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[Paranoid parenting? Rematerializing risk and fear for children.](#)

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Paranoid parenting?

Rematerializing risk and fear for children

Rachel Pain

Senior Lecturer in Geography

Department of Geography and International Centre for Regional Regeneration and

Development Studies

University of Durham, South Road,

Durham, DH1 3LE, England

Tel direct 0191 334 1876

Secretaries 0191 334 8100

Fax 0191 334 1801

email rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract

Both in the social sciences and in popular debates, recent commentaries on fear for children highlight the mismatch between children's and parents' fears and the risk of stranger danger, and point to cultural changes to childhood and parenting in explanation. This paper suggests that a materialist approach to fear and risk may be equally helpful to understanding, and of more strategic advantage in promoting social change which benefits children, especially those who have been victims. It is argued that if research is child-centred, grounded in particular places, and explicit about the social stratification of risk, then experience of victimization itself can explain a large part of children's fears. In support, the paper draws on quantitative and qualitative research with 1069 children aged 10-16 in a deprived area of north east England. The geographies of child victimization and children's fears are compared, showing that many fears about public space are spatially congruent with experiences of risk. These geographies of risk and fear are gendered and racialized and, in this geographical context, paedophiles and asylum seekers have replaced the 'stranger' in children's accounts of danger. Implications for current public and policy debates are discussed.

Key words: children, risk, fear, paranoid parenting, materialism, north east England.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an expansion of interest in children and risk across the social sciences (e.g. Roberts et al. 1995; Scott et al. 1998; Panter-Brick and Smith 2000). In human geography this work has focused largely on the issue of fears for children's safety in higher income countries. As moral panics about abuse and stranger danger abound, especially in the UK and US, it is argued that children's lives are ever more spatially restricted and highly supervised (Aitken 2001a; Katz 1993, Valentine 1996). While violence is most common in the home (Morgan and Zedner 1992; Stanko 1990), fear of stranger danger constrains children's movements and activities in public space at great cost to their autonomy, social interaction and health (Hillman et al. 1990; Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Waiton 2001). Children's own fear of crime and self regulation in avoiding 'dangerous' people and places are increasingly well recognised (Anderson et al. 1994; Maguire and Shirlow 2004; Tucker 2003), as are the effects of growing up in highly risk conscious societies on long term sensitivity to risk and fear (Goodey 1994, 1997; Waiton 2001). This interest from academics is mirrored by popular commentaries on 'paranoid parenting' (Bennett 2001; Ferguson 2001; Freely and Bright 2001; Furedi 1997, 2001), as fear for children appears to epitomise the risk anxiety which dogs modern western societies. In a widely quoted thesis, people worry about an ever increasing range of dangers which in reality are unlikely to happen: a culture of anxiety which is driven by rapid technological development and global insecurity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Fear of crime has been analysed through this lens (see Gold and Revill 2003; Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Hubbard 2003). In relation to children's safety, this inflated risk anxiety is particularly damaging to idealised western notions of what childhood should be - innocent, free and unfettered (Scott et al. 1998) - and particularly paradoxical given its apparent incongruence with actual risk (Furedi 2001; Stanko 1990; Walklate 1989).

While supporting the general notion that fear can be damaging to children, this paper takes issue with the assumption that fear and the risks of crime that children face are incongruent. It is argued that if an approach is taken to discerning risk and fear which is child-centred, cognisant of the social stratification of risk, and firmly grounded in particular places, parents' and children's fears may be seen to have a material basis. The paper is written in light of recent calls for the 'rematerializing' of human geography (Jackson 2000; and see Gregson 2003; Lees 2002; Pain 2003a). In the geographical literature on fear of crime, an earlier concern with mapping risk and rationalising how justified or unjustified fear is, has been added to over time by cultural accounts focusing on the meaning and signification of fear. The analysis here seeks to find a midway between these approaches through interrogating what actually happens to children, where, and with what implications? Such a materialist approach, it is argued, is more likely to promote social change which benefits children, especially those who have been victims. Below, we summarise existing explanations. Empirical evidence is then presented from a recent study which allows the geographies of victimization and children's fears to be compared quantitatively and qualitatively.

Explanations of fear for children

Rationalist explanations and risk versus fear

The early tendency in the fear of crime literature to assign fears as rational or irrational on the basis of risk (Hough and Mayhew 1983) focused on women and older people, at a time when little was known about the extent of victimization or fear for children. This form of rationalist empiricism has been heavily criticised (Sparks 1992; Stanko 1990; Young 1988), and has led to 'risk' being viewed as not wholly knowable, or left out of the equation altogether (for example, much of the literature on parents' fears gives only fleeting attention to the actual, rather than perceived, victimization of children as an important component of these fears). An

assumed mismatch between levels of fear and levels of risk for children remains a key theme in the literature.

This mismatch has three dimensions. First, fear is viewed as out of kilter with actual levels of harm. Parents' main fear for their children is often reported as abduction or abuse by strangers (Furedi 2001; Tucker 2003; Valentine 1997), which statistically is extremely rare and therefore easy to dismiss as a largely imaginary, if frightening, moral panic. Without detailed knowledge of victimization experiences of local children, however, the picture of fear is incomplete. Some of the literature on children's experiences of public spaces has, nonetheless, recognised the importance of gangs and disorderly behaviour in creating concern about particular places among children (Nayak 2003; Skelton 2000; Tucker and Matthews 2001; Valentine 1997). This connection echoes earlier writings on women's fear of violence, which highlighted the role of sexual harassment and domestic abuse in shaping their fear of public places (Pain 1997; Painter 1992; Stanko 1987).

