

The situational and relational nature of safety perception in public spaces

A study on the background of feelings of unsafety experienced by children in a Dutch deprived neighborhood

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Abstract

Although unsafety feelings constitute a serious and prevalent public health problem among children, little is known about the reasons why children feel unsafe at some public spaces. This paper describes what places children between the age of 10 and 12 living in a Dutch deprived neighborhood perceive to be unsafe and the situational and relational factors which give rise to these feelings. We found that children do not perceive public spaces as either safe or unsafe in itself, but unsafety feelings arise at places because of relational factors, based on children's own experiences or stories about unsafety within the neighborhood. The children used different types of strategies to deal with unsafety, which are similar to strategies used by teenagers. For example, children avoided people they felt unsafe with and moved around in groups at places they perceived as unsafe. Furthermore, the children suggested that safety in public space could be improved by having more surveillance, but also realize that feeling unsafe is sometimes part of life.

Key words: unsafety perception, children, go-along interview, neighborhoods

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Introduction

It is important that children feel safe at neighborhood public spaces, because unsafety feelings constitute a serious and prevalent public health problem among children (Mijanovich & Weitzman, 2003). Studies point out that these feelings could lead to emotional problems (Meltzer et al., 2007), lower school performances (Milam et al., 2010) and anxiety disorders (McKenzie and Harpham, 2006). Children who feel unsafe in public space also experience more physical health problems. They have a greater risk of cardiovascular disease and obesity as adults due to a decrease in outdoor activities (Carver et al., 2008; Molnar et al., 2004).

However, current research into children's feelings of unsafety in public space often focuses on the concerns of adults, overlooking the perception of children (Bromley & Stacey, 2012; Nayak, 2003). It is important to realize that every child has his or her own experiences and their own individual perspective, which differs significantly from the perception of adults (James & Prout, 2003; Matthews & Limb, 1999). Therefore it is no surprise that research has shown differences between their perceptions of neighborhood safety as well (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). Adults often don't know about the risks children have to deal with and respond to things adults believe children worry about, rather than the actual concerns of children (Kelley et al., 1997; Turner et al., 2006).

Research on why children feel unsafe in public space often paid little attention to the spatial setting of the places where children feel unsafe, to the circumstances under which unsafety feelings are evoked as well as the ways children dealt with experienced unsafety at those places. Some studies found that situational factors influence children's safety perception, such as the number of playgrounds (González-Carrasco et al., 2019) and trees (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). Others identified relational determinants that influence whether a child feels safe, such as being familiar with places (Collins, 2001) and stranger danger (Scott et al. 2000; Moore & McArthur, 2017). To enrich and add detail to our understanding of children's safety perception in socio-spatial context, more research on the situational and relational factors which give rise to unsafety feelings is needed at those places where unsafety actually is experienced. These insights will help policy makers and urban planners to develop public spaces which are being perceived as more safe by children (Matthews & Limb, 1999).

Little is known about the safety perception of children in Western European deprived neighborhoods, since most research on children's unsafety feelings took place in other parts of the world such as North America (Mijanovich & Weitzman, 2003; Côté-Lussier et al., 2015) and Great Britain (Bromley & Stacey, 2012; Meltzer et al., 2007; Mullan, 2003; Scott et al. 2000). Deprived neighborhoods in Western European cities have been relatively well maintained and poverty concentrations are lower than in other parts of the world, as for instance the ghettos in the United States (Friedrichs et al., 2003) due to their social housing schemes and social security system. These kind of differences between countries may very well lead to different safety perceptions and determinants as well. More research into the safety perception of children in the Western European spatial context is needed to learn about their specific experiences with unsafety.

This paper describes what places Dutch children between the age of 10 and 12 living in a deprived neighbourhood in the city of Utrecht perceive to be unsafe as well as what situational and relational factors give rise to these feelings. We also studied how these children deal with experienced unsafety and asked them about their ideas on how to improve safety at public spaces.

