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Participation, protection and the porcupine's dilemma: towards the inclusion of lesser heard young voices

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of young people in urban planning is vital for creating equitable, healthy cities. Global frameworks like UNICEF's "child-friendly cities" and the UNCRC (UN 1989) emphasise rights to participate, however, balancing participation with rights to protection is critical, particularly in addressing sensitive issues like violence and abuse. Schopenhauer's 'porcupine's dilemma', where the desire for closeness conflicts with the risks of proximity, offers a metaphor for the dynamic interplay between seemingly indivisible rights of children and youth. For marginalised youth, this tension highlights the need for participatory processes that are both inclusive and safe. Using a contextual prevention lens, making spaces safer and enhancing wellbeing rather than merely reducing crime, urban planners can address the social and spatial dynamics of safety in ways that resonate with young people's lived experiences. Based on literature review and a study with boys who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour in Scotland, this paper explores how reshaping public spaces can enhance safety and empower youth. Framing youth participation as protection highlights its transformative potential in urban planning, promoting coexistence and well-being. This paper emphasises context-sensitive approaches to address youth violence and harm, advocating for safer, healthier environments that respect young people's rights and experiences.

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Introduction

The inclusion of children and youth in urban planning is increasingly recognised as critical for creating healthy and equitable cities (Cairns *et al.* 2024). Global frameworks, including UNICEF's 'child-friendly cities' initiative and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989), highlight the importance of children's rights to participate in decisions that influence their lives. However, this principle demands careful consideration alongside their rights to protection, particularly in contexts involving sensitive issues such as violence and abuse. Schopenhauer proposed the 'porcupine's dilemma' offering an appropriate metaphor for this tension, illustrating how the desire for connection can be constrained by the potential risks associated with proximity:

> *(§396) On a cold winter's day a community of porcupines huddled very close together to protect themselves from freezing through their mutual warmth. However, they soon felt one another's quills, which then forced them apart. Now when the need for warmth brought them closer together again, that second drawback repeated itself so that they were tossed back and forth between both kinds of suffering until they discovered a moderate distance from one another, at which they could best endure the situation.* (Del Caro and Janaway 2015, p. 584)

We propose the porcupine's dilemma to illuminate the intricate ethical interplay between children's rights to participation and protection in socially sensitive research. This dilemma highlights the tensions that arise in designing participatory processes that are both inclusive and safe for marginalised and 'hard-to-reach' young people. Navigating participation and protection – the porcupine's dilemma – not only respects interconnected rights, but can enhance collective protection through participation of lesser heard voices around sensitive subjects such as harm and abuse.

Children's rights to participation are gateways to realising other rights but can be hindered by traditional protectionist approaches that inadvertently exclude young people from meaningful engagement

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(Fox 2013). Much of our contemporary knowledge of child abuse tends towards individualised discourses, targeting individuals involved, through individualised child protection systems and individual-level treatment for those who perpetrate abuse and those that are harmed (Firmin and Rayment-McHugh 2020). Common systemic responses often take place behind closed doors of social work, youth justice or therapy spaces which, whilst important, does little to change the physical, social and temporal conditions that may have contributed to harm. Smallbone and Rayment-McHugh (2013) highlight that even when individual interventions were successful, many other children and young people will continue to experience exposure to structural and environmental risks if we do not address the contextual and social conditions in the spaces where harms occur.

This paper draws upon a study exploring the social worlds of four boys, aged 13–18 years old, who have displayed Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB), and four practitioners who have supported boys, to consider how youth participation can act as a means of protection, fostering regenerative practices that enhance coexistence, wellbeing, and safety in urban environments. Contextual prevention pushes the paradigmatic pendulum of research and practice away from disciplinary and practice silos towards place-based understandings of harm and abuse. At the heart of this vision lies interdisciplinary and intergenerational collaboration, building bridges and allyships between children, youth, adults and disciplines including urban planning and social work towards a shared vision for social protection and an 'eco-social world' (Banks *et al.* 2024).

The porcupine's dilemma: participation and/or/as protection

Under the UNCRC (UN 1989), Article 12 is recognised as a foundational principle for realising all other rights, emphasising that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting their lives. However, operationalising this principle often involves navigating ethical and practical tensions. Engaging marginalised youth, particularly on sensitive topics such as sexuality and sexual abuse, frequently triggers protective responses that inadvertently create barriers to their participation. Schopenhauer (Del Caro and Janaway (2015)) metaphor of the porcupine's dilemma encapsulates this tension where proximity can facilitate connection but carries the risk of harm, whereas maintaining distance may compromise the potential for meaningful engagement. Balfe *et al.* (2019) describe the ethical tension of representing stigmatised young people's views through the perspectives of adults which mirrors their voices not being heard until they come to the attention of welfare or justice services. Yet, embedding protection into participatory research and practices cannot be underestimated as highlighted by a literature review exploring safety in research with children and young people by Randall *et al.* (2016) which found a distinct lack of attention around child protection, safety and awareness around inadvertently colluding with harmful social practices. Children and young people's participation requires creating meaningful connections to understand their perceptions and priorities, much like the porcupines striving for closeness. Yet as Denith *et al.* (2009) note, engaging children and young people, especially those labelled as 'vulnerable' or involved in 'forbidden topics' such as sexuality, invokes risks for both them and the researcher. These risks often prompt institutional, relational, or individual dynamics that prioritise protection over participation, perpetuating potential cycles of exclusion and limiting the realisation of participation rights. This push-pull dynamic mirrors the porcupine's dilemma and underscores the ambivalence inherent in participatory methods.