Second, fear is often viewed as incongruent with locations of risk. While fear for children focuses in sharpest relief on public space, feminist authors have pointed to the danger that these fears about children being outside can overshadow the issue of abuse in the home (Pain 1997; Stanko 1990; Walklate 1989). The implication is sometimes that fear for children in public space is *not* founded in significant risks. Thirdly, those whose lives are said to be most shielded from potential harm (western, white, suburban, middle class children) are at less risk of any sort of danger, but particularly accidents and violence, than children living in poorer areas and countries (Aitken 2001a; MacIntyre 2000). So parents, as well as being perceived as culpable for children's criminality and blamed for their lack of protection when children are victimized, are now accused of unnecessary and foolhardy over-protectiveness (Furedi 2001; 2002).

The small body of research into children's experiences of victimization has given more direct insight into the relationship between fear and risk, identifying that they are more likely to be victims of crime and harassment than people in other age groups (Anderson et al. 1994; Aye-Maung 1995; Brown 1995; Hartless et al. 1995; Morgan and Zedner 1992; Mori 2001). Some authors have demonstrated that children's own fear of crime is well founded given the high rates of crime they experience in daily life (Anderson et al. 1994; Brown 1995). Less credence or sympathy is given to parents' fears, who, it is assumed, are informed about risk by the media and by experts giving conflicting advice (Furedi 2001) rather than knowledge from their own or their children's experiences.

Cultural explanations: ideologies of childhood and parenting

Debates over risk and fear in criminology, sociology and human geography have rightly deconstructed the rationalist paradigm which insists that accurate knowledge of risk is possible and that if fear does not match risk it is unjustified (for good examples of this critique see Lupton and Tulloch 1999; Sparks 1992; Walklate 1997). A key focus in recent literature which seeks to explain fear for children has been the relationships between broader cultural change and how risk is perceived, particularly discourses and ideologies about the reconfiguration of childhood and parenting. Increasingly, it is suggested, children and childhood are socially constructed as 'at risk', and ideologies of children as innocent, vulnerable and incompetent inform and justify parents' regulation and surveillance (Aitken 2001a; Scott et al. 1998; Valentine 1996, 1997). For example, Valentine has examined evolving parental fears in light of concerns about the reconfiguration of childhood in the twentieth century. Through exploring differing constructions of children as 'angels' or 'devils', she suggests that the spatial restrictions imposed by fear of crime are examples of a

wider process of ‘othering’ and marginalisation of children (Valentine 1996; see also James 1990; Sibley 1995).

These cultural processes are widely felt to have sharpened in the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992), owing to the central place of children and childhood within it: ‘today we live in a climate of heightened risk awareness coupled with a nostalgia for an imagined past in which children played safely throughout a carefree innocent childhood’ (Jackson and Scott 1999: 87).

Stranger danger, which is central in warnings to children from parents, schools and the police, has a key place here. The stranger is constructed in oppositional terms to the child and ‘embodies that which must be expelled from the purified space of the community, the purified life of the good citizen, and the purified body of the child’ (Ahmed 2000: 22). The stranger is often invoked in cultural explanations as a symbolic, rather than real, threat to children’s safety (as the accounts of children in the research reported here made clear).

In a wide ranging critique of ‘paranoid parenting’, Furedi (2001) argues that fear for children is an unjustified and unnecessary product of changing cultures of parenting. For Furedi the blame lies largely with the ‘child protection industry’ - medics, scientists, child care and development experts – who, via the media, government bodies, campaign groups and corporate interests, bombard parents with advice about the need to supervise their children, inflating anxiety and creating moral panics. He also indicts a massive change in everyday cultures of parenting, arguing that parents are now afraid to support each other or intervene in assisting or disciplining other people’s children, for fear of accusations of abuse.

Rematerializing fear for children

Many criticisms can be made of Furedi’s position, which is universalist and very selective in the information on risk which it uses. However, on the whole, cultural accounts of fear for

children have made a valuable contribution in conceptualising fear as shaped by social forces far beyond the immediate happening of crime. Nonetheless, because many of these accounts, including those of geographers, either sidestep actual risk or portray risk as nebulous and unknowable, the result is that victimization is missing from many cultural accounts of the 'fear of crime': both as a material everyday experience, and as it informs and shapes parents' and children's fears. What if children's fears, alternatively, largely reflect victimization? For this to be answered, we need to know where incidents and fear of victimization are located. While some of the criminological studies of children's lives mentioned earlier have drawn attention to victimization in public as well as private spaces, none has attempted to compare the specific places in which children are victimized with locations of fear.

Recent efforts to 'rematerialize' of social and cultural geography (Jackson 2000; Gregson 2003) involve a number of strands, in all of which 'matter' is given epistemological value in understanding the relations between people and places. Each of these strands has gathered pace partly in response to the excesses of the cultural turn, which tended to privilege discourse and other incorporeal phenomena in human geography. Some geographers are interested in the materialities of objects within particular cultures and landscapes (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004; Latham and McCormack 2004), or in reclaiming the material through attention to embodiment, performance and practices, and non-representational theory (Dewsbury et al 2002). For others, including myself, these are interesting theoretical and epistemological approaches which sometimes seem void of political content and intent. Following a tradition of materialism which emphasises concrete economic and social relations, it has been suggested that geographers refocus attention on material realities and lived experiences of oppression and injustice within a spatial framework (see Gregson 2003; Pain and Bailey 2004). Materiality might be mobilised to ground political struggles. This paper is orientated to this third strand, particularly as the field of children's geographies has

been criticised for failing to live up to the rhetoric of involving children, and for having relatively few impacts for children themselves (Matthews and Limb 1999; Smith 2004). In comparison with the cultural accounts of fear which have been popular recently, materialism is forwarded here as having strategic advantage in promoting social change which benefits children, especially those who have been victims.

