

**SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND
URBAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

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SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF CHILDREN AND
YOUTH VOLUME 32

**SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH
AND URBAN CHILDREN
AND YOUTH**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Linda Jane Shaw is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood and Education Studies at Oxford Brookes University, UK. She worked for 15 years as a primary school teacher before moving into Further Education where she managed and delivered early years and Playwork qualifications. In 2007, she took up a consultancy post at Staffordshire County Council. The roles included support for new early years and youth provision, community development and a funded project on children's transitions within and between settings. While working for local government, she completed an MA in Social Policy with a focus on statutory and third sector policy and practice. She moved into higher education in 2016, lecturing in human rights and social justice in education, feminist perspective in education and constructions of childhood. She completed her PhD in 2017 and has since published in Playwork journals and for the series *Advances in Playwork Research*. Her latest publication is a monograph titled *Re-imagining Playwork Through a Poststructural Lens* (Routledge, 2023).

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CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND THE CITY

Rachel Berman, Patrizia Albanese and Xiaobei Chen

ABSTRACT

In keeping with the long-standing focus on cities and urbanism in sociology, the researchers in this volume contribute to our knowledge of children, youth, and the city. These scholars take up ideas connected to agency, belonging, citizenship, identity, participation, power, and relationality and explore both historical and contemporary ways children and youth co-construct, contribute to, are constructed by, navigate, negotiate, and resist their urban social worlds and urban relationships.

Keywords: Agency; belonging; citizenship; identity; participation; power; relationality; children; youth; urban; city

INTRODUCTION

Cities and urbanism have been a core concern of sociology since its emergence as an academic discipline. Urban patterns of social life, which are characterized by large concentration of populations, higher density, growing diversity, weaker kin relationships, increase in social conflict, formal surveillance and social control, and greater inequalities, have direct and structural influence on the lives of children and youth. According to the United Nations, almost one-third of the 4 billion people living in urban areas today are children (UNICEF, 2022). An increasing number of scholars in social science disciplines have also grappled with the complex realities of urban childhood and youth as well as the popular tendency to associate urban childhood and youth with deficit, crisis, and danger.

Scholars focusing on children and human geography have critically examined urban spatial organization for children, as well as connections between children and

nature (see, e.g., [Freeman & van Heezik, 2018](#)). [Malone \(2018\)](#), writing on children, cities, and the environment opens her book by noting that urban children are often depicted as the most disadvantaged social group of our time. She notes that while cities have always been framed as risky places, especially for children, the urban spaces that children inhabit today have been depicted as increasingly crowded, polluted, and out-of-touch with nature ([Malone, 2018](#)). [Murnaghan and Shillington \(2016\)](#) challenge anti-urban assumptions that “view nature as external to the city” and direct attention to existing urban natures that are meaningful to children (p. 1).

While not the disorderly and diseased places they may be made out to be, cities can be a place of great inequities. [Bartlett \(1999\)](#) discusses city authorities’ responsibilities in responding to the rights and needs of children and youth, which compete with other multiple demands for dwindling resources. [Camilleri’s \(2007\)](#) volume highlights the experiences of the often under-served population of children and youth in inner cities around the world, especially their debilitating mental health challenges, and explores how creative arts can be used as helpful interventions for therapeutic and advocacy purposes.

While urban children are depicted as victims of their locale, urban youth are more often than not depicted as social problems, contributing to the “danger” of cities. Add to these perceptions a global pandemic that had children and youth confined to the indoors, learning virtually from home, with once bustling streets turned desolate, and the city looks scarier and more alienating than ever. However, as [Christensen and O’Brien \(2003\)](#) remind us, studies of cities and childhood should “[move] beyond ideas of the city as a problem or children as a problem” as how “ordinary city childhoods are formed, lived and experienced” (p. xvi) also need to be studied and understood. Indeed, cities offer access to opportunities for civic engagement, greater diversity of peoples, and increased access to services. Notably, even the once declining American cities of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have been experiencing population turnaround and growth since the 1990s, with amenities, including schools for families with young children, said to be improving in central cities in recent years ([Sander & Testa, 2015](#)). Yet many questions remain. What is the role of children and youth in determining such amenities, in the creation of services and policies, what are their opportunities for civic engagement? Where is their voice in city building?

Volume 32 of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* explores some of the ways children and youth co-construct, contribute to, are constructed by, navigate, negotiate and resist their urban social worlds and urban relationships. While not all authors in this volume make their academic home in sociology, all of the chapters take a sociological approach in that attention is paid to large-scale social processes, structures, and relationships.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

Section I: Social Construction and Relationality – Children’s and Youth’s Relationships with Urban Contexts

As noted, one of the persistent themes of deficit surrounding urban children is a lack of connection to nature, with the assumption that any such connection will

bring positive effects for all children uniformly. In the first chapter in this volume, Angela Oulton and Susan Jagger examine the school garden movement in urban settings in North America through the use of historical texts and contemporary discourse. They demonstrate how the school garden has been neither welcoming nor accessible for all children, and how the movement constructed/constructs childhood in particular ways. The school garden movement, while seemingly innocuous or beneficial, enforces and reinforces unequal power relations where racialized, impoverished, and immigrant children are meant to be “civilized” and assimilated.

While time spent with nature in whatever form is unproblematically seen as a cure-all for what apparently ails urban children, the on-line world is often demonized, or, like nature, offered up as a panacea. How do relationships with the digital play out in the lives of urban young people according to young people themselves? The next two chapters in the collection examine the relationship to digital spaces as reported by youth, itself a contested term, during the global pandemic.

