



Picture: Rhonda Milner

The Fear of Attack



Parents' concerns for the safety of their children

Ours is a society in which independence is highly valued and sought after, and our capacity to achieve a sense of freedom and independence is an important component of our quality of life and sense of wellbeing. An ingredient of this independence is the ability to move around our community as and when we choose – indeed this ability helps foster a sense of independence, competence and a feeling of being in control of our lives.

For children, independent mobility is likely to contribute to their development and the growth of a sense of competence and control. One of the factors limiting their freedom of movement is whether parents feel it is safe for their children to go about the neighbourhood unsupervised. This is likely to depend in part on parents' assessments of whether their children will be safe from traffic danger – and here an understanding of how capable their children are to make judgements enabling them to avoid traffic danger will be important.

But danger from traffic is not the only safety concern that parents have. The media constantly highlight the dangers children face from other people, and random attacks on children, molestation by strangers, kidnapping and attacks by gangs and individuals are all given prominence. One could be forgiven for believing that random attacks by strangers are a common and an ever-present danger. Safety campaigns such as 'stranger danger' and the safety house program both reflect community concern about these types of attacks on children and reinforce the fear that many parents and children have when children are out of the home unsupervised.

In reality, such attacks on children are relatively uncommon and are not increasing. The Australian Bureau of Statistics crime victimisation survey (Ross et al. 1994: 20) shows

that from 1983–93 the rate of victimisation of young people in Victoria actually declined – by 35 per cent over the ten-year period – and that the rate of reported sexual assault also declined substantially. The evidence also indicates that abduction is less common for children under the age of 14 than for older age groups.

It is also well documented that children are more at risk from people they know than from strangers, with national data indicating that in over 85 per cent of cases of reported sexual abuse against children the perpetrator was known to the victim (Angus and Woodward 1995: 16).

Nevertheless, it is the fear of crime – the *perception* that children are vulnerable to attack if they are out in the streets unsupervised – rather than its reality that influences the behaviour of parents.

The Study

This article describes the concern that parents have about their children being victims of assault if left unsupervised in public. It examines how widespread these concerns are and

whether children are also afraid of being attacked. It looks at whether parents are more worried for their daughters than their sons, and whether their concerns decline as children get older. It discusses whether certain types of parents are more worried than others about the safety of their children – for example, do city parents have a greater sense of danger than parents living in rural areas, and do low income families and families from non-English-speaking backgrounds have a greater sense of vulnerability about their children than other families?

The data are drawn from the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) conducted in 12 localities throughout Australia (see introductory article on pages 6–7 for a description of the study and sample). Parents answered questions about each of their children living in the household. In all, data were collected for approximately 6725 children, comprising 3676 primary school children, 2272 secondary school children, and 777 children who had left school.

Parents (mainly mothers) were asked three questions about their concerns for the child's safety when going to school unsupervised by

an adult. Parents, and also their teenage children (both those at secondary school and those who had left school), were asked two questions relating to safety on public transport when travelling unsupervised to and from places of entertainment. Table 1 summarises the information collected.

Costs of the Fear of Attack

Parents' fears about their children being victims of crime is sometimes translated into increased supervision, such as driving children everywhere, restricting where children may travel alone, confining children more, and monitoring children's whereabouts at all times. Such vigilance can result in important costs for children, parents and the community at large.

Increased supervision can mean that children's independence is curtailed, in which case parent-child relationships can become strained as children interpret this as their parents' failure to trust them. Suffocating parental supervision can lead children to take inappropriate risks as they rebel to prove that they can cope, or as they simply dismiss their parent's concerns as unfounded anxiety.

Parental anxiety can easily be transmitted to children and, in turn, undermine children's sense of control of the world in which they live. Such anxieties and uncertainties about being able to manage can stay with children as they grow up and become adults. To the extent that parents feel that daughters are at greater risk of attack than sons, feelings of anxiety, incompetence and lack of control are more likely to be transmitted to daughters than to sons, and thus have long-term consequences for gender equity in adult life.

The quality of life of parents can be significantly affected as well, if parents are so concerned that they feel it necessary to be constantly on call for their child's transport needs. Rushing around on the transport run after school and on weekends ('mum's taxi') erodes the free time of parents and restricts their capacity to pursue leisure and other activities and this, in turn, can lead to parental resentments about children's demands on them. Further, the need to transport children can have a direct effect on a mother's capacity to combine work and family responsibilities.

