



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Designing neighbourhood parks to foster women and girls' sense of safety*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/199323/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Barker, A orcid.org/0000-0001-7801-4216, Warrington Brown, S, Forman, H et al. (3 more authors) (2023) Designing neighbourhood parks to foster women and girls' sense of safety. *Town and Country Planning*, 92 (3). pp. 200-204. ISSN 0040-9960

This is an author accepted version of an article published in *Town and Country Planning Journal*.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Designing neighbourhood parks to foster women and girls' sense of safety

Drawing on research on women and girls' views on parks and safety, **Anna Barker, Helen Forman, Carl McClean, Susannah Walker and Sibylla Warrington Brown** look at the need for public space design and policy to fully consider green space—a vital element of any 20-minute neighbourhood—through the lens of gender and safety, and then outline some key guidance principles for parks professionals

Parks are an essential part of local neighbourhoods. As well as providing environmental benefits, a local park can help to create a sense of community and provides a space in which to be active, play and relax, which benefits mental as well as physical health. So it is no surprise that parks are recognised as a key part of a thriving 20-minute neighbourhood, and also one of the top five amenities that British people would like to have within a 15-minute walk of their home.¹

But simply providing a park is not enough; it has to be accessible and of good quality. Unequal provision of green space is now being recognised as an important issue.² Engagement with nature is often lower among groups who could benefit the most, including women.³ Deprived communities often have a lower quality and quantity of green space provision than more privileged areas, and the creation of 20-minute neighbourhoods recognises the importance of addressing these inequalities.⁴

So far, gender has been given less attention in policy and research,^{5,6} despite recognition that women may spend more time in their local area as a result of gendered caring responsibilities and different commuting patterns.^{6,7} Neighbourhood parks may therefore be of particular importance for some women, and so inequalities in local park provision may be amplified for them.

These are not the only barriers that women and girls face in accessing good-quality local parks and their benefits. Our recent research demonstrates that safety is perhaps the single

biggest issue for women and girls, significantly restricting their ability to access parks and other green space. The majority of women and girls we interviewed in West Yorkshire think that parks in their local area are very or fairly unsafe for women and girls (57% and 76%, respectively).⁸ Any public space design or policy which does not consider green space through the lens of gender and safety will fail to be fully inclusive. This, clearly, has to include the 20-minute neighbourhood.

Women have particular safety concerns which men do not share, notably a fear of rape, and the constant worry that sexual assault may form part of other crimes, such as robbery. Their feelings of safety are also affected by other aspects of their identity such as race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and age. Notably, parks are a particular source of fear. Nearly one in 10 young people aged 16-19 years who experienced rape (including attempts) since the age of 16 were victimised in a park or open space, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales.⁹

Safety is a relative and multi-faceted concept, broader than crime. Some acts of sexual harassment which women regularly experience in public spaces are not categorised as crimes, but do impact on how safe they feel. Some 71% of women in the UK have been sexually harassed in public, and this figure is much higher (86%) among 18-24 year olds.¹⁰

The implications of this for women's access to community parks and local neighbourhood mobility need to be addressed. 'Good green spaces in the right places' will only be accessible for women and girls if they feel safe there. This principle has to be at the centre of design and policy if we are to provide inclusive and vibrant local spaces for all.

In the rest of this article, we set out what women and girls told us about parks and safety, as well as giving an outline of the guidance for parks professionals which is being created as a next stage from our research.

Research findings

In 2022, we interviewed 117 women and girls aged 13-84 years across West Yorkshire to better understand what women and girls perceive to make parks feel safe and unsafe, and why.¹¹ Their views were varied, depending on identity, age, location, and park experiences, yet key areas of consensus also emerged. These are the issues that we focus on below, as issues that can be considered in planning new parks for compact neighbourhoods, as well as improving existing local spaces.

