

# **Child-Friendly Cities: Critically Exploring the Evidence Base of a Resurgent Agenda**

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## Abstract

Recent public debates about Australia's children and young people have increasingly acknowledged the direct impact of urban development on their health and well-being. This paper reviews a broad range of trans-disciplinary literature addressing child-friendliness in contemporary Australian cities, drawing particular attention to the fact that even some of the most recognised texts on children and young people in Australia make few references in their analysis to the issue of place and neighbourhood. More specifically, the paper points to two particular research challenges confronting the ongoing study of young people's well-being in urban areas, including a) the need for a more thorough analysis, both conceptual and applied, about how children and young people's well-being is affected by different urban forms and by the social and ecological variations that occur throughout cities; and b) the focus on younger children needs to be complemented by a focus on adolescents and young adults who in turn need to be actively involved in confronting these challenges.

### Introduction: reinstating children and young people to debate and research

Recent years have seen a rapidly growing public debate about the welfare of children in Australia. The debate is evident in, and stimulated by, a continuing stream of reportage in the Australian popular media on issues such as childhood obesity, psychic stress in children and young people, the neglected transport needs of the young, and concern about child exposure to abuse and other forms of harm. These foci echo wider international discussions that are responding to new professional concerns about the health and well-being of young people in Western countries.

Much of this reportage has an urban cast, suggesting increased popular recognition that the health and well-being of children have direct corollaries in dimensions of urban development. For example, a widely read and cited 2004 essay in the *Sydney Morning Herald* made explicit links between the epidemic of childhood obesity, and new forms of urban development that apparently consigned children to sedentary lives. The wealthier areas of Australia's cities were held to contain a 'bubble wrap generation' – 'pampered prisoners' whose possibilities for recreation and self expression were limited by poor residential design and by high levels of parental anxiety and control (Cadzow 2004).

The contemporary debates on children's well-being in Western, especially English-speaking, countries have two defining qualities. First, they mark a resurgence of concern for children in professional, political and popular quarters after a period of declining apparent interest in the well-being of young people. Arguably, other populations groups have claimed the centre stage of public debate since the 1970s. They include the swelling legions of older people in the West's ageing societies, new migrant populations that have aroused social interest (and lamentably, occasional social antipathy), and the social groups that from the 1960s sought liberation from older repressive moral and institutional orders, including women, gay people and disabled people.

The second defining quality of the new debates on children is their increasing multidisciplinary, reflecting new professional and scientific recognition of the interdependencies between the different dimensions of children's health and well-being. Increasingly, the traditionally specialized understandings of children's health are opening out to recognize the broad range of factors in the everyday environment that influence the physical and mental condition of children. This is a key point of implication in the new debates for urban scholars and policy makers, whose understandings about the creation and experience of social space are increasingly sought by public health experts, child psychologists and child educationalists. Childhood experts show increasing recognition of, and interest in, the ways in which built environments both reflect and condition the key environmental and behavioural dynamics that shape the well-being of children.

In Australia, these two qualities of the new debates on children were manifest in the 2005 publication, *Children of the Lucky Country?* The book has been a bestseller in a subject area not previously known for mass sales, and was marketed and sold in the main variety stores that populate suburban shopping malls. The book was co-authored by a widely esteemed epidemiologist, an economist and a psychologist, reflecting the new possibilities, indeed imperatives, for interdisciplinary discussion of children's issues. The book's subtitle – *How Australian Society has Turned its Back on Children and Why Children Matter* – supports the view that children have been suffering from impoverished popular and political attention in recent decades, with deleterious consequences for their well-being.

The three authors, none of whom are recognized as urban scholars, go to considerable lengths in the book to explore how the qualities of built environments help to determine the life chances of children.

These explorations are limited and preliminary and invite a broader, more thoroughgoing engagement between urbanists and the various professions with dedicated interests in children.

This paper aims to further this engagement by exploring how urban scholarship might contribute to improved understanding of the well being of children in contemporary Australian cities. Our point of departure is a belief that children have not figured highly in the debates or research agendas that have framed and defined Australian urban studies in recent years. (Here we define 'urban studies' as the cross-disciplinary endeavour that seeks to explain patterns and processes of urbanisation, including the role of urban (especially planning) policies in shaping urban change.) Further, we argue that, with a few notable exceptions, Australian urban policy frameworks have not exhibited much awareness of, or sensitivity to, children's needs and experiences in recent decades.

