

Skate parks as a context for adolescent development

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The Current Research

This research was conducted in a coastal city of Australia (population of 500,000) in which approximately thirty outdoor skate parks have been built and are maintained by the local city council and are freely available for use by all. Research by Boag et al.

The research addressed the following questions:

1. What is the extent and nature of skate park usage? Who uses and who does not use these facilities? How and when are they used? What happens in these parks?
2. What reasons are given for using skate parks? What factors encourage and constrain park usage?
3. What psychosocial outcomes are associated with skateboarding, skate park usage, and identification with the skating subculture?
4. What changes can be made to improve and broaden park usage, and to increase prosocial, and decrease antisocial, outcomes from park usage?

The research aimed to inform youth policy regarding leisure spaces and services, especially the location, design, management and impact of skate parks and other multi-facility youth precincts. The current paper presents findings relevant to all four research questions, although space constraints require some selectivity of reporting. Thus, the major focus here is on the third of the above questions, namely, the interface between skate boarding/skate park usage and developmental outcomes. The research comprised three studies, each of which used a different data collection method. Study 1 comprised 20 individual and two group interviews with skate park users and other stakeholders. In Study 2, participation and activities at two skate parks were observed by pairs of trained observers. Finally, in Study 3, adolescent students from two secondary schools completed a questionnaire relating to leisure activities, skate park use, perceptions of benefits and drawbacks of park usage, and likely correlates of skate park-based behaviors. This mixed-method approach permitted verification and clarification of findings across studies.

Interview Study Aims The aim of the interview study was to identify issues relating to use and non-use of skate parks, the characteristics of users, the culture associated with the parks, perceptions of pro- and anti-social outcomes of park usage, and factors likely to improve and detract from park usage. Given the exploratory nature of these aims, a heterogeneous mix of interviewees was sought, and both individual and group interview were conducted. 9 Method Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 adults and eight adolescents. Two group interviews were also conducted. Interviews were audio-taped (with the interviewees' permission) and transcribed for later analyses. Copies of the interview schedules are available upon request. Selection of the 12 adult interviewees was based on their expertise and interest in skate parks, skateboarding and/or adolescent leisure behavior. They comprised two elected local government representatives, three local government officials with responsibilities for recreation, youth or community affairs, two parents of skate park users, five industry representatives (e.g., a skate park designer, an on-line retailer of skate products), and a former professional skateboarder who resides in and who learnt to skateboard in the city. Two of these adults were current users of skate parks. Interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. Individual interviews were conducted with eight adolescents selected

on a purposive basis to include four users and four non-users of skate parks. There were five males (aged 13-17 years) and three females (aged 16-18 years). Interviews included both same- and mixed-sex dyads. They lasted between 10 and 25 minutes. Each of the two focus groups included six adolescents (four females and two males, ages 13-16 years), and a mix of skateboarders and non-skateboarders. These group interviews were used, in part, to reduce unnecessary interviewee inhibitions and to enable additional insights