Children's Accounts of Confronting City Street Life: Can the Inner City be Truly Child-Friendly?

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Abstract:

As Auckland's inner-city intensifies, families are moving into high and medium-rise apartments in central and fringe CBD neighbourhoods. For many families, residing in the inner-city is a response to a lack of more suitable, affordable housing elsewhere and the rising transport costs and traffic congestion associated with suburban living. Other parents have sought the convenience and proximity to work and other amenities offered by an inner-city location. Planning policies in the past have not considered the specific needs of parents and children in these environments. However overtures to creating a child-friendly and inclusive inner-city appear in the recently published Auckland Plan.

In this paper we report on findings from focus groups with inner-city children 9-12 years conducted as part of the *Kids in the City* project. As the children talk about their lives, and moving and playing around neighbourhood streets, many describe distress and discomfort as they confront the likes of homelessness, drunkenness, massage parlours and sex shops. A few children also describe strategies for coping with these encounters, an emerging acceptance of difference and pride in becoming streetwise. The findings highlight tensions in creating a child-friendly city which takes account of the developmental needs and sensibilities of children while also aspiring to value diversity, tolerance and inclusiveness.

Introduction

Auckland became a 'super city' on 1 November 2010. The former cities of the regions – Manukau, Auckland, Waitakere and North Shore – were amalgamated with the regional council and districts of Rodney, Papakura and Franklin to form the Auckland Council under the Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009. A major focus of the Auckland Council's first two years in office was developing 'The Auckland Plan' (2012) which sets out a strategy for the city's growth and development over the next 30 years. It is a broad aspirational document that addresses social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes. A priority of lifting the wellbeing of children and young people – to 'put children and young people first' – is prominent in the plan.

Accommodating an additional one million people by 2040 is another central concern of the Auckland Plan. In contrast to the city's traditional growth pattern of horizontal suburban development, a more compact urban trajectory is proposed with higher density residential nodes around metropolitan and town centres. Movement in this direction across the Auckland region started in the early 1990s, increased in pace between the late 1990s and 2005 and, in line with all residential building consents, declined sharply after 2005 (Auckland Council, 2012c, p.45). Of the higher density dwellings built over this period, close to 16,000 were new apartments in the CBD (Murphy, 2008). This construction boom contributed to a 92 % increase in CBD residents in the 15 years from 1991, an increase that included families with children. From the 2001 to the 2006 Census the numbers of 0-14 year olds residing in the CBD increased 12 % per annum. Drivers of this increase included a severe shortage of affordable housing in near city neighbourhoods and rising time and transport costs associated with commuting to the centre from city fringe suburbs where housing was more affordable (Carroll *et al.*, 2011). An apartment in one of the many poor quality blocks built during this era provided a convenient and cheap housing option for many families despite the manifest lack of child-friendly amenities close at hand (Carroll et al., 2011; Murphy *et al.*, 1999).

The rising number of inner-city children has not gone unnoticed by the Auckland Council. The City Centre Masterplan (CCMP) (Auckland Council, 2012a), a non-statutory supporting document to the Auckland Plan, acknowledges the presence of children in the city while also noting a lack of features currently to encourage their presence – as visitors or residents. Looking to the future, targets are set for increasing the number of children living in the city centre as well as the type, number and sizes of play spaces - playgrounds, sports and recreational facilities (p.26). The document is not naïve to tensions likely to arise creating 'a place for everyone' while responding to the Council priority to 'put children and young people first' (p.40). Managing noise and the competing demands for open space are touched on, while maintaining the city as a safe place for children at the same time as providing for alcohol use and adult entertainment is explicitly flagged. Does the CCMP signal a departure from the child-blind inner-city planning policies of the past (Costello, 2005; Gleeson and Sipe, 2006)? It is

too early to tell if the plan's aspirations pan out to be more than hopeful rhetoric. Tracking children's experience of living in the CBD will be needed to evaluate whether targets and strategies find tangible expression in ways that resonate with inner-city children's lives.

Some city quarters will be sites of tension more than others as the needs of children and families compete with adult entertainment. Karangahape Road, commonly known as K'Rd is a city precinct where conflict is likely as apartment complexes are positioned side by side with restaurants, night clubs and adult venues. Figure 1 illustrates the proximity of high-rise dwellings to Vegas Girl, an image that has adorned the strip club's façade for over 30 years.