There have, however, been important tributary streams of interest in children in the broader catchment of urban scholarship, including, for example, the work of Tranter (2007) on children's rights and Cunningham (1999) on play environments. Arguably, however, the mainstreams of urban studies have not focused on children but on other population groups, including the poor and socially excluded; the aged and ageing; women and migrants. None of these social group concerns should be diminished by our analysis. Indeed, locating children within these discrete and overlapping population groupings will be an essential step in producing improved understanding of how social differences shape the experience and the quality of urban childhood.

As we see it, the contemporary task for urban studies is to respond to the 'invitation' for engagement implicit in the emerging interest in built environments in other areas of child-focused scholarship, especially the health sciences. This cross sectoral engagement should enrich all engaged fields, for example by reinstating children, a vital population group, to urban studies and by bringing to health and childhood studies the epistemological and methodological insights of the spatial sciences (notably, Geography and Planning). One especially acute insight that urban studies might offer childhood debates is the falsity of environmental determinism. We detect a determinist resonance in some contemporary public health focused analyses; for example, the emergent proposition in the United States that low density suburbia is essentially dangerous to children's well-being (e.g. Hirschhorn 2005) and/or inevitably produces forms of childhood morbidity, such as obesity (e.g. Plantinga & Bernell 2005).

This paper will propose in outline the prospects and priorities for an urban research agenda focused on children's well-being in the contemporary Australian city. This outline begins consideration of how urban research might engage, debate and strengthen the insights and propositions emerging from other areas of childhood research, especially in the field of public health.

An important framing consideration is tendency of Australian urban policy to ignore or at least understate children's issues. Policy impacts are one – arguably high priority – research prospect for a child focused urban scholarship. Also, reinstating children to scholarship is likely to produce a stronger contest of ideas about how human well-being is influenced by urban change and urban policy.

The concept and the policy of urban consolidation is one area where this stronger intellectual contest is needed. The consolidation ideal has been informed by a mixture of positive and normative thinking, including concerns about specific dimensions of human well-being, such as physical mobility, personal health and social capital. There is little evidence, however, that the conceptualisation and practice of this powerful ideal – which is remaking Australian cities, driving them to higher densities – has been mindful of children's needs. We hold no *a priori* normative position on consolidation, viewing densification as one possible policy lever that may (or may not) serve strategic aims in particular urban contexts. We do anticipate, however, that a research based instatement of children in consolidation debates and practice is likely to produce more nuanced, and context dependent understanding of how density shapes different dimensions of human well-being.

We intend to construct our exploratory research agenda inductively, by anchoring it in the object field of urban analysis, the contemporary (and historically produced) city. Here we distinguish between settings that capture and represent distinct forms of the contemporary Australian urban experience: the consolidating and renewing city, incorporating the inner metropolitan redevelopment zone and the denser parts of the ageing, poorer middle ring suburb; versus the low set residential suburban setting, including those parts of middle ring suburbs and newer, especially masterplanned, outer ring estates. As with any typology, distinguishing between these settings is an abstraction from a more complicated

reality, but which arguably isolates important distinctive fields of urban change and experience. The typology also invites consideration of how urban policies shape (or fail to shape) the spatially variegated forces of urbanisation to produce a geography of metropolitan experiences and possibilities. Our argument is that Australian urban studies can contribute to the broader project of improving understanding of children's well-being by doing what it has usually done: concentrating analysis on the most distinctive and powerful domains of contemporary urbanisation as a means for interpreting the broader urban experience.

The paper has three parts. The next section briefly summarises the recent history of scholarship on urban children's well-being in Western countries, including Australia. We then explore the prospects and priorities for a renewed child focused urban scholarship framed by the typology outlined above. The paper concludes with a broad-brush summary of how child focused urban scholarship might strengthen both Australian urban policy and the broader research enterprise of childhood research.

### **Lost in Space: the Rise and Fall of Kids in the City**

Modern conceptions of childhood and child well-being emerged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and were crystallized during the class struggles, environmental changes and demographic shifts that were unleashed by modernization. Children were the first 'poor creatures' that mid and late Victorian reform movements sought to rescue from the hellfire cities that emerged in the wake of first wave industrialism. On the question of child well-being, there was a decided unity of understanding and purpose – a corollary of what we might now term interdisciplinarity – amongst the various sanitary, labour and housing reformers who sought to check the course of a raw capitalism that was careering towards a social and ecological precipice. Town planning emerged as part of a wave of social improvements which sought, amongst other things, to safeguard children. Whether consciously alert to their deeper purpose or not, the Victorian improvers seemed at least instinctually aware that by rescuing the 'vulnerable' (children, then women, then the proletariat) from the maw of industrial capital, the reform project was in fact rescuing capitalism from an increasingly apparent will for self destruction. By securing the material welfare of the vulnerable, reform guaranteed a future for capitalism and diverted politics away from the revolutionary cataclysm, which some by the late nineteenth century believed was inevitable.

