



Article

School Dropout in Satellite Towns around Bucharest, Romania

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Abstract: School dropout is a pressing social problem that stems from systemic inadequacies in the education system and socio-economic background. The aim of this study was to analyze how the travel time and financial difficulties impact school dropout in satellite towns near Bucharest, the capital of Romania. Data on dropout rates in recent years were provided by the Ilfov County General School Inspectorate and were supplemented by 30 semi-structured interviews with the parents, caregivers, or the legal representatives of students who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out. The study's findings reveal significant correlations between the travel time to school, familial financial situation, and attitudes towards education, impacting dropout rates across various satellite towns. Addressing the challenge of school dropout promises societal improvement and empowers policymakers to enact more inclusive policies benefiting all members of society.

Keywords: school dropout; travel time; financial difficulties; family; towns



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1. Introduction

Education is essential for the existence and development of any society. School dropout is an urgent issue that affects individuals, communities, and societies worldwide. Early school leavers are defined as those who leave school without obtaining minimal credentials, usually an upper secondary education diploma (De Witte et al. 2013). In OECD countries, 40% of adults (25–64 years of age) have a tertiary education and 40% have an upper or post-secondary education, while 20% have no upper secondary education (OECD 2023). Eurostat (2022a) states that, in 2022, 23.3% of people aged 25–74 years in the EU had a low level of education, with almost 82% aged 25–54 years having completed at least upper secondary education, compared to 68.4% aged 55–74 years. The literature on early school leaving suggests that school dropout is associated with long-term unemployment, poverty, poor health, dependence on public assistance, single parenthood (for women), political and social disengagement, and juvenile crime (Vizcain 2005; Hayes et al. 2002). Therefore, it is not surprising that school dropout is a significant national problem for both students and society. In this context, extensive research was carried out to identify factors that could explain why students drop out of school. The studies have revealed that several factors contribute to the risk of students dropping out of school, including poor academic performance, frequent misbehavior, disengagement from school activities, belonging to low-income or single-parent families, a poor relationship with parents, attending schools with low academic standards, inadequate support from teachers, and negative peer influence (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Janosz et al. 2008; Archambault et al. 2009).

Family background, particularly socio-economic background, has a considerable influence on educational success in general and on the behavior of school dropout (Rumberger 1995). In a survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology on the situation of school dropout entitled “Recognition of the Current Status of School Non-attendance”, it was found that sudden changes in the family living environment (including financial problems, father or mother moving for work, family separation, or parents changing or losing their jobs) are responsible for almost 10% of school

dropout cases (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2019). Pupils from low-income families are more likely to drop out of school. Almost two-thirds of the students from low-income families and 1.5% of students from high-income families drop out of school (Paraita and Pastor 2000). Coleman (1988) argues that students who change schools frequently are more likely to fail in school and eventually drop out because they lose their social connections. This is mainly the case of high school students, for whom family support is not enough to compensate for the effects of school mobility. Several studies have emphasized the importance of national and local economic context, student mobility, and family interest for education for understanding the problem of school dropout (Hagan et al. 1996; Ream 2003; Gasper et al. 2012).

Another aspect that can influence school dropout is the travel time. The likelihood that a student will drop out of primary school increases with the distance a student needs to travel to school (Foster and McLanahan 1996). The relationship between children's literacy skills, school quality, and instructional time can be linked to the distance to school. Children who travel long distances to school are more likely to miss hours of daily instructions, important opening announcements, and academic activities, which can have a negative effect on their school performance (Dickerson and McIntosh 2013). Several empirical studies explored the relationship between the travel distance to school and children's education, highlighting the significant impact on school participation. A study conducted in Canada concluded that high school students who live far from the local universities are less likely to attend school, especially those from low-income families (Frenette 2006). These findings are supported by another research showing that a greater distance to school is a significant barrier to participation in higher education (Flannery and Cullinan 2014). Tansel (1997) conducted a similar study in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire and found that distance hindered enrolment in primary school and middle school participation, with the effect being more considerable for girls. Similarly, Grootaert and Patrinos (1999) conclude that travel time has a greater impact on schooling and child labor among the Ivorian rural populations than the urban population. These findings underscore the crucial role that distance and time play in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes.