Figure 1: Vegas Girl

K'Rd has a rich history. Located along a prominent ridgeline above the Waitemata harbour it was a route used by Maori to trek between the Waitemata and Manukau harbours lying to the east and west of the city. In the early 1900s it was the city's premier shopping street and many heritage buildings, once department stores, remain. Fortunes dipped for K'Rd in the 1960s when over 15,000 homes in the adjacent suburbs of Freemans Bay and Newton were demolished to make way for motorway developments. The loss of resident shoppers led to a relocation of businesses and vacated premises, along with falling rents, provided an opening for the establishment of a red-light district (Karangahape Road Heritage, no date). K'Rd has remained a hub of Auckland's sex industry, notwithstanding the gentrification of neighbouring suburbs since the 1980s. As such, conflicts between competing interests are not new on K'Rd.

Karangahape Road has had special meaning as a place of belonging to several minority population groups over the years. In Maori, 'karanga' means greetings or welcome and while 'Karangahape' has several possible meanings, the notion of welcome is often cited because it mirrors the way the street is experienced or remembered by various groups of people. Pacific migrants settled in the central city suburbs from the 1950s when housing was cheap and K'Rd was the local Pacific hub. Although gentrification and motorway developments have largely displaced these communities, Pacific churches remain in the streets running off the K'Rd ridge and congregations still flow into the city for Sunday services.

The tolerance and acceptance of K'Rd has made it a favoured hang out for homeless people. Two of the city's shelters for street people, James Liston Hostel and the City Mission are within a couple of blocks of K'Rd and a café set up to provide a meeting place and support services for homeless people is located on the street. Strategies detailed in Auckland Council's Homeless Action plan are directed towards the welfare of rough sleepers, tracking their numbers, facilitating service provision and raising public awareness of homeless issues (Auckland Council, 2012b).

The GLBTI (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex) communities have also found solace on K'Rd. Rainbow flags adorn many of the restaurants, clubs and bars along K'Rd posting a welcome to these communities. Rainbow Youth, which offers a meeting place for younger members of the communities, is located on the street, and, in recognition that members of a target market frequent the

street, 'love your condom' beams out from billboards and verandah awnings. In June 2013 a dance work entitled 'K'Rd Strip: A place to stand' was performed in an Auckland theatre by an all queer cast to celebrate 'the lives and the memories of those who have enriched the spirit of our most infamous road.' The show's programme incorporated personal stories of belonging to K'Rd written by each of the dancers and the many tributes to the street's place in their communities' lives included 'the act of unconditional welcome is the story that still lingers most along the K'Rd ridge' (Okareka Dance Company, 2013).

Figure 2. Rainbow flags on K Rd

Urban areas where the sex industry thrives, epitomised by Amsterdam's De Wallen, are often districts of ambivalence in the eyes of the public-at-large. On the one hand they can be sites infused with potential danger, the presence of drugs, activities of debatable morality (Hubbard, 1997); on the other, they can be read as places of tolerance, excitement, and freedom (Aalbers, 2005). Typically, the informality and ad hoc character of such districts means there are few clear demarcations signalling entry and departure, and this can add to the ambiguity for those passing though. In the case of De Wallen, for instance, Aalbers remarks that it:

> "…announces itself slowly. Both physically and socially, the area is not strictly separated from its surroundings, and borders appear relatively porous. The occasional sex shop can be found on adjacent streets among cultural institutions, respectable cafes, child-care facilities, and residential housing…" (2005, p.55)

The sex industry is represented on K'Rd by massage parlours, strip clubs and adult shops and like Aalbers description of De Wallen, these premises sit alongside cafes and apartments. The New Zealand Prostitutes Collective has offices on the street and sex workers are part of the local environment at most times of the day and night. More so since the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 decriminalised all forms of prostitution. By day the street is a busy commercial strip. An active business association plays up the street's edgy charm promoting it as a colourful and vibrant meeting place for diverse, creative people and activities (KRoad, 2013). This sentiment was picked up by Auckland's mayor in the foreword to the CCMP where he describes K'Rd as having 'an eclectic, bohemian culture that every great city needs' (Auckland Council, 2012a, p.4). In the European context, Ashworth et al. (1988, p.201) contend that the reputation of a city's red-light district can 'contribute to the exciting image of the city for tourists'. While many of the street's residents, visitors and business owners may experience the street in this way it is also a street of everyday shops. Adjoining an assortment of cafes and boutique retail stores are convenience stores, laundromat, pharmacies, and hairdressers meeting the mundane needs of the new wave of residents living in apartment blocks clustering below the ridgeline.