Beckett *et al.* (2022) emphasise the importance of engaging children and young people to deepen understanding of their lived realities and address the issues they face. However, barriers to participation can be rooted in a false juxtaposition between protection and participation, persistent in research particularly on sensitive topics like youth sexual violence (Warrington and Larkins 2019). The tension between participation and protection frequently surfaces in research ethics, where protection concerns often supersede participation goals (Hackett 2017, Powell *et al.* 2018, Warrington and Larkins 2019). Hill and Warrington (2022) argue that participation is not only an end but also a means of achieving safety, wellbeing, and social justice. By fostering self-efficacy and countering feelings of powerlessness, participation can support children and young people's entitlement to protection and respect. Hamilton *et al.* (2019) highlight how participation reinforces children and young people's sense of being deserving of protection, serving as a foundation for accessing justice and safety both individually and collectively. Creative approaches to participatory methods are essential for engaging children and youth (Cilliers and Timmermans 2014), at the margins.

Lesser heard voices: 'unchildlike' children and young people

One particularly troubling and emotive social issue is 'harmful sexual behaviour' (HSB) displayed by children and young people (under 18). As a term, HSB acknowledges the diversity of these behaviours and their impacts. For this study, harmful sexual behaviour is defined as: 'Sexual behaviours by children and young people under the age of 18 that are developmentally inappropriate, harmful towards self and others, or abusive towards another child, young person, or adult' (Hackett *et al.* 2019). In the UK, it is estimated that one-third of all child sexual abuse is perpetrated by another child under 18 (Hackett et al. 2014, 2019). Currently, there is no national framework in the UK to address the needs of children under 18 who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviours, complicating efforts to assess the true extent of this public health issue.

This critical and multifaceted social issue emerged as a clinically and socially distinct phenomenon around the late 1980's, indelibly shaped by the growing awareness of sexual abuse and adult sex offenders. Criminological perspectives of adults were applied to children and young people labelling them, like mini-adult offenders, as 'abusers', focusing on their actions rather than considering important distinctions such as age, maturity, cognitive development, and social or familial contexts (Myers 2002). Echoing Aitken's (2001) notion of the 'unchildlike child', Brownlie (2001) argues that their pervasive social identity becomes 'being risk', overshadowing the notion of them as 'being child', reflecting adult fears about their potential future (p. 352). Dominant terms such as 'adolescent sexual offender' or 'juvenile sexual abuser' persist in many contexts but are problematic; they can stigmatise individuals, create fixed identities and fail to consider the developmental and situational contexts of these young people (Willis and Letourneau 2018). Most of these children and young people will not display harmful behaviours again or into their adulthoods, emphasising the need for nuanced, non-stigmatising approaches. Hackett *et al.* (2024) explored life outcomes of 69 adults 10–20 years after they had displayed HSB in their childhoods and found that 94% had not sexually reoffended. However, Hackett *et al.* (2024) also found that only 26% of the sample could be classified as having experienced 'successful developmental life outcomes' compelling 'a necessary shift from passive social issues . . . .to a very active engagement in child's social and environmental ecology' as a key determinant for sustained long-term change (p. 159). Children and young people who display HSB often experience significant adversities. Balfe *et al.* (2019) describe the 'shockingly wide catalogue of trauma and harm' saturating their disrupted social worlds. Many experience high levels of violence, neglect, and deprivation, as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Hackett *et al.* 2013, Moodie 2021). Difficulties in peer relationships are also common, ranging from social isolation to experiences of bullying (Balfe *et al.* 2019).

The dominant focus in research on HSB tends to focus on individual risk factors, neglecting the broader social, physical and relational worlds of young people. This narrow lens often shapes interventions that centre on individuals, sometimes their families, which overlook the profound influence of social and systemic contexts. Research emphasises the need to move beyond individualising and deficit-focused discourses, instead addressing the systemic and ecological factors that contribute to HSB (McCuish and Lussier 2017). This paper draws upon a study exploring the social worlds of adolescent boys (aged 13–18 years old) in Scotland who have displayed HSB to learn about social and spatial dimensions of safety, risk and children's rights. We acknowledge the socially constructed nature of terms like 'children' and 'young person', noting their varying meanings across cultures and disciplines. Importantly, the UNCRC (UN 1989) defines children as under 18, but we focus particularly on 'young people' recognising broader social, biological, and cultural transitions around adolescence. Dominant Western constructions often portray children and young people as either innocent victims at risk or delinquent and risky, marginalising those who do not fit neatly into these categories including adolescents (Aitken 2001, Jenks 2005, James and Prout 2015). This dichotomy privileges protectionist narratives that exclude 'risky' young people (Piper 2000, Robinson 2008, McAlinden 2018). UNCRC General Comment No. 20 (2016) critiques this tendency, calling for environments that promote adolescent rights rather than narrow, problem-focused interventions.