School system in Romania

The Ministry of Education coordinates the Romanian education system at the national level and the county school inspectorates at the local level, both being subordinated to the Romanian government. The national education system is structured as follows: Early childhood education is provided in state and private kindergartens or schools for children aged 0–6 years and follows a common curriculum with national standards. The primary level (ISCED 1) consists of a preparatory grade and grades 0 to 4. The secondary level comprises lower secondary or Gymnasium (ISCED 2) for children aged 10 to 14, covering grades 5 to 8, and upper secondary or high school level (ISCED 3) for students aged 14 to 18, covering grades 9 to 12/13. The latter offers theoretical, vocational, and technological programs. Access to upper secondary education units is provided through a national evaluation and distribution system. Tertiary non-university education encompasses post-secondary education (ISCED 4), such as technical and professional education. The structure of tertiary education is based on the principles of the Bologna system and is offered by higher education institutions and universities (ISCED 5–8). According to the National Education Law no. 1/2011, compulsory education includes primary and secondary education. The obligation to attend full-time education for 10 grades ends when the student turns 18 years of age (Parlamentul Romaniei 2011). Law 198/2023 establishes that students who have not attended school for more than 2 years are considered to be in the situation of school dropout. The same law mentions a series of programs and measures aimed to reduce school dropout, such as the "School after school" and "Second chance" programs, as well as priority intervention measures with the support of local, county, national, and international partners (Parlamentul Romaniei 2023).

The problem of school dropout is highly topical for the Romanian education system due to high levels of this indicator (Merce et al. 2015). At the European level, the

(Eurostat 2022b) report shows that Romania has the highest dropout rate (16%) in the European Union, followed by Spain (14%), Hungary, Germany, and Italy, each with a comparable dropout rate of 12% (Eurostat 2022b). A 2022 report by the Ministry of Education on pre-university education in Romania states that, in the 2021–2022 school year, 1.2% of primary and secondary school students and 1.6% of upper secondary dropped out of school (Ministry of Education 2022). In Romania, the method used to register school dropout cases is known as the “entry–exit” method. The dropout rate is determined by taking the difference between the number of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year and those who are registered at the end of the same year. This is expressed as a percentage of the number of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year. However, the Romanian National Statistics Institute has pointed out that this method can lead to distortions at the county level, as students move between schools in different counties during the school year. For the 2021–2022 school year, the National Institute of Statistics reported a higher dropout rate: 1.3% in primary and secondary levels and 2.1% at upper secondary level (National Institute of Statistics 2022).

Smaller towns close to larger cities may face particular challenges. Some studies concluded that students in small towns tend to have a lower academic performance and are more likely to drop out of school (Roscigno and Crowley 2001; Strange 2011). It is still unclear whether adolescents living in rural areas face different socio-economic characteristics or educational environments compared to their urban counterparts.

Our main objective is to identify the impact of travel time (walking time) on the problem of school dropout among students enrolled in secondary and high schools located in the satellite cities of Bucharest (Figure 1). The decision of which school students will attend is usually made by their parents or legal representative and sometimes by the students themselves (Salar et al. 2022). This decision can be based on social factors (friends or recommendations from acquaintances), economic factors (travel cost), and sometimes also on the school’s reputation. Another objective is to investigate whether the financial challenges faced by families of students who must travel long distances to reach school constitute a significant factor in increasing the school dropout rate. Also, we explore the possible correlations between walking time to school, caregivers’ perceptions, and the likelihood of dropping out of school.

