

# What makes a child feel unsafe in their neighbourhood?

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Differences in the way children and adults perceive the world extend to their sense of safety in their social and physical environments and this in turn can impact their health, say researchers at the University of Montreal and its affiliated Research Centre at CHU Sainte Justine, a children's hospital. "While we knew that a child's sense of safety is informed by his or her own parents' sense of safety, we did not know how the child's own perceptions of their environment contributes to this sense," explained first author Carolyn Côté-Lussier, of the University of Montreal's International Center for Comparative Criminology.

Firstly, the research team surveyed 500 eight to ten year olds and their [parents](#). The families live in the Montreal metropolitan area and were

asked about their perception of their urban environment and their [sense of safety](#). This was then correlated with various [objective factors](#), such as the demographic make-up of the neighbourhood, its traffic patterns, its lighting and the presence of trees and green spaces.

Overall, children's perceptions parallel their parents': if parents consider their neighbourhood to be safe, so do their kids. However, kids' feelings are not drawn from their parents alone. Children see the objective factors in their environment differently from their parents. "Parents consider high-rates of [single parent families](#), a lack of trust amongst neighbours, and the presence of graffiti, rundown buildings and heavy traffic as being indicative of an unsafe environment, while children feel safer than their parents if the streets are better lit and if there is more greenery," Côté-Lussier explained. She believes this is due to the fact that children are scared of the dark and because vegetation can reduce stress. "Planting trees is not just good for the environment, it also has a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of the population," she said.

## **Unsafe schools**

These same human and physical factors are also correlated with a sense of unsafeness amongst teenagers at school. In a second study, the research team observed that poverty (whether chronic or occurring after the age of 10) only partially explains a sense of insecurity amongst teens. The research involved 2,120 teenagers from across Quebec.

"Poverty is a factor that increases the risk of victimization at school, but, youths' feelings of a lack of safety are also linked to living neighborhoods that parents describe as being demarked by the presence of litter, drug use and sales and groups of youth causing trouble. A high rate of single parent families and a lack of green spaces also play a role," Côté-Lussier explained, noting that these environmental factors must also be addressed when intervening to reduce insecurity in schools.

## Linking safety and health

The findings are important because feelings of safety can be a pathway linking poverty, the local [environment](#) and health. "Lower family incomes are associated with lower perceptions of safety in the neighbourhood and at school, and this perception is in turn linked with a greater rate of health problems such as obesity," Côté-Lussier said.

Studies also show that a low sense of safety is indicative of a poor quality of sleep, asthma, psychological distress and a lack of physical activity. "If the neighbourhood is perceived as being less safe, [children](#) will be less likely to take physical exercise outdoors and more likely to spend time in front of a screen. Moreover, feeling unsafe could contribute to a deregulation of the endocrine system and to poorer health," Côté-Lussier added.

Provided by University of Montreal

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