The study's consideration of boys is grounded in the overwhelming gender asymmetry in empirical evidence around HSB such as Hackett *et al.* (2013) study identifying 97% of their sample as male. Gender sensitive and responsive understandings are crucial, particularly in spatial and urban studies where built environments both reflect and reproduce social power and gendered relations (Kern 2021). Gender plays a crucial role in shaping how cities are experienced and navigated (Barker *et al.* 2024). Research exposes gendered experiences of safety as multidimensional and relational, which compounds barriers to access to public spaces and parks for girls which can be dominated by boys (Barker *et al.* 2023). Research also illuminates the significant role of

gender in shaping experiences of violence. The Youth Endowment Fund (2024) illuminates some gendered dimensions of violence including how boys are disproportionately affected by violence due to increased likelihood of experiencing and perpetrating violence and gendered differences of types of violence experienced yet with less variance around experience of sexual assault.

Whilst we focus on the experiences of boys who have displayed HSB, we argue that these ideas are highly relevant to spatial and urban studies particularly when young people are seen as problems or projects to adult systems. Meaningful change and prevention require changing the contexts that contribute to harm, shifting the focus from 'who' and 'what' to 'where', compelling consideration of spatial dimensions of abuse, prevention and contextual responses (Lloyd 2022).

Contextual prevention: a framework for safer cities

A paradigm shift toward ecological approaches can address these gaps by integrating the voices and experiences of young people into prevention strategies. Ecological approaches prioritise the interplay between individuals and broader environmental and systemic factors, offering more holistic and public health-oriented understandings and responses to HSB (Balfe *et al.* 2019, Lloyd 2022). Such approaches align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those targeting violence prevention and social sustainability (Jabareen *et al.* 2017). Rayment-McHugh and McKillop (2025) propose an innovative call to action for 'just prevention' of child sexual abuse, drawing upon Agyeman's (2013) articulation of 'just sustainability', offering a framework for the prevention of abuse through interconnected conditions to enhance the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people foregrounded in equity and equality, within the boundaries of resources available. This positions prevention beyond individuals and recognises the impacts of harm and abuse in communities where young people, including those harmed and who harm, are embedded (McKillop *et al.* 2015). Certain contexts carry higher risks of harm and abuse, highlighting the need to focus prevention efforts where they are most needed including being sensitive to, and attentive of, local sociocultural and environmental risk factors (Rayment-McHugh 2023). Place-based prevention may increase understandings of concentrations of abuse and local contexts (Rayment-McHugh *et al.* 2015) so, by situating HSB within a broader context of social interactions and environmental influences, this paradigm shift not only enhances prevention strategies but also promotes long-term wellbeing for individuals and communities alike.

Abuse and harm can be addressed through a public health prevention framework encompassing primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions (Letourneau *et al.* 2014, McKibbin and Humphreys 2020). Primary prevention focuses on universal, community-wide strategies that address social and environmental drivers of harm before it occurs. This includes comprehensive relationships and sex education, consent programmes (e.g. NSPCC (2024) 'PANTS' resources), online safety, and creating child-safe organisations. Evidence highlights the value of clear messaging, parental involvement, skill-building, and bystander training with young adolescents as cost-effective strategies for reducing child sexual abuse (Letourneau *et al.* 2014). Secondary prevention targets individuals and contexts at elevated risk, supporting early intervention. This includes helplines like Stop It Now (Horn *et al.* 2015), online warning messages to deter image sharing (Prichard *et al.* 2022), and targeted initiatives such as the 'Respecting Sexual Safety' programme, which supports carers of children and young people in out-of-home care to recognise and respond to HSB and Child Sexual Exploitation (McKibbin *et al.* 2019). Tertiary prevention responds after abuse has occurred, aiming to reduce long-term harm and prevent recurrence. The AIM3 model (Leonard and Hackett 2019) exemplifies this, offering a structured assessment framework that guides multi-agency responses, helps determine supervision needs, and supports informed intervention planning for young people displaying HSB.

Conceptualising the social dimensions of harm and abuse of and by children and young people acknowledges interconnections and interaction between the young person and their environment. This focus expands to places where young people spend their time which can be criminogenic in natures (Smallbone and Rayment-McHugh 2013) thus the locus of intervention broadens beyond behaviour towards safer environments as a primary protection against abuse (Rayment-McHugh *et al.* 2024). This signals a paradigm shift towards more contextually sensitive and responsive understandings and interventions including contextual safeguarding and contextual prevention. Contextual safeguarding emphasises the importance of working in social ecologies of young people's lives, particularly social, systemic and environmental contexts, to address contextual factors and relationships to create safer spaces and prevent harm

(Firmin 2017, 2020). Contextual prevention offers a transformative approach to safety by shifting the focus from conventional crime reduction to creating environments that inherently support wellbeing and protection. Rayment-McHugh *et al.* (2024) define contextual prevention as a broad term encompassing prevention strategies aimed at addressing both macro- and micro-level factors that create conditions conducive to child sexual abuse, grounded in the understanding that human behaviour is shaped by the context in which it occurs. Unlike traditional crime prevention strategies that prioritise deterrence, surveillance and enforcement, contextual prevention emphasises understanding and addressing the social and spatial dynamics that contribute to harm. This approach acknowledges that reducing crime statistics does not necessarily equate to enhancing safety or improving the quality of life for individuals within a community. Policies and interventions often focus narrowly on measuring crime and crime reduction through records of individual incidents rather than the spaces in which they occurred, which fails to account for the social, political, economic and cultural conditions that facilitate or prevent harm (Firmin 2017, Wroe *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, Wood (2025) repositions the notion of anti-social behaviour as (in) actions that cause communities harm, to reflect how this is not just about adolescent's behaviour but 'something that is inflicted upon them by the physical and social environments state-led policies and practices create and maintain' (p. 78).