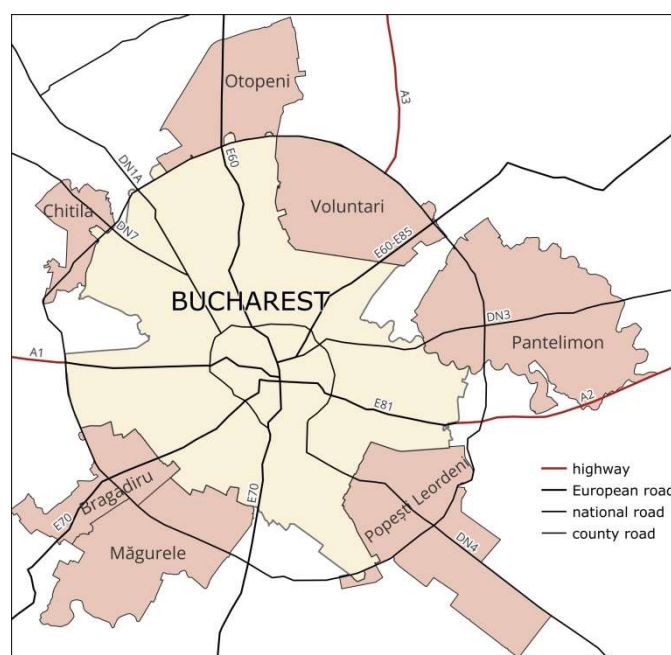


Figure 1. Satellite cities of Bucharest.

The Romanian economy and education system have undergone significant changes since 1990. It has been difficult to cope with these changes, both in terms of adapting the education process and changing families' attitude towards education. Another problem that affects the school dropout rate is related to the mobility of the population for professional reasons. Many young people with children leave them in the care of grandparents or other acquaintances, a decision that can have a negative impact on their education. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted these deficits, particularly with the shift to online learning. Due to the lack of skills in using learning devices or a lack of internet access, many students have struggled to cope with new demands.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Source

The data on students who dropped out of school or are at risk of dropout were provided by the Ilfov County School General Inspectorate. A sample of 50 families of students who dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out was selected for the study. Information about their financial difficulties and some contact details were provided by the town halls. We tried to contact these families either in person or by phone. Out of the 50 families contacted, only 30 responded and agreed to be interviewed. All the families interviewed lived in the town analyzed: 3 in Popesti-Leordeni, 7 in Pantelimon, 5 in Bragadiru, 6 in Magurele, 3 in Otopeni, 2 in Chitila, and 4 in Voluntari; so, it was relatively easy to travel to the interviews. In order to carry out these interviews, we had 20 face-to-face meetings and 10 telephone conversations. Each interview lasted about 30 min. Sometimes, we conducted the interview with both parents and sometimes with one parent, carer, or legal representative of the student. The interviews were a real challenge. The families were often reluctant to talk about school dropout, and their cumbersome and sometimes incoherent language made the interviews difficult.

2.2. Travel Time to School and Method

This study used a mixed methods approach that integrated both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the factors that influence school dropout. The quantitative component included mapping walking time to school, while the qualitative component consisted of interviews about the lived experiences and perspectives of families affected by school dropout. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a holistic analysis. Walking time to school highlighted potential barriers to school attendance, while the qualitative data, derived from interviews, provided an in-depth, contextualized understanding of the personal and social factors that contribute to school dropout.

The main research steps were: identifying the towns for the study; geocoding the schools in each selected town; designing maps of walking time to school; identifying and interviewing families experiencing school dropout; building a word cloud based on the interviews to visually represent the most common themes and concerns expressed by the families; and interpreting the results from both the quantitative maps and qualitative interviews in tandem to identify correlations and provide a nuanced understanding of the issues.

Due to internet expansion, web mapping platforms, such as OpenStreetMap (OSM) and Google Maps, are increasingly used for their open access and integration of transportation networks (García-Albertos et al. 2019; Gaglione et al. 2022). In addition, accurate geographic information from high-performance platforms, such as the Google Maps API, can provide quite accurate travel time, distance, and routes (Haitao et al. 2019). The Google Maps API uses historical averages to generate credible predictions that consider traffic conditions and congestion losses through real-time location data (Costa et al. 2021).

