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Children, Violence, Community and the Physical Environment: Foreword to the Special Issue

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Children, Violence, Community and the Physical Environment: Foreword to the Special Issue

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Place matters. From a very young age, children are acutely aware of their physical surroundings and take comfort from familiarity, down to the level of individual branches on a climbing tree or cracks in the curb. Changes to a child's physical environment can cause life-long memory dichotomies of "before or after" the change (whether it be flood, fire, war or simply a house move). Memories are strongly spatial, as we know from the sweetest nostalgia felt during visits to childhood locales or, conversely, deep-rooted anxieties triggered by locations similar to sites of childhood trauma. The impact of living conditions and structural factors on children's health, well-being and development is significant (Iltus 2012; UNICEF 2012). When these environments include risk factors for violence, the impact on children and youth can be highly detrimental. For an overview of the effects of community violence on children, see Bernard van Leer Foundation (2012).

This collection of papers was elicited by a worldwide call in autumn 2011 for manuscripts with a focus on children, violence, community and the physical environment. Violence and abuse of children have received much attention from researchers and policymakers in recent times. However, the physical environment in which violence occurs is not often a focus. This special issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* aims to examine the interplay between the communities in which children live, the physical parameters of these environments and the nature and incidence of violence experienced by children and youth—that is, the socio-ecological factors that moderate or aggravate violence against children.

The result is a fascinating series of papers and field reports from Northern Ireland, the United States, Columbia, Brazil, Portugal, South Africa, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In addition to their geographic distribution, the contributions are characterized by their innovative approaches to research and

interventions with children and youth, which include focus groups, mapping, drawings, oral history, Photovoice and asset-based community development. All provide insight to the importance of space and place in children's lives.

Our journey commences in **Northern Ireland**. Siobhán McAlister, Deena Haydon and Phil Scraton examine violence in the lives of children and youth in "post-conflict" Northern Ireland. They describe the strictly demarcated boundaries of the nationalist and unionist communities and how, in the most deprived communities, these are impenetrable "walls" beyond which lie violence and vulnerability. Security and safety is found only in one's own community. Symbols such as flags and painted pavements and murals delineate the boundaries. Movement is restricted and considerations of threat and violence and personal safety are paramount. Personal strategies to promote safety include concealing one's cultural identity and avoiding particular places. Public spaces are places to be traversed carefully and with vigilance, within a group for safety. Segregation by religious affiliation is also the norm in the wider population, where 94 percent of the school population attends segregated education.

In the **southeast United States**, Natasha Blanchet-Cohen and Rebeccah Nelems describe a psychosocial program for promoting children's healing, safety and well-being in post-disaster contexts (in this case, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which hit a number of states in the region in 2005). Major natural disasters disrupt the lives of children at many levels (family, community, education and built environment). This paper describes the evaluation of a program designed to help children understand their emotions and to develop positive coping strategies. Hurricane Katrina caused flooding in 80 percent of New Orleans, Louisiana and massive disruption and displacement of families which lingers to this day, not least in the form of high rates of PTSD and associated mental health needs. The majority of child participants said the program helped them to express their emotions and feel better about themselves, and these new coping skills were evident back in mainstream classrooms and at home.

The spatial dimension of youth fear is the focus of Ellen Foley, Laurie Ross and Celeste Arista's research on youth gangs in **Worcester, Massachusetts, USA**. They describe a geography of fear whereby feelings of vulnerability and safety are linked to clearly demarcated physical spaces. They study how the built environment and other neighborhood factors shape youths' feelings of vulnerability. Derelict buildings, lack of lighting, signs of drug use and related features of urban decay in the built environment all contributed to youths' fear and nervousness. A key insight is that gang membership is partly driven by feelings of vulnerability, so helping youth feel safe in their own neighborhoods can help reduce gang membership.

Amy Ritterbusch conducted a participatory action research project with "street girls" (a term rejected by her participants who replaced it with "VMC girls" indicating *victimization, marginalization and hope*) in **Bogotá, Columbia**. Her focus was on the girls' socio-spatial worlds and the memories and emotions associated with physical space in the city (that is, place-memories of violence). There are high

background levels of criminal and military violence in Columbia and violence is a part of everyday life for VMC girls. Geographical expeditions were conducted to gather geo-ethnographic data—roving focus groups that allowed the girls to describe memories and feelings invoked by particular locations. In another exercise, participants used maps to visually represent symbols for home, safety, risk, danger and violence. Poignantly, some report that there are no safe places and that everywhere is dangerous. The author argues that it is not enough for researchers to describe and communicate. This paper concludes with the steps being taken by the researcher and the research actors to struggle against repression, drug addiction and poverty, including public art and participation at academic/INGO conferences and public meetings.

In **Curitiba, Brazil**, Ana Carina Stelko-Pereira and Lúcia Cavalcanti de Albuquerque Williams describe the violence that occurs in schools located in various socio-economic neighborhoods. High levels of theft, threats and physical violence were experienced by school students in the previous six months. School location and neighborhood was important and adult respondents reported the most severe and violent episodes in the school located in the area with the highest homicide rate and lowest income levels. Interestingly, this perception was not shared by student respondents.

