

Safe Spaces

Growing Up in Queensland 2022

Youth Advocate Foreword

I was honoured to partake in the very enlightening Safe Spaces: Growing Up in Queensland 2022 project. Having lived mostly in urban environments, I found it incredibly interesting to explore community spaces in regional areas to gain an appreciation of how available various services and community spaces have been to me. I believe young people feeling safe in public areas of their community is essential to their growth and should be valued more highly in today's society. There should be a place in the community that every young Queenslander can easily access where they can feel included, safe and heard, no matter where they are or who they are. (Member of Queensland Family and Child Commission Youth Advisory Council.)

Growing Up in Queensland

Growing Up in Queensland (GUIQ) is the Queensland Family and Child Commission's (QFCC's) flagship youth engagement project that hears from children and young people across Queensland about their experiences of their communities, their hopes, and the issues that matter to them.

The project delivers on the QFCC's Child and Youth Participation Framework, which emphasises our commitment to:



The project also delivers on QFCC's Strategic Plan 2022 – 26. One of the five strategic priorities under the plan is to raise awareness and advocate for children and their families. Through sharing GUIQ findings, we educate stakeholders about what matters to children and young people and support stakeholders to better respond to children and young people's needs.



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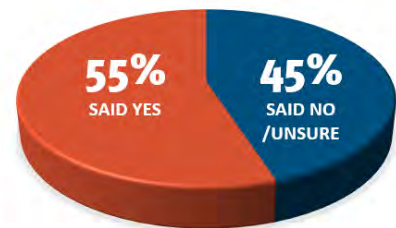
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Hearing from children and young people is important. Children who feel their views have been listened to have higher subjective wellbeing compared to children who feel otherwise.^{1,2} In addition, our commitment to amplifying the voice of children and young people embeds Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 states that children have the right to express their views on matters that affect them, and that these views should be considered by decision makers.

Safe Spaces: Growing Up in Queensland 2022

The Safe Spaces project aims to support implementation of measures that will help young people feel safer in public spaces in their communities. The project responds to a previous finding about young people’s experiences of their community and used focus groups to find out what safe spaces mean to young people in Queensland.

GUIQ 2020³ asked young people aged 13 – 18 if there are enough safe spaces where they can spend time with friends in their community. Only 55 per cent of participants said yes while 45 per cent said no or were unsure if there were enough safe spaces in their communities.



This is important because young people in Growing Up in Queensland 2020 told us how valuable community spaces are.

Growing Up in Queensland 2020

40%

Said spaces to spend time with friends make their community a great place.

Young people 8-18 years

47%

Said more of these spaces would make their community even better.

Young people 8-18 years

Young people have also told researchers that using public spaces can:

- Promote social inclusion
- Autonomy
- Security
- Relaxation, and
- Health and fitness.⁴

Consequently, perceiving public spaces as unsafe limits valuable opportunities for young people’s development and enjoyment of their community.

¹ Lloyd, K., & Emerson, L. (2017). (Re)examining the relationship between children's subjective wellbeing and their perception of participation rights. *Child Indicators Research*, 10(3), 591-608.

² Watson, J. C. (2017). Examining the relationship between self-esteem, mattering, school connectedness, and wellness among middle school students. *Professional School Counselling*, 21(1), 108-118.

³ Queensland Family and Child Commission. (2021). *Voices of hope: Growing up in Queensland 2020*. The State of Queensland.

⁴ Nissen, S., Prendergast, K., Aoyagi, M., Burningham, K., Hasan, M. M., Heyward, B., . . . Yoshida, A. (2020). Young people and environmental affordances in urban sustainable development: Insights into transport and green and public spaces in seven cities. *Sustainable Earth*, 3, 1 - 12.

The Safe Spaces project findings emphasise the importance of outdoor recreational spaces, such as skate parks, and structured recreational spaces supervised by adults. Young people's feelings of safety are influenced by the people using the space and by the physical characteristics of the spaces. Young people feel safe around crowds, friends, trusted adults, friendly staff, and police and security officers. They feel unsafe around people who are rude or who are taking or dealing drugs. Sufficient lighting, security cameras, and the ability to see their surroundings help young people feel safe.

Method

The Safe Spaces project used focus groups to talk with young people about their perceptions of public spaces in their communities. The focus groups were co-designed by QFCC youth advocates (members of the QFCC Youth Advisory Committee) and applied a range of engagement methodologies to facilitate diverse discourse.

