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1 **Place (in)securities: Older adults' perceptions across urban environments in the United**  
2 **Kingdom**

3  
4 **Abstract:** This paper explores empirical accounts of perceived insecurities and  
5 accompanying issues that make urban place problematic and can impact older adults'  
6 wellbeing and overall quality of life. Findings reported derive from the project "Place-  
7 Making with Older People: Towards Age-Friendly Communities" which investigates both  
8 barriers and facilitators to developing age-friendly cities. Drawing on interviews with older  
9 adults in three cities in the United Kingdom (UK), the analysis demonstrates that physical  
10 and social vulnerabilities along with the characteristics of the built and social environment,  
11 play a role in influencing older adults' behaviours, routines and habits in the community. The  
12 results are discussed with a view of influencing practice and policy priorities relating to age-  
13 friendly cities.

14 **Keywords:** public space; coping strategies; age-friendly cities.

15

16 **Introduction**

17 A growing body of research on public spaces in urban environments has identified the central  
18 role of place in people's experiences of health and wellbeing (Bornioli, Parkhurst & Morgan,  
19 2018; Cattell, Dines, Gesler & Curtis, 2008; Finlay, Franke, McKay & Sims-Gould, 2015)  
20 and community life including aspects of place identity, belonging and attachment (Buffel et  
21 al., 2014; Phillipson, 2007; Scharf, Phillipson & Smith, 2003). For older adults, particularly,  
22 a spatial and affective attachment to their home and community, to *being-in-place*, is crucial  
23 to their wellbeing (Rowles, 2017 cited in Finlay, Gaugler & Kane, 2018), as these are places  
24 where everyday life unfolds (Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve & Allen, 2012). Furthermore,  
25 the physical and social characteristics of the neighbourhood, appear as relevant contexts that

26 may affect activities, routines and behaviour (Day, 2008; Michael, Green & Farquhar, 2006).  
27 For instance, empirical studies have found that positive perceptions of neighbourhood safety  
28 encourage social interaction and mutual aid (Baum & Palmer, 2002), whereas people who  
29 perceived the environment unsafe tend to alter their outdoor activities and routines (McGinn,  
30 Evenson, Herring, Huston & Rodriguez, 2008), leading to a negative sense of community  
31 (Lund, 2002). Thus, these aspects should be highlighted within an ageing society and age-  
32 friendly policy agenda.

33

34 Criminology, sociology and psychology theorists have attempted to explain the complex  
35 interplay between the subjective fear of crime or perceived insecurity and the objective risk  
36 of victimisation (*e.g.* Farrall, Jackson & Gray, 2009; Hardyns & Pauwels, 2010; Sampson,  
37 2012). According to the fear of crime literature, “perceptions can be a powerful and  
38 independent factor that may affect people through different pathways than *actual*  
39 *experiences*” (Wood et al., 2008, p. 16 emphasis added). Thus, whilst fear of crime can  
40 impact perceptions of safety, feelings of insecurity are driven by factors embedded in the  
41 built and social environment. These include fears or anxieties concerning noise, litter, traffic,  
42 vandalism, street harassment, poor housing, overcrowding, or potentially threatening social  
43 groups (Amin, 2006; Sandercock, 2000).

44

45 Numerous studies have concluded that older adults are more likely to experience feelings of  
46 insecurity and are an at-risk group (*e.g.* Pain, 1997; Warr, 1984). One of the factors  
47 explaining this phenomenon is the notion of self-perception of physical and social  
48 vulnerability attached to particular social groups. For older adults, these perceptions stem  
49 from a limited capacity to cope with ‘dangerous’ situations, a decreasing family and social  
50 support network and representations of unsafe places in local media outlets (Valera-Pertegas

51 & Guàrdia-Olmos, 2017; Varela, 2008). In this sense, perceived insecurity and accompanying  
52 issues make some *places* problematic for older people, at particular times of the day. In this  
53 article we provide an account of older adults' experiences of urban place (in)securities, their  
54 ways of dealing with these, and outline implications for the delivery of age-friendly cities.