Travel time is a widely used and easily understandable indicator. To calculate the travel time, we used the API service provided by Google Maps in GIS. In this study, we evaluated the travel time to secondary and upper secondary or high school units at the level of the NUTS2 administrative unit consisting of towns. Data about the location of each school

were obtained from the websites of the Ilfov County School General Inspectorate. Each school was geolocated using the Google Maps platform, all addresses being exactly where indicated by the source mentioned above. Geospatial data, including road infrastructure and the administrative town boundary, were downloaded from <https://geo-spatial.org> (accessed on 5 February 2024).

In this study, it was assumed that students living in the seven towns would attend school from their town, and the way of travel considered was walking. The procedures were as follows: (1) geolocation of each school based on the address provided by the Google Maps service (2) using the TravelTime add-in to calculate the time slots (<5; 5–10; 10–15; 15–20; 20–25; 25–30; and <30). The process was repeated for every secondary and high school unit for the selected towns. The software used was ArcGIS Pro 2.5.0.

Using the <https://voyant-tools.org/> (accessed on 4 February 2024) platform, we designed word clouds based on the interviews with the families of the students who dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out.

3. Results

Travel Time and Educational Offer

The travel time to school and the availability of schools in the area are important factors that influence a student's choice of school (He and Giuliano 2018). In many towns, only one or two schools are available, which limits the students' options. In most cases, students are enrolled in the school they are assigned to by the administrative authorities.

Popești-Leordeni, located southeast of Bucharest, shows some particularities of school dropout, both at the high school and secondary school levels. The population increase in recent years has influenced these particularities (Petre et al. 2023). Popești-Leordeni is among Bucharest' satellite towns with the highest population growth rate (53,434 inhabitants in 2021 compared to 21,895 inhabitants in 2011). Most of those who settle and choose to live in this town are aged 20–45 years. In many cases, these families have children who attend town schools and consider education an important factor for their children's personal development and future. From the data analysis provided by ISJ Ilfov, the dropout rate between 2006 and 2021 was low, with less than 2% of students who drop out of school. According to the interviewees' perspective, families and teachers play an essential role in education and students' perception of school. In 20 out of 30 interviews, the interviewees said that, when children feel supported and the teachers are kind to them, they are more motivated to attend to school and to participate in school contests and other extracurricular activities.

In the case of the Popești-Leordeni town, the occurrence of school dropout is more a consequence of the socio-economic situation of the students' families than a great travel time to school. School dropout cases were not recorded in areas where the travel time to school was considerable (>30 min) and walking was not a feasible option (Figure 2). In these particular situations (three out of three interviews conducted in Popești-Leordeni), the financial constraints of the family caused the students' parents to emigrate abroad for work, and the grandparents to look after the children. During the interviews, it was mentioned that the students found it difficult to meet the school requirements due to emotional difficulties aroused by these circumstances. The students' high rate of absences ultimately led to their school dropout. There was a lack of adequate or insufficient emotional support from the grandparents, and the school failed to communicate effectively with the families. This context deepened the problem and contributed to academic failure and ultimately to school dropout.

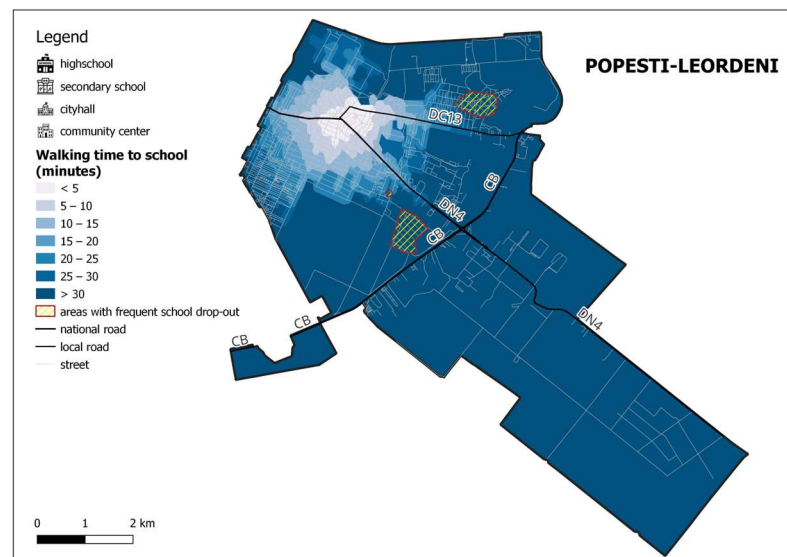


Figure 2. Travel time to school in Popesti-Leordeni.