Women and girls told us that visibility is crucial for their sense of safety in parks, with darkness perceived as less safe than daytime, and open areas preferred to areas of thick vegetation and hidden or secluded spaces. As one participant explained:

'So parks with thick vegetation, hedges, trees; no I don't feel safer [...] they have thinned things quite a lot so there is more visibility and that feels really good.'

The creation of visibility and openness along main paths and in core areas of parks is vital. In this respect, the edges of parks also feel safer, particularly in the absence of fences or other barriers, as they are overlooked by passers-by on the street and facilitate easy escape.

For teenage girls a sense of openness is even more important. Fences and barriers—like those around multi-use games areas (MUGAs)—made girls feel trapped and unsafe. Girls were also concerned about play spaces being dominated by boys, and the lack of facilities in parks which met their needs. The girls we spoke to prioritised active sociability—so things like age-appropriate swings and group seating can make them feel like parks are spaces for them.

Generally, women and girls do not feel safe in parks after dark, and largely avoid parks at these times. In a country where it can get dark as early as 3pm, that's a significant restriction. So lighting emerged as a key issue. For some women and girls, lighting on commonly used routes through parks would mean that they could confidently walk home on a winter's afternoon, walk their dog in the park in the early morning feeling safe, or access an exercise class or work opportunity in another part of the neighbourhood where the park acts as the significant cut-through route. Teenage girls also pointed out that some facilities in parks are lit, but not the paths to/from them.

However, this was not a unanimous opinion. Other women did not feel that lighting would be sufficient for them to use parks after dark, and prioritised societal change. As two participants put it:

'That's not going to stop men from hurting a woman just because there's more lighting in the park.'

'We are doing things around it which make us safer, but not dealing with the cause, which is males' behaviour [...] and until that is dealt with, women and girls will not be safe in those quiet spaces.'

Experiences of harassment pervaded women and girls' sense of unsafety in parks. Furthermore, participants often discussed avoiding parks where they had heard about incidents of male violence, such as rape. These findings are concerning for the gendered accessibility of all parks, yet have particular implications for women's local mobility, including use of active travel routes through parks.

'Last month a girl got raped in the park. And the weird thing is [...] she was just taking her kids to school and it was 8 in the morning, so it wasn't even night [...] he's just grabbed her and raped her in the park [...] And the thing is, it's not the first time I've heard of it, so I kind of feel weird going there.'

Women and girls felt that men should take more responsibility for changing their behaviour in parks to make women and girls feel safer, such as not walking or jogging too close and standing up to harassment. In addition, there was agreement, from girls especially, that relevant authorities are not doing enough about harassment in parks:

'Parks are all the same as they used to be, and they've still had loads of reports about women being harassed.'

Another clear area of agreement was that well used parks felt safer. Women and girls said that their sense of wellbeing and safety in parks was improved by the park being used and shared by other users that they perceived as legitimate. The presence of other women was seen as a sign of safety, and empowered other women and girls to use the park. Furthermore, parks that have a range of facilities and mixed uses, including amenities such as cafés, tend to be busier and so felt safer.

'Having other women and girls there, especially [...] on their own; it makes you feel a lot better.'

The presence of park staff, volunteers and other users helps women to feel that they are not alone or isolated, reduces prospects for violence, and gives a greater chance of bystander intervention in the case of trouble. Opportunities to seek help are also important, with women emphasising the importance of visible staffing and policing, and girls favouring the installation

of help points. Organised activities were also seen to improve safety by bringing in more users who could intervene or provide support.

'I will walk the dog while parkrun's going on because [...] there's an organised thing going on, there's lots of volunteers around, there's lots of people I could ask for help if I needed.'

These events also extend women's use of parks by enabling them to engage in exercise, recreational and social activities that they would not do alone because of safety concerns.

While this may seem like a blueprint for parks in compact 20-minute neighbourhoods, there are other issues, in particular the uneven access to high-quality park space in deprived areas.⁴ As one girl explained, the lack of access to quality facilities in her local park, including a play space, meant that she had to travel to a park further away:

'There was a reason I wouldn't leave and go to the park. The state of it. You'd have a swing set without the swings. They would have been taken away having been vandalised. We'd spend most money on transport to get to another park that was better maintained.'