Urban planning plays a critical role in implementing contextual prevention and safeguarding, as the design and functionality of public spaces profoundly influence the experiences of children and youth. Research by Smallbone *et al.* (2017) in Aurukun and West Cairns in Australia demonstrates the effectiveness of neighbourhood-focused initiatives in mitigating youth violence and abuse. These place-based strategies illustrate how tailored interventions, grounded in the unique characteristics of specific communities, can create safer environments for vulnerable populations. Rayment-McHugh *et al.* (2024) emphasise the importance of contextualising interventions to local settings, highlighting that effective prevention requires a nuanced understanding of the social and environmental factors at play. Their work underscores that safety is not a one-size-fits-all concept; instead, it is deeply influenced by the interplay of community dynamics, cultural norms, and physical design. Firmin and Rayment-McHugh (2020) reflect on the different 'roads' to contextually respond to abuse and harm affecting young people in communities, and their comparative study reveals the critical role of community and organisational mechanisms in fostering safety. One 'road' presented by Firmin and Rayment-McHugh (2020) included contextual assessment of a housing estate in an urban metropolitan context through engagement with local residents, observations and mapping with young people. These collaborative endeavours identified ecological dimensions including quality and level of guardianship and wider environmental factors, such as inadequate lighting and drug dealing, that were conducive to harm. This informed responses that fostered community confidence and guardianship and reclamation of unsafe spaces within the estate by using them for positive activities. The other 'road' illuminating contextual responses was in a rural context where peer sexual harm was unfolding across ecological contexts including peers, school and neighbourhoods in locations such as parks and unused public buildings. This project foregrounded community engagement by embedding prevention in community consultation, ownership and development of nurturing relationships of trust. Together with community leaders, practitioners and researchers developed prevention responses informed by collaborative contextual assessment sensitised to social, spatial and temporal dimensions of harm including enhancing guardianship (Firmin and Rayment-McHugh 2020).

Urban planners, in collaboration with local stakeholders, can leverage these insights to design spaces that not only protect youth but also empower them. For instance, principles of contextual safeguarding provide practical guidance on embedding safety considerations into urban design and planning (Firmin 2017, 2020, Lefevre *et al.* 2023). Embedding contextual safeguarding into local areas through multiagency collaboration emphasises the importance of addressing the broader social contexts that influence young people's experiences, particularly in areas where they are at heightened risk of harm. By adopting a contextual prevention lens, urban planners can contribute to healthier and more equitable cities. This approach moves beyond merely controlling risk and instead seeks to create environments where children and youth can thrive, fostering resilience and community cohesion in the process.

Methodology: safe and sensitive research

This study employed methods to explore the social worlds of boys (aged 13–18) who have displayed HSB, aiming to address gaps in understanding by

situating these behaviours within sociological and ecological contexts. After full institutional (University) ethical approval was granted, further ethical approval was sought by local and national services who may be supporting young people who have displayed HSB before engaging agencies and teams to identify potential participants. The project was iteratively adapted to incorporate practitioners, supporting young people who have displayed HSB in a range of settings including out-of-home care and social work services, who could reflect on a young person they had supported. This adaptation followed the same methods, including Research Toolbox used with young people. Given the sensitivity, sessions with young people were in person (although a young person's preference to meet online would have been respected) and all sessions with practitioners were also in-person with two additional sessions through Microsoft Teams. Research sessions took place in a range of settings including social work offices, community centres and schools.

The journey to recruit participants highlighted systemic barriers within welfare, justice, public, and third-sector services. While gaining access to 'hard-to-reach' populations presented challenges, these barriers often reflected fragmented systems and intense workloads exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, the study engaged with four boys and four practitioners, over multiple sessions, within the scope of the research.

Ethical framework and anonymity

Given the significant social stigma surrounding HSB, protecting participants' identities was paramount. Full anonymisation of individuals and locations was maintained throughout the research process and outputs. These necessarily restricted participants' opportunities to be directly recognised for their contributions, a common feature in participatory methods. To address this, the study utilised the Lundy Model of Participation (Lundy 2007), which emphasises four key elements: space, voice, audience, and influence. Two specific national policy audiences were engaged to reflect on young people's insights, with personalised acknowledgments planned for participants as symbolic of 'audience' and 'influence'.