Pantelimon, located east of Bucharest, has a relatively high number of students, with more than 2000 students enrolled in secondary education in 2021. The highest dropout rate was 3.86% in the 2015–2016 school year at Secondary School No. 1 (Figure 3).

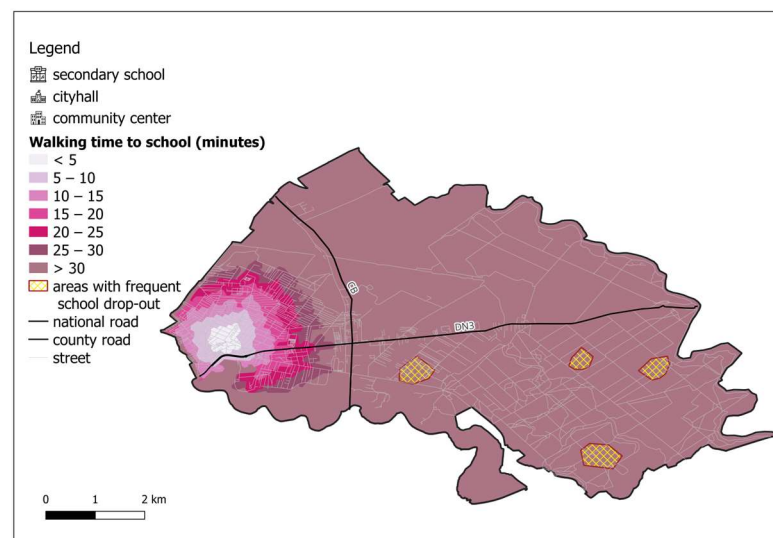


Figure 3. Travel time to school in Pantelimon.

The travel time to school, correlated with poor material conditions as well as a lack of communication between the students' families and the school, could be one of the reasons for school dropout. The areas where dropout occurs are quite far away from the schools, 40–45 km away. In this case, it is not possible to walk to school, and students have to travel more than 50 min by public transport to reach school in the morning and the same time in the afternoon when they return home.

In Bragadiru, southwest of Bucharest, the school dropout situation is similar to that in the previously analyzed towns. However, the increased number of inhabitants in the last ten years has reduced the dropout rate. The highest dropout rate was recorded in the 2015–2016 school year, at 2.4%. Since then, it has steadily decreased, reaching 0.3% in the 2020–2021 school year. The school has introduced after-school lessons to help the students who were unable to keep up with their peers.

Likewise, in Bragadiru, many children need to travel more than 30 min between their home and school (Figure 4). Four out of five families interviewed in Bragadiru were financially dependent on social aid to cover their basic needs. Also, there was a common practice in these households, such as the need for children to help with household chores or to work for neighbors for a modest amount of money. The poor economic situation of these families contributed to children no longer attending school. In the case of three families, the geographical distance to the school combined with the lack of financial resources for transport contributed to a high number of absentees.



Figure 4. Travel time to school in Bragadiru.

In Magurele, southwest of Bucharest, the number of early school leavers has fluctuated over the years. The highest dropout rate was recorded in the 2010–2011 school year—2.57%. The dropout trend has decreased in recent years, with a low rate (0.19%) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the case of Magurele, the travel time to school impacts school dropout. During the interviews with the families of students who dropped out of school, distance and the travel time were mentioned in four out of six cases among the reasons for the students' high number of absences. Students who live more than 30 km away from school or have to walk more than 30 min to reach school have to use public transport, which is not always available and affordable for families (Figure 5).