Background

Children's safety in public space

There are several factors that shape the safety perception of children in public space. With regard to situational factors, research on neighborhood safety among children living in Quebec found that the level of street lighting and the presence of greenery are positively associated with perceived levels of neighborhood safety (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). The same study found that children do not relate physical cues which suggest disorder and a lack of community involvement, such as graffiti and poorly maintained buildings, to unsafety in public space, in contrast to adults. This result suggests that children do not (yet) connect safety with situational neighborhood conditions implying a lack of community involvement and disorder. Places especially designated for children were identified as places children felt most safe, such as schools and sport centers (Moore & McArthur, 2017). Children's perceptions on safety is also positively related to the number of spots available to play within the neighborhood and children's satisfaction with these places and their neighborhood in general (González-Carrasco et al., 2019).

Other studies focused on how relational factors influence the safety perception of children. Familiarity plays a large role as children feel more safe at familiar places and with familiar people (Moore & McArthur, 2017; Collins, 2001). Children expressed that they feel most safe around people they know well, such as their parents and other family members. With regard to familiar places, Scottish children between the age of 9 and 15 perceived public spaces as being riskier than their own home (Scott et al. 2000). Places were seen as riskier the further they were located from home, thus the less familiar they were with the place.

In accordance with the association between familiarity and safety, logically stranger danger is found to enhance feelings of unsafety among children (Scott et al. 2000). Children find it difficult to explain why certain strangers are perceived as unsafe. They often talk about having a certain 'gut feeling' that makes them believe some people might be unsafe (Moore & McArthur, 2017). In general strangers with a different race, religion or living area were considered as being less safe by children (Moore & McArthur, 2017). This is exemplified by a study under Caucasian children aged 8 to 10, which showed that neighborhoods with a higher proportion of visible minorities were perceived as less safe (Côté-Lussier et al. 2015).

Furthermore, children's safety perception is influenced by their own experiences as well as through experiences and perceptions of others (Moore & McArthur, 2017). Adults for instance warn children about people who might be unsafe or places which might be unsafe. Experiences and perceptions of others are often spread through stories that influence children's safety perception within public space. It is important to note that these stories might not always be nor have to be adequate, but can as well be based on rumors and gossip. Much of what children know about risks and danger in general, they learn through stories in the media, which creates a general awareness about the problems and issues that can prevail within communities (Moore & McArthur, 2017).

Since above mentioned situational and relational determinants of unsafety were identified without paying much attention to the places where children feel unsafe, this research aims to enrich and add detail to our understanding of children's safety perception in its actual socio-spatial context.

Coping with unsafety in public space

Most studies on coping mechanisms to deal with unsafe situations focus on teenagers rather than children. A number of coping strategies have been identified, which can be used either separately or in combination (Van der Burgt, 2015), i.e.: avoidance strategies, precautionary strategies, risk-confronting strategies and empowerment or boldness strategies.

Avoidance strategies involve avoiding certain places you don't feel safe and people you don't feel safe with (Van der Burgt, 2015; Cobbina et al., 2008). Often certain places are being avoided at certain times, especially in the evenings. Teenagers are for example more likely to avoid certain places in the evening or not to go outside at all (Visser et al., 2017).

Precautionary strategies (Leonard, 2007) involve taking measures in advance to prepare for potential risks you might come across. Teenagers for instance carry items such as keys, a cell phone or a weapon while being at certain public spaces, which can be used as a defense tool in case of danger (Starkweather 2007). Young people also reported that they prefer to be in a group at unsafe places. Having a friend around makes them feel more confident and therefore creates a sense of safety (Visser et al., 2017; Tucker & Matthews, 2001).