55

## 56 **Method**

57 This article derives from a three-year ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded  
58 project examining enablers and barriers to creating age-friendly communities that promote  
59 healthy and active ageing. The research was subject to Heriot-Watt University's ethical  
60 review process and research governance. The qualitative approach to data collection and  
61 analysis was set to gain in-depth understandings about the diversity of older adults' lived-  
62 experiences in the urban environment and how these experiences are underpinned by  
63 physical, social and psychological factors. We employed an interpretivist paradigm  
64 (Creswell, 2014); a holistic exploration of both individual and social phenomena to uncover  
65 reality through older adults' views, needs and experiences of urban place insecurities.

66

67 We selected nine neighbourhoods across three cities in the United Kingdom (UK)  
68 (Edinburgh, Glasgow and Manchester), representing a broad range of urban areas in each  
69 city, in terms of urban development, demographic characteristics and levels of social and  
70 economic deprivation. Our fieldwork was undertaken over a ten-month period (2016-2017);  
71 comprising 102 semi-structured interviews (between 25-150 minutes long) with older adults  
72 (aged 60 to 92) conducted at participants' homes or public places of their choosing (e.g.  
73 coffee shops, community centres). Participants were recruited via contacts in existing  
74 community groups and snowballing techniques. The interviews covered issues of sense of  
75 place, community barriers and enablers, physical and social environmental experiences, and

76 potential age-friendly improvements. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed  
77 verbatim in preparation for analysis.

78 Interview transcripts were organised, read and discussed using a thematic analysis approach;  
79 we worked towards identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within our data set aiming to  
80 understand the participants' perceptions and experiences of navigating urban space. Our  
81 analytical approach was both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (driven by research  
82 questions). Guided by Braun and Clarke's approach (2006), this systematic and iterative  
83 analytical process involved: (1) familiarising ourselves with the transcripts (noting initial  
84 ideas on the margins); (2) generating initial codes; (3) merging codes (identifying patterns in  
85 the data); (4) searching for themes (collating codes into potential themes, gathering all  
86 relevant data for each potential theme); (5) reviewing themes (confirming themes work in  
87 relation to coded transcripts extracts); (6) defining themes (refining the specifics of each  
88 theme, creating clear names and descriptions); and (7) producing a report (interpreting the  
89 whole data set, relating back to the research questions and literature).

90

91 Our analysis generated three main themes on older adults' experiences of neighbourhood and  
92 place: 'place familiarity and perceptions of security', 'paradoxical vulnerability and public  
93 space', and 'place appropriation and managing place insecurities'. Below we focus on place  
94 insecurities and the ways older people deal with and manage insecurities in the context of  
95 urban space.

96

### 97 **Place familiarity and perceptions of security**

98 Across all nine neighbourhoods, participants reflected on place and neighbourhood in terms  
99 of a sense of familiarity, embodied through everyday civilities and habitual routines  
100 exchanged within the community. Previous research has identified the importance of

101 neighbourhood as places of meaningful ‘encounters’, where engaging with and coming into  
102 face-to-face contact with others can facilitate a sense of connection within community;  
103 thereby conferring a local insider status (Hay, 1998 cited in Finlay et al., 2018, p. 3). More  
104 importantly, place familiarity not only reinforced participants’ physical, social and  
105 autobiographical attachment or *insideness* (Rowles, 1983) to their neighbourhood but their  
106 sense of security and safety. Knowing that neighbours were looking out for each other was an  
107 important factor affecting perceptions of place and older adult’s activities, as illustrated in the  
108 following quotes:

109

110 I’d rather walk round here at two-three in the morning than go up the town and walk.  
111 Everybody knows everybody else, even the older ones. They’ve got their families  
112 here, and they know who they are. I think we feel safer because we know who we  
113 know. [...]. We feel safe in our own community (67-year-old female, Craigmillar,  
114 Edinburgh)

115

116 This is a tight-knit community, everybody knows everybody. Everybody knows  
117 everybody’s business, you can’t do nothing. But it’s good to know that you can walk  
118 out your door, you’re going to be safe (60-year-old female, Easterhouse, Glasgow)