There are also costs to the community of substantially constraining children's freedom to move around unsupervised. Engwicht (1992) argues that unrestricted mobility is important to the child's sense of belonging to their community. As our personal worlds become increasingly privatised by travelling in private cars as well as living in private homes, opportunities to interact in a locality become fewer, thus undermining the sense of being part of a community. Then there are the financial and environmental costs involved in driving children everywhere, as well as the effect on the physical fitness of children.

Level of Concern

With the exception of Brownlee and McDonald's (1992) report, based on early data (268 cases) from one outer suburban area (Berwick) of the ALSS survey, and a Canberra study (Tranter 1993) that found that fear of molestation was a factor in about 30 per cent of cases where parents did not allow children to travel to school alone, there has been little research into the levels of parental concern about their children being victims of attack from strangers. The Australian Living Standards Study provides one of the first opportunities to build up a picture of such parental concern.

Table 2 reflects a widespread concern among parents that their children might be attacked when travelling unsupervised – although the intensity of parental worries is not known.

Almost 40 per cent of primary and secondary school children had a parent who was concerned about them being attacked or kidnapped on the way to school.

There was also considerable concern about the danger for older children travelling unsupervised on public transport on the way to and from entertainment. More than half the teenagers (secondary school and school leavers) had parents who were concerned about their safety on public transport while going to entertainment, and two-thirds had parents who worried about their safety coming home at night.

The relatively low level of concern about violence on public transport on the way to school (10 per cent) most likely reflects the high level of use at this time of day and the perception that there is safety in numbers.

As children grow older their parents are

less likely to worry about them being attacked or kidnapped on the way to school. For example, half the primary school children had a parent who was worried about kidnapping compared with a quarter of secondary school children. (Concerns about violence on public transport increase a little, from about 8 per cent to 14 per cent, but this is probably due to higher rates of use of public transport among secondary school students.) This does not mean that the teenagers' parents have stopped worrying, but rather that they worry about different things: while about half the primary school children had parents who worried about attack or kidnapping, the parents of well over half the secondary school students worried about safety to and from entertainment, and the parents of about half of the school leavers had similar concerns.

Gender and the Fear of Attack

On most measures girls are more likely than boys to have parents worrying about their safety (Table 3), particularly in the categories of attack or kidnap on the way to school and, particularly when girls have left secondary school, travelling home at night from entertainment. The concern for the safety of older girls at night is very high indeed with almost 70 per cent of these girls having parents who worried about their safety.

While this greater concern about the safety of girls reflects the fact that more girls than boys are the victims of rape, sex offences and abduction, it is inconsistent with the fact that, in Victoria at least, boys are about 2.5 times more likely than girls to be a victim of crimes such as assault and homicide (Ross et al. 1994: 22).

Table 1. Which questions were asked in relation to which children?

Who responded to question?	Age/stage of child					
	Primary school children		Secondary school children		Children who have left school	
	Parent	Child	Parent	Child	Parent	Child
Concerned about:						
Attack in street on way to school	√	x	√	x	x	x
Kidnap on way to school	√	x	√	x	x	x
Violence on public transport on way to school	√	x	√	x	x	x
Safety on public transport on way to entertainment	x	x	√	√	√	√
Safety on transport coming home from entertainment at night	x	x	√	√	√	√

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Table 2. Percentage of parents concerned about attacks on children by age of child

Parent is concerned about:	Primary school children	Secondary school children	Children who have left school	All
	%	%	%	%
Attack in street on way to school	43.7	28.6	na	37.9
Kidnap on way to school	50.9	24.2	na	41.2
Violence on public transport on way to school	7.6	13.6	na	9.9
Safety on public transport on way to entertainment	na	57.4	43.4	54.1
Safety on transport coming home from entertainment at night	na	70.3	45.5	66.8
Base N	3606	2251	664	

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
na = This question was not asked of, or in relation to, these children.
This base N varies slightly because of missing data. The base N represents the smallest number of cases on which percentages were calculated.

As mentioned earlier, parental anxiety that results in increased supervision of children to the detriment of their freedom can undermine children's sense of control and competence. The high degree of concern about the vulnerability of girls to attack can have implications for the development in girls of a sense of control and independence. Studies have shown that girls and boys are often reared differently and that this can have long-term impacts for gender roles, level of self-esteem and the ability to interact. For example, Heatherington and Parke (1979) showed how parents can encourage independence and assertiveness in sons but passivity in daughters, and in a study of parental protectiveness of young children on the way to school, Kniveton (1986) argued that dissimilar treatment of girls and boys

encouraged a dependence in girls that flows through to later life.