A materialist explanation for patterns of fear among children has the following implications. First, it means emphasising children's tangible experiences, the everyday material impacts of crime and fear on children's lives, and acknowledging that these are often invisible due to children's poor political representation. Carrying out child-centred research involves giving credence to the legitimacy of children's knowledge, an established position for social science research on children (Christensen and James 2000; Matthews and Limb 1999). In this context it means obtaining information about risk from children, rather than official sources which greatly misrepresent it. Furedi's (2001) widely quoted treatise is based on official sources, which leads him to discount most fears for children as imaginary or unnecessary artefacts of culture. While many geographers, in contrast, have viewed children as experts in the local and socially specific problems they face (e.g. Matthews et al. 1998; Holloway and Valentine 2001), few have sought to measure their victimization.

Secondly, a materialist approach means grounding children's experiences in particular places to interrogate risk and fear, and investigating the materiality of those environments, an approach which is borne out by children's close relationships with their local environments (Matthews and Limb 1999; McKendrick 1997; Holloway and Valentine 2001). The physical, economic, social and civic fabric of neighbourhoods create particular sets of interactions between children and their neighbourhoods, which in turn are shaped by class, gender, age and race. Some studies which have unpicked local fearscape have stressed the impact of

children and young people's experiences and knowledge of their localities (Brown 1995; Loader et al. 1998; Maguire and Shirlow 2004; Nayak 2003; Tucker 2003), and their competence with regard to risk despite their being labelled by parents and society as incompetent and in need of protection (Valentine 1997). Scott et al. (1998: 700) conclude that 'safety and danger depend upon the immediate locality in which children live their lives', and that further research is needed on 'the ways in which real and imagined dangers feature in both parents' and children's landscapes of risk'.

Thirdly, it means giving a leading role to the socio-economic differences between children (such as class, race, gender and ability) which profoundly structure their material experiences. The wide differences between children in terms of risk, crime, fear and use of public space are central to these debates. Critics of fearful parents such as Furedi (2001, 2002) often fail to distinguish between parents whose children are more and less at risk. Children from poor backgrounds have far higher rates of ill health, death and injury from accidents in the home, outside and as pedestrians (Hillman et al. 1990; ONS 2004; Roberts et al. 1995; Unicef 2001), and different involvements in crime (Brown 1998; MacDonald 1997). Victimization is a more real and immediate risk – though by no means exclusively so - for children in deprived and marginalized areas, where rates of violence, crime and disorder tend to be highest, children are more likely to witness crime, and criminals are more likely to be known rather than outsiders (Aitken 2001a; Anderson et al. 1994; Loader et al. 1998; MacIntyre 2000). Experiences of victimization are also structured by sexism, racism and ageism (Aitken 2001b; MacIntyre 2000; Pain 2001). Thus parents and children from all backgrounds may report fearing victimization, but can not be viewed as *equally* fearful. Further, despite stereotypes prevalent in the British media of children chaperoned completely from public space, many children and teenagers in poorer neighbourhoods have a strong presence in and relationship with public space (see for example Matthews et al. 2000; Skelton 2001; Waiton 2001), and

among middle class children too there are wide differences in values and practices, play spaces and opportunities.

All this is not to deny the impacts of discourses of fear, which many including Valentine and Furedi have highlighted. These impacts clearly have material consequences for children's social and spatial lives; and as Valentine has recognised, experiences of crime and fear shape the discourses which circulate among children and adults. This paper is not attempting a simple detangling of discourse from matter – which is neither possible nor desirable, as the two are always entwined in all sorts of ways (Latham and McCormack 2004; Lees 2002) - this is a strategically useful but nonetheless artificial dualism. The aim here is to contribute to the diverse literature on risk and fear for children by exploring some of the material aspects of these geographies. The aim is not to suggest that exploring these local risks is the only meaningful way to explain fear for children, which is multi-faceted; but to emphasise both their potency and their low visibility in current debates.

Methodology

Findings are drawn from a research project which investigated experiences of victimization, fear of crime and sources of support for three age groups of children in the town of Gateshead in north east England: 10-11 year olds in the final year of primary school, 11-12 year olds in the first year of secondary school, and 15-16 year olds in the final compulsory year of education. These year groups have been identified as key transition points in children's lives. The research was commissioned by the charity Victim Support in order to address the lack of knowledge about young people as victims of crime, and as a feasibility study for a junior victim support pilot which is now underway. Gateshead is a large town with a population of 191,151 in 2001, of which 98.4% were white people (National Statistics Online 2002). Despite some high profile quayside redevelopment, Gateshead has not attracted the sort of

investment and economic growth which has provided a boost to other depressed post-industrial UK cities. The inner wards in which the study was carried out remain some of the most deprived in the UK. The research drew on a representative sample of children who attended nine primary schools, four secondary schools, two exclusion units, and one school for children with physical disabilities¹. The neighbourhoods, schools and children involved have been anonymised in this paper.

Given the importance of children's own accounts of crime, it was carefully considered how best to let children speak with confidence, but also in confidence. First, 10 discussion groups were carried out with 55 children in same sex groups from five of the schools. These were conducted within the age brackets above. Here an emergent qualitative methodology was adopted with the aim of collecting polyvocal accounts (Goss and Leinbach 1996) of children's perceptions and experiences of crime in their neighbourhoods². Children were asked about the nature and impact of their perceptions and experiences of victimisation in particular places, and the types of support children accessed when victimization occurred. Secondly, findings from the discussion groups fed into the design of a questionnaire, which 1069 children filled out in class time. The questionnaire sought to measure the incidence and location of victimisation against young people, and the effects of fear of crime (their own concerns and those of their parents/guardians). While surveys have well documented limitations (see Farrell et al. 1997), they allowed children to report personal victimization and fear privately and anonymously³. Finally, a verification exercise was carried out with members of Gateshead Youth Assembly, 45 young people of a range of ages and social backgrounds elected by pupils in the town's schools to have input into policy issues on their behalf. Using participatory diagramming techniques (see Kesby 2000), they evaluated the findings and added to them where appropriate.