119

120 This notion of neighbours looking out for each other was not defined as emotional  
121 ‘closeness’ or interpersonal intimacy but as a source of dependence in times of adversity (*e.g.*  
122 being taken ill, needing help moving heavy items), which provided residents with a sense of  
123 security and safety when ageing in the community. In this sense, the social connections that  
124 older adults developed within the immediate community imbued place with protective  
125 qualities. In the following quote, this form of place protection was visible when older adults  
126 would intervene to ensure the wellbeing of other residents:

127

128 I’ve got another friend who lives about 100-yards away in a tenement. He was taken

129           ill in Princes Street some months ago [...] anyway bottom line is we swapped keys  
130           and things. He has a routine; most people do get into a routine. If I don't see him for a  
131           day or two I'll go and rap on the door (72-year-old male, Morningside, Edinburgh)

132

133   As indicated earlier, positive perceptions of safety and security are conducive to developing a  
134   stronger sense of community, which is evident in participants' accounts of 'being looked  
135   after' or 'being known' in their neighbourhoods. Older adults living in more deprived  
136   communities were more likely to report a stronger sense of place familiarity and feelings of  
137   safety, and were much less apprehensive in using the neighbourhood, particularly in the  
138   evening (*i.e.* Baguley, Craigmillar, Easterhouse). Conversely, it was in the least deprived  
139   communities where place insecurities were more acutely felt. In neighbourhoods  
140   experiencing social segregation (*e.g.* Govanhill) there was a weaker place familiarity and  
141   higher perception of insecurity; and for many it was the eroding of social support in old age  
142   that led to feelings of unsafety and vulnerability.

143

#### 144   **Paradoxical vulnerability and public space**

145   According to the 'fear of victimisation paradox' older people tend to report greater levels of  
146   perceived insecurity/unsafety whilst experiencing lower victimisation rates, when compared  
147   to other social groups (Hough & Mayhew, 1983 cited in De Donder, Buffel, Dury, De Witte,  
148   & Verté, 2013, p. 918). Participants' accounts regarding perceptions of crime echoed such  
149   paradox as only very few participants had actual experience of crime. Older adults' feelings  
150   of insecurity often stemmed from concerns about place maintenance and physical and social  
151   features of the environment; concerns they constantly negotiated in terms of their changing  
152   physical bodies and social support to access and use urban space. Place insecurities were  
153   centred around 'vulnerability'; a reflection of the participants' perception of their capacity to  
154   avoid crime or defend themselves in dangerous/risky situations (Allik & Kearns, 2016).

155 Additionally, older adults often wanted to exert control and their right to use public space,  
156 especially if physical barriers (*e.g.* potholes, fruit stands, business boards) and social barriers  
157 (*e.g.* disorder, insensitivity and lack of respect) made it a hostile environment, yet often felt  
158 unable to do so. Many older adults felt unsafe and wary when moving around the community  
159 which impacted their confidence to manage situations:

160

161       When you're older you're more vulnerable. I'm finding I'm losing that bravery, if you  
162 like. You feel more vulnerable as you're getting older and I can feel it now more. It's  
163 a terrible world, isn't it! [...] now I'm less likely to say something. I don't know  
164 whether it's because it's getting worse now or whether it's just because I'm getting  
165 older (67-year-old female, Rusholme, Manchester)

166

167 In this sense, feelings of vulnerability in the community were built on and perhaps  
168 contributed to a culture of fear. Notions of embodied capabilities combined with  
169 environmental attributes also contributed to assessments of community and social insecurity,  
170 as expressed below, where the emotional impact of negotiating physical space were also  
171 evident.

172

173       I don't have the same confidence as I did when I was 70, you know? I just try to keep  
174 aggravation away, but for some reason [...] I seem to draw them to me. [...] When I  
175 was 70 I didn't mind that because I knew I could handle it, but now I couldn't handle  
176 it, you know? I can't go out now (86-year-old male, Morningside, Edinburgh)

177

178       If you're going to visit friends, to the shops, to clubs, you've got all these things to  
179 negotiate. Like dangerous roads, snow and ice, whatever, the distance involved and so  
180 on [...] it's just that, oh god, you know, do I need all that grief? (78-year-old female,  
181 Partick, Glasgow)