Figure 3. A mix of businesses line K Rd

Invariably, accounts of the character of red light districts tend to be silent on the reactions of other city-dwellers such as children. Rather, children are more likely to be mentioned as a population to be protected against involvement in, rather than exposed to, the landscape of prostitution (Kohm and Sellwood, 2004). However as Aalbers (2005, p.59) remarks, a centrally defining characteristic of red light districts is 'they cannot exist without the notions of watching and being watched'. Children passing by are among the watching.

In this paper we present and discuss data on inner-city children's experiences and responses to people and situations that they find confronting in their neighbourhood streets with a particular focus on the vicinity of K'Rd.

Context

Kids in the City is investigating children's experiences and use of local neighbourhoods. In the wider study, 253 nine to twelve year olds were recruited through six suburban and three inner-city Auckland schools. Experiential data were gathered from children during 'go-along' neighbourhood walks, and quantitative data on their mobility and physical activity using trip diaries, geographic positioning systems and accelerometers.

In the inner city a subgroup of 40 children living in high-rise apartment blocks and medium-density dwellings also participated in school-based discussion groups. Data from the discussion groups will be reported in this paper. Participating children were ethnically diverse, consistent with the demographic characteristics of the inner city. Thirty per cent were New Zealand European, 20% Chinese, 15% Pilipino, 12.5% Korean, 7.5% Samoan, 5% Maori and one child identified with each of the following ethnic groups – Indonesian, Cambodian, Japanese and Indian. A high proportion of Auckland residents are migrants with 37% of the population born overseas in 2006 (Statistics NZ, 1997, 2007). The CBD is the first residential address for many on arrival. Of our sample a higher proportion of new migrant children lived in high-rise apartments and conversely European children were more likely to reside in medium-density dwellings. Equal numbers of boys and girls participated in the study and similar numbers by gender lived in high and medium rise dwellings.

Methods

School-based discussion groups were convened approximately six months after the children had participated as individuals in data collection activities. One or more of the authors led five groups: boys only, girls only, new migrants and two of mixed gender and ethnicity. A semi structured interview schedule was used to focus discussion around neighbourhood use and experiences, places the children went and with whom, the meaning and value of independence and factors that encouraged or constrained unsupervised play, exploration and active travel.

The discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. Multiple readings of the transcripts by the first author led to the identification of key themes within the data and the sorting of text excerpts into theme files. A thematic analysis was undertaken and interpretations were refined through discussion with research team members. The goal of analysis was to draw out the common features of children's experiences, as well as the variations deriving from particular perspectives.

Findings

At times children found themselves in situations that were unsettling as they ventured out into neighbourhood streets. Troubling encounters with unfamiliar adults are discussed under three themes: encounters with 'weird' people; responses to K'Rd and the sex industry; and becoming street-smart.

Encounters with 'weird' people

The children's adult-related fears arose in response to people they variously described as creepy, freaky or homeless. A number of the children lived close to a shelter for homeless people and sightings and encounters with shelter users were relatively common. As the following quote indicates the children and their parents recognised particular neighbourhood spaces as being the favoured haunts of shelter users and best avoided by the children.

> 'There's certain parts of the area that my mum's definitely put out of bounds 'cos there've been creepy people there. Like there's this corner of grass where there's like…. hobos, hobos live there.

The children appeared to accept staying away from this particular place and leaving it to the shelter users but they felt the presence of homeless people in a nearby children's playground was unfair. As the quote below says, it made the park a less attractive play destination.

> '…at Western Park across the road from where we live um, there's often hobos who sleep underneath the slides and stuff and then you'll go there after school and you'll see them or you'll see their sleeping stuff and then you don't want to play at the park or anything. Yeah. 'Cause it's kind of….[you] don't know what they've done'

Several accounts of being pushed or followed by 'scary' people were reported but more commonly children's concerns focused on the drink and drug-related behaviour of people living on the street and the litter and other evidence of their activities left behind. Another behaviour experienced as particularly disconcerting was being approached and asked for spare change by strangers. Fear of being 'taken' by a stranger was mentioned, as in the excerpt below, but it was not commonly reported.

> 'it's not safe because strangers might take you. We got chased by a stranger last year'

The rights and wrongs of a shelter being located next door to apartments, a school and a park were discussed. Some children considered it wrong, and stories were told of children living next to the hostel being hassled, but others felt neighbourhood spaces should be shared. The following quote illustrates an emerging acceptance of homeless people paired with strategies adopted to avoid direct contact.

> 'I try and think not to judge them by how they look. I try to kind of avoid them, 'cause I get freaked out by them. Like if they're coming towards me I just like ….try not coming really close to them. Kind of staying a distance.

