

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, April 2011

Children and young people speak out about safety

"Well, it's not the nicest place to live. Just going to the shops I get scared." boy 15

What do children and young people say about safety?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research into the wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia.¹ As part of the research, more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds reported in an online survey that safety was fundamental to their wellbeing. They expressed their feelings about safety at home, in the community and in public places, as well as their general sense of feeling secure.

The children and young people who participated in the research said they felt the least safe in the local community, with more than 40 per cent stating they often or sometimes felt scared in the community. This was more of a concern for girls than boys, with more boys indicating they felt safe in their local community, as well as at parties and gatherings, sporting events and in places where there were lots of young people.

"One time I was walking back from the train station and there was this creepy guy following me. On the corner of the street there's this shop. I didn't want to go home in case he found out where I live. So I just ran into this shop. The shop owners live behind the shop and know where I live. So they let me wait behind the shop and I stayed there for three hours until the guy actually left. He was just staying out there." girl 15

Children and young people are heavily reliant on public transport. Almost 60 per cent of children and young people said they used public transport.

"Because of where I live, I spend a lot of time on public transport, buses and trains, getting to school. I like public transport because it helps me get where I need to go and I don't have my 'Ls' or anything." girl 16

While almost two-thirds of children and young people said they always felt safe on public transport during the day, only about 20 per cent said they always felt safe at night. Girls felt considerably less safe than boys when using public transport.

One group of girls spoke about feeling scared at train stations and other public places. They told of being 'frozen with fear' by men saying 'inappropriate things' to them.

"You kind of expect it to happen, but when it does happen you get freaked out. You kind of think, you know, what you would do at the time – and then it happens and you just... freeze." girl 15



Many Aboriginal children and young people in the Kimberley region said the funerals of friends and family members made them feel sad, unwell, upset and unsafe. Funerals caused them to worry about losing more family members, which affected their sense of security.

Almost 20 per cent of children and young people said they did not always feel safe at home.

What has other research said about safety?

A report by the Australian Childhood Foundation found that many 10 and 14 year-olds feel unsafe in their local environment. Two out of every five children surveyed said they felt unsafe in public places such as shopping centres, cinemas and sporting grounds, as well as walking to school.² Twenty-seven per cent said they felt anxious about catching public transport and, in general, girls felt more unsafe than boys.³

Half of the children and young people surveyed felt that children in their age group were not made to feel welcome by adults in public places, and they wanted better recreational spaces for children.

In late 2010, the Injury Control Council of Western Australia (ICCWA) ran the 'Our Space, Safe Place' project with more than 500 children and young people aged between 12 and 25 years from a range of socially diverse backgrounds.⁴ The project found that 50 per cent of young people felt unsafe in public places, and that young people ranked Perth's public spaces in the following order of safety:⁵

Perth's Top 5 Unsafe Places
1. Pubs/bars/nightclubs
2. Taxi ranks
3. Skate parks
4. Public transport stops/stations
5. Public toilets

Perth's Top 5 Safe Places
1. Hospitals and schools
2. Workplaces
3. Cafes/restaurants/fast food outlets
4. Sporting clubs
5. Shopping centres/youth centres

In 2010, Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians revealed that 23.5 per cent of children and young people said personal safety was an issue of concern for them.⁶ More than 20 per cent rated 'crime, safety and violence' as one of the most important issues in Australia today. Research shows that young people aged between 15 and 24 years are at the highest risk of becoming victims of assault.⁷

What needs to be done?

Children and young people regularly use public spaces for recreation and socialisation. Therefore, it is concerning that they feel unsafe in these environments.

Young people are frequent users of public space; they use public space because they do not own or have access to more private spaces in which to congregate. They use public spaces to meet, socialise and form connections with their peers and their community.⁸

In 2010, ICCWA held a forum with young people aged from 12 to 25 years in Bunbury, Western Australia, to find out more about young people's perceptions of safety in their community and to 'recognise young people as equal partners in the process of community change and capacity building'⁹



The young people who participated in the forum could identify only a small number of safe public places in which to socialise. They said there was a need to:

- increase local recreational activities and entertainment opportunities for young people
- establish youth recreational facilities close to mainstream services, so that the proximity to adults and families would reduce the potential for antisocial behaviour.¹⁰

The suggestion to establish co-located facilities is consistent with research that shows it does help reduce antisocial behaviour and improve safety.

There is a growing body of research on activity support and mixed use neighbourhoods where it is found that opportunities for crime are reduced by increasing the range of activities in public spaces. Crime prevention and community development programs can work together to provide a greater capacity for community ownership of the public realm.¹¹

Many of the children and young people who participated in the ICCWA forum felt that public places could become friendlier environments if there was better education about, and tolerance of, diversity: "A more welcoming environment needs to be encouraged by everyone. This can only be achieved through society becoming more accepting of social differences".¹²

Priorities for policy and program development

Programs and services are improved when community participation is part of the planning process. Crime prevention strategies and the design of safe public spaces and transport systems will, therefore, benefit from the input of children and young people.

¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian Children and Young People*, Perth, Western Australia.

² Tucci, J et al 2008, *Children's Sense of Safety: Children's experiences of childhood in contemporary Australia*, Australian Childhood Foundation, Victoria, p. 8.

³ Tucci, J et al 2008, *Children's Sense of Safety: Children's experiences of childhood in contemporary Australia*, Australian Childhood Foundation, Victoria, p. 8.

⁴ Press release, *Youth get creative on safety – free exhibition*, Injury Control Council of Western Australia, West Perth, 28 March 2011.

⁵ Press release, *One in two young people feel 'unsafe' in public places*, Injury Control Council of Western Australia, West Perth, 17 March 2011.

⁶ Mission Australia Youth Survey 2010, *National Survey of Young Australians, key and emerging issues*, Mission Australia, p. 11.

⁷ Australian Institute of Criminology 2008, *Australian Crime Facts and Figures 2007*, Australian Government, Canberra, p. 23.

⁸ Copeland, A 2008, 'Participation and the role of public space – Our space, their space and myspace', *The Journal of Law and Social Justice*, Volume 2, Article 4, p. 17.

⁹ Injury Control Council of Western Australia 2010, *Y-Safety Question and Answer Forum* [website] viewed 21 April 2011, <http://www.iccwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Y-Safety-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>, p. 5.

¹⁰ Injury Control Council of Western Australia 2010, *Y-Safety Question and Answer Forum* [website] viewed 21 April 2011, <http://www.iccwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Y-Safety-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>, p. 5.

¹¹ Western Australian Planning Commission 2006, *Designing Out Crime Guidelines*, Perth, p. 2.

¹² Injury Control Council of Western Australia 2011, *Our Space, Safe Place Qualitative Themes*, information received by the Commissioner for Children and Young People's Office, 2 May 2011, p. 6.