Risk-confronting strategies involve the assessment, interpretation and handling of situations which might be unsafe, for example by leaving a certain place when a certain situation arises or talking your way out of an argument (Leonard, 2007). Teenagers for instance monitor their surroundings to identify what is happening around them (Cahill, 2000). They also divide places, persons and times into self-constructed categories which helps them making the distinction between what is safe and what is unsafe, a process often referred to as 'cognitive mapping'. These maps help them to navigate safely through the neighborhood. Children seem to use cognitive maps as well when they construct their ideas about safety around the concepts 'private' and 'public', where the home situation is conceptualized as 'private' and perceived as less risky than the 'public' situation (Harden, 2000). Using risk-confronting strategies is one way for teenagers to develop 'street literacy' (Cahill, 2000) or becoming 'street-wise' (Anderson, 1994). Street literacy is developed through having experiences within the neighborhood and passed on to each other by individuals. Street literacy provides guidance for dealing with risks at public spaces within the neighborhood by knowing which unwritten rules and strategies can be applied. Little is known about the extent to which children develop and use street literacy. However, some form of street literacy can be expected when they spend a lot of time in the neighborhood and have developed connections with neighbors, parents and friends. This gives them a great deal of knowledge about the fears and feelings of unsafety that prevail within a community (Valentine, 1997).

Empowerment or boldness strategies are used to resist representations and feelings of fear and risk (Koskela, 1997). Teenagers for example tell themselves that there is "no reason to be afraid" in public space, which is an example of an empowerment strategy (Van der Burgt, 2015). Another boldness strategy used by both teenagers and children is to claim public spaces through active usage of that space. This creates a sense of agency and therefore increases the level of confidence and boldness experienced at those places (Watt & Stenson, 1998; Van der Burgt, 2008). Confidence can also be increased by walking a 'bold walk', which makes an individual feel bold and fearless (Koskela, 1997).

As some of the above mentioned strategies have only been identified among teenagers, present research explores whether children use these or similar strategies as well. Furthermore, this study aimed to describe and analyze the extent to and ways in which children cope with unsafety feelings within their own neighborhood.

Context and methods

Selection of respondents

For this study, eight interviews with a total of fourteen children (seven boys and seven girls) between the age of 10 and 12 have been conducted. Participants all lived in the Northern and Eastern parts of Zuilen, which is a deprived neighborhood in the city of Utrecht in The Netherlands. Children have been recruited through contacts with supervisors of local playgrounds, neighborhood communities and messages on social media. This resulted in a diverse sample of children from households with different income levels and different ethnic backgrounds.

Interview method

The interviews have been conducted using the go-along method. This is an increasingly popular and innovative social research method used to investigate the connection between self and place. Go-along interviews enable the researcher to thoroughly examine the participant's everyday life at the places where life takes place (Finlay & Bowman, 2017). The method therefore is very suitable for investigating the subtle and complex ways in which the environment influences safety perceptions. Go-along interviews provide rich data, because walking within the neighborhood evokes memories which might be forgotten during a regular interview. This could be for instance an alley a child once has been bullied by teenagers. In addition, go-along interviews enable the researcher to make a more egalitarian connection with the respondent, because a walking interview is being experienced as more spontaneous and natural. Therefore, respondents are less concerned about whether they give the "correct" answer (Hitchins & Jones, 2004; Finlay & Bowman, 2017). Especially for children this can be pleasant, as they might look up to the researcher because of the age difference and because they are less familiar with formal interview settings.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, a 25 year old Caucasian male. Before the data collection two practice interviews have been carried out to test the interview questions and the interview set up. Children participated either individually or together with a good friend or relative, depending on their preference. Children were first asked to show a place they liked to visit within the neighborhood, to make them feel more at ease with the researcher and the interview setting. Next, the researcher asked children to show places within their neighborhood where they, sometimes, felt unsafe. At those places the children were asked to elaborate on their behavior, experiences and perceptions at the place related to unsafety. Also, children were asked how they cope with experienced feelings of unsafety at those places.

All parents were informed about the aim of this research and gave consent to their child to participate in the interview. Children were informed about the aim of this research beforehand and at the start of the actual interview. Furthermore, they were informed that the interview would be audiotaped and used for academic research but that their privacy would be protected. Moreover, they were informed that they could refuse to answer questions they were uncomfortable with and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were assigned pseudonyms, and these are used throughout this paper to protect their privacy.