Within the 'legacy of distorted consent' described by Hackett (2017), young people with experience of harm and abuse may feel uncertainty about dissenting or withdrawing consent in research contexts. To mitigate this, a 'Research Supporter' was identified for each participant. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the age of participants, an 'About Me' form was designed in a sensitive, child-friendly way that invited participants to share information they felt comfortable sharing to try to gather a broader contextual overview of the 'sample'. Only one young person filled this in completely. Together with the information shared by practitioner participants, the storied 'data' gathered in this study relate to eight young people in Scotland, aged between 13 and 18 years old, who displayed HSB in a range of contexts (including online spaces and public spaces), who have experienced a range of trauma and adversity and some of whom have additional support needs, disabilities and neurodiversity.

Research techniques

The participatory research design and methods aimed to support young people as active participants, rather than 'subjects' under study, and place value on their experiential knowledge in developing broader social understandings of HSB. To facilitate discussions and mapping, the researcher developed a 'Research Toolbox', offering participants choice and control over how they shared their experiences. Tools included large sheets of paper, pens, clay, Lego, toy figures and vehicles. Drawing on mapping techniques from children's geographies, the study supported participatory engagement by empowering participants to visually represent their everyday social worlds without relying solely on verbal narratives. This approach aligned with Ergler's and Freeman (2020) assertion that maps can serve as direct vehicles for children's voices. Participants were invited to make maps of people, places and things in their everyday life and the project aimed to try to consider their experiences with a particular focus on safety, risk and children's rights. The large roll of paper became a key space where notes could be made openly about the discussions, including spaces 'visited' in the Virtual Environment, and written up as detailed 'notes' as soon as possible after each session to form the data set.

The medium used most was the Virtual Reality (VR) headset that allowed the participants (young people and practitioners) to explore spaces and places from the research space. This innovative use of the Meta Quest 2 Virtual Reality (VR) headset enabled participants to safely explore and share spaces that relate to their experiences of everyday life. Utilising the Meta's Wander application, which integrates Google Street View data, participants navigated Virtual Environments using handheld controllers which was cast onto a laptop computer allowing the researcher to view the Virtual Environment. As described by Witmer and Singer (1998), the immersive nature of VR enhances the 'psychological state' of presence, enabling a deeper engagement with the

environment and generating detailed discussions about their social and spatial worlds. For safety, participants used the VR technology in seated mode due to the often small, unfamiliar rooms and furniture, which increased the risk of tripping or falling – especially since the headset obscures real-world vision to enhance immersion.

Using Virtual Reality (VR) enhanced the research by enabling participants to explore meaningful spaces, creating the capacity to traverse space in ways that would not have been possible in a physical research session. This allowed seamless transitions between locations that would have been costly, time-consuming, or risky to visit in person. The shadow side of these strengths are significant limitations related to experiencing the physical environment such as sensory aspects of sound, smell and real life buzzing around. The VR technology further enhanced data generation through the capacity for different perspectives on space which can elevate perceptual capacity and manipulation of context such as viewing from above street level (Bailenson and Beall 2006). The Virtual Environment provided a fresh perspective, allowing them to see the space in a new way including noticing aspects of design and place that may contribute to risk.

Data analysis: mapping stories of social worlds

Despite recruitment challenges, the data generated from sessions with young people and practitioners were profound. Rather than collaged maps, stories unfolded within the research sessions that bounced between people, time and places. Some were tiny threads of stories, others longer, deeper narratives that stand by themselves like testimonies, all entangled in everyday lives, their pasts and their futures. Stories were analysed through principles of Narrative Inquiry – the study of experience understood through the stories people tell. The 'story' in narrative practice can be considered as 'a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful' (Clandinin 2006, p. 375). The stories participants shared offer a way of understanding experience within a three-dimensional prism of temporality, place and sociality (Clandinin *et al.* 2016). The first step of analysis was organising different threads of stories and reflections using NVivo software. Most story splinters organised as an NVivo 'code' happened somewhere so to bring coherence to the different narratives, stories were mapped by the spaces in which they were 'placed'.

Key narratives emerged around spaces such as schools, bedrooms, care systems, digital spaces, pasts and imagined futures and public spaces. This paper explores narratives embedded in 'public' spaces to illuminate possibilities towards prevention and reduction of youth harm and abuse. By prioritising young people's perspectives and ethical rigor, this study highlighted the social and spatial dimensions of safety and risk, contributing to a nuanced understanding of young people's experiences of the everyday contexts they navigate.

Findings

Exclusion and 'boring' public spaces

The three-dimensional prism of Narrative Inquiry makes visible experiences of place, time and social conditions – place can be understood like scenes where the action takes place and characters come to be known (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). A curious feature of some spaces travelling through, using the VR technology – 'boring' places! 'Boring' becomes a quality of the space, not an internal experience being bored, which is a subtle but significant distinction captured in different narratives from young participants:

old park is boring

it was boring

Area Two is boring

it's boring

it was boring there

it's boring

boring – parks and shops

(multiple young participants)

Looking in closer detail to 'boring' park spaces, play equipment such as climbing frames and broken slides appears as a dimension of 'boringness' exposing how physicality and embodied practices may shape experiences of spaces such as parks:

> *He carries on as we go past his old primary school and he points out the park that has a web-like climbing frame. He is so succinct and descriptive, you climb up it and it has a pole in the middle, they upgraded it because the old park is boring.* (Young Person)