182

183 Pavements and kerbs were particularly problematic for those with mobility and visual  
184 impairments, and some mentioned that street spaces failed to reflect the needs of older adults  
185 in terms of supporting accessibility and inclusivity. Uncertainty about what spaces were safe  
186 to walk on and changing environmental conditions were considerations for participants when  
187 thinking about safety and age-friendly communities:

188

189 I fell over and that was because of an uneven pavement and so I've become very wary  
190 about where I walk. [...] But also taking them up so regularly and laying them down  
191 and so even though you might think one month "Oh, this bit's a bit uneven", the next  
192 month it'll be that bit (66-year-old female, Leith, Edinburgh)

193

194 For many, 'fear of falling' created a barrier to leaving the home. This embodied and  
195 environmentally situated vulnerability and consequent lack of confidence had social  
196 implications as older adults chose to 'stay in' and withdraw rather than engage in the  
197 neighbourhood; many felt socially excluded. Fear of falling was also evident when using  
198 public transport. Many participants felt that that there was a lack of sensitivity amongst  
199 transport providers and users which often discouraged use:

200

201 It's terrible on the buses. I have to say to them [*drivers*] 'will you let me sit down  
202 please before you move'. I don't use the buses now, although I've got my bus pass.  
203 I'm frightened now of falling again, you know, especially the buses when they jerk  
204 and there's people behind you and they push you (92-year-old female, Baguley,  
205 Manchester)

206 These accounts support Goldsmith's (2011) notion of 'architectural disability', where the  
207 design of public space confronted older adults with barriers and hazards, making the  
208 environment uncomfortable and unsafe to use, which exacerbates self-perceived

209 vulnerabilities and excludes older adults from participating in the community. Responding to  
210 these place insecurities, some participants developed specific strategies to negotiate public  
211 space.

212

213

#### 214 **Place appropriation and managing place insecurities**

215 Older adults' accounts of perceived insecurities around public space evidence the influence  
216 of embodied and situated environmental factors on behaviours with many adopting place  
217 'avoidance strategies' (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981) to manage safety-related issues. For  
218 instance, the presence of obstacles in the street often forced many participants - especially  
219 women – to come out at certain times of the day or take alternative routes to reach their  
220 destination. Some even avoided using local shops and cash-machines for fear of being  
221 mugged, whilst others would consciously map 'safer' routes by walking on well-lit streets or  
222 avoiding certain zones of the neighbourhood that were deemed 'no-go' areas. For others,  
223 strategies included adopting modes of travel that meant they spent less time traversing public  
224 space, such as taxis or relying upon friends and family as a mode of transport. The following  
225 quotes illustrate some of those strategies:

226           Tomorrow night I've got a cook session meeting, but I get a lift up and a lift back  
227           because the meeting is at night at 7:30 and I don't like hanging about bus stops at  
228           night. So, one of my friends in the church comes and collects me for that and brings  
229           me back home (78-year-old female, Partick, Glasgow)

230           It shook me a little bit [incidence of crime] but then I thought I'll go in future along  
231           the main street where it's lit-up. That's why I take the car often at night and park it.  
232           I'm now fairly sensible with where I walk and when I walk in the dark (67-year-old  
233           female, Didsbury, Manchester)

234

235 Others opted for walking on busy streets because to them an increased street-life reduced  
236 perceived insecurity and supported their engaging in public spaces:

237

238 I think that because you feel comfortable in where you live you also feel safe in where  
239 you live. We all work on the principle the more people who are out walking the safer  
240 it is, the better it is. And we're of an age where we aren't doing Kung Fu anymore  
241 (78-year-old female, Rusholme, Manchester)

242

243 Negative media portrayal and stigma attached to certain places also had an impact on the way  
244 participants navigated, appropriated or felt marginalised in public space. Although some  
245 older adults internalised social representations of their neighbourhood as an unsafe and  
246 dangerous place, others were keen to challenge this in a clear attempt to change people's  
247 perceptions of insecurity whilst others preferred not to dwell on negative stigma:

248 Craigmillar has a terrible reputation but I've never once felt threatened, news have  
249 been negative towards us. People don't like it. It's an assumption people make. (60-  
250 year-old female, Craigmillar, Edinburgh)

251

252 It doesn't worry me. There are people who do, and people read their newspapers and  
253 read horrible things and think that could happen here. I can't be bothered with that. I  
254 really can't (80-year-old female, Partick, Glasgow)