Analysis

The interviews have been transcribed, coded and analyzed using MaxQDA qualitative software (version 12.3.1). The researcher has carried out all the coding. General patterns and themes that

emerged during the first stage of the analysis were further refined during subsequent rounds of coding.

Neighborhood

The study took place in the Northern and Eastern parts of Zuilen, a neighborhood located in Noordwest which is one of the 10 districts in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Utrecht is the 4th city of The Netherlands with 350.000 inhabitants. It is a centrally located, multicultural city with a relatively young and high educated population.

Pictures of public spaces in Zuilen (source: photos by researcher, 2019)



Picture 1: Playground



Picture 2: Soccer court



Picture 3: Terraced houses



Picture 4: Apartment blocks

Zuilen is located in the Northwest of Utrecht and the Northern and Eastern parts of Zuilen combined have 13.000 inhabitants. Traditionally Zuilen was a working-class neighborhood and nowadays still many of those families live in Zuilen. They feel a strong connection with their neighborhood, which is represented by its many residents organizations compared to other neighborhoods. In the eighties and nineties many immigrants moved to the neighborhood and therefore 34 percent of the inhabitants nowadays has a non-Western background (Gemeente Utrecht, 2019). Most of these inhabitants have either a Moroccan or Turkish background. The neighborhood consists of a number of smaller sub-neighborhoods, each with their own characteristics and types of housing. Most of these sub-neighborhoods are centered around a square at which often a playground is located. These squares are used by children, youth and parents to meet other inhabitants and engage in social activities. Zuilen has a small shopping center and has limited green space, aside from some small parks around the district. The housing consists of apartment buildings and terraced houses. Part of the housing stock originates from

before the Second World War and part consists of apartment buildings which have been built after the war. As a consequence of restructuring developments some parts of the neighborhood have been demolished in the last decades and replaced with new construction (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018). This has led to gentrification and an influx of high-income households in small parts of the neighborhood.

Zuilen is considered a deprived neighborhood, especially the Northern and Eastern parts. Incidents with gun fire and robberies have taken place in the neighborhood in the last years and those events often get picked up on by the media, which has given Zuilen a bad reputation (RTV Utrecht, 2019; DUIC, 2018). The people living in the Northern and Eastern parts of Zuilen grade public space within their neighborhood below the Utrecht average. 40 percent of its inhabitants report that they sometimes feel unsafe in their own neighborhood, which is 10 percent point above the Utrecht average. Crime rates are above average and inhabitants complain about street clutter and shoplifting. Especially youth nuisance is a problem. Youth often meets at public spaces within the neighborhood to hang out and especially in Zuilen their behavior, or even their presence, causes friction with other inhabitants. (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018).

Findings

Places that make children feel unsafe

Children perceived their neighborhood as a safe place in general, although they all could mention places where they (sometimes) feel unsafe. When children were asked to show a place they like and places where they feel unsafe, it appeared that the distinction between those places was not easily made. Places where children liked to play, such as playgrounds and soccer courts, were often places they sometimes felt unsafe as well. This is illustrated in the following quote by Sanne (10 years old, Dutch) who is talking about a playground she likes to play:

'There is beautiful nature over here and a lot of children come here to play. And what I do, I mostly play with the water over there. And actually, it's always nice to play here, except in the evenings. (...) It starts around 8pm, then we go home and we see boys and girls in their cars talking to each other and sometimes inhaling nangs (laughing gas). When I see that I always want to go home, because I don't like it when they're there.'

While playgrounds and soccer courts were the most common places children sometimes felt unsafe, a wide range of other places has been shown to the researcher. These places could be clearly defined such as a square or a bush, but also rather vague such as part of a sidewalk next to an apartment building. Not only is the level of safety of the same place perceived differently by the same child depending on situational and relational factors, but the same place can also be perceived differently by different children. This is emphasized in the following quotes by Bram (11 years old, Dutch) and Larissa (11 years old, Russian), who were both talking about the same square within their neighborhood:

Bram: 'Actually, it's very quiet over here, and there is never any trouble'

Larissa: 'Yes, there are a lot of boys [over there], mostly late in the afternoon and in the evening. If I then for example had to go to karate, I had to pass this square. And when I went home, there were always boys over there and it seemed like they were talking about me and followed me. It was a group of boys and they had knives, so that was unsafe for sure'

While Bram has never encountered unsafety at the particular square, Larissa expresses she's afraid around this space as she has been chased by loitering youth over there in the past. Previous experiences by children can therefore lead to large differences between safety perceptions among children, even on identical public spaces.