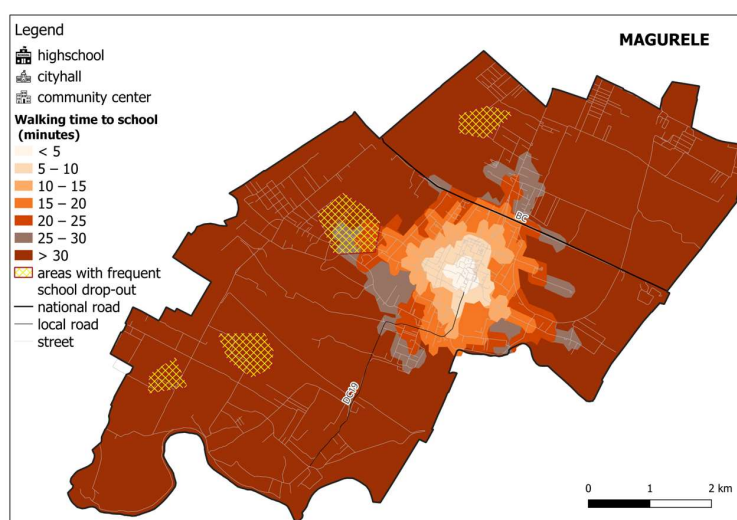


Figure 5. Travel time to school in Magurele.

In Otopeni, one school comprises primary, secondary, and upper education (Figure 5). The statistics from the Ilfov County School General Inspectorate show that the school dropout rate is relatively low, below 2%. Here, the presence of Henri Coanda International Airport has a significant impact on social and economic life. The travel time to school was not the main factor in dropping out (Figure 6). The families of the students we interviewed encourage their children to attend school, even if their financial situation is precarious and the students have to skip some school days to help their families with household chores or they have to take care of their siblings. This was the situation for all families interviewed in Otopeni. The families interviewed also mentioned that they receive social aid and the school regularly contacts them to ask about the reasons for the students' absence. The teachers' engagement and community support to reduce school dropout cases were perceived as positive aspects and were highly appreciated by the interviewees.

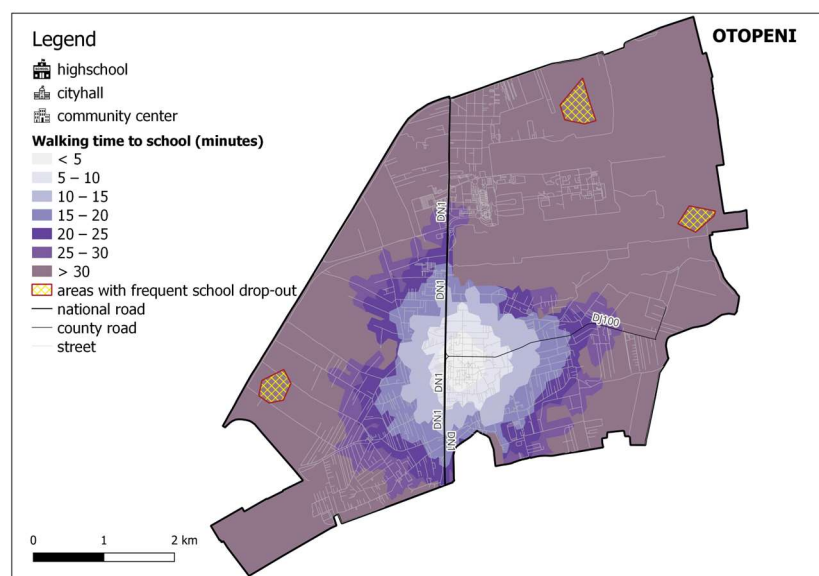


Figure 6. Travel time to school in Otopeni.

Chitila has one school, which includes both secondary and upper secondary education. According to the Ilfov County General School Inspectorate data, the school dropout rate has been relatively high in the last 10 years. In the 2005–2006 school year, the dropout rate was 1.9%, but it increased to 2.5% in the 2010–2011 school year. All the families interviewed mentioned financial difficulties and the stress brought about by them, which created a tense and stressful family environment. The children were discouraged from attending school and pressed to help the family with money. Some school dropout cases were recorded for students who had to walk more than 30 min to school (Figure 7).

In Voluntari, there are two schools, one for secondary and one for upper secondary education, with different school results and a different dropout rate (Figure 8).