Generally speaking, parents worry less as children get older. Table 3 shows that about 40 per cent of primary school boys had a parent who worried about them being attacked on the way to school, but this drops to 22 per cent for secondary school boys. The same drop in levels of concern is evident for both girls and boys on most measures, especially regarding dangers on the way to school.

However, the reality is that victimisation increases as children get older. Table 4 indicates the reported rates of offences against young people in Victoria in 1993–94 and shows that children under the age of 14 are the least likely to be victims of homicide, rape, assault, kidnap and abduction.

Among teenagers, however, there are some important gender differences (Table 3). Not only do parents worry more about the safety of their daughters, they are more likely to maintain that worry as their daughters make the transition out of the school system, whereas as sons leave school parental concern for their safety lessens. About 68 per cent of secondary school boys had parents who worried about them travelling home from entertainment at night; this dropped to 40 per cent when their sons had left school. In contrast, 69 per cent of secondary school girls had parents who worried about their safety at night; this remained steady at 71 per cent when their daughters had left school.

Location and the Fear of Attack

The 12 local government areas from which ALSS data were collected can be classified into four categories: inner urban, middle urban, outer urban and rural. This classification enables us to examine whether parents' concerns about children's vulnerability to crime is linked to the area in which they live. It helps us to answer such questions as: Do parents feel that the country is a better and safer place in which to rear children? Do inner city parents fear for the wellbeing of their children while parents in outer suburbs feel their neighbourhoods are safer for their children?

Table 5 shows that country parents are much less likely to worry about their children's safety than city parents – a fact that will undoubtedly have an impact on the way country and city children experience their childhood. While some of the rural–urban differences on the transport questions may be affected by the lower use of public transport in rural areas, responses to questions about attack in the street and kidnap indicate real differences between rural and urban parents in their perceptions of danger.

If Engwicht (1992) is right, and the freedom to explore one's local area is important for the development in a child of a sense of belonging to a locality, then the relative lack of parental worry about child safety in country areas should have a positive effect on a child's sense of belonging in a rural community.

Table 5 also shows that in cities, as a general rule, it does not make much difference whether children live in an inner, middle or outer urban area – the perception of danger is much the same. Perhaps the inner areas are seen to be slightly safer in some regards, particularly public transport, possibly because it is more crowded in inner areas than in the outer suburbs. In outer areas there is a marginally higher level of concern by parents about attacks and kidnap on the way to school – a concern that could be influenced by the lower population density in these areas. However, there are no reliable statistics to indicate whether this fear is founded.

Family Income and the Fear of Attack

There was no evidence that families on low incomes held greater fears than other families for their children's safety on the way to school (Table 6). However those from more affluent homes were likely to be more concerned about safety on public transport: about 60 per cent of teenagers from the highest

Table 3. Fear of attack by gender

<i>Parent is concerned about:</i>	<i>Primary school children %</i>	<i>Secondary school children %</i>	<i>Children who have left school %</i>	<i>All %</i>
Attack in Street on way to school				
Boys	39.6	22.3	na	33.0
Girls	48.0	34.8	na	42.9
Kidnap on way to school				
Boys	48.0	17.3	na	36.3
Girls	55.8	31.1	na	46.2
Violence on public transport on way to school				
Boys	7.6	11.6	na	9.1
Girls	7.6	15.6	na	10.7
Safety on public transport on way to entertainment				
Boys	na	55.5	36.8	50.0
Girls	na	60.2	51.5	58.4
Safety on transport coming home from entertainment at night				
Boys	na	67.8	40.2	52.4
Girls	na	69.2	71.8	69.8
Base N				
Boys	1831	1117	356	3304
Girls	1778	1125	299	3202

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–1992, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Table 4. Number and rates of victims per 1000 persons by offence type and age

<i>Offence</i>	<i>Age</i>					<i>Population</i>
	<i>0–9</i>	<i>10–14</i>	<i>15–19</i>	<i>20–24</i>	<i>25+</i>	
Homicide	.001 (6)	.01 (3)	.04 (12)	.06 (23)	.03 (96)	.03 (140)
Rape	.1 (38)	.3 (93)	.6 (196)	.5 (183)	.1 (359)	.9 (869)
Sex offences	.9 (542)	3.1 (965)	2.7 (881)	1.5 (568)	.3 (953)	.9 (3909)
Assault	.5 (319)	2.5 (767)	7.1 (2305)	7.4 (2766)	2.5 (7020)	3.0 (13177)
Kidnap or abduction	.01 (28)	.1 (27)	.2 (59)	.1 (40)	.01 (107)	.1 (261)

Source: Victoria (LEAP) data, May 1993–April 1994.