Another participant described how she had become more confident walking in the streets after realising not all homeless people approached her for money.

Responses to K'Rd and the sex industry

Mention of K'Rd triggered a barrage of negative experiences of people and situations children had encountered on the street - drunk people, strip clubs, vomit, freaky people, billboards of naked people, shops selling party pills (legal highs). References to a number of visual markers of the sex industry appear in the following section of a focus group transcript.

> '**Oh, just take away K'Rd 'cos I don't like K'Rd. It's really dodgy and stuff.
> Yeah, 'cos there's a lot of stripper…
> **Yeah, there's a strip club over there. One time one time we saw three. Peaches 'n' Cream [an adult club]…. it's disgusting.
> ** And then especially if kids like our age go op-shopping and then you're, they you have to view all that horrible stuff. It's just disgusting
>
> ** And it's just not something that we should have to deal with at our age.
>
> **Like because here's my house and then you go up the road and then there's all the yucky shops. And then there's Dick Smith [electronics store] right there and I want to go to Dick

Smith to get a new controller and then I have to walk past all those shops like right there. We really don't want to do that.

**Sex shops and the um, liquor stores. Adult shops. And also there's always vomit on the ground.'

Children felt awkward and embarrassed walking past strip clubs and adult shops. In their eyes they were disgusting places prompting suggestions such as 'put them in deserted areas where not a lot of children can go' and 'move like the whole road to another like, the edge of Auckland'. But it wasn't only the sex industry that contributed to the children's discomfort on K'Rd. Passing liquor shops, and seeing dishevelled and intoxicated people and being asked for money were amongst other experiences which made them feel uneasy and on guard. Some children said they would never go to K'Rd whereas others, like the boy above who wanted to buy goods at Dick Smith's, described trying to pass unseen by walking fast, on the edge of the footpath and with eyes looking straight ahead.

Nothing in the children's talk suggested they saw K'Rd as a place that welcomed children. It was a place for adults and dodgy adult behaviours. Walking past adult shops and massage parlours, even on the opposite side of the street, felt uncomfortable. Countering the visual dominance of the sex industry at street level was one strategy suggested by the children that would make the street feel like a better place to be.

'.. um, the adult shops, they could kind of cover up the pictures of naked people…. Yeah, cause on one shop there's an extremely big billboard of it….. and it's quite disgusting. Yeah, it's really disturbing.'

K'Rd was also seen as a place homeless people belonged and several of the children were aware a café on the street was set up specifically for homeless people.

'…also um, lots of hobos go there because there's a shop um, on um, like, right next to K'Rd that um, gives away um, free food in the morning.'

Visual, olfactory and social cues were interpreted to mean the children did not belong on the street. They were affronted by the explicit signs of the sex industry and offended by drinking and other anti-social behaviour and the smells and debris that resulted from these activities.

Becoming street-smart

Despite the children's dis-ease at being confronted by aspects of inner city street life, many valued being out and about on their own. They liked learning about the city, 'places that are worth going to and places that aren't '. Other pluses included the chance to hang out with friends, fresh air, feeling happy, not being embarrassed by parents and being independent. Understandings of being independent included 'being free', 'making your own decisions' and as indicated below, taking responsibility for yourself.

'cos like, if you're going to be independent you can't be silly and that. Like, you have to kinda keep safe as well. Like, if you're walking around by yourself it's like, a bit dangerous but so you have to keep safe and that. And you've also got to stand up for yourself.'

The children talked about becoming more confident when they knew how to get to destinations by themselves and, importantly, became familiar with alternative routes to exit from places if they felt unsafe.

'…if you get lost you know where to go, and then you can know where all the phone booths are …and you can go and call someone'

'Because if someone's chasing you could run away… and you'll know where to go.'

The children felt their parents also recognised when they became more knowledgeable about the city and 'your parents will let you go out more'. In the quote below a participant's street confidence is acknowledged.

'…like one of my friends she, her mum um, always says that I'm really street-smart so that's why she doesn't really mind her hanging out with me when we go like to Ponsonby Road or K'Rd even though she doesn't really like K'Rd much anyway.'

Being observant and alert to potential dangers when out and about unsupervised was part of becoming street-smart. Accounts of fearful situations were shared along with ways they assessed risk and the actions taken to avoid unwanted encounters. Knowing the area, or being with a friend who did, was important. Other strategies included avoiding eye contact, running fast, taking an alternative route and for the child quoted below – hopping on a bus.