One limitation of the research is that these methods are unlikely to uncover significant evidence about crime against children in the home such as domestic violence and sexual abuse. It was decided to exclude direct questions on these topics, and although many assaults in the home were reported, the findings are interpreted in light of this likely undercounting.

The study allows quantitative and qualitative comparison of patterns and locations of children's victimization and fear. While data from all three methods indicate how, how often and where children had been victimized and fearful over the last year, the questionnaires enable measurement and greater elaboration on where victimization occurred, and the discussion groups provide in-depth contextual data on fear, its relationships with risk and other factors. These datasets are used together in the analysis which follows.

Victimization and fear among children in Gateshead

Figure 1 shows the types and levels of victimization of children over the last 12 months. It shows that experiences of property and violent crime are a commonplace material reality for many children in this area. In about two thirds of violent incidents the perpetrators were other children, while for cases of harassment most offenders were adults. Boys were more likely to report being victims of property crime and violent crime, and girls to have been bullied.

Younger children were more likely to report being harassed, while older teenagers were more likely to report violence. There was a high rate of racist violence and harassment reported to the study. Only 34 children (3% of the sample) described themselves as black or ethnic minority, but 28% of these children reported being attacked or harassed because of their race or religion, compared with only 3% of white children.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 also gives some summary data for children's fear and parents' warnings. These revolved predominantly around violent crime. Overall, 58% of girls and 35% of boys said that they worried when they were out and about because of crime. Older children were less likely to say this than younger children, though this difference was much greater for boys than girls. While these findings reflect those of research elsewhere, it must be borne in mind that boys are less likely to report feelings of vulnerability, worry or fear than girls (Goodey 1997). Nonetheless, 60% of girls and 48% of boys said that there were places they found scary, and a high level of precautionary behaviour was reported among both sexes.

A comparison of sites of victimization, children's fear and parents' warnings

In the rest of the paper a comparison is made between the sites of these incidents of victimization and children's fear. This dichotomy (victimization and fear) arises from past analyses: the rationalist comparisons in the criminological literature which insist on dichotomization, and the cultural accounts of geographers and sociologists which tend to sidestep risk. Victimization and fear are separated out here as an analytical device, in order to move towards a concluding argument that the two *should not* be viewed as separate, either in terms of children's common emotions and experiences or how they might be conceptualised in future.

In the questionnaire, children recorded sites for 1107 of the 1622 incidents of victimization reported. 597 of the children who reported fear of crime also recorded at least one place they feared. The sites included types of place (e.g. a park), specific places (e.g. a named park), specified areas (e.g. a named town or neighbourhood), and general features of places (e.g. 'a dark place', 'where druggies meet'). The sites were placed in these categories for analysis and, where appropriate and possible on the information given, aggregated (for example, a named park was also counted as a park). The main interest in this paper is in types of place;

Figure 2 lists and ranks 20 of these plus ‘specified areas’, as sites of victimization and as sites of children’s fear. Below, these places are divided into three categories to further the analysis. These categorisations are not wholly discrete. Some places lie close to boundaries between categories (and see the concluding discussion which considers the subjectivity of interpreting and comparing ranked data of this type).

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Higher risk / lower fear places

The places that can be categorised as having an above average incidence of victimization, but relatively low levels of fear among children, are mainly everyday private and semi-private spaces (bold font in Figure 2). These include school, the location with the highest incidence of victimization (it accounts for over a third of crimes where a site was given), and home which has the fourth highest incidence. Despite these figures, very few children say they fear school or home. (Two other locations, another house and buses, have higher incidences of victimization than fear in relative and absolute terms.)

This stark mismatch is not unexpected, as it is well documented that children are most at risk from people and places they know but that fears are more likely to focus on strangers and public spaces (Stanko 1990). Moreover, the actual figure for victimization in the home is likely to be far higher. One explanation for the mismatch may be that in routine, everyday spaces, risk management is part of daily life and therefore largely unconscious and unremarkable (Painter 1992). Yet it is not the case that incidents such as bullying, domestic violence and harassment from people who are known do not create fear (see Hester et al. 2000; Pain 1997; Percy-Smith and Matthews 2001; Stanko 1988; Walklate 1995); often these fears are more invidious as they are ongoing, rather than of the moment and place. One

significant difference is that incidents of crime in private space – in the home, if not at school - do not become common knowledge through the currency of local talk about crime in the same way as incidents involving public space and strangers (see Taylor 1995). This talk has an important role in children's knowledge of local risk, which in turn informs their fear of crime (Anderson et al. 1994; Nayak 2003; and see next section). We might conclude too that the language and tools of 'fear of crime' in this project have not elicited private fears – it was not the intention of the study to explore them, and children were asked primarily about fear when 'out and about', which most would interpret as in public space (but see Farrall et al. (1997) on language as a broader problematic in fear of crime research).