Focus groups were held in inner regional and outer regional areas of Queensland. This is because GUIQ 2020 found young people's perceptions of safe spaces in their communities differed according to the remoteness status of their town. Of the participants in major cities, approximately 60 per cent said there were enough safe spaces where they can spend time with friends. However, only 49 per cent of participants in inner regional Australia and 44 per cent of young people in outer regional Australia said there were enough safe spaces. We visited two schools in the Darling Downs – South West region, and two in Far North Queensland (see Table 1). The names of participants, schools and towns have been withheld for confidentiality reasons.

Table 1. Location of, and number of participants at, each school

School	Department of Education Region	Remoteness classification	Number of participants
School 1	Darling Downs – South West	Outer regional Australia	7
School 2	Darling Downs – South West	Inner regional Australia	14
School 3	Far North Queensland	Outer regional Australia	13
School 4	Far North Queensland	Outer Regional Australia	10

Focus groups ran for 1.5 hours and were facilitated by QFCC staff and QFCC youth advocates. Participants were aged 13 – 15 years. Participants told us where they spend time with friends, what makes them feel safe or unsafe in these spaces, and characteristics of an ideal safe space.



Findings

Where young people spend time

Across the four schools, students identified 59 spaces where they spend time with friends. We categorised these 59 spaces into 13 types of location (see Table 2). Many of the spaces were outdoor recreational spaces (e.g., parks, skate parks) and supervised recreational spaces or clubs (e.g., pools, gyms). For each region, Table 2 shows the number of spaces in each type of location.

Table 2. Number of spaces in each location type in Darling Downs – South West and in Far North Queensland

Location category	Darling Downs – South West	Far North Queensland	Total number of places in each location type
Outdoor recreational space (e.g., park, skate park)	5	12	17
Supervised recreational space / club (e.g., pool, gym)	5	9	14
Natural area (e.g., beach, waterfall)	1	7	8
Small local shop or cafe	1	4	5
Fast food place	2	0	2
Library	1	1	2
Large shopping complex	1	3	4
Town streets	1	1	2
Advocacy organisation	0	1	1
Agricultural area	1	0	1
Cinema	0	1	1
Mixed-use indoor / outdoor area (with shops, parks, walking paths etc.)	0	1	1
Youth centre	0	1	1
Total number of locations in each region	18	41	

Features that help young people feel safe

For each space, participants described the factors that helped them feel safe there. From these descriptions, we identified 20 categories of features that helped young people feel safe in public spaces. Table 3 shows the safety features identified in each type of location. The most prevalent safety feature, identified in nine of the 13 location types, was the presence of crowds. Open spaces also made young people feel safe. Participants said open spaces allowed them to see who was nearby and allowed others to see if the young person was in danger. Friends and familiar or nice people also helped young people feel safe.

Features that make young people feel unsafe

For each space, participants also described characteristics that made them feel unsafe. From this list, we identified 18 groups of features that made participants feel unsafe in public spaces (see Table 4). For six location types, participants described a general feeling of unsafety, either all the time or at certain times (e.g., after dark). Specific features that were present in at least four of the location types were people perceived as unsafe; rude people; insufficient lighting; and insufficient security staff, police officers and / or security cameras.

Table 3. Safety features of each location type

Safety feature	Advocacy organisation	Agricultural area	Cinema	Fast-food place	Large shopping complex	Library	Mixed-use indoor / outdoor area	Natural feature / space	Outdoor recreational space	Small local shop or café	Supervised recreational space or club	Town streets	Youth centre	Number of location categories with each safety feature
Crowded	1			1	1		1		1	1	1	1		9
Open space			1	1		1		1	1	1	1	1		8
Friends; familiar / nice people			1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1		8
Welcoming staff			1			1				1	1			4
Adult / staff supervision					1				1	1	1			4
Close to other places / visible from street				1	1				1	1				4
Police / security present or nearby				1	1						1			3
Not too many people					1	1					1			3
Trusted / friendly adults									1	1	1			3
Security cameras					1				1		1			3
Enclosed				1	1						1			3
Away from people								1				1		2
No judgement	1										1			2
Familiar place								1	1					2
Know the staff										1				1
Lighting									1					1
Good facilities								1						1
Lifeguards											1			1
Safe if sensible								1						1
Provides distraction											1			1
Number of safety features in each location	2	0	3	6	8	4	1	6	9	8	13	4	0	

