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"We are used to it" : explorations of childhood perceptions of danger and safety in living in the Johannesburg inner city.

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2014-09-05
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/15412

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the daily realities of childhood in the Johannesburg inner city, investigating how the children understand and negotiate the possible dangers and probable safeties of the inner city. Growing up in the inner city is an image few think is possible. However, throughout my research I will argue for a conceptualisation of childhood that speaks to the urban public spaces in the Johannesburg inner city and an inner city that speaks to the a new childhood in South Africa. I have used danger and safety negotiation as the bridge between studies of the Johannesburg inner city and studies of a South African childhood, and as a bridge in the gap between theories on childhood and theories on the city. I investigate the ways that the children negotiate the everyday dangers in the city and develop practices of safety, and how these practices and avoidance techniques speak to the reality of living in the inner city. The very nature of the congested inner city offers a freedom that many suburban childhoods lack, and that the children experience an independent mobility within an infamously dangerous space speaks to the changes within the inner city often hidden behind the skewed opinion of many of the Johannesburg inner city. I make a claim that the inner city offers more freedom of mobility that is expected. This mobility is a relatively simple and well practiced form of creating visibility within the pedestrian congestion of the city. These practises of visibility, I argue, is heavily reliant on the layout of the inner city and the ways in which children understand the dangers that face them. As such, their safety practices are a complex network of sharing cautionary stories and avoidance techniques. For most children, this environment is also the only space that they know and therefore, what to outsiders might seem a dangerous, chaotic and confusing space is to the children just their everyday experience. These are the stories about which I write.