Places with congruence between risk and fear

Places which have comparable rankings for both victimization and fear make up the largest category (italic font in Figure 2). These include streets, which rank second for victimization incidence and third as a place children fear; parks which rank fifth and fourth; and fields/open spaces which rank seventh and fifth. 'Specified areas', which include 37 neighbourhoods and towns outside those the children lived in, rank highest as locations of children's fear, and although there is insufficient space to detail them in this paper, they rank third as a site of victimization. The Metro (light rail transit system) and woods rank midway as sites of crime, and have close to average levels of fear. Leisure facilities and pubs/clubs occupy a mid to low position as sites of victimization and fear, and there are negligible levels of both crime and fear in carparks, in train stations and while using mobile phones. For mobile phones, the issue of the language of risk and fear in the questionnaire may be relevant again – in other words children may not have thought of their mobiles as a site of victimization. Recent research suggests that harassment and bullying by text and voice are becoming significant issues, and that theft of mobiles is a common crime against children and young people (Authors forthcoming; NCH 2002; Simmons 2002).

Mobiles phones apart, these are all public places where, for this sample of children, there is some congruence between fear and actual risk based on children's reports of victimization over the last twelve months.

While the aggregate data in Figure 2 show associations between sites of victimization and sites of fear, qualitative data from focus groups and questionnaires point to the connections between the two at the level of individual experience. In the discussion groups and on their questionnaires, children explained why they found these sorts of places frightening. Two issues were dominant, both of which point to the material basis of many of these fears. First is the effect of the first and second hand experiences of victimization of children and their friends in particular places:

A: About a few weeks ago I was walking up [streetname] and this man followed us in a white van [...] he just started to get faster and faster and when I stopped he just stopped the van and stared at us so I turned around and then he just went away.

Q: How did you feel?

A: Proper scared.

Q: Yeah it sounds scary.

B: These blokies, I was walking to [place name] and they jumped out of the car and tried to grab us so I just went straight back to mine.

Boys aged 10-11, discussion group

One time me and my friend were walking along [name of park] and this man came out and he start chasing wor [us/our] and he got wor cos little Karen was with wor and he got her against the wall and he tried to rape her but we telled wor Mam.

[Name of woods] because someone jumped out at my friend and attacked them (boy aged 10-11, questionnaire)

[Name of Metro station] because two people have been mugged in three days (girl aged 15-16, questionnaire)

The second issue has been variously described as disorderly, subcriminal or 'anti-social' behaviour, the latter a phrase which has become associated in British social policy with fears about young people, although there is little evidence that it is increasing (Rutter et al. 1998). Just as sexual harassment has been given a central place in reinforcing women's fear of rape (Pain 1997; Stanko 1990), it is not just incidents of violence that create anxiety for children. In particular, the behaviour of older teenagers in certain places reinforces fears of harassment and victimization:

[Name of park] because there are people with drugs who drink and make trouble (boy aged 10-11, questionnaire)

We usually go down to [name of park] quite a lot and there's big gangs down that end (Girls aged 11-12, discussion group)

[Streetname] as it's full of smackheads [heroin addicts] (girl aged 15-16, questionnaires)

Corners where empty cans lie around and tabs [cigarettes] also that's probably where drug addicts stand so it's a good idea to look out (girl aged 11-12, questionnaire)

While the primary argument here is that interpretations of fear should begin with children's accounts of actual everyday risk, this is not to say that perceptions of danger are not also informed by exaggeration and social prejudice. For example, perceptions of danger were highly racialised among many children in this sample. While Gateshead has a very low black and ethnic minority population, it was apparent that there is a deeply racist element to some children's fears, mainly focusing on the small numbers of asylum seekers and migrants who live in the town. The reputations of particular groups such as these are fed by a more general racism. For black and ethnic minority children, this racism leads to fear of racist victimization, which is justified given the high incidence identified in Figure 1.

[Don't go to places] where refugees are as they are perverts and follow us home and stalk us for sex (girl aged 15-16, questionnaire, elaborating on parents' warnings)

A: There's Kosovans around now

B: Oh aye, there's loads of Kosovans come down from their country coz of the war and that and they all live round [this neighbourhood] and Newcastle.

A: There's been loads sent back because they raped lasses

Boys aged 15-16, discussion group

[Neighbourhood] because the Jews can attack you and steal your pennies (girl aged 15-16, questionnaire)

[Same neighbourhood] - there are lots of racist people there (Pakistani boy, aged 15-16, questionnaire)

Fear of the 'other' is thus present in both children's fears. Other studies have highlighted young people's fears revolving around racial and ethnic difference (Watt and Stenson 1998; Webster 2003), religious and sectarian difference (Maguire and Shirlow 2004; Shirlow 2003), and fear of homeless people (Pain and Townshend 2002). The latter appear in this study in children's discussions of locally recognised 'tramps' frequenting some open spaces and areas of woodland. The traditional stereotype of the 'stranger' is less evident, seeming to have been replaced by direct reference to asylum seekers and paedophiles. From discussions of paedophiles in discussion groups, this term has a different meaning – children are clear about the sexual nature of the threat they pose, and the term is applied to *recognised* men who were known in the locality to be hanging around regularly, or were neighbours:

A: Used to be a paedophile living on [name of road]

B: Like facing the school and all the Mams used to get there before like ten to three and they just used to stand for like fifteen minutes in case he came.

A: He followed Vicky

B: Aye Vicky. Up the street

Boys aged 10-11, discussion group

There's one who lives along here somewhere, me and Jonathan passed him. He keeps on looking in the school, you know when we play out.

Girl aged 10-11, discussion group

As most of the incidents of harassment (Figure 1) reported to the study took place in public space and involved adults, it would be difficult to dismiss these fears about paedophiles as unfounded. In their accounts of danger, children are not making the sorts of distinctions which ‘stranger danger’ is based upon, and which are still prominent in public discourses and education programmes about children’s safety in public space, an issue to which we return at the end of the paper. As Ahmed (2000) has argued, strangers are already known and recognised as having other bodies and not belonging to the spaces in which they are encountered. Local meanings of the stranger are also formed in specific cultural and political contexts (see Maguire and Shirlow 2004; Pain 2004). In Gateshead, the category of ‘stranger’ as an unknown outsider to the neighbourhood posing an unclear threat barely surfaces in these children’s discussions about risk and fear.