Given their greater facilities, staffing and resources, 'major' city parks may continue to feel safer for some women and girls:

'In the bigger parks [...] definitely you feel much more comfortable being around those facilities because there is people there and there is stuff going on and there is a sense of it being official [...] And it attracts people throughout the day.'

For 20-minute neighbourhoods to work in the long run, we will need to address this, by redressing the uneven distribution of high-quality facilities but most of all by ensuring that all parks of every size feel safe for women and girls.

To this end, West Yorkshire Combined Authority has worked with Keep Britain Tidy, who manage the Green Flag Award programme, Make Space for Girls and the University of Leeds to develop a set of design and management principles for both existing parks and new developments. The following section is a very brief outline of what this guidance contains.

New parks guidance

‘If more things make it safer for you to be in parks, obviously you’d want to be in parks more often, because it’s safer for you.’

The guidance – *Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls* - cover 10 principles (see Table 1) under three themes. ‘Eyes on the park’ reflects the fact that the presence of others makes women and girls feel safer. ‘Awareness’ addresses design issues that can help women and girls feel more secure. ‘Inclusion’ considers the importance of bringing a diverse cross-section of women and girls into our parks and designing spaces with their input.

Forming supplementary guidance to the Green Flag Award programme—the benchmark standard for management of parks and green spaces across the UK and beyond—the principles illustrate practices and projects that can be implemented at varying scales and budgets. In addition, 10 case studies from Britain and abroad are included to demonstrate how these principles can be applied. One of the case studies is of Umeå in northern Sweden, which began focusing on gender equality in 1978. A group of teenage girls worked with landscape architects and an artist to create Frizon (‘Freezone’) in Årstidernas Park (see the picture below). Based on a roundabout, it has coloured roof lights and swinging seats, with backrests, ergonomically designed to suit teenage girls. It also hosts WiFi and speakers to play music; and it has excellent visibility and lighting, situated near well used paths.

Table 1
Principles for safer parks

	Principle	Description
Eyes on the park	Busyness and activation	The presence of other people makes parks feel safer. This can be fostered by targeted activation to bring more women and girls into the park, as well as activities that make parks busier.
	Staffing and authority figures	Parks staff and other official presences such as the police are important in creating a sense of safety.
Awareness	Visibility and openness	The ability to see around for a good distance and be seen by others—particularly along main paths and in core areas of the park—is important.

	Escape	Women and girls feel safer near the perimeters of parks and in unfenced spaces, because they can escape more easily from dangerous situations, and are more visible.
	Lighting	Good lighting along main paths in parks can improve some women’s access, but contrast, light colour and aspect need to be taken into account, as well as considerations around the effects on residents and wildlife.
	Wayfinding and layout	Facilities, paths and features need to be arranged to encourage use by women, maximise visibility, and be easy to navigate.
Inclusion	Belonging and familiarity	Familiarity makes parks feel safer, and can be fostered through both design and activation; and women from diverse groups need to feel that they belong.
	Image	The image and reputation of a park influences how safe it feels to potential users, and requires good maintenance, management, and communications.
	Access and location	A safe park on its own is not enough. For women and girls to use the park, they must also be able to access it safely, which means that the surrounding area and approach must all feel safe.
	Co-production and engagement	Involving women and girls in designing parks creates safer spaces, but it is essential to consider intersectionality and other needs.

Conclusion

Designing safer parks is important for everyone, but our research demonstrates that the perspectives and lived experiences of women and girls require specific consideration. If we can

create vibrant, lively, sociable and active green spaces that are welcoming for women and girls, local parks could be cornerstones of gender-inclusive and accessible 20-minute neighbourhoods.