Table 5. Parental fear of attack on children by location of family (all aged children)

<i>Parent is concerned about:</i>	<i>Location</i>			<i>Rural %</i>
	<i>Inner urban %</i>	<i>Middle urban %</i>	<i>Outer urban %</i>	
Attack in street on way to school	46.3	45.0	46.9	15.1
Kidnap on way to school	44.0	47.0	50.8	20.3
Violence on public transport on way to school	14.7	14.5	12.8	0.5
Safety on public transport on way to entertainment	59.8	71.3	69.6	11.7
Safety on transport coming home from entertainment at night	75.4	86.3	80.8	37.6

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

income families had parents concerned about their safety on public transport on the way to entertainment compared with about 50 per cent of teenagers from the lowest income families.

It is not clear why this difference should exist. It may indicate that some parents are more confident of their child's ability to protect themselves; it may reflect different patterns of travel; it may reflect greater anxiety by the wealthier that their children will be victimised and attacked by youth gangs from poorer areas; or it may be the result of those from wealthier families using public transport less and therefore having greater fears of the unknown. Again, no reliable statistics exist to indicate if children from higher income families are at greater risk of victimisation.

Ethnicity and the Fear of Attack

Children whose mothers came from non-English-speaking backgrounds were more likely than other children to have a parent worrying about them being attacked on the way to school, or to and from entertainment (Table 7). This is most marked among the younger children, where further analysis (not reported in Table 7) showed that 54 per cent of children from non-English-speaking backgrounds had parents worrying about attacks on the way to school compared with about 42 per cent of children from English-speaking backgrounds.

It is not clear whether the greater fear of mothers from non-English-speaking backgrounds reflects a difference in the likelihood of attack or simply a greater sense of vulnerability and a lower sense of control compared with other parents. Again, no reliable statistics are available to suggest these fears may be founded.

The Transmission of the Fear of Attack

Among the many things that parents can pass on to their children is a particular way of seeing the world. Although children frequently differ from their parents in terms of taste and fashion, they are likely to share similar values and orientation to the world around them. If parents see the world as predictable, then their children are likely to develop a similar perspective. If parents perceive the world as chaotic and dangerous, a world where individuals exercise little control over their fate, then children will tend to inherit a similar world view (Angal 1982; de Vaus 1992; Henry 1973). If parents believe that society is occupied by malevolent strangers engaging in random acts of violence against children, it is likely that they will pass this fear on to their children. The question is, to what extent do children share their parents' concerns?

The responses of ALSS parents and teenagers to questions about their safety concerns regarding travel to and from entertainment provide a glimpse of the extent to which teenagers share their parents' perceptions. Table 8 shows that a match exists between parental levels of concern about the safety of their teenage child and the teenager's own level of concern. Almost 57 per cent of teenagers whose parents worried about their safety on public transport travelling to a place of entertainment shared their

parent's concern, and more than 70 per cent of teenagers whose parent feared for their safety coming home at night also worried about their own safety.

Similarly, if parents do not worry, their teenage children tend also not to worry. Seventy per cent of teenagers whose parents did not worry about their safety on public transport themselves felt safe, and 55 per cent of teenagers whose parents were not worried about their safety coming home at night did not worry about their own safety.

Although there are many teenagers whose concerns about their safety do not match those of their parents, it is far more likely that the teenager and parent will share the same safety concerns. If information about the safety concerns of *both* parents rather than from just one (mainly the mother) had been obtained, it is likely that the match between the perceptions of the teenager and at least one parent would have been even closer.

Conclusion

The Australian Living Standards Study demonstrates a high level of concern by parents about the vulnerability of their children to attack. These concerns are greater for daughters, and are more common in the city than the country, and among parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Concerns about attack and kidnapping on the way to school diminish as children grow older, but these worries are replaced by fresh concerns for the safety of teenagers as they

travel to and from entertainment. The level of parental concern is matched to a considerable extent by the concerns held by their children, with children appearing to internalise the perceptions of their parents about the safety of the world 'out there'.

On the basis of actual incidents of attack, the level of fear of attacks on children is far higher than seems justified. No doubt this stems from the 'newsworthy' and highly publicised events so favoured by the media. All over the world gruesome and apparently random attacks occur; we are likely to hear of them and perceive such events to be common, unpredictable and out of our control. These perceptions may create feelings of vulnerability, fear and a sense of siege that can lead to a withdrawal into the private domains of the home and private transport.

One response to the fear of attack has been to increase people's awareness of the possibility of attack so that they avoid placing themselves in situations they perceive to be dangerous. Another is to help people feel that they can protect themselves if necessary. Care needs to be taken that such well intentioned remedies do not unwittingly create or exaggerate the sense of fear.