Situational and relational determinants of children's unsafety feelings

Whether a child feels safe in public space seems to depend more on relational rather than physical factors. The people children encounter, their relationships with these people and the behaviors these people perform seem to play a large role in shaping their safety perceptions in public space in daily life. Three groups of people who often seem to evoke unsafety feelings can be distinguished: strangers, loitering youth and mean peers.

Strangers, or so called stranger danger, play a major role in the way children perceive safety in public space. Children are afraid of strangers because they potentially can do harm and behave unpredictably. When children were asked who those strangers exactly were, they mostly referred to middle aged and older men using terms such as lunatics, rapists, stalkers and creeps. They told that a certain gaze, type of clothing or strange behavior could indicate whether a stranger was a potential threat. However, children found it difficult to exactly describe how they judge the potential threat of a stranger, just like Hassan (11 years old, Moroccan-Dutch):

'Some people you can see they're nice, but some, well, they do stuff that's not allowed. (...) Yes, it sounds strange, maybe it sounds like I'm blaming people out of nowhere, but sometimes you just see whether people are nice.'

Hassan seems to refer to having a certain 'gut feeling' as was identified by Moore & McArthur (2017). Other children felt more unsafe around strangers with whom they are less familiar or share few characteristics, which also supports findings of Moore & McArthur (2017) regarding stranger danger. Milan (12 years old, Dutch) for example told that he feels unsafe in a street close to his home where a lot of Polish people are living as they behave very differently from the Dutch. In general, children associated certain spots within the neighborhood with strangers danger based on stories heard from others, which often fueled children's fears for strangers. These stories might play a more important role than personal experiences in shaping a child's safety perception, which is illustrated in the following quote by Sanne (10 years old, Dutch):

Sanne: 'Not in the grocery store, but around the shopping center, there it's not always... there sometimes are people who mistreat children.'

Interviewer: 'Alright, and how do you know that happens?'

Sanne: 'I mostly heard it from friends and did not experience it myself.'

Although both boys and girls mention strangers as a potential threat, girls seemed to have greater concerns about stranger danger. Girls talked more about stranger danger than boys and were more specific in describing their fears of being grabbed or being hurt. Several girls for example mentioned that they had either seen or heard about an incident with a man who had tried to harass a girl next to their elementary school. Coming across this very same man in the neighborhood made the girls feel unsafe, like Esmay (12 years old, Moroccan-Dutch) was telling:

'Well, I saw that man [who had tried to harass the girl] staring intensely at me. Because when we went to gym class we saw that man again, and I was very shocked because I thought he's back. So now that scary feeling comes back again. And he really looked at me like 'I'm gonna stalk you.'

Other girls also reported that they have been gazed at or followed by older men and mentioned fear for abduction or stalking. The strangers boys talked about were often associated with the use of alcohol or drugs. Elom (10 years old, Moroccan) for instance told that he rather not walks past a house he knows junkies live.

Loitering youth also affects children's safety perception in public space. Children associated loitering youth with bullying, threatening, littering, using drugs, drinking alcohol and vandalism. Both own experiences and stories heard from others here played a role in shaping children's safety perception. In line with findings of Moore & McArthur (2017), many children for instance say that they have felt unsafe because of threats or bullying behavior by loitering youth in the past. Nowadays, this makes them feel more unsafe at places where loitering youth hangs around. The impact stories can have on shaping fear for loitering youth is exemplified by Bram (11 years old, Dutch), who told the researcher a story he heard told by his father. His dad once had put a gun to his head by teens when he was young and this happened on a similar soccer court Bram often plays soccer with his friends. Therefore, he's always on guard while playing soccer at that type of courts. What stands out is that spaces loitering youth use to hang out often coincide with places children like to play, such as playgrounds and soccer courts. The tension between loitering youth and children on playgrounds is illustrated in the following quote by Maarten (11 years old, Dutch):