> *He then goes to the park (in VR) that seems to be close to [another area of the city], which seems to be green space in a built up area. He points out that the flying fox*[1] *is broken. I wonder if he spends his time here but he doesn't answer . . . .so I wonder if other teenagers might spend time here? He says that other people do but there are*

fights. I wonder who is fighting? Children he says, it's scary he says. (Young Person)

Another young person reflects on a park space exposing how space is never static and indelibly shaped by powerful social and cultural messages around adolescents in 'public' spaces and park who may feel both in and out of place, unwelcome and under suspicion:

He leaves the park space (in VR) commenting 'I'm finally out of that delinquent park' although he struggles to say the word 'delinquent', I (researcher) ask him what the means and he says he doesn't know what it means but it's a weirdos park'. (Young Person)

More explicit social exclusions of adolescents also emerge in narratives:

The local council had issues with young people congregating beside the transport hub so put in an alarm system that apparently gave out a high pitch that only worked with teenagers. It was to stop them from congregating there. So, you know, I thought that was quite interesting. I guess almost excluding people from certain areas, yes, and it was areas that frightened people because everybody used the transport hub to get in and out and to do stuff. But if it was maybe like somewhere less visible then I don't think anybody would have been that bothered. . .if it had been outside the corner shop, say in a housing estate outside the city nobody would have been bothered, but because it was very visible I think . . . . . .all of a sudden, you know, it was targeted to get these alarms that would move all the young people. (Practitioner)

Such formal exclusionary measures were echoed by another practitioner who described an 'exclusion zone' which mapped sections of an urban space as out of bounds for certain young people who would face legal consequences should they enter.

It was not just social conditions that may contribute to the dynamics of risk but also physical aspects including the design of public spaces. A practitioner described a space that young people congregated, where harmful sexual behaviour occurred. The area had been designed in a distinct way, reflecting urban planning design prioritising pedestrians within a network of walkable spaces with a lot of green space. These green spaces, including where the behaviour took place, were landscaped with trees and bushes. The behaviour happened at night-time where a group of young people were hanging out in one of these green, wooded areas and many of the young people were using alcohol and drugs.

I think there are specific sites that we know young people congregate, and I don't know. . . it's kind of funny. . .like there's all these woods, and there's all these planned green spaces. And see if you're driving in and out of here and you don't see houses, you see trees then houses and that's part of the model . . . . for the idea of green spaces

. . . . . it means that they end up sitting drinking in a bush, or in like a cluster of bushes, like big bushes. . .. . ..you know what I mean . . . . . and that would be quite ordinary, that these become spaces that young people (hang out). (Practitioner)

Exclusions that may be experienced by young people, direct and indirect, may also reflect broader social inequalities. Thinking sociologically, 'boredom' can be understood as socially and organisationally dependent resulting from social inequality (Ohlmeier *et al.* 2020) thus 'boring' spaces may signify lack of investment, spatial sensitivity to the needs of teenagers and well maintained spaces with 'modern equipment' to 'make a place feel cared for and used' (Wood 2025, p. 83) and care in communities. Garside (2009, p. 14) highlights the preoccupation with interventions aimed towards risks posed by children and young people, thus placing responsibility on them, at the expense of socially mediated risks, vulnerabilities and 'risky social arrangements' that they face in their everyday lives, which serves in directing attention away from the socio-structural factors that shape their 'riskiness'. Their stories highlight tensions surrounding the legitimacy of adolescents' presence in public spaces such as parks, which seem explicitly and implicitly designed for younger children. This could exacerbate feelings of exclusion, expressed through the labelling of such spaces as 'boring', akin to Douglas' (1992) notion of social pollution. These 'boring' spaces may reflect inhibited access and restricted opportunities for placemaking in areas that could otherwise be safer for young people. Such exclusion may be reinforced by social policies focused on 'cost-effective, "scientific" means of identifying and eliminating risks' (Disney and Lloyd 2020, p. 9), ultimately limiting adolescents' participation in public spaces. Furthermore, urban planning and design may inadvertently impact on guardianship in different spaces and at different times such as green spaces with reduced traffic at night times.

Navigating violence and risk in public spaces

Beyond the 'boring', stories from young people and practitioners describe how young people were navigating multiple forms of violence, harm and abuse in their everyday social worlds. Fights and threats between peers and exposure to adult violence were common in certain spaces that young people spend time in or pass through such as on their way to school:

> *Off again we travel (in VR) and he stops again at a street space – he says lots of fights happen here! I gently enquire, adults or children – adults. He's even seen blood on the ground and someone once had a knife! I wonder the time of the day – daytime.* (Young Person)

> *He's now been assaulted quite a few times as repercussions for like some of his behaviours, unfortunately, like people have been, like if he's been walking down the street close to his home, he's been, like, picked up and put into back of cars and taken places and beaten up.* (Practitioner)

Different stories weave together to illustrate multidimensional forms of intersecting harm that young people are exposed to. Safety appeared to be negotiated through simultaneously risky yet protective strategies including using violence and carrying weapons. These risks become further exacerbated by the use of alcohol and drugs which could intersect with further harm and exploitation including selling drugs or carrying weapons for adults, coerced by adults with the notion that under 18s face less harsh criminal proceedings that adults. The pull to spaces where teenagers, creating temporal spaces of fun, can also be a site of significant risk including a pull for abusive adults:

