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## Urban inclusion as wellbeing: Exploring children's accounts of confronting diversity on inner city streets

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### ABSTRACT

The diversity of people living in a city is often most visible on inner city streets. These streets are also the neighbourhood environment of children who live in the central city. In the past, the wellbeing and sensibilities of children have been marginalised in planning practices in western cities but this is beginning to change with child-friendly and inclusive city discourses now more common. In this paper we report on children's experiences confronting diversity in inner-city Auckland. In 2012, 40 inner-city children, 9–12 years, participated in walking interviews in their local streets and school-based focus group discussions. As the children talked about their lives, moving and playing around neighbourhood streets, many described distress and discomfort as they confronted homelessness, drunkenness, and signs of the sex industry. A few older children also described strategies for coping with these encounters, an emerging acceptance of difference and pride in becoming streetwise. New Zealand (NZ) has a history of progressive social policy. In 2003, it became the first country in the world to decriminalise all forms of prostitution. Securing the health and human rights of sex workers were the primary drivers of the reforms. Similar concerns for health and rights underpin broadly inclusive local policies towards homelessness. To promote the health and wellbeing of inner city children their presence on city streets, alongside those of other marginalised groups, needs to be at the forefront of planning concerns. However we conclude that there are inherent tensions in promoting a child-friendly city in which diversity and inclusiveness are also valued.

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### 1. Introduction

Neighbourhood streets and public spaces are important sites for children's play and exploration. Traditionally they have been the everyday settings in which children expend energy, relate to peers and learn a range of social, physical and cognitive skills fundamental to healthy development (Day and Wager, 2010; Freeman and Tranter, 2011). Neighbourhood play and mobility also shape children's sense of place; and enable experiences of social inclusion and belonging that are so crucial to identity formation and wellbeing (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006; Tranter and Pawson, 2001).

Considerations of wellbeing are a logical extension of a broadened focus on urban health, and take scholarship into closer alignment with the planning goals of local governments. As Kearns

and Andrews (2010, p.309) point out, there has been a paucity of theoretical development around geographically-emplaced wellbeing (but see Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007) and so understanding has tended to develop through cumulative broadening of empirical investigations. We contribute to this understanding of emplaced wellbeing through examining an instance of the local public spaces that commonly allow children to test their emerging competencies as they confront new experiences and encounter unfamiliar people and situations (Matthews et al., 2000). For children living in the inner city, where streets and parks are habitually shared by a diversity of people, encounters with difference can be common.

Streets in which children can safely walk alone is one of Unicef's (2009) urban design principles for a child-friendly city. Implicit in the principle is that children, despite their lack of democratic power, have a right to inhabit public spaces. The notion that all individuals have a 'right to the city' – a visible and legitimate presence in public spaces (Harvey, 2003; Mitchell, 2003) – has long preoccupied social theorists and urban commentators (Marcuse,

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2009; Young, 1990); Curiously, children are seldom, if ever, a concern of writers in this field; groups who are 'a priori defined as illegitimate and thus threatening to the existing order' (Mitchell, 2003, p.53) such as homeless, itinerant persons, and sex workers are the usual focus. While children's legal exclusion from public spaces is uncommon there are numerous accounts of young people's presence in public spaces being discouraged by design and concern for their safety (Lasch, 1995; Woolley, 2006). The decline in children's spatial freedom reported in many countries in recent decades has been attributed largely to parental fears of strangers and the increasing intensity of traffic (Fyhri et al., 2011; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). Media representations of children being abducted or harmed by strangers have also contributed to a normative shift to greater surveillance of children's outdoor behaviours, despite the relative rarity of such events.

In the inner city, homeless people are among the strangers children see as they navigate their way around and through neighbourhood places. Vulnerable people, who may be homeless and/or have a mental illness, are more likely to cluster and survive in poorer, socially diverse inner-city neighbourhoods than in more affluent and/or family friendly suburban areas. Inner city streets, parks and community service venues can be rare sites of acceptance for individuals displaced by mainstream society. Yet even in the inner city, exclusionary socio-spatial processes make tenure fragile and the threat of being moved on ever-present (De Verteuil et al., 2007; Dear and Wolch, 1987). As Mitchell (2003) argues, the spaces that homeless people occupy are the product of physical as well as representational contests over their rights to a legitimate presence in the city. When vulnerable groups have no legitimate right to belong, no 'place-in-the-world', their health and wellbeing is undermined (Curtis, 2004; Dorling, 2013).