The dropout rate in Voluntari is higher in secondary school. The highest value was recorded in the 2011–2012 school year, when it reached 9.23%. The economic crisis of the previous years has deepened the financial difficulties in the case of low-income families. As a consequence, students over 15 years old were constrained to participate in work activities and had to drop out of school. The walking travel time to school (>30 min) also impacted the students' attitudes towards attending school, leading to absenteeism and knowledge gaps.

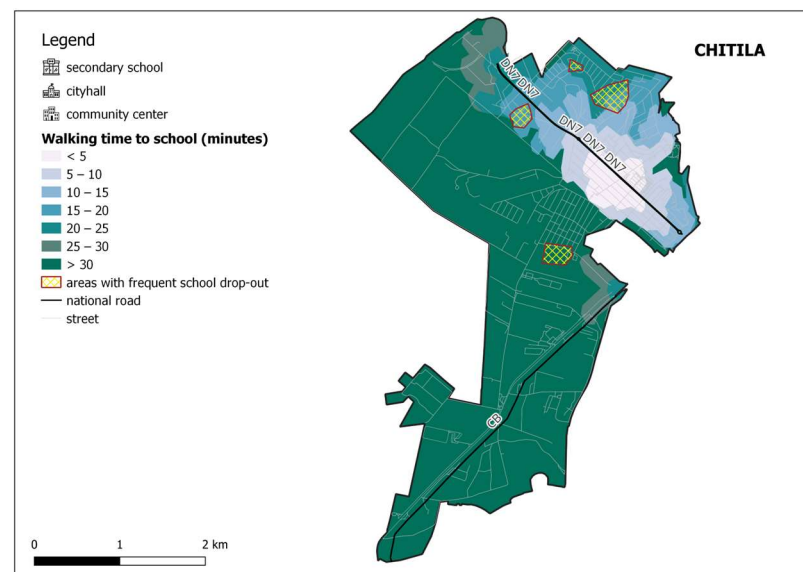


Figure 7. Travel time to school in Chitila.

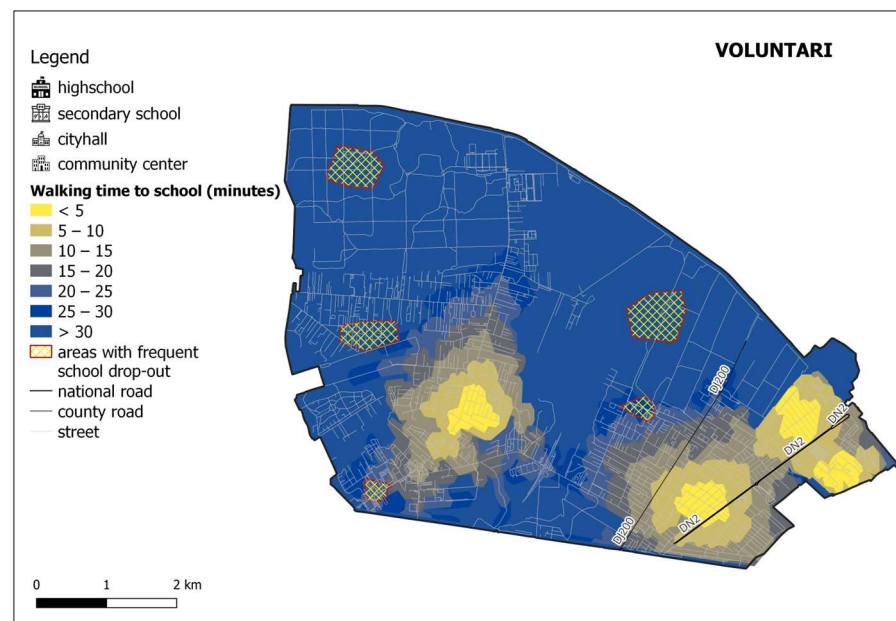


Figure 8. Travel time to school in Voluntari.