The neurodiverse youth living in urban spaces in Alice Leyman’s UK study reveals that computer gaming and Cosplay – dressing up as a character from a work of fiction (such as a comic book, video game, or television show) – fostered connections with like-minded individuals. This is in contrast to reports of autistic youth who may find urban settings oppressive and chaotic. By using creative and flexible methods, Leyman centers the perspectives of autistic youth, an under-researched and overlooked group.

The third chapter in this section by Lucas Walsh, Cathy Waite, Beatriz Gallo Cordoba, and Masha Mikola includes discussion of a large-scale, mixed-method study undertaken in Australia that explores young people negotiating troubled transitions during the pandemic, with a focus on how young lives in the city were digitally mediated. The study draws on the voices and experiences of young people in order to understand the role of the digital in their everyday lives; how they negotiated disruptions to education, work and managing relationships during the pandemic to articulate the relationships between digital lives and embodied experiences in the city. Feelings of ambivalence were found to be prominent.

Section II: Citizenship, Space, and Belonging

The position of children and youth in discussions about notions of citizenship only began to receive scholars’ sustained attention in the last 20 years or so. Tom Cockburn’s essay “Children and citizenship in Britain: A case for a socially interdependent model of citizenship” broke ground by drawing attention to children’s relationship to citizenship, noting children’s exclusion from citizenship throughout the nineteenth century until the 1980s, when the idea of children’s rights received growing interest (Cockburn, 1998). Children’s position in a society’s citizenship regime is complex, contested, and mutable. In recent years, scholars have pointed to the discourse of the child as the ideal, victim-citizen in certain contexts (such as child welfare, Chen 2003 & 2008, and youth incarceration, Viterbo, 2022) and its effects of portraying adults as blameworthy and undeserving. Yet at the same time, in many other contexts children continue to be marginalized in and even excluded from substantive decision-making.

The next chapter in this volume is “Inclusion in the Non-inclusive Community: Exploring Children’s Exclusion from the Urban Planning Process in Iran” by Bahar Manouchehri, Edgar A. Burns, Ayyoob Sharifi, and Sina Davoudi. In this work, the authors approach this age-based exclusion as a structural pattern in Iranian society and reveal a number of obstacles to including children’s perspectives in planning, which stem from cultural practices and mechanisms of planning bureaucracy.

Linda Jane Shaw’s chapter “Spaces for Play: Intergenerational Community Development of an Urban Park in the East Midlands of England” discusses a community development project that intentionally promotes cooperation between generations through playwork in a multi-ethnic context. Shaw’s project demonstrated the potential of community-based play in urban environments for creating socially just relations and practices.

Citizenship politics is also about hierarchy and terms of belonging and identity, as well as actions to navigate these. Alex Bing’s chapter “Educational Streaming, and Identity Formation Among Stem-bound Asian Canadian Youth” examines how STEM-based streaming articulates with anti-Asian racism in Canada’s public school system to shape academic as well as identity options available to Asian Canadian youth. Through the accounts of school lives from youth themselves, Bing uncovers diverse and partial acts of resistance among Asian Canadian youth that would otherwise have been misread and dismissed as passive internalization of prejudice and dominant norms.

Section III: Power, Structure, and Agency

The third section of the book brings together chapters that take up ideas of power, structure, and agency and examine local, national and international policies and initiatives and urban children and youth.

In the United States, book bans are at a historic high according to [PEN America \(2022\)](#) and youth experiencing these bans are pushing back. Christine Emeran examines how public high school students navigate their marginalized position as minors, to challenge the structures of authority represented by their parents and school administration. She centers youth in her analysis as she examines case studies of protest by students to overturn book bans.

In the next chapter in this section, Sydney Chapados demonstrates how government strategies said to be aimed at ending child poverty in the province of Ontario, Canada, are used to justify community revitalization efforts that displace low-income populations, and which ultimately prioritize and benefit private market investment. She outlines how central to these strategies is the figure of the child – constructed as innocent and vulnerable – thus requiring protection and saving from the perils of urban poverty, by middle- and upper-class interventions.

As is obvious by now, urban neighborhoods are more than physical spaces, they encompass social relationships and understandings ([Adams, 2019](#)). The child-friendliness of urban environments consists of relationships, systems and spaces that enable young and older inhabitants to experience a sense of belonging, or not ([Adams, 2019](#)). Children’s participation and voice in transforming

their surroundings is central to the creation of child-friendly cities and neighborhoods. The Child Friendly City Initiative (CFCI) is a UNICEF-led collective impact intervention aimed at promoting children's rights at city and community levels. This volume closes with a chapter by Pamela Wridt, Danielle Goldberg, Yvonne Vissing, Kristi Rudelius-Palmer, Maddy Wegner, and Adrianna Zhana discussing the benefits of this initiative. They provide a historical analysis of the CFCI globally and in the United States, and how this intervention draws upon and advances sociological research on young people's meaningful participation. Three case studies are analyzed to examine children's participation in CFCIs and explore lessons learned.

This collection demonstrates that "the city" in itself is not the dangerous space nor disorderly place that it is often made out to be. It is for the most part, the backdrop upon which children's and youth's relationships to each other and to adults play out. Dynamic yet unequal power relations remain in place through structures, policies, and practices that continue to frame children as innocent victims and youth as social problems. The researchers in this volume contribute to the growing body of scholarship rethinking children and youth and the city.

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SECTION I

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND
RELATIONALITY – CHILDREN’S
AND YOUTH’S RELATIONSHIPS
TO/WITH URBAN CONTEXTS