While our increasingly privatised lives have exaggerated our sense of danger of the world outside, strengthening ties to our local community, and enhancing informal mechanisms of social control, will foster the belief that we can manage in the world we live in.

Possibly the most effective response is to increase people's sense of agency – their

Table 6. Fear of crime by family income level

<i>Parent is concerned about:</i>	<i>Family income relative to poverty line</i>				
	<i><100%</i>	<i>100-119%</i>	<i>120-149%</i>	<i>150-199%</i>	<i>200%+</i>
Attack in street on way to school	36.6	38.6	38.7	37.0	39.6
Kidnap on way to school	39.9	41.1	43.4	41.4	40.9
Violence on public transport on way to school	8.6	10.0	9.6	8.5	13.6
Safety on public transport on way to entertainment	51.3	50.8	49.5	56.6	59.8
Safety on transport coming home from entertainment at night	66.1	57.0	64.8	69.8	71.2

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Table 7. Parental fear of attack on children by country of birth of mother

<i>Parent is concerned about:</i>	<i>Mother's country of birth</i>	
	<i>English-speaking %</i>	<i>Non-English-speaking %</i>
Attack in street on way to school	36.8	44.3
Kidnap on way to school	40.6	45.6
Violence on public transport on way to school	9.0	14.9
Safety on public transport on way to entertainment	53.2	60.0
Safety on transport coming home from entertainment at night	59.3	69.9

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Table 8. Teenager's concern about safety to and from entertainment by parental concern

	<i>To entertainment</i>		<i>From entertainment</i>	
	<i>Parent worried %</i>	<i>Parent not worried %</i>	<i>Parent worried %</i>	<i>Parent not worried %</i>
Teenager worried	56.7	28.9	71.1	44.6
Teenager not worried	43.3	70.2	28.9	55.4

Source: Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) 1991–92, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

sense that they can manage and cope positively in the world around them. Of course, at the same time as we might wish to encourage a sense of independence and control in children we must not unduly endanger them. A balance needs to be achieved, and a generally safe environment created.

Creating a safe public transport system is one component of increasing a sense of safety. Given that in some states at least the level of staffing on trains, stations and trams has declined since these data were collected, it would be instructive to know whether concerns about safety on public transport have increased. Transport planning initiatives should take into account the level of concern that parents have for the safety of their children.

An environment in which parental fears are allayed will contribute in an important way to the living standards of Australian parents and their children. Central to achieving a proper balance between confinement and independence in our children is an accurate and responsible assessment of the level of dangers that exist for children in our society. Certainly there are dangers of attack by strangers, but these need to be kept in proper perspective. In trying to protect our children we must at the same time guard against undermining their capacity to become competent, coping adults.

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The authors are grateful to AIFS Research Officers Wendy Stone and Christine Millward for their assistance with the data analysis for this article.



Local Differences in Views of providers

As part of the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) of 5000 families in 12 rural and urban areas of Australia, the Institute conducted a survey of 1100 service providers from the spheres of children's services, community services, education, employment, health, housing, leisure and recreation, safety and security, transport, and youth and amenity services. (See pages 6-7 for a description of the ALSS.)

The survey covered a host of issues associated with living standards and the contribution that service provision makes to family wellbeing. In one of many questions,¹ service providers and families were presented with a list of selected problems that families in their neighbourhoods might face and asked to rate their importance as issues in the local area.

Do Perceptions Differ Across Regions?

The design of the study allowed us to look at whether families on the urban fringe and in rural areas were disadvantaged in their ability to access services compared with their counterparts elsewhere. Funding

allocation for service provision is often calculated on a per capita basis, although there has been an increased use of needs-based assessment to determine resource allocation. Regardless of the basis of provision, access to services depends on the relationship between demand and provision. An issue from the study, therefore, is whether families and providers in particular regions see the need for services differently.

Figure 1 illustrates how providers and parents rate the importance of problems for families. The four outer urban areas of the study (Berwick, Werribee, Campbelltown and Penrith) are listed first in the Figure, followed by Elizabeth/Munno-Para, which has characteristics of both an outer and a middle area. Box Hill and Ryde are the two middle urban areas in the study, and Melbourne and South Sydney the two inner urban areas. Riverland (actually, Berri, Loxton and Renmark, three of the seven Riverland towns), Roma/Bungil and Tennant Creek are the three rural areas surveyed.

In all of the charts, two peaks tend to stand out as far as providers are concerned, namely Campbelltown and