255

256 Some older adults deliberately used the so-called 'invisibility' of old age to their advantage  
257 when navigating public spaces - invisibility makes them feel safe. As one 65-year-old woman  
258 in Govanhill mentioned: "young guys standing in the corner don't see me, it's like I'm in  
259 another plane". Others often adopted specific strategies to remain 'visible', which some felt

260 had the potential to objectify and stigmatise older adults by highlighting weakness and  
261 vulnerability, as illustrated below:

262           A lady in the community now has had to buy herself a high vis vest to cross the road  
263 because she's terrified that the traffic won't see her. It's stigmatising, isn't it? She's  
264 not said anything about that, but that's my perception of it. And buses tend to not stop  
265 for her either if they don't see her. So that's why she does it as well (65-year-old  
266 female, Rusholme, Manchester)

## 267 **Concluding discussion**

268 Drawing on theoretical understandings relating to perceptions of insecurity/safety and the  
269 impact of the built and social environment on people's sense of place, in this article we  
270 analysed older adults' experiences of vulnerability and marginalisation in public space across  
271 nine neighbourhoods in the UK. A qualitative methodology was employed to explore the  
272 varied nuances of older adults' lived-experiences of urban place insecurities, and thus it is  
273 crucial to consider the study's context when interpreting the findings as these primarily  
274 reflect the research participants' views and perceptions.

275

276 In line with the literature (Baum & Palmer, 2002; Day, 2008; Lund, 2002; McGinn et al.,  
277 2008; Michael, Green, & Farquhar, 2006), our findings emphasise the central role of the  
278 physical and social features of the urban environment in shaping perceptions of safety and  
279 security in the lives of older adults. Participants' responses to feeling insecure often  
280 compromised the ability to navigate outdoor spaces and access community settings;  
281 disrupting their social interactions, behaviours, routines and habits in the community.

282

283 The findings revealed the need to shift towards a broader understanding of perceptions of  
284 safety and security, beyond notions of 'fear of crime' to including factors such as  
285 accessibility and usability of public space, and involvement with other residents. A strong

286 sense of place familiarity and autobiographical attachment, or what Rowles (1983) termed  
287 ‘insiderness’, provided older adults with positive perceptions of safety/security. Participants  
288 living in more deprived communities were more likely to report stronger sense of place  
289 familiarity and much less apprehension in using the neighbourhood, which encouraged  
290 feelings of inclusion and protection. This finding contradicts previous research that suggest  
291 that levels of support, trust and feelings of safety tend to be lower in disadvantaged areas  
292 (Allik & Kearns, 2016). In neighbourhoods where social segregation was prominent and  
293 perceived place familiarity was lower, participants often expressed fear of using outdoor  
294 spaces.

295

296 Our findings also identified the ways in which older adults developed strategies in response  
297 to feelings of place insecurity. Whilst some withdrew from community in response to feeling  
298 insecure, others adopted specific strategies in relation to place use. This suggests that far  
299 from being passive actors in response to insecurity, older adults consciously adopt place  
300 response mechanisms and re-negotiate spaces in different ways (*see* De Donder et al., 2013;  
301 Sandercock, 2000; Wood et al., 2008). In determining solutions and interventions, it is  
302 important that the knowledge and experience of older adults are effectively utilised to design  
303 and deliver age-friendly cities which are safer and more secure; a key aspect that has also  
304 been highlighted in Buffel’s (2018) work as a means of co-researching with older adults. This  
305 will allow older people a greater sense of community and opportunities to come together to  
306 identify strategies to support engagement in urban spaces.

307

308 Lastly, notions of place were deeply embedded in the experiences of older adults. Whilst  
309 sense of place and aspects of place attachment, identity and belonging have been afforded  
310 attention in the literature, there has been a lack of empirical work exploring these concepts in

311 relation to the design and delivery of age-friendly cities and communities. Although  
312 prevention and policing services are important, we need to find ways to support people to feel  
313 more confident and secure in their communities through approaches to place management  
314 that reflect individual and collective responses to the use of urban space. This requires a  
315 closer articulation of place in the design of interventions that support active ageing in the  
316 community.

317

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322

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