Table 4. Unsafe features of each location type

Unsafe features	Advocacy organisation	Agricultural area	Cinema	Fast-food place	Large shopping complex	Library	Mixed-use indoor / outdoor area	Natural feature / space	Outdoor recreational space	Small local shop or café	Supervised recreational space or club	Town Streets	Youth centre	Number of location categories with each unsafe feature
Feels unsafe at all or certain times														6
Unsafe people														4
Rude people														4
Insufficient lighting														4
Insufficient security staff, police, and cameras														4
Poorly maintained (e.g., long grass)														2
Feel judged														2
Smoking and vaping														2
Drinking, drug taking or dealing														2
Fighting														2
Doesn't have teen-only areas														2
Stabbings														1
Natural hazards (dangerous water)														1
Rude staff														1
Unsafe toilets														1
Anyone can access														1
Isolated														1
Too masculine														1
Number of unsafe features in each location	0	0	0	1	6	1	1	6	13	7	2	1	3	

Case studies: Popular spaces

School 1: Darling Downs – Southwest

The local park was a popular place for students in School 1 in Darling Downs – South West. Most felt safe there because it was crowded, and their friends and nice people were there. However, the presence of people who were perceived to be unsafe meant that some participants did not feel safe at the park. Several participants said they would feel safer if the grass was mown more often, because the long grass attracted snakes.

Other popular locations included the golf course, local shop, pool, and town streets. The people in these places (staff, friends, trusted adults) helped young people feel safe.



School 2: Darling Downs – Southwest

For students in School 2, one of the most popular spaces was a local fast-food place. Students said the people in and around the location (friends and nice people, adults who supervised the space, and police and security staff) helped them feel safe. Participants also felt safe because of the open space, which allowed them to see their surroundings, and the fact that the fast-food place was close to other populated spaces and visible from the street.

Picnic tables in a park next to a creek were also popular, but most students felt unsafe there. One participant told us drug taking and drug dealing made him feel unsafe in the park, especially at night. He said a police station was very close to the park, and he wanted police officers to do random checks of the park.



School 3: Far North Queensland

The most popular place for young people in School 3 in Far North Queensland was the local showground, which contains several sporting areas. However, most participants visited the showgrounds only occasionally and said they would feel safe only if improvements were made. Participants were concerned about insufficient lighting; insufficient security staff, police officers, and / or security cameras; the presence of people perceived to be unsafe; and toilets that seemed unsafe.

Another popular space was a local waterfall. Most of the young people who visited that space said they would feel safe there only if improvements were made. They wanted more lighting. They were also concerned about the concrete path that was broken and covered with overgrown grass.

The cinema was a popular space, and most participants who spent time there said they felt safe. The open space, welcoming staff, and presence of friends and nice people helped them feel safe.



School 4: Far North Queensland

Most participants at School 4 spent time at the local skate park. However, none of these students felt safe there. Participants felt unsafe due to the prevalence of smoking and vaping, the presence of unsafe people, swearing, and drug taking and dealing. The local youth centre was also popular, but only one participant felt safe there. Other participants felt unsafe because of rude people and fighting.

Other popular spaces included a large shopping complex in a nearby town, local swimming holes, and a nearby beach village. Generally, young people perceived these spaces as safe.

Safety features of an ideal space

Young people in the focus groups were asked to imagine an ideal safe space in their community, and to describe the features that would make this space feel safe. Across the four schools, participants identified 23 features. Commonly mentioned features were better lighting; more police officers, security guards and / or security cameras; and more / cleaner toilets. Table 5 shows the safety features that were described by students in at least two of the four schools.

Table 5. Features of an ideal safe space

Features of an ideal safe space	School 1 (DDSW ¹)	School 2 (DDSW)	School 3 (FNQ ²)	School 4 (FNQ)
Lighting				
Police, security guards, and cameras				
More / cleaner toilets				
Doorways etc. to allow safe movement between spaces				
Friendly people, including adults				
Adult supervision				
Well maintained (e.g., mown grass; fixed footpaths)				
Spaces for specific ages				
Fenced or enclosed space				
Better roads				

¹ Darling Downs – South West ² Far North Queensland

Summary of findings

The young people who took part in the Safe Spaces project clearly articulated their thoughts about the public spaces in their communities. They told us about their appreciation of outdoor recreational spaces (e.g., parks), structured recreational spaces supervised by adults (e.g., gyms), and natural areas (e.g., swimming holes).