'Where I'm sitting right now, sometimes loitering youth is hanging around. And when we're playing football over here, they sometimes grab my ball and start shooting at us extremely hard on purpose. And they threaten that we must go away, otherwise they for example come after us with a knife and stuff like that. And that's the type of stuff they're saying to us.'

Maarten's perception of safety at the soccer courts seems to be relational, depending on the presence of loitering youth and the extent to which they engage in unpleasant behavior. These findings support results of Visser et al. (2017), arguing that risk perception should be seen as a dynamic negotiation of different uses of public space by various groups.

Mean peers evoke feelings of unsafety at public spaces in similar ways as loitering youth does. Both groups hang out at the same places and are perceived by children as risky because of their aggressiveness and bullying behavior. However, while loitering youth mainly uses threats to 'claim' their territory, mean peers seem to be threatening 'just for fun'. Bram (11 years old, Dutch) for instance recalls that mean boys told him and his friends that there were dead animals buried at the foot of a tree they were climbing in and they therefore weren't allowed to climb in this tree. The boys told him that they would get their dad to call the police if they wouldn't climb out of the tree instantly. Bram knew the story about the dead animals wasn't true, but felt like they made up the story so they would have a reason to get angry at him. He has ideas about where those mean peers live and why they perform this behavior:

'Well look, sometimes you also have children, in two or three areas within this neighborhood, you also have, well, annoying boys, uhm, those are less kind, they curse at you, and then... (...) Mostly these are the kids from poorer families, who are looking for something to, well, express their frustration I think. And they do so by trying to bully others.'

Like Bram, other children also had or heard about harmful experiences with peers. Incidents such as having stones thrown at them, being chased or having a knife held at their throat have been mentioned, which negatively impacted children's safety perceptions.

Physical neighborhood conditions were barely mentioned as a trigger for unsafety feelings. Laetitia (12 years old, African) and Esmay (12 years old, Moroccan-Dutch) believed that the water stream next to a playground in the neighborhood is unsafe. However, they seemed to be more concerned about the safety of children who can't swim than their own safety. Similarly, both girls expressed their concerns about a bush of nettles next to a soccer field as they were afraid younger children might tumble into the bushes. Others felt uncomfortable at places where cigarettes or empty bags of weed or cocaine were scattered on the floor. There was one bush in particular that contributed to an increased feeling of unsafety. In this bush children have found empty cans, burned newspapers, drugs, needles and even stolen items. These are all cues that hint at the presence of people that engage in unsafe or criminal behavior and hence associated more with the social environment rather than the physical environment.

Coping with unsafety feelings

Children used different strategies to deal with feelings of unsafety. Most of these strategies have already been identified among teenagers (Van der Burgt, 2015), i.e. avoidance strategies, precautionary strategies, risk-confronting strategies, and empowerment or boldness strategies.

Avoidance strategies were most commonly used to avoid persons and places. Avoidance strategies were often used when children encounter people they don't feel safe with in public space, as is illustrated in the following quote by Floris (11 years old, Dutch):

'When I visit the soccer court and I see five different players who are all one or two feet taller, then I'm thinking 'ah'. And in one glance I can see that they're very rough and annoying and yes, then I go back home, play wall soccer or go do something else.'

Children often choose to leave a space, go home and tell their parents what happened when tensions arises. This supports findings of Collins (2001) as it confirms that home is often considered as a 'safe haven'. Children also completely avoid certain places. This happens when own experiences, stories or rumors heard within the neighborhood negatively impact their safety perception and make them feel unsafe around those places. The size of the avoided area can be as large as a whole sub neighborhood as is the case with Bram (11 years old, Dutch), who perceives a certain part of his neighborhood as unsafe because he has been chased and threatened several times by children living over there:

'I really never go there. Only if I really have to and that's for example... Last time I went to the city center of Utrecht by bike so then I had to go here. But then I tried to avoid it by for example riding along the cycling path [which is situated at the edges of this sub neighborhood] as long as I can.'