Reform was overtaken by the currents of class struggle diverted from the prospect of revolution and conflict and a new improvement project produced the Welfare State in the twentieth-century. Modernization continued with a political licence that stipulated the need for constant material improvement, including for the working class and vulnerable groups. Children were submerged into this social compact, but remained at its centre. Their sheer demographic significance in a time of rapid population increase, especially after the Second World War, ensured a political and social centrality for children. In the everyday practice and thinking of the professions that created and recreated cities, children were an assumed central consideration. Indeed, so deeply assumed that some commentators became concerned that urban professional practice, though relentless in focus on children, was also thoughtless about their particular needs. Were they another artefact of modernity, mass produced and mass provided for?

Thus, in North America and Europe a lively literature emerged during the 1960s, which attempted to give more explicit thought to the links between urban development and children's welfare. Colin Ward's *The Child in the City* (1978) distilled this complaint with industrial modernism and proposed an urbanism that was much more conscious of children's diverse needs, including their abiding preference for secure homeworlds over broad cityscapes. The growing critical focus on children amongst urban commentators was stimulated by the establishment of a ten year program in 1968, called *Growing Up in Cities*, coordinated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Much of this discussion focused on highly particular questions, such as how aspects of child psychology were influenced by environmental conditions (e.g. Gump 1975), or narrow concerns with the physical design of child play areas (e.g. Lady Allen of Hurtwood 1968). Overall, the ambition of these projects and commentaries was not so much to re-centre children socially as to urge greater institutional awareness of their unique and sensitive qualities (e.g. Lynch 1977). Children were still at the core of the modernization project, but institutions were behaving zombie-like, providing thoughtlessly for their assumed, not considered, needs.

During the 1980s research into children's issues mostly continued with the themes established during the 1970s. That is, it focused on how the physical environment impacted on the social and mental development of children (e.g. Homel & Burns 1985). Some attempts were made to understand the

environment from a child's perspective and incorporate these ideas into policy, but by and large the emphasis remained on children's development and how that is shaped by the physical environment. National and international debates on children and cities had quietened by the 1990s.

As noted earlier, recent years have witnessed renewed interest in public and professional discussion of urban children's issues in English-speaking countries. Specifically, children's physical health has emerged as an area of sharp concern with the recognition that levels of physical fitness among urban children have been declining, most notably in Western countries. Scholarly research and popular interest in children's health has continued into the twenty-first century, focusing particularly on the incidence of childhood obesity and the associated decrease in children's physical activity. Responding to concern about childhood obesity, a growing range of studies has examined the links between children's physical activity patterns and built environment form (eg Richardson & Prior 2005). Other investigations have pointed to an alarming rise in mental health disorders among children in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (UNICEF 2007).

The sense of urgency that seems to characterize new assessments of children's well-being seems charged by the view that children have been downgraded or even swept aside as a political concern and as an institutional priority. There are several potential dimensions to this claim. First, a demographic shift has been underway in developed countries towards smaller households and fewer children. Population ageing has become a key political and institutional concern, arguably to the exclusion of children's issues. Second, the rise of neo-liberalism, especially in English-speaking countries has been marked by the ascendancy of economic priorities over social priorities in political and institutional realms. In this context, econocratic thinking fixes on Economic Wo/Man – the consumer/taxpayer. Children don't make the balance sheet.

Importantly, the new debates which are attempting to refocus political and institutional attention on children, frequently resonate with strident criticism of neo-liberalism and its socio-political consequences, such as increased social and residential segregation, environmental depletion and injury, and strengthened consumerism and materialism. In Australia, *Children of the Lucky Country?* largely attributes the rising indications of morbidity amongst young Australians to the growth of social inequality and the increased competitive pressures on families and individuals. The authors implicate urban transformations in the decline of child welfare, arguing that economic change has created a geography of winner and loser neighbourhoods in the cities. Children sorted or born into the new urban poverty concentrations face relatively poor life prospects.