The secondary school has a lower dropout rate compared to the upper secondary school. The highest rate was over 2% between 2006 and 2008. However, the school dropout rate decreased over time, reaching 0.2% in the school year of 2018–2019. Although the school is in the western part of the town with a good and diverse transport infrastructure, from some neighborhoods, the time needed to reach school exceeds 30 min walking (Figure 8). Schools made efforts to decrease the students' travel time to school and introduced a daily school bus.

4. Discussion

Travel Time to School

A long travel time can make school less attractive to students (Afoakwah and Koomson 2021). This can also have an impact on parents who have to accompany children on their daily journey to school. For high school students aged 14–18 years, the travel time to school can be a major concern (Lidbe et al. 2020). Students who live in the urban fringe have

Also, there is a strong correlation between income and the perceived importance of education. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face academic difficulties, such as lower grades and accumulating fewer credits (Bowen et al. 2010). In low-income families, money is sometimes prioritized over education (Xiao et al. 2022). This was the case in the families we interviewed in Chitila, Voluntari, Pantelimon, and Bragadiru, where economic affordability was the major reason for school dropout, especially in the case of families with multiple children, where the older children are often expected to help with household chores or take care of their siblings. Many interviewees mentioned that children over 14 years old were most likely to leave school before completing secondary education.

“He has done enough school (he has finished secondary education), and he doesn’t need secondary education (high school). Now, he has to work to bring money for his younger siblings. There are many of us in the house! For school, he used to go one hour each way. If every day he misses two hours on the road with the time spend at school, he misses a whole day...”. (Ioana, 43 years old, mother of a child who dropped out of school at 15 years, Voluntari)

“He is too young (11 years old) to go to school alone, and we had to take him. We (grandparents) are too old to go with him every day. When his parents return from work abroad, they should take him to school more often. We give him food and a place to sleep”. (Nicu, 78 years old, grandfather, Pantelimon)

“We are lucky with the headmistress. She is always caring with the kids and is there if they need anything. She told us that M. is a good child and we should let him continue his schooling”. (Maria, 43, mother of a child who struggle with financial difficulties, Otopeni)

The interviews revealed that some children are pressed to work or help with household chores instead of spending time on school work. After speaking with 10 families whose children experienced school dropout, it was found that an exacerbated feeling of disengagement and alienation from the educational system contribute to the decision of dropout. Schools play a crucial role in supporting and guiding students on their social and educational paths (Voight and King-White 2021). The implementation of proactive measures, such as personalized counselling, academic intervention programs, and community outreach initiatives, can help schools to identify students at risk early and provide the necessary resources and support to address their needs. The creation of a supportive and inclusive learning environment that values diversity and encourages student engagement can help to mitigate the risk factors associated with dropout and foster a sense of belonging and motivation among students. By working together, teachers, parents, and stakeholders can empower students to overcome challenges, realize their potential, and stay on the path to academic success and personal fulfilment.

The findings of this study are valuable for school administrators and teachers, allowing them to tailor support services and interventions in order to meet the specific needs of students in their communities. Moreover, policymakers can use the study findings to understand the dynamics that influence educational outcomes in the satellite towns of Bucharest. This could lead to policy innovations aimed to reduce the dropout rates and improve school attainment.

5. Conclusions

The issue of school dropout in the satellite towns near Bucharest is complex and multifaceted, with various factors contributing to the decision of students to leave school prematurely. This study highlights the significant impact of the travel time to school, financial difficulties, and family background on dropout rates. Long travel times, particularly for students living more than 30 km away from school and facing transportation challenges, make school less attractive and contribute to absenteeism and disengagement. Financial constraints exacerbate the problem, especially where families prioritize immediate financial concerns over education. Also, family dynamics, such as parental migration for work or the

need for older siblings to contribute to household income, can disrupt children's education and increase the likelihood of dropout. The findings underscore the importance of proactive measures and targeted interventions to address the root causes of school dropout. Even if schools play a crucial role in providing and supporting at-risk students, collaboration between teachers, parents, and policymakers is essential to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. A personalized intervention program and community involvement can help schools to identify at-risk students early and provide the necessary resources and support to help them to stay in school.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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