Lower risk / higher fear places

The category that might have been expected to be the largest is one of the smallest, as only two locations have a significantly lower incidence of victimization and higher levels of fear (underlined font in Figure 2). Back lanes and alleys (mostly behind terraced housing) and paths (which in this area tend to be either cuts between buildings with high walls, or walkways/cyclepaths through open space) stand out in this respect. The qualitative data suggest that these places have physical properties which are particularly frightening, often being described as dark and isolated with nowhere to go and no one to see if anything happens, as well as having social properties connected to the types of people who are perceived to hang around there:

[At a certain Metro station] the path’s hidden by trees (girl aged 15-16, questionnaire)

The ash path – scary when it's dark (boy aged 11-12, questionnaire)

Cut at the bottom of [street] there is people drinking there every night (girl aged 10-11, questionnaire)

The lines [old railway tracks] at [neighbourhood] where the druggies go (girl aged 11-12, questionnaire)

Unlike some of the public places discussed above – especially parks and streets – many children tried to avoid back lanes, alleys and paths altogether, which may partly account for the lower incidence of victimization there.

Gender and the geography of children's fear

Figures 3a and 3b show patterns of victimization and fear for boys and girls in the most significant sites discussed above. Boys report higher levels of victimization in the majority of the places, with the significant exceptions of school and the streets, but girls have higher levels of fear in most places. Further, there is a qualitative difference in the types of place boys and girls are more likely to fear. Girls seem more sensitive to and concerned about crime in local, everyday spaces such as back lanes/alleys, parks, streets and paths. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to report feeling fearful of less everyday and more distant spaces, including woods and churches/graveyards, but most strikingly in specified areas. These were other neighbourhoods or towns, often those with reputations for crime and violence which are justified given some children's experiences.

FIGURES 3a AND 3b ABOUT HERE

These data should be interpreted in light of the fact that girls reported more fear of crime than boys, and gave more examples of sites where they felt fearful. However, the data do suggest that the gap between victimization and fear is wider for girls than boys - because in most of these places boys have a higher risk of victimization than girls - than when we focus on children as a single group. This is not to say that girls' fears have no material basis, as girls experience some victimization in almost all of these places, though usually at lower levels than boys. Girls are also exposed to higher risks of sexual assault than boys, which is likely to be under-counted by this study.

The data point to a more complex interplay between fear and risk than the discussion so far has suggested: discussion groups suggest that girls' own fear and their parents' warnings mean they are less likely to frequent these local places, while boys' greater risk-taking behaviour in using places where they know victimization occurs increases their levels of victimization (Goodey 1997; Walklate 1995, 1997). The findings also relate to boys' and girls' differing use of public space which other studies have highlighted (Matthews et al. 1998; Skelton 2000; Tucker 2003; Tucker and Matthews 2001). Boys, particularly as they get older, generally have a wider spatial range, feel more comfortable in and in control of public places in their own neighbourhoods, and feel safer in numbers, all of which may explain the focusing of their fears on places outside the immediate locality:

Where I live it's like more safe cos all me friends that come to [name of school] they live there, so if I get hit or owt [anything], the other person gets hit who hits me, so we'll just stick up for each other.

Boy aged 11-12, discussion group

A: What I would do, I've got this little group of us who all hang around each other down my way, right, and I say if one of them gets bullied and that, we just gang up to ask what they are doing, and if they try to start on them just hoy [throw] them into the river.

B: Aha

C: Then they don't do it again

Boys aged 10-11, discussion group

Q: Is there anywhere that you avoid going? Are there any places that you are scared to go?

A: [Name of nearby city]

B: I'm scared to walk in [name of nearby neighbourhood]

[...]

B: [name of nearby neighbourhood], when I go to me mate's, his house, I run to the bus stop

C: I thought you couldn't run

B: Everyone's off their heads, they get as high as a kite

D: I divn't [don't] go to [ame of park in same neighbourhood]

B: [Name of park]'s bad as well

Boys aged 15-16, discussion group

Girls' use of space, on the other hand, is constrained by the presence of boys as well as older teenagers (Tucker and Matthews 2001) and their own and parents' fears about sexual assault (Pain 1997; Scott et al. 1998; Tucker 2003). Although from this study many parents clearly worry about boys (see Valentine and McKendrick 1997), and young boys themselves are

fearful (see Goodey 1997), the data suggest significant gender differences overall in boys' and girls' fear and how it affects their perceptions and use of different places.

Discussion

The chief aim of this paper has been to apply a materialist approach to fear for children. In the earlier sections, I outlined three main implications of this approach; first, a focus on children's tangible experiences of safety as they report them; second, grounding experiences in particular places and paying attention to the material properties of those places; and third, giving a leading role in analysis to socio-economic differences between children. The empirical sections which followed demonstrated these imperatives.

First, the data show the commonness of victimization amongst this group of children, and the ways in which material experiences of crime and harassment create fearfulness. Children often link their fears of particular groups of people who victimize children to known events and encounters, whether these involve other children, older teenagers, or adults as perpetrators. Fear and victimization have been separated in this paper for ease of analysis - mirroring how criminology has dealt with fear for decades - but children's experiences suggest that this is an artificial device, and that the relationship between fear and victimization is both closer and more nuanced than the bulk of crime surveys have suggested.