Just as challengingly for the neo-liberal model, an accumulation of scientific evidence suggests that growing material wealth poses very real physical and psychological risks for children. Luthar's (2003) survey of evidence points to the heavy psychological costs that American children are paying for 'the culture of affluence' that has been contrived by contemporary neo-liberalism. This criticism, of course, is not confined to neo-liberalism and questions a deep assumption of modernization generally: that rising and generalizing affluence would drive a mass improvement in children's well-being. The criticism was echoed in a 2004 popular book in the United States, entitled *Home-Along America: The Hidden Toll of Day Care, Behavioral Drugs, and Other Parent Substitutes*. The book's author, Mary Eberstadt, reported skyrocketing rates of depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders among children and teenagers in middle class and wealthier families. Commentators have taken issue with Eberstadt's causal assessment – especially her critique of day care and working motherhood – but there is rising agreement amongst childhood experts in the United States that many middle class children are suffering from parental deprivation. The steadily accumulating evidence reviewed and discussed by these works points to a much more complex, even fraught, relationship between household wealth and child well-being.

This commentary emerges at a time when debates about children echo those of the Victorian reform period. Some may scoff at this comparison. But in so doing they ignore the stridency of concern emanating from child health experts who report an alarming decline in the well-being of children assessed against a variety of mental and physical health indicators. These claims from experts, not advocates or activists, suggest that many Western children are imperilled by the socio-economic and environmental pressures bearing down on them and by the institutional disregard for their worsening circumstances. The authors of *Children of the Lucky Country?* state for Australia: '[t]he present generation of children may be the first in the history of the world to have lower life expectancy than their parents' (Stanley, Richardson & Prior 2005: 52). 'Child rescue' appears to be back on the agenda, as in the nineteenth-century, again with a strong emphasis on fundamental health issues and their basis in urban conditions.

Urban analysis is essential to improved scientific understanding of children's contemporary problems and needs. Urban environments are where the vast majority of people in Western countries reside and are the principal context within which we must provide flourishing conditions for children. But they are more than mere context: cities and suburbs are dynamic, even fluid, social spaces where constant transformation acts independently to shape the communities that inhabit them. This recognition is seeping through to the non urban professions – in health, community development, education, recreation – who look increasingly to urban analysis for enhanced understanding of how complex environments influence the well-being of children. However, this renewed focus on children's well-being and the relationship to the built environment is not well served by a developed urban understanding (see Gleeson & Sipe 2006). Most contemporary developed cities are hybridised landscapes containing surviving (frequently gentrified) historical accretions from industrialism, significant suburban swathes bequeathed by 20<sup>th</sup> century planned growth and new and emergent compact urban forms (including both brownfield redevelopment and compact suburbia). These contemporary landscapes are also marked by socio-spatial polarisation, revealed in the contrast between localised concentrations of poverty/exclusion and new spaces of affluence and selective inclusion, such as gated communities.

### **Children, Young People and Australian Suburbia**

A renewed focus on children's wellbeing invites plentiful re-considerations of the fundamental physical, emotional and intellectual needs of children and young people. Some of this revisioning relates the needs of children to the qualities of built environments and begins to outline some of the qualities of a child friendly community or city, including the provision of specific social and environmental resources that are needed to secure these needs. However, such resources are significantly mediated by the spaces and places in which they manifest. For example, a masterplanned community primarily comprised of young middle class families, and not marked by significant ethnic diversity, provides a service/need context that is very distinct from an inner city redevelopment area, where households with children are a minority, and where there is a weak presence of services and facilities for children. An ageing middle ring area, with significant levels of ethnic diversity, low socio-economic status, and tenuous housing circumstances, provides a further distinct service need environment.

The following typology distinguishing between the higher density city and middle to outer suburban Australia attempts to better structure analysis of children's urban lived environments by isolating important distinctive fields of urban change and experience. In doing so, the analysis seeks to open up everyday social life to scrutiny and move beyond a view of built environments as passive containers of people, resources and services to an understanding of how they make up and conduct of everyday life in the case contexts, especially at the household level, meets (or fails to) the needs of children and young people.

#### ***Children & Young People in the Compact City***

Two domains of contemporary metropolitan development present key concerns for addressing the needs of children and young people, namely:

- Middle suburban higher density neighbourhoods
- Higher density urban futures

Australian cities are moving to a new higher density future. Many of our major metropolitan areas now have plans that strongly promote higher density housing in centres across the city in order to create more compact cities. These new higher density and mixed use town and neighbourhood centres will account for the majority of new housing development in the next 20 to 30 years. In Sydney, between 60% and 70% of new development will take the form of infill and urban renewal development in medium and higher density forms, accounting for some 440,000 new dwellings in all.

The main logic for this, apart from the assumed environmental sustainability benefits and infrastructure economies of a compact city, are demographic projections that predict families becoming an ever smaller component of the population structure.

