separating from his wife last June, he bought an Urban Arrow—a low-slung sort of bike, with a large box at the front for children. It cost him \$4,500 second-hand, a steal, since they retail for thousands of dollars more. Mr Barton uses it to take his two children, nine and seven years old, to school. In bad weather, occasionally he calls a taxi, but he has not felt any need to buy a car. “I’ve got a raincoat”, he says. “I do it year round.”

After a pandemic boom, the sale of bicycles in general has slowed in America. But sales of the sort that carry children seem to be defying the trend. Brett Thurber, the owner of The New Wheel, a small chain of bike stores in the San Francisco Bay area, says that over the past decade sales of family e-bikes have gone from nothing to a majority of his business, and continue to rise. The most popular brand Mr Thurber sells is Tern, a Taiwanese firm which makes bikes that can carry up to three children on the back. Like the Urban Arrows, these can cost several thousand dollars.

Convenience, more than, say, environmentalism, is driving the boom. Speak to the growing number of e-bike parents (a large majority, it seems, fathers) and they universally mention skipping car traffic, wasting less time coaxing recalcitrant children into car seats and never worrying about parking. Car drivers, they say, are suckers. “We have friends who won’t go to the beach because of parking,” says Chris Toman, a 42-year-old father in Seattle. That is not a problem on a bike. The fanciest sorts of e-bikes can transport plenty of beach gear, as well as children.

What e-bikes are replacing is generally not the family car but the second runaround. Few parents are giving up driving completely, but a lot of shuttling children around comprises journeys of one to three miles (1.6-4.8km)—too far for a toddler to walk, fiddly by public transport, but efficient on a bike. “We bike him to soccer practice, to swim lessons, to his paediatrician; we bike to birthday parties and to the park,” says Molly Fleck, a software engineer in Chicago, of her five-year-old.