> *Unfortunately, it's a pull for perpetrators as well. We had two boys hanging about that area two weeks ago and they were offered £10 each to go back to a guy's flat.* (Practitioner)

> *He was criminally exploited and he was selling drugs. And you just reflect like he's told us how much he was getting paid to sell drugs - £30 a week to take the risk of selling drugs.... his peer group had similar issues, and vulnerabilities I suppose, and needs.* (Practitioner)

> *(about local shop owner) It's just been the newspaper.... he's been convicted of two rapes. There's all these really 'under the influence' girls and boys and he's had a room above the shop ..... .young people sometimes went in and sought help (but were abused).* (Practitioner)

Most participants in the research described landscapes where violence and fear are a part of everyday life, contributing to teenagers creating spaces where they can meet their needs including fun, excitement and belonging. Some participant stories highlighted how social hierarchies, and the absence of adult guardianship exacerbated risks in these spaces. Harmful behaviours were not just outcomes of individual choices but were shaped by the physical and social conditions of the spaces themselves, thus dynamics within spaces can contribute to risk and harm, to or between young people. This relates to both the presence of influences that could heighten risk (e.g. drugs, alcohol, and harmful adults) and the absence of influences that could increase safety (e.g. community guardianship, spaces that they can legitimately belong and have fun). Placemaking became entangled in young people searching for and creating spaces of belonging, meaning and mattering which could be created or enhanced through risk-taking or making behaviours. More structurally, risk taking can be understood as a form of 'edgework' (Lyng 2005), activities at the edge or boundaries between order and disorder, directing us to consider more broadly the needs of children and young people who may be experiencing adversity and social exclusion. This resonates with the concept of 'risk environments' which draws attention to the social and/or physical spaces where harm is produced and reduced with particular focus on intersections between micro and macro levels of influence (Rhodes 2002).

Working to enhance safety through physical design of spaces and community guardianship may be valuable avenues for local governments to reduce harm of, between and by young people. Through their safe participation, we can learn more about designing meaningful places, where they matter and can belong, offering them sanctuary and safety. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to what makes spaces meaningful and safe for young people, and their narratives cannot provide simple answers to complex social issues. Safe and sensitive participation of young people – especially those often seen as part of the problem – requires engagement at different levels of the built environment. This includes broader planning that recognises adolescents' rights to play, as well as more localised, contextual responses that address emerging concerns within communities. Such approaches can help develop safeguarding and prevention strategies that go beyond simply relocating the problem or relying on justice-based responses, by enhancing community guardianship and addressing environmental features that may heighten risk. This ethos of prevention and protection through participation echoes Coman and Devaney (2011) concept of ecologies of children in care, encouraging us to free our thinking and consider how we might proactively shape everyday environments to positively influence future outcomes and alter potentially harmful aspects of children's social environments as a form of 'preventative intervention' – much like addressing hygiene before surgical treatment (p. 49).

Implications for urban planning and design

We hope that these reflections encourage urban planners to reflect upon how public spaces are designed, to ensure inclusivity, safety and engagement for adolescents. Explicit exclusion measures, such as high-pitched alarms to deter young people, and implicit exclusions, such as poor maintenance and design of parks, often push adolescents into marginalised,

unsafe areas. Placemaking for adolescents involves recognising their need for spaces that provide both belonging and safety. Risk-taking behaviours, often seen in socially excluded youth, can be tied to their search for identity and meaning. Urban planners must address this by designing spaces that respects rights to play (UNCRC article 31) and meet their developmental needs. Designing parks with and for different ages of children and young people, oriented through the frameworks of children's rights, could create more age sensitive spaces that uphold rights to play. Designing 'risky play' spaces, defined as 'thrilling or exciting forms of free play' that involve uncertainty of outcome, differentiates 'risk' from hazard by reframing risk as potential of personal development and situational evaluation (Beaulieu and Beno 2024). Nuanced spaces that consider social dynamics such as age, socioeconomic factors and gender can also unite rights to play and be safe. This aligns with the concept of child-focused cities (Cairns *et al.* 2024), emphasising the importance of safe participation and inclusive design. By engaging adolescents as active participants in urban planning, municipalities can address the dynamics of exclusion and risk in public spaces. Contextual prevention in urban planning, focusing on making environments inherently safer rather than reducing crime statistics, offers a pathway to reimagine urban spaces for children and young people, as described in (Table 1).

Table 1. Enhancing children's rights of adolescents through contextual prevention approaches.