In analysing fear primarily through reported risk in this way, my argument is not that these are the only explanations of fear we should look for, but that these are what we should look at first⁴. The point may seem straightforward, but it is one that requires restating at this time in order to counter the wide assumption that many fears for children are groundless, misplaced or largely culturally constructed.

Second, the grounding of the analysis of victimization and fear in particular places challenges taken for granted assumptions in discourses about fear. One such assumption is that public places are actually relatively safe for children. Both levels and sites of victimisation against children in public space appear to offer a strong material basis for children's fears in this study. As the qualitative data show, we can think about the materiality of places in terms of their physical properties – who is present and how easy it is for them to hurt you, and for you to escape or seek protection, in that environment; and in terms of social relations and networks – for example the talk which circulates about events in public space in contrast to private space danger. Many local places are feared for specific local reasons; the 'lines' over ex-industrial land which are landscaped for recreation or awaiting development and the networks of back lanes behind terraced housing in the central districts of Gateshead would not necessarily relate to fear in the same ways elsewhere. An interesting dimension which has arisen here is the gendering of risk, fear and place, as there is some evidence that girls are more sensitive to and more concerned about incidents happening in local, everyday places while boys were more concerned about more distant places with dangerous reputations. I suggested that girls' less powerful structural position in their everyday encounters with local environments may be one reason for this.

Third, together the data – which are drawn largely from children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in some of the most disadvantaged wards of the UK – demonstrate that the material experiences of risky places and people are very different to the 'expert' view circulating in the UK at present, epitomised by Furedi's work, which is that parents worry unnecessarily about a risk of victimization which is actually negligible. I argued earlier that this perspective is based on a white, suburban, middle class 'norm' of childhood which is unlikely to be representative even of that narrow group (although their *experiences*, rather than what is suggested by social indicators, are under researched). None of this is to suggest

that poor children's experiences of places, risk and fear are somehow more 'material' than those of children in more affluent areas: only that their experiences appear far more pressing than the SUV-clad lifestyles of a small minority which have received more attention in public debates about fear.

There is, of course, a difficulty with this argument if emphasis on the material is interpreted to 'unproblematically refer to the actual real' (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004, 672). It would be misleading to present the scene children portray as a factual or 'real' estimate of risk, otherwise the analysis might be accused of having an element of the rationalist empiricism which was critiqued at the outset. The data presented here, like all crime data, are not a complete record of either victimization or fear. However given that they come directly from children, and analytical categories arose from children's discussions at the beginning of the research, they afford a more reliable picture than is available from secondary sources such as parents or police records. Certain incidents and places are likely to have been under-counted, especially home abuse. The interpretation of numbers, too, is subjective – for example, 11 children in the sample report being victims of crime in the town centre in the last year, 26 children fear the town centre and 50 are warned by their parents not to go there, but on what basis do we judge whether these fears are justified? As a researcher and a parent my instinct is that they are, but others' interpretations and standpoints will differ. Many academic analyses have deconstructed the question of playing off risk and fear (Sparks 1992; Lupton and Tulloch 1999), and yet in practice it remains a dilemma which parents and children face daily in decisions about their use of space. Perhaps the greatest value of these data is to show that some locations have more congruence as sites of victimization and fear than others. Such geographies could potentially be valuable in countering the invisibility of children's victimization in the face of the overexposure of parents' fears, to have input into current

debates about moral panics and the rationality of fear for children, and to inform more effective policy responses.

Policy implications

These findings have some significant implications for public debate and policy. At present children's everyday experiences of risk have low visibility in these debates. The study emphasises the need for more effective and comprehensive research into crime against children at local levels, if their needs are to be represented and addressed (see Brown 1998; Muncie 2003; Pain 2003b). Only a small minority of these offences are reported to the police (who are under no obligation to publish age-specific victimization data), crime surveys rarely include younger children, and there is very little qualitative research in support of those quantitative surveys and audits that exist (Mason 2000). The findings underline the high incidence of crime in private and semi-private spaces, which should continue to be the emphasis of most policy and research attention. They also demonstrate that public space is not necessarily safe in comparison. Research which has sought to highlight a significant mismatch of fear and risk in the spatial control of children has emphasised the extent of abuse of children in the domestic sphere (Pain 1997; Stanko 1990; Walklate 1989). But any failure to acknowledge that the victimization of children takes different forms but is endemic across spatial boundaries carries a danger of negating both its structural determinants and comprehensive strategies to tackle it which take account of these. The high levels of victimization in public space reported to this research also raise some questions about the notion of regulating and othering children in their use of public space, which tends to have been conceptualised by geographers in morally negative terms (James 1990; Valentine 1996).

The study has also demonstrated that child victims need as much or more support than adults, for whom far more services are available in Britain (Pain and Gill 2003), and that their fears

should be taken seriously. Fear of crime tends to be tackled in current policy in England and Wales as more straightforward and easier to shift than crime itself (Gilling 1997), but for children as for many other groups, fear is often closely related to real rather than imagined threats. Children's victimization is slowly beginning to receive policy attention. In response to the research reported here, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council have piloted a junior victim support scheme in local schools, and are developing a network of safe walking routes to increase children's use of public spaces in safety. Such initiatives need to recognise the high rates of racist violence and harassment experienced by black and ethnic minority children. These types of initiative are more likely to address children's fear and experiences of victimization than the educational approach which has been a key feature of crime prevention policy in the UK since the 1980s (Walklate 1989). All schoolchildren are targeted by 'stranger danger' education campaigns. The intensity of this focus is not only inappropriate given the low incidence of assault by strangers (Furedi 2001; Waiton 2001) but, as this research has shown, the distinctions it implies about dangerous and safe people and places do not hold from children's perspectives. Much victimization of children takes place in private or semi-private spaces, or in public space between people who are well known to each other. Children talked far more about 'paedophiles' who were known in the locality and were connected to cases of harassment and attempted assault, than about 'strangers'. In this sense educating children about danger is a contradiction in terms. Any input in schools needs to be realistic, make use of children's existing knowledge, and to acknowledge the wide range of people and locations involved in the victimization they experience.