Planners are planning for cities to accommodate singles, couples and the elderly. As far as the planners are concerned, family housing is already over supplied in this new ageing city and needs little encouragement. As a consequence, contemporary strategic planning has almost become child-blind,

with the new higher density centres being built essentially for the childless in mind. The talk is of 'vibrant' and 'liveable' mixed use town centres, characterised by pavement cafes, restaurant and entertainment precincts, shopping and office jobs. However, these are a long way from the traditional family-centric suburbs of the past. In the process, the new Australian compact city will be developed into distinctive zones based on age, life style and household composition with town centres for the childless, the suburbs remaining for the minority with children.

This process has been proceeding for some time, promoted by both planners and developers. While higher density housing in the form of flats and town houses has been around for many years, the rate of building has accelerated in the last two decades. In Sydney, more higher density dwellings were built between 1981 and 2001 than separate houses (NSW Department of Planning 2005). The rate of development has also accelerated in Brisbane and Melbourne. Traditionally, higher density housing has been an inner city phenomenon. But the new city plans for each of Australia's eastern seaboard capitals envisage higher density as a feature of suburban town and neighbourhood areas in an unprecedented manner. In particular, the middle suburbs will become the focus of much new higher density renewal. The plans for Sydney envisage a fifth of new urban development will be located in the middle suburbs of western Sydney and another third in the already more densified inner eastern suburbs and inner city.

The two domains of the higher density city outlined above present considerable challenges in addressing the needs of children and young people. For the purposes of this paper, the specific focus will be on Sydney but there would seem to be numerous implications for Australia's other consolidating cities. First, and most direct, is the position of children in a particular, and at present, minority housing sub-market – the higher density and predominantly rental submarkets of middle ring suburban areas in Sydney, taken up by families who are dependent on high density rental housing as the only affordable and accessible housing option and in doing so, highlight the concerns facing children and their parents in what are arguably some of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia's largest city.

The second concerns the implications of the future currently being planned for our cities under the rubric of higher density and compact city planning. In particular, while the compact city plans do not explicitly exclude children, the logic of what is being planned will, under current settings, effectively result in a polarised city, one newly built in town centres and transport corridors for childless households, where the great growth in urban population is expected to come from, and the other, a suburban population in low density housing where families will be catered for. While this may be an over-simplification, the current trends in development certainly point us in that direction.

Indeed, what the example of the middle suburban higher density market shows is that this strict social demarcation is unlikely, but that failing to plan for families in the new high density city will inevitably lead to the kinds of problems revealing themselves in Sydney's disadvantaged middle suburbs, these were themselves the product of planning decision made 30 years ago to create neighbourhoods that promoted higher density without consideration of who might actually end up living there.

There are two aspects of this new compact world that needs better understanding. The first is the fact that the new plans are being rolled out across our cities that have inherent fault lines of status, income and household structure. Certainly in the case of Sydney, the largest and most extensive of Australian cities, these social fault lines have been all but ignored in the metropolitan planning process. Yet they will have significant impacts in terms of the social outcomes of this densification process - a block of apartments built in Bankstown, for example, will house a very different community to one built in Bondi. Importantly, the profile of households occupying higher density housing varied dramatically. Far from being a child free housing type, flats house significant numbers of children. The question becomes: How far is the high density city a child friendly city? The problem for children in the higher density city is that they are largely drawn from among our poorest and most disadvantaged communities. Whether this will change is the key question that we need to consider. Recent research has shown a close correlation between higher density housing in middle and outer suburbs of Sydney and high levels of disadvantage (Randolph & Holloway 2005). These are not public housing estates, but areas of low income private housing, dominated by private rental and characterised by high proportions of flats in concentrations around town centres and transport corridors previously zoned for this kind of housing. Essentially, this is the bottom of the Sydney housing market. Importantly, the proportion of children and families is higher in these areas than the Sydney average.

It is likely that children in the new middle and upper income high amenity developments now being built in waterside and inner city locations may experience trouble-free childhoods, although this remains untested. On the other hand, the older low end rental flat market in a range of locations across the city is likely to be a very different experience for a child.