The final full-length paper examines children's perceptions of place and violence in public housing neighborhoods in **Lisbon, Portugal**. Residents are housed on the basis of ethnicity, characterized by the spatial concentration of social disadvantage. Most of the children were unhappy with the area in which they lived. They saw neighborhood adults ("people") as the greatest source of problems, and described them as disruptive, disorderly or violent. The children attributed much of the disorder and violence in their communities to the ethnic spatial segregation of, predominantly, those of African origins (largely from former Portuguese colonies) and "gypsies" (Roma people). The children's photographs show a preoccupation with the physical degradation of public spaces and equipment. Clearly, children are attuned to their physical surroundings and disturbed by litter, graffiti and vandalism. Children were also sensitive to anti-social, aggressive environments characterized by street-drinking, shouting on the streets, fights and conflict. Such behavior limits children's movement and sense of safety and security. The authors argue that children's suggestions for better security, better public and playing spaces and an improved physical environment should resonate with policy makers. After all, urban and housing policies that impact so negatively on children amount to a form of social violence against children.

This special issue also contains five field reports, two from the United States, and one each from South Africa, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Together they provide a snapshot of a range of innovative interventions with children and youth focused on aspects of the physical and social environment.

The first two field reports are authored by Katie Aspen Gavenus, Jennifer Tobin-Gurley and Lori Peek and examine the effects of oil spills on communities in opposite ends of the United States: **Alaska** and the Gulf Coast states of **Louisiana**,

Mississippi and Alabama. The first of these reports on an oral history project among communities affected by the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil tanker spill, which aimed to understand the lasting effects of oil spills on communities so as to inform other communities dealing with current, and future, spills. What is clear from the interviews and discussions in Alaska is that the 1989 environmental disaster had pronounced and prolonged impacts on residents. It fundamentally altered the dynamics in homes, schools and surrounding communities. More than 20 years later, those who were children at the time spoke emotionally of the effect on their families, and their environments.

The second oil-spill field report is an oral history focusing on the more recent 2010 *BP/Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Children participated in an after-school oil spills curriculum, which included drawing and studying the effects of the previous oil spill in Alaska. Interviews and focus groups were held with youth and adults throughout Gulf Coast communities. Dominant concerns were economic damage to the fishing and tourism industries, as well as concern for environmental damage. Throughout, children had an opportunity to tell their stories and share their experiences.

There follows three field reports from sub-Saharan Africa. Melanie Zuch, Catherine Mathews, Petra De Koker, Yolisa Mtshizana and Amanda Mason-Jones describe a Photovoice project for school safety in **Cape Town, South Africa**. Both sexual and physical violence are features of South African society (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Ward et al. 2012). Schools, unfortunately, are not immune, as their pupils reflect the widespread poverty and patriarchal norms that facilitate gender-based and other forms of violence in the wider society. As has been reported in multiple settings, the Photovoice methodology resulted in feelings of empowerment among participants. In this setting, it provided insights into pupils' safety concerns at school and generated suggested solutions. However, the authors are careful to note that the project did not bring about miraculous change and that students not directly involved in it remained largely unengaged. Teachers expressed some concerns that the problems of the school were being overstated but students responded that teachers do not know the full extent of what goes on (which is perhaps true of schools worldwide).

Emily Zinck and Carola Eyber describe a peace education program focusing on environmental education based on tree nurseries in **Nakuru, Kenya**. Children are encouraged to care for the environment through tree planting. The program provides environmental awareness and a constructive use of leisure time. As in many conflicts, scarce environmental resources and environmental degradation were factors in Kenya's 2008 post-election violence. The underlying ethos of this peace education program is that children are encouraged to respect and care for the environment. This encourages cooperation and community engagement. The tree-planting clubs were successful in bringing young people from different ethnic groups together on a common activity. The hope is that this will positively impact their future development and attitudes towards other ethnic groups and the environment.

In the final field report, Carole MacNeil describes an asset-based youth-led community development training focused on peace-building and civic engagement in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**. The training included developing a positive vision for youth participants' communities, identifying obstacles and selecting a priority focus. The planning phase included the identification of human, material and financial resources. The idea was to focus on existing capacities, rather than on needs, inadequacies and gaps. This was an innovation in a context in which the focus is traditionally on what is wrong and what is missing (an orientation certainly not unique to the DRC). The author noted a paradigm shift from "I need" to "I have" but stressed the need for a locally based NGO to champion this work, as "drive-by" training can be ineffective, or worse, once the initial impression/energy has passed.

Common Themes

Each of the contributions in this special issue examines aspects of children, violence, community and the physical environment. We learn that in some environments children live in tightly demarcated spaces, beyond which is the dangerous "other" community (Northern Ireland), gang (Massachusetts), ethnic group (Portugal), tribe (Kenya) or just the wider general population (Columbia). The threat or fear of violence restricts the physical boundaries of children's lives in regions throughout the world. In these sealed spaces, a new generation is reared with mistrust and hatred of the other community. This is contrary to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 19(1) reads:

States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Undoubtedly, children who experience fear and threat in their immediate physical environments on a daily basis are experiencing "physical or mental violence." As stressed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General comment No. 13, "the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence" (2011), the term "violence" should not be narrowly interpreted as meaning only physical harm, but also includes "non-physical and/or non-intentional forms of harm (such as, inter alia, neglect and psychological maltreatment)" (4).

A second common theme is the researchers' efforts to ensure the voice of the child/youth was central to the research. A variety of methodologies were employed and the result is a rich account of children's worlds, in their own words, drawing and photographs. Adults are rarely permitted to see the detailed contours of children's lives. The contributions in this special issue highlight that we must take time to listen to children and youth and apply what we learn to better urban and social planning, and better integration of the different groups within societies worldwide. Too many children live in fearful and violent communities and environments.

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