> '[I] saw some fighting and it was quite and it was quite brutal. The bus came so [I] quickly on'

Parents had been an important source of advice on how to stay safe but they had also learned from other children and their own experiences.

> '…my parents were saying if there's any problems … or if something happened go into the supermarket …or somewhere where there's lots of people there.'

> 'And not going down sort of like back, not back roads, but like alleyways and everything, especially if it's night time.'

The following quote illustrates one child's approach to weighing up risk, taking account of local knowledge and adapting behaviour accordingly.

> ' If I know it's like a place that's all good, like, I might take a different route to get there or like have a bit of fun on the way but if it's like somewhere I don't know I'll just like, follow the rules….'

Many inner-city children became familiar with, and sometimes accepting of, aspects of street behaviour their suburban contemporaries would be less likely to experience. This city knowledge was a source of pride for some and could set them apart as suggested in the follow quote.

> ' ….people who live in houses are very naïve when it comes to people who are drunk or …. do drugs and when you live in an area that's so close to it you kind of get used to it. 'Cos like, people are always like, oh, my god. I saw someone sniffing glue the other day and you're like, so what. You see it all the time in my area. They're just like, what? That's so dangerous and it's like, not really. If you learn how to be safe in that area then it's not really scary.'

Familiarity with local streets and public spaces and the people inhabiting them gave children confidence that they could look after themselves. Sights that were once disturbing became less so 'once they've been there for ages you kind of get used to it and it doesn't completely bug you all the time'. Neighbourhood and city knowledge was an important precursor to becoming street-smart and moving independently around city streets, alert and responsive to their environment, was a useful means of acquiring such knowledge.

Discussion

Traditionally children's play and exploration have taken place in local neighbourhoods. The people and places close to home have provided the context within which children learn to navigate their social and physical worlds. To varying extents this was true for our participants. For those who ventured into local streets and public spaces regularly the encounters and perceptions reported can be seen as learning to navigate their social and physical worlds. Other children were seldom, if ever, outdoors unsupervised. In light of the MMCP's priorities, do the children's experiences describe a city that currently 'puts children and young people first'? Or adopting a lower benchmark, has a reasonable balance been struck between the competing needs of the different users of city streets? In the eyes of the children, probably not, despite the glimmer of an emerging awareness that public spaces are shared and inner city living requires tolerance towards the behaviours of others.

Regarding city spaces it's often said that 'if it works for kids it works for everyone'. Perhaps a temporal assumption is implicit in this refrain, and night-time adult activities are excluded. While the premise may be reasonable, there are day-time spill-over effects of the night-time economy that the children keenly observed. The street environment in K'Rd did not feel like a safe and inclusive place for many of our participants: the karanga or welcome appreciated by others has not been extended to children. While K'Rd featured prominently in our data, encounters with homeless people were more wide spread and the sex industry has a presence in other parts of the city.

Public concerns over the visibility of the sex industry and the presence of homeless people attract media attention intermittently. The location of brothels near inner-city and suburban schools has raised concerns for schools and parents but K'Rd has not had recent media prominence. Attention has turned to street sex workers and kerb cruising customers near town centres in South Auckland (Calder, 2013; Jones, 2012; Tan and Cumming, 2012; Taylor, 2013) and community tensions around ' traffic problems, noise, antisocial behaviour; litter and improving the environment ' (Auckland Council, no date).

To meet MMCP targets of more families with children *choosing* to live in the central city perceptions will need to change. Inner-city and higher-density housing are seldom planned with children in mind and in New Zealand and elsewhere have been largely considered unsuitable environments for families (Fincher, 2004; Gifford, 2007). A more family-friendly physical and social environment will be needed, created not only by providing more welcoming spaces but also by tempering children's day-time experiences of aspects of city life that are threatening or signal that they do not belong. Increasing the number of parks, playgrounds and recreational facilities in the city will provide opportunities for children's play but their use and impact on children's wellbeing will be greatly enhanced if the routes between home and amenity are also safe and welcoming spaces. As Freeman points out planning policies tend to confine children's use of public spaces to destination such as skate parks and playgrounds (Freeman, 2006) rather than encouraging their presence city wide.

This paper raises a number of questions. Are the children's fears and uneasiness over homeless people and visual markers of the sex industry simply mimicking general adult intolerance and practices of social distancing (Hodgetts *et al.*, 2011)? Does their discomfort reflect an inevitable developmental stage? Can graduated exposure lead to social knowledge, street literacy and greater acceptance of difference? Is it realistic for all parts of a city to be child-friendly or is segmentation by demographic groups inescapable?

Acknowledgements

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