The guidance principles we have outlined show how we can make changes to park design and management to help women and girls feel safer and more welcome in these spaces, at all times of day and throughout the year. However, the women and girls we spoke to also highlighted broader social issues, such as misogyny, harassment, and violence against women and girls, requiring more fundamental change. Societal change is essential and necessary, but we can make a difference in the present by changing our parks. And that is what this research and the guidance addresses.

o **Dr Anna Barker** is Associate Professor of Criminal Justice & Criminology at the University of Leeds. **Helen Forman** is Urban Design Manager at West Yorkshire Combined Authority. **Carl McClean** is International Development Manager at Keep Britain Tidy. **Susannah Walker** is Co-founder of Make Space for Girls. **Dr Sibylla Warrington Brown** is an independent researcher. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

1 F Smith: ‘Most Britons would like their area to become a ‘15-minute neighbourhood’’. Web article. YouGov, Mar. 2023. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/articles-reports/2023/03/06/most-britons-would-their-area-become-15-minute-nei>

2 Natural England’s new Green Infrastructure Framework recognises inequalities in green space provision in urban areas, and aims to improve access to local green space for all (within a 15-minute walk from home)—see ‘Natural England unveils new Green Infrastructure Framework’. Press Release. Natural England, 2 Feb. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/news/natural-england-unveils-new-green-infrastructure-framework

3 F Boyd, MP White, SL Bell and J Burt: ‘Who doesn’t visit natural environments for recreation and why: A population representative analysis of spatial, individual and temporal factors among adults in England’. *Landscape & Urban Planning*, 2018, Vol. 175, 102-13

4 *20-Minute Neighbourhoods—Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities. An Introduction for Council Planners in England*. TCPA, Mar. 2021. www.tcpa.org.uk/collection/the-20-minute-neighbourhood/; and A Calafiore, R Dunning, A Nurse and A Singleton: ‘The 20-minute city: An equity analysis of Liverpool City Region’. *Transportation Research Part D: Transport & Environment*, 2022, Vol. 102, 103111. Available at https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3146153/1/20MinCity_LCR.pdf

5 Although see M Bruntlett: *The 15-Minute City: A Feminist Utopia?* Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative, on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany, Federal Republic of Germany, 2022. www.transformative-mobility.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/TUMI_WMW_Feminism_and_the15min_City-TZGmSO.pdf; and S MacIntyre: *Her 20-Minute neighbourhood*. Research Masters Thesis, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, 2022. <https://frw.studenttheses.ub.rug.nl/3996/1/SorchaThesis.pdf>

6 S MacIntyre: *Her 20-Minute Neighbourhood* (see note 5)

7 D Wheatley: 'Location, vocation, location? Spatial entrapment among women in dual career households'. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 2013, Vol. 20(6), 720–36

8 In comparison, only 4% of professionals felt that parks in their area of West Yorkshire are very/fairly unsafe

9 *Nature of Sexual Assault by Rape or Penetration, England and Wales: Year Ending 2020*. Crime Survey for England and Wales. Office for National Statistics, Mar. 2021. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/natureofsexualassaultbyrapeorpenetrationenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020

10 *Prevalence and Reporting of Sexual Harassment in UK Public Spaces*. All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for UN Women. Mar. 2021. www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf

11 A Barker, G Holmes, R Alam, L Cape-Davenport, S Osei-Appiah and S Warrington Brown: *What Makes a Park Feel Safe or Unsafe? The Views of women, Girls and Professionals in West Yorkshire*. University of Leeds, Dec. 2022. <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/194214/>

We also interviewed 27 professionals from parks and urban design services in local government and police to provide a comparative perspective. We used Q methodology to identify the main perspectives held by women, girls and professionals, with participants rating their agreement or disagreement with 49 statements relating to feelings of safety in parks. Afterwards, participants reflected on reasons for their views in interviews and focus groups, adding a rich qualitative understanding. Factor analysis was used to identify participants who ranked statements in a statistically similar way, and who share a viewpoint, alongside areas of consensus and divergence.

[Image caption]

The 'Freezone' in Årstidernas Park in Umeå, northern Sweden