The association of higher density housing and families in Sydney's middle suburbs is not new, Alex Gooding noting this trend in his 1992 study of the social impacts of urban consolidation in Western Sydney. He also pointed to the connection (p.45) between the role of the higher density sector for families and the implications for social services and social infrastructure provision:

*“The presence of a significant number of families and young children in multiunit housing has obvious implications for the planning of human services, especially children’s services. Despite the image of multi-unit housing as being largely the domain of childless couples and young singles, the fact is that areas which are undergoing significant consolidation also have a significant proportion of young families”.*

In particular, Gooding pointed to the higher proportion of families with children aged under 4 years old in areas with concentrations of higher density housing in Western Sydney (50%) compared to areas of low density housing (41%). Gooding also looked at the impact of urban densification on the demand for social infrastructure. He concluded that this form of housing was resulting in increased pressure on day care facilities for very young children and out of school hours care for older children, as well services for youth, family support services and general community support services. Moreover, few government agencies had undertaken analysis of the needs before consolidation had occurred and responses had been *ad hoc*, contrasting to the situation in new release areas. The piecemeal and fragmented redevelopment of consolidation areas also meant that service planning was difficult and unpredictable – it was difficult to predict the likely size and community outcomes in terms of who would live in the dwellings. Gooding concluded, noting that higher density households are disadvantaged in relation to the general population: “It is clear that human services planning and provision to date have not been adequate to meet the current demands caused by urban consolidation” (p65). He suggested further that social service providers were preoccupied with catching up for the backlog of past underinvestment rather than planning for the outcomes of uncertain new development. Given the piecemeal manner in which urban renewal takes place, there are rarely sufficient funds in advance to build service as they are required, Gooding’s analysis and his conclusions still stands today.

While this analysis helps to identify specific issues affecting children in living in a higher density housing, a number of critical policy questions remain that invite urban researchers to focus more specifically on children in the higher density city:

- What impacts does living in a flat have on early development and early learning?
- How much does the transitoriness of the flat market affect children? Is it a built form issue or the fact that flats tend to be rental and therefore concentrated in high mobility neighbourhoods?
- How does lack of interior space, close proximity to neighbours, and poor open space provision impact on children? How different are these children from Australian norms? What is the impact of a lack of useable open space on children’s development and wellbeing?
- What are the longer term impacts on development, health and wellbeing of living for long period during childhood in higher density housing? A key question to answer is to what extent does the built form affect children’s’ outcomes or is it much more a cultural, economic and social issue – would the children living in these flats have the same outcomes if they lived in houses?

### **Children & Young People in the Outer Suburbs**

Turning attention to children and young people living beyond the compact city, it is important to recognise the distinct demographic patterns that characterise Australia’s outer suburban communities, especially in the major metropolitan areas of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Both 2001 and 2006 census data clearly indicate a disproportionate concentration of children residing in outer suburban communities. Randolph (2004:38) noted on the basis of 2001 census data, that “if you are old, or young, single, without children, or simply want a smaller home or a home affordable to one income, or

a first time buyer, you won't be moving to our newest suburban estates". But with some noteworthy exceptions, these same children residing in outer suburban communities are living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (Vinson 2001), despite recent evidence that some of the most entrenched disadvantaged communities are now found in the ageing middle suburbs (Harding *et al.* 2006).

Whilst it is essential to pinpoint the particular needs of children, it is worth noting beforehand how Australia's outer suburbs remain a still largely unexplored world, as Newton (1999) observed. Peel's (1995) insightful work in Elizabeth in South Australia and Powell's (1993) work in Western Sydney are arguably the standout exceptions but Baum's (1997) sociological study and Fischer's (2003) analysis of migration trends, both in Adelaide's peri-urban fringe, and Taylor & Birrell's (2003) employment prospects comparison highlight what is at best a fleeting interest in outer suburbia. The only long-term Australian studies specifically on new suburbs or communities are Lyn Richard's (1990) *Nobody's Home*, a study of the new outer suburb, (alias) Green Views in Victoria in its first three years of existence from 1978 to 1981 and the more widely acknowledged longitudinal study of Bryson and Thompson (1972; Bryson & Winter 1999). This is also despite the fact that Australia's cities have long been characterised by their expanding suburbanisation (Stretton 1970) where the outer suburbs continue to be the standout context for Australia's overall population growth, with over fifty per cent of new dwellings approved for outer suburban locations of the capital cities (Productivity Commission 2004). Gilbert (1988) arguably has devoted the most rigorous analysis of why the suburbs have been neglected by many but especially the academy, chronicling the long history of anti-suburbanism in Australia which has almost paradoxically sought to deny or ridicule the deep lure of the suburbs and an ongoing Australian affinity for suburban living (Johnstone 1994; Gleeson 2006).