He expresses taking a different route to avoid the sub neighborhood he feels unsafe as much as possible. Another avoidance strategy often used is walking or cycling faster when unsafe people or places are encountered. Esmay (12 years old, Moroccan-Dutch) for example said that she cycles faster along certain bushes when she comes back from riding school, because she's scared somebody will come out of the bushes. These kind of strategies are commonly used by children, which exemplifies how feelings of unsafety can impact children's socio-spatial practices within

the neighborhood. In line with findings of Visser et al. (2017) the interviewed Dutch children state that most public spaces in the neighborhood are being avoided in the evenings. Max (10, Dutch) is one of those children who prefers to stay inside when it gets dark:

Max: 'After school or in the weekends I go here to play with friends, friends who live over there. And I think in the evening I would... after 8 o'clock I would prefer not to come here.'

Interviewer: 'Alright, and why is that?'

Max: 'It depends on who's present, because at some places there might be people who don't come here to play, but to hang around and bother other people.'

As Max illustrates the 'dark' is associated with an increased presence of loitering youth on the streets, which is why children in the evenings prefer to play indoors. Children also mentioned that their vision becomes worse in the dark, which makes it harder to spot potential risks and therefore negatively impacts their safety perception.

A precautionary strategy often used by children is moving around in groups. Children expressed that they prefer to go to places they feel unsafe together with a group or another person, similar to how teenagers behave (Visser et al., 2017). Travelling in groups makes them feel safe as everybody within the group looks out for each other when potential risk arises. This is illustrated by Max (10, Dutch), who explains why he feels safe around bushes he likes to play:

'I always was here with a group. (...) I liked it that we were in a group, cause we were like a friend group, yes, and we just helped each other'

Furthermore, it was mentioned that being part of a group decreases the probability of being a victim in case of an attack and therefore decreases feelings of unsafety. Children also expressed that groups are less likely to be attacked as there would always be group members who would then automatically witness and report these harms.

Risk-confronting strategies are used by children as well. They for example check whether potential risks such as strangers or loitering youth are present at places they want to visit by first making an assessment of the safety risks and chances to get into trouble at the particular site. Then, children determine whether they want to proceed to this place. This finding supports notions of Van der Burgt (2015) that different strategies, in this case a risk-confronting and an avoidance strategy, can be combined to deal with feelings of unsafety. In line with findings of Harden (2000), children also use cognitive maps as a risk-confronting strategy to help them navigate safely through the neighborhood. Sanne (10 years old, Dutch) for example expressed in an earlier quote (page 9) that she conceptualizes the area around the shopping center as unsafe, while Bram (11 years old, Dutch) said earlier (page 10) that he makes a distinction between parts of the neighborhoods where nice kids live and parts of the neighborhood where mean kids live. These ways to deal with unsafety seem to indicate that children already develop a sense of street literacy, just as teenagers (Van der Burgt, 2015). The development of street literacy is expressed by Milan (12 years old, Dutch) who tells:

'There's a lot going on here in Zuilen, as yesterday when there was a robbery somewhere. But I see stuff happen very often, so I've gotten used to it. I can deal with it better, with the bustle in Zuilen. (...) When you live somewhere for 6 years and it happens that often, in the end it becomes like a rhythm in my head.'

Milan mentions getting better at dealing with the unsafety issues in Zuilen, because he had to deal with unsafety feelings already many times in his neighborhood. This makes clear that previous experiences with unsafety do not only lead to increased levels of fear in public spaces, but can also help in the process of coping with unsafety.

Some children mentioned the use of empowerment strategies to deal with feelings of unsafety, in line with findings of Koskela (1997). A few boys said that they rely on the fact that they can run faster than people who might bring them in danger. Others try to think of positive things when they feel unsafe in public spaces. Sanne (10 years old, Dutch) for instance told that she leaves a place when she feels unsafe, while thinking about funny things that happened to her and her family that make her feel better again.