Key strategies	Focus
Positioning children's rights at the centre	Foregrounding children's rights frameworks that prioritises and integrates children's rights into all policies, practices, and decisions. Reflect and respond to rights across continuums of ages and needs identifying those most likely to have rights overlooked or breached. Enhance participation across the continuum, from consultation to co-design, foregrounding safety and Lundy Model of participation (Lundy 2007).
Improving community guardianship	Integrating community-led stewardship and guardianship into urban planning. This might include designing parks with caretaker kiosks, allocating spaces for community activities, or establishing 'eyes on the street' principles through mixed-use zoning that encourages constant activity and community guardianship. Sensitivity to social and temporal dimensions of place that may shift guardianship such as evening and night time
Embedding contextual safeguarding	Developing multiagency, multisectoral and community partnerships with those who play a role in the spaces that young people spend time in. Utilise Contextual Safeguarding resources such as Scale Up Community Locations toolkits with location assessments, guidance and briefing papers (Contextual Safeguarding Network 2022). Develop contextually sensitive and responsive place-based prevention strategies paralleling longer-term urban planning with micro-level, hyper local interventions.
Designing nuanced spaces	Incorporating flexible urban spaces into city plans that cater to diverse needs sensitive to age, gender and needs of children and young people. Examples include modular playgrounds, multi-use sports courts, urban pocket parks for relaxation, and pop-up recreational zones that can adapt to seasonal or demographic changes.
Challenging exclusionary practices	Addressing structures and systems that marginalise young people such as zoning laws or urban design elements that exclude and discriminate youth. Prioritise safety over surveillance and exclusion. For instance, revising ordinances that limit access to open spaces or redesigning public areas with features like open seating, wide pedestrian paths, and inclusive signage that welcome all demographics, including adolescents.
Enhancing safety	Prioritizing urban layouts that maximize visibility, such as well-lit streets, open plazas, and transparent structures for public buildings. Designing green corridors or linear parks that connect neighbourhoods encourages safe movement and activity within and between urban spaces.
Integrating urban green infrastructure	Embedding green spaces, such as parks, green walls, and urban forests, into city plans to create safe, engaging, and restorative environments for young people. Consider the interplay between green infrastructure and community guardianship. Features like nature trails, urban gardens, and outdoor classrooms provide opportunities for recreation, learning, and relaxation in a natural setting.
Planning for active transport networks	Designing cycling lanes, skate-friendly pathways, and accessible public transport routes to connect young people with key amenities such as schools, parks, and cultural centres. Active transport networks reduce isolation and foster independence while ensuring safe mobility throughout the city.
Leveraging public art and placemaking	Incorporating youth-centred placemaking initiatives, such as murals, graffiti walls, and interactive sculptures, to create vibrant public spaces. These efforts allow young people to express themselves creatively and develop a sense of belonging within their urban environment.
Reimagining underutilized spaces	Transforming abandoned lots, unused car parks, or vacant buildings into safe, engaging spaces for young people to have fun. This could include skate parks, pop-up cinemas, or cultural hubs designed to foster positive interactions and active use of previously neglected areas. Consider co-creation with young people and community representatives to ensure sensitivity to community contexts.
Embedding resilience in urban design	Incorporating features that address climate and environmental challenges while creating safe spaces recognising the collective agenda of Sustainable Development Goals. Examples include shaded play areas for hot climates, flood-resilient parks, or stormwater gardens that double as recreational spaces, ensuring safety and usability in changing conditions.
Designing safer transport hubs	Redesigning urban transport nodes such as bus stops and train stations to prioritize safety and accessibility for young people. This could include integrating clear sightlines, sufficient lighting, youth-friendly waiting areas, and safe crossings to make these spaces more welcoming and secure.
Fostering connectivity through smart technology	Considering integrating contextual safeguarding and prevention and safety with other urban agendas for example smart city technologies into urban planning, such as app-based mapping for safe routes, emergency call systems in public areas, and Wi-Fi-enabled youth zones, to create a connected and secure urban environment that meets the needs of younger populations.

Conclusion

While young people need to be accountable for harmful and abusive sexual behaviours and public protection upheld, the prevention of harm and abuse cannot be achieved solely through individualised, decontextualised responses such as prison cells, social work offices, or therapy rooms. True prevention lies in engaging with the everyday realities of children and young people, and this cannot be done effectively without their active involvement. Even though we are all graduates of childhood and adolescence, Punch (2002, p. 328) aptly reminds us that we 'forget, unlearn and abandon elements of our childhood'. This limits our ability to fully understand life through a child's eyes.

Insights gained through the participation of young people can significantly enhance knowledge about harm and abuse, including Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB). Such knowledge strengthens our collective capacity to develop and implement primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies. However, conducting socially sensitive research necessitates embracing the 'porcupine's dilemma', which requires balancing safety and risk for all involved in the research process. By respecting the rights to both participation and protection, we not only safeguard individual participants but also enable broader protection through the inclusion of marginalised voices. Negotiating this delicate balance is essential to amplifying lesser-heard voices and understanding complex social issues from new perspectives. This approach can empower local governments to move beyond traditional crime and 'anti-social behaviour' prevention frameworks, addressing the contextual and spatial dimensions of harm. By doing so, policymakers and urban planners can better respond to local needs and build environments that foster contextual safety for all children and young people. Ultimately, valuing the experiences of young people at the edges of society enables the creation of healthier, more inclusive urban environments. This ensures no one is left behind and equips communities to address the root causes of harm while promoting the rights, safety, and wellbeing of all children.

Note

1. A 'flying fox' is a playground structure like a small zip line where the user holds onto handgrips or sits on a seat or basket attached to a cable with a pulley.

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