A rapidly rising feature of Australian outer suburbia is the master planned community (MPC). Although Bounds (2000) and Costley (2006) provide helpful conceptual overviews of this suburban form, it is Gwyther's (2004) doctoral study comparing a MPC with a typical residential development area in western Sydney that provides the deepest analysis of children and young people. She stresses the centrality of security in a MPC, particularly the safety of children:

"The idea of feeling safe while strolling around the estate, even after dark which a number of informants did, and in allowing children to play with other children outside the home provides residents with confirmation as to the physical security of their housing choice. Additionally, physical security involves the belief by parents that children can be protected from falling in with a 'gang' (a fear many parents in the study expressed) because they socialize with families holding similar values and parental styles as themselves".

However, the well-being of children and young people in Australia's new and outer suburban communities remain largely unexamined, partly because of the broader lack of emphasis in relating children and young people's experiences in relation to place. Ellen and Turner's (1997) observation of the lack of empirical studies to provide guidance to policy makers about the relative importance of particular neighbourhood attributes, including physical distance and isolation, on children's and adolescents' sense of well-being remains largely true for Australia today. While the bulk of studies they cited found that the characteristics of areas where children grew up do have impact on their behaviour and well-being, "the existing evidence is inconclusive when it comes to determining which neighbourhood conditions matter most" (p. 835), even if some overseas empirical evidence is promising more certainty (Beauvais & Jenson 2003; Goux & Maurin 2006). In Australia, some work at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the 1990s distinguished issues for young people and place culminating in Winter's (1994) analysis of 12-19 year olds experiences living in urban fringe areas where he concludes on the basis of a large comparative sample with young people in inner Sydney and Melbourne, that the key differences in their experiences appear in relation to post-secondary education and entertainment options. The most pertinent contemporary work on the subject of young people and outer suburbia in Australia has come from Jackson & Macdonald (2005) who argue in their study of adolescent lives in Melbourne's north-western peri-urban communities that while their sense of well-being is shaped in part by their built environment, a physically deterministic policy approach is insufficient because it fails to recognise the importance of social relationships. These authors urge policy makers to investigate the concept of social cohesion as a "superior basis for their thinking".

It is notable that some of the most recognised texts on children and young people in Australia (Stanley *et al* 2005; Richardson & Prior 2005; Bowes 2004; Eckersley *et al.* 2006) make few specific references in their analysis to the issue of place and neighbourhood, and, apart from a small chapter from Fegan & Bowes (2004), little differentiation of children's experiences depending on where they are raised. One has to return to 2001 to read a paper in the primary youth studies periodical *Youth Studies*

*Australia* that explicitly addresses the issue of young people and place. Even here, the principal exponent of public space and young people (White 2001) does not specifically acknowledge the spatial differentiation of needs and resources. Noting the resurgence of interest in children and young people's well-being, there nevertheless seems to be a blind spot to the urban fringe in large-scale projects such as UNICEF's *Growing Up in Cities*, major national initiatives actively encouraging youth involvement in planning (Freeman *et al.* 1999). Even in Australia's first national Child-Friendly Cities conference, captured in Gleeson & Sipe (2006), no paper turns attention to the distinctly different environment of the outer suburbs. This lack of attention also raises the more provocative issue of the extent to which place may be a less critical factor in directly impacting children and young people's well-being. Although focussed on whole populations, Savage (2005) and Wellman's (2001) lucid arguments that a diminishing attachment to local place of residence is being supplanted by more universal and contemporary means of attachment to a sense of belonging and community, resonates for the experiences of many children and young people in an Internet-mediated world. Mirroring the lack of scholarly attention to the relationship between place and children and young people, is the lack of evident concern amongst the property development industry, the principal purveyors of MPCs and outer suburban development.

If scholarly attention was to focus more readily on children and young people's experiences of growing up in Australia's outer suburbs, what particular areas of policy research would be of most pressing interest?

A more rigorous analysis of the particular governance issues associated with outer suburban growth would appear to have immediate implications for children and young people's well-being. The public sector has largely distanced itself from any meaningful involvement in the emergence of social infrastructure in outer suburban, privately administered MPCs, not least for the fact that most of these MPCs have emerged in areas where governments are hard pressed addressing far more entrenched socio-economic disadvantage than that perceived in MPCs. However, the unfortunate implications of such a policy stance if it were to persist is to exacerbate such divisions. Despite all major metropolitan cities leaning heavily on outer suburbia, including master planned developments, to accommodate growth, it is notable that with the exception of the Victorian Government's Growth Areas Authority (GAA), there is precious little structural apparatus that might even begin to address the role of government in outer suburban development. The GAA at least concentrates attention on the specific needs of these areas, its stated goal being "to simplify contact between local Councils, developers and Victorian Government agencies, and to work collaboratively to implement measures to improve the planning system" (<http://www.gaa.vic.gov.au/>). There would seem to be obvious benefits for children and young people in narrowing the focus on growth areas elsewhere in the country, not least to avoid the cherry picking approach to what services and agencies come to be involved in these areas.