When participants told us what influenced their feelings of safety in public spaces, two broad themes emerged. One overarching theme relates to the people in public spaces. Participants felt unsafe in spaces where people were swearing, fighting, and being rude. In contrast, they felt safe in the presence of friends, trusted adults, welcoming staff, police and security staff, and adults who provided supervision. Many young people said they wanted more police and security guards in public spaces.

The other overarching theme relates to physical features of the spaces. Open spaces and spaces that were close to populated spaces and streets helped participants feel safe. Participants said these features would allow them to notice danger and be seen by others if they were in danger. Sufficient lighting and security cameras also helped young people feel safe. In addition, young people wanted simple changes that would remove physical hazards. For example, participants wanted vegetation and footpaths to be better maintained.

Limitations and supporting findings

Several limitations need to be considered when interpreting the findings. Participants lived in outer regional and inner regional locations, so their views cannot be assumed to represent those of young people in remote locations or major cities. In addition, the small number of participants in each location means their views might not represent the views of most young people in those locations. Similarly, the students who agreed to participate in the focus groups and obtained parental consent to take part might not represent the general population of young people in their locations.

However, our findings are consistent with those of studies in other locations and studies with more participants. These studies support our findings regarding the importance of the people in public spaces and the physical features of public spaces. For example, Australian and international research has shown the likelihood that young people will use a public space is influenced by the presence of friends and the presence of people who are engaging in undesirable behaviour (e.g., taking or dealing drugs),^{5,6} and the

⁵ Van Hecke, L., Deforche, B., Van Dyck, D., De Bourdeaudhuij, I., Veitch, J., Van Cauwenberg, J., & Carpenter, D. O. (2016). Social and physical environmental factors influencing adolescents' physical activity in urban public open spaces: A qualitative study using walk-along interviews. *PLOS One*, *11*(5).

⁶ Ries, A. V., Gittelsohn, J., Voorhess, C. C., Roche, K. M., Clifton, K. J., & Astone, N. M. (2008). The environment and urban adolescents' use of recreational facilities for physical activities: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, *23*(1), 43 - 50

presence of drug paraphernalia.⁷ Around the world, lighting helps people of various ages feel safe at night⁸ and encourages physical activity at night.^{9,10}



Implications and next steps

The ultimate aim of Growing Up in Queensland 2022 is to support implementation of measures that will help young people feel more safe in public spaces in their communities. Achieving this aim will involve sharing findings with stakeholders who are best placed to respond to young people's views through changes to policy and practice. These stakeholders may include local councils, the Queensland Police Service, community organisations, and community planners.

Local councils could support young people's feelings of safety through simple measures such as maintaining vegetation, fixing broken footpaths, and installing better lighting. In addition, young people's appreciation of police presence may inform police practice. The finding that young people value adult supervision may influence how community organisations structure spaces, events and activities for young people. In the longer term, our findings regarding young people's appreciation of open and visible spaces may inform community planning.

Another aim of the Safe Spaces project is to support youth participation in decisions that affect them, in accordance with QFCC's Child and Youth Participation Framework. We will educate stakeholders about the importance of hearing young people's views and the methods we have used to hear from young people. We will also share our findings with young people, including those who took part, to show how their views are used and encourage their involvement in other projects that aim to hear their voices.

⁷ Australian Government Department of Social Services. (2017). *Talking with young people about the national framework: Outcomes of conversations with young people about the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Young People*. Australian Government.

⁸ Rakonjac, I., Zoric, A., Rakonjac, I., Milosevic, J., Maric, J., & Furundzic, D. (2022). Increasing the livability of open spaces during nighttime: The importance of lighting in waterfront areas. *Sustainability*, 14(10).

⁹ da Silva, I., Hino, A., Lopes, A., Ekelund, A., Brage, S., H, G., . . . Hallal, P. (2017). Built environment and physical activity: Domain- and activity-specific associations among Brazilian adolescents. *BMC Public Health*, 17.

¹⁰ Edwards, N., Hooper, P., Knuiaman, M., Foster, S., & Giles-Corti, B. (2015). Associations between park features and adolescent park use for physical activity. *The International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 12(1).