Few other strategies have been used as well to deal with feelings of unsafety. Examples are talking about unsafe experiences with parents or friends, ignoring people who engage in annoying behavior and using karate skills to get out of an unsafe situation. From all the strategies that were being used by children, the strategies that were used the most have been identified among teenagers as well (Van der Burgt, 2015; Visser, 2017). Therefore, our findings indicate that children cope with unsafety in similar ways as teenagers do.

Improving sense of safety in public space

Children were also asked whether they had ideas about how safety at neighborhood public spaces they sometimes felt unsafe could be improved. More supervision was one of the suggested changes. Children mentioned that putting up security cameras or an increased visibility of the neighborhood police officer within the neighborhood could help to strengthen children's sense of safety. Also the presence of adults in general would already help. This is illustrated in the following quote by Larissa (11 years old, Russian), who was finding ways around the neighborhood after being chased by loitering youth:

'So I went looking for a place where a lot of people were, because I was scared to go along places few people were. Because, those were the places loitering youth could be. (...) Otherwise nobody could stand up for me, which was too scary.'

Larissa's statement illustrates that adults give children a sense of protection, as an adult is expected to reach out in case of trouble. Results from Collins (2001) indicate that children specifically allude to the presence of specific adults as parents or acquaintances. Naima (10 years old, Moroccan-Dutch) for instance said that she feels safe while playing at the schoolyard of their elementary school in the afternoon, as there are always teachers around. With regard to the physical environment, children suggested that bushes in which strangers can hide could be removed. Often children refer to particular bushes in the neighborhood where stolen bags, passports and scooters have been found. Removing those bushes would prevent criminals from performing their activities out of sight and therefore keep them away.

Some children seemed to realize that social safety cannot easily be improved. This is illustrated in the following quote by Hassan (11 years old, Moroccan-Dutch), who sometimes feels unsafe while passing by a house a drug addict lives:

'Look, the police can't prove that they did anything [wrong]. And yes, what could you do? You can't evict them from their home. It's because of the people. They should better themselves.'

This sentiment was shared by others. Children seem to acknowledge that dealing with risks is part of life, and sometimes feeling unsafe therefore is part of life as well.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to learn about the places children perceive to be unsafe and the situational and relational factors which give rise to these feelings. We found that children do not perceive public spaces as either safe or unsafe in itself, but unsafety feelings arise at places because of relational factors, based on children's own experiences or stories about unsafety within the neighborhood. Especially strangers, loitering youth and mean peers were major concerns of children and all contributed to the extent children feel unsafe in their own ways. In light of the exploratory nature of this study, future research on the safety perception of children in different neighborhoods and with different backgrounds is needed to further deepen our understanding of the ways in which relational factors shape children's safety perception under different circumstances. Also, future studies using larger sample sizes would enable researchers to gain insights in potential differences between genders in what determinants shape their safety perception.

Furthermore, this study showed that avoidance was the most common strategy for children to deal with these experiences of unsafety. Children avoided places and people they didn't feel safe around and took other routes to avoid risks. Other strategies such as travelling in groups and cognitive mapping were used regularly as well. Since similar coping mechanisms with unsafety have already been identified among teenagers, our results lead to the conclusion that children cope with feelings of unsafety in similar ways teenagers do. Since our study is among the first to study children's use of coping mechanisms, future research is needed on when and under what circumstances these strategies are used by children and what considerations children take into account.

Finally, present research reported that children think safety at public spaces could be improved by increased supervision. They often felt more safe when adults were around so they could reach out in case of an unsafe situation. However, children also seemed to realize that not all potential risks within public space can easily be eliminated and feeling unsafe is sometimes part of life. Policy or interventions aimed to reduce unsafety feelings among children should therefore not only focus on increased supervision, but also on learning children how to physically and mentally cope with the inevitable unsafety and unsafe situations in public space.

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