Another pressing social policy research issue in outer suburbia is to examine the extent of local participatory planning processes. In terms of growing outer suburbs, there are major concerns that the decisions on critical social infrastructure provision, for example, is influenced considerably more by the needs of individual developments than implications for the whole growth area. Such an applied research agenda would draw on successful examples of such approaches, especially those that have incorporated outer suburban growth areas like the Community Renewal (Queensland) and Neighbourhood Renewal (Victoria) programs. This style of bottom-up, collaborative and participative planning undoubtedly still requires leadership from the influential centres of all levels of government but may provide some momentum to overcoming some seemingly intractable problems impacting outer suburban Australia, such as affordable housing, arguably the most pressing issue affecting the well-being of children and young people. Importantly, Eckersley *et al.*'s (2006) findings highlight that the most effective policy responses will not be simply about attempting to enhance young people's resilience, flexibility and adaptability to suit changing social circumstances but that realising young people's potential and optimising their well-being also means shaping social conditions to suit their needs.

Specific initiatives for children and young people in outer suburbia that may also warrant more attention are:

- A more considered concentration on the experiences of adolescence in outer suburbia to be led by local government with an accent on provision of spaces for fostering creativity (McMahon 2004). As a general observation, there do seem to be far more sporting and leisure opportunities provided for young people than the creative arts, although how specific this tendency is to outer suburbia is speculative. Nonetheless, the frequently cited reasons for

aberrant youth behaviour – boredom and isolation – do seem to have purchase in outer suburbia and offering more outlets for creative expression may prove to be an effective measure to not only prevent such behaviour but more importantly have young people feel much more active contributors to their whole community's well-being. When will we see a pub in an MPC, for example, that allows teenage bands to thrash out their latest musings?

- Analysis of how educational institutions integrate the experience of living in a new community with the school curricula and the extent to which schools provide the space for understanding children and young people's experiences of living in their local community.
- The relationship between place and children and young people's health and wellbeing where there persists a sense that the significance of place is rather crowded out by medically-oriented responses to the specific health scares of the day like obesity, drug use, diabetes, and mental health. Growing interest by large public and private urban development corporations and key children's advocacy organisations like the NSW Commission for Children & Young People in place-based measures of children's well-being point to optimistic signs that this gap is being narrowed.
- A more active analysis of how youth-specific affairs organisations and networks in the outer suburbs organise and advocate, to not only challenge the traditional focus of such organisations on the inner suburbs and/or long-held stigmatised 'sinkhole' suburbs but also to draw further attention to the particular issues of disadvantage for children and young people in these areas. As Woolcock's (2006) case study of an MPC showed, these issues are largely being picked up by the few not-for-profit agencies active in outer suburbia, many associated with the Christian churches, and whatever the quality of their responses, the piecemeal nature of youth service provision does not do justice to the scale of how many young people reside in these areas.

## Summary

The paper has pointed to two particular research challenges confronting the ongoing study of creating child-friendly cities, including a) the need for a more thorough analysis, both conceptual and applied, about how children and young people's well-being is affected by different urban forms and by the social and ecological variations that occur throughout cities; and b) the focus on younger children needs to be complemented by a focus on adolescents and young adults who in turn need to be actively involved in confronting these challenges.

The suggested shifts in scholarly attention to the place of children and young people outlined above do not of course fit neatly into any single disciplinary endeavour. Instead, it demands a rigorous, multidisciplinary approach with a gaze that challenges not just methodologically, but also practically via direct implications for the public, private and not-for-profit sectors through a refocused urban studies lens. Moreover, as this paper has spent some time emphasising, there is much ground yet to be made up in terms of a collective appreciation of particular manifestations of the lived experience of growing up in Australian urban environments, whether it be the flat in a dense inner city suburb or a MPC in outer suburbia. Such approaches will need to overcome treasured blind spots and prejudices about Australian suburbia that is more respectful of the diversity of lived experiences, especially those of children and young people. This is not an appreciation that seeks to find billboard-laden virtues of 'family living' where they do not exist or turns blindly away from the exclusivity and consequent degradation of the civic and public spirit characteristic of some developments privileging the childhood experience over others. Rather, it is a call to come to realistic grips conceptually and empirically with the sorts of Australian communities emerging in urban and suburban Australia and the futures being created in them for all their children and young people.

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