So far as educating parents goes, just as Roberts et al. (1995) concluded from their work on child safety from accidents, sharp social gradients in risk are about risky local environments rather than poor parenting. This current research also suggests that parents and children are already employing risk-avoidance behaviour to the extent that further education and warnings

are not needed (Waiton 2001). Instead, we might envisage a relationship between parents, children and policy where information flows each way, so that local, bottom-up understandings of risk have a far greater role in influencing public policy (see Roberts et al. 1995).

Research on children, risk and fear in human geography has provided some of the most interesting and innovative work on the geography of crime, an area of the discipline which sometimes still lives up to its reputation as rather sterile and unchallenging. However, in developing socio-cultural explanations of fear for children which engage with wider ideologies about childhood, it is important that we do not leave ‘risk’ out of the geographies we construct. Understanding of fear and risk requires *both* highlighting the manufacturing and manipulation of fear discourses which have received most attention in the literature, *and* exposing hidden, real, and damaging experiences of crime, disorder and harassment (Shirlow and Pain 2003). As for the details of these relationships between discourses and everyday experiences of fear, these have received surprisingly little empirical or theoretical attention and might be a promising next avenue.

Notes

¹ While more children in the younger age bracket were included in the sample, it was otherwise representative of the social mix of the town.

² The discussion groups were tape recorded, transcribed and subject to qualitative analysis. Quotes are presented here verbatim with [...] indicating material left out.

³ For the youngest children, a researcher stood at the front of the class and read out the questions to overcome any difficulties with literacy. The 1069 questionnaires which were

completed were input and analysed using SPSS. A large amount of qualitative data was also collected and analysed, from answers to open-ended questions and additional comments that children wrote down. These data were analysed alongside the discussion group data, and some are presented in this paper as they were written. Parental consent was arranged by schools, and children were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they did not have to answer any questions they didn't want to. Schools were aware of the sensitive nature of the questions and provision was in place to support children who found them upsetting.

⁴ There are numerous other perspectives on the constitution of fear of crime which are valid but which have been excluded from this analysis – for example fear as part of emotional geographies (Panelli et al. 2003), fear in relation to local economic history (Loader et al. 1998), fear as a tool of governance (Garland 1996), fear as a psychological state reflecting individual lifecourses (Hollway and Jefferson 1997).

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Figure 1: Reported victimization in the last 12 months, and children's fear

	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Property crime in last 12 months		
My bike was stolen	11	6
My home was broken into	7	6
Something was stolen from me on the street	8	3
Something was stolen from me at school	12	11
Something was stolen from me on the Metro	2	1
Something was stolen from me somewhere else	3	3
Violent crime in last 12 months		
I was bullied	28	42
Someone threatened to hurt me	24	21
I was hit	27	17
I was beaten up	10	4
I was attacked/harassed because of my race/religion**	37	20
I was glassed/bottled	3	2
I was stabbed	3	0
Harassment in last 12 months		
I was followed	24	25
Someone tried to get me to go somewhere with them	6	6
Someone flashed at me	7	6
Total number of victimizations reported	n=808	n=814
Children's fear of crime		
Worry when out and about because of crime	35	58
Find some places scary	48	60
Avoid certain places to avoid crime	35	40

* Sample = 1069

** of children in ethnic minority groups

Figure 2: Rank order of sites of victimization and fear

Sites of victimization			Sites in which children are fearful		
Rank position		% of incidents*	Rank position		% of children who mentioned a site**
1	School	36.9	1	<i>Specified areas</i>	32.8
2	<i>Streets</i>	28.7	2	<u>Back lanes/alleys</u>	12.6
3	<i>Specified areas</i>	9.8	3	<i>Streets</i>	8.2
4	Home	6.5	4	<i>Parks</i>	7.9
5	<i>Parks</i>	3.7	5	<i>Fields/open spaces</i>	6.2
6	Shops	2.8	6	<u>Paths</u>	5.4
7	Another house	1.7	7	<i>Woods</i>	4.6
	<i>Fields/open spaces</i>	1.7	8	Churches/graveyards	4.0
8	Buses	1.6		<i>Metro</i>	4.0
9	<i>Metro</i>	1.3	9	Shops	2.8
10	<i>Woods</i>	1.2	10	Tunnels/subways	3.4
11	Leisure facilities	1.0	11	Buildings	2.5
12	Churches/graveyards	0.8	12	Home	2.0
13	<u>Paths</u>	0.6	13	Leisure facilities	1.0
14	<u>Back lanes/alleys</u>	<0.5	14	School	0.8
15	Pubs/clubs	<0.5		Pubs/clubs	0.8
16	On mobile phone	<0.5	15	Another house	0.7
17	Buildings	<0.5	16	Train stations	<0.5
	Carparks	<0.5	17	Buses	<0.5
	Train stations	<0.5	18	Carparks	0
18	Tunnels/subways	0		On mobile phone	0

Key: **Bold** higher risk/lower fear places
 Italics places with congruence between risk and fear
 Underlined lower risk/higher fear places

* Sites were reported for 1107 of the 1622 incidents of victimization reported to the research

** 597 of the 1069 children in the study mentioned at least one site which they were afraid of

Figure 3: Sites of victimization and fear, by gender

(supplied in accompanying file)