The sight of homeless people evokes strong and varied emotional responses. Hodgetts and colleagues (Hodgetts et al., 2008, 2011) examined the social distancing practices of housed adults as they observe or interact with homeless people in New Zealand cities. Their respondents conveyed a range of experiences, understandings and practices, from compassion and gestures of friendship and inclusion to characterising homeless people as dangerous, mentally unstable and repulsive; people to be avoided who did not belong in the city (Hodgetts et al., 2011). Responses were influenced by factors such as participants' understanding of homelessness, use of urban spaces, personal ethics and familiarity with homeless people (Hodgetts et al., 2011, p.1750). How do children respond when confronting people who are homeless? While children and entire families can themselves be itinerant and often dwelling on the edge of homelessness (Kearns et al., 1992), we know of no accounts of housed children's encounters with individuals who are homeless.

Cities of the 21st century have been reimagined as sites of connection, places where different groups of people come together providing 'opportunities for encounter between strangers' (Valentine, 2008, p.323). Referring to the work of Amin (2006), Laurier and Philo (2006), Thrift (2005) and others who examine the social and democratic potency of mundane interactions between people in public places, Valentine (2008) questions whether such encounters produce a change in values or increased respect for others that generalises beyond specific individual encounters. As Valentine (2014) baldly states 'difference is a hallmark of cities'. Arguably, if such difference is stimulating and embraced with tolerance, it can help "reconstruct the city as potentially health promoting" (Moon and Kearns, 2014, p.158). Interactions between different classes, ethnicities, religious affiliations, or sexual orientation have generally been the focus of this work. Again, children have remained largely invisible in considerations of contemporary urban social encounters with others. To contribute to addressing

this gap, and to bring a specifically human wellbeing dimension to such questions, in this paper we investigate how children aged 9–12 years' experience and respond to encounters with difference on inner city neighbourhood streets in Auckland, New Zealand.

## 2. The Auckland context

Auckland, a city of 1.4M people, has a sprawling urban form and a housing norm of standalone houses with gardens. Until recently inner-city apartment living was uncommon. However, a rapid growth in new apartments since the 1990s has changed this situation (Murphy, 2008) and contributed to a 92% population increase in Auckland's central business district in the 15 years from 1991–2006 – and a further 47% to 2013. While not designed with families in mind, a lack of affordable housing in near-city neighbourhoods has resulted in families with children moving into these high-rise and medium density apartments (Carroll et al., 2011).

Like cities elsewhere, planning policies in Auckland's inner city have not conventionally taken account of the specific needs of children (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006; Whitzman and Mizrachi, 2009). To use a term coined by Randolph, policies have been largely 'child-blind' (Randolph, 2006). However an emphasis in a City Centre Masterplan (CCMP) released in 2012 (Auckland Council, 2012a) on promoting the wellbeing of children suggests the needs of the increasing number of children living in the city have not gone unnoticed. Targets have been set for increasing the number of children visiting and living in the city centre as well as the type, number and sizes of play spaces – playgrounds, sports and recreational facilities. Along with being child-friendly, Auckland is envisioned as a socially inclusive city where diversity is celebrated (Auckland Council, 2012a). Tensions are anticipated in creating 'a place for everyone' while at the same time responding to the Council priority to 'put children and young people first' (p.40) – particularly in providing for children's safety alongside areas for alcohol use and adult entertainment.

Many of the aspirations signalled in the CCMP replicate trends in cities internationally: the quest to create a more child-friendly (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006; UNICEF, 2009) and socially inclusive city that celebrates diversity (Amin, 2006); a city of vibrant, sustainable, mixed use neighbourhoods based on new urbanist principles (Talen, 2013); and a competitive cosmopolitan city attractive to tourists and financial and creative capital (Paganoni, 2012).

### 2.1. Karangahape Road

Tensions between social groups are liable to be greater in some areas of any city than others. Karangahape Road, commonly known as 'K'Rd', is one Auckland precinct where conflict is likely as apartment complexes are positioned side by side with restaurants, night clubs and 'adult' venues. Fig. 1 illustrates the proximity of high-rise dwellings to the 'Vegas Girl', an image that has adorned a strip club's façade for over 30 years.

K'Rd has a rich history. Located along a prominent ridgeline above the Waitemata Harbour, in pre-European times it was a route traditionally used by Maori to trek between harbours lying to the east and west of the city. By the early 1900s K'Rd was the city's premier shopping street and many heritage buildings, once department stores, remain. Fortunes dipped in the 1960s when over 15,000 homes in adjacent suburbs were demolished to make way for motorway developments (Mees, 2010). The loss of resident shoppers led to a relocation of businesses and vacated premises, which, along with falling rents, encouraged the establishment of the present red-light district.

In Maori 'karanga' means greetings or welcome, and while 'Karangahape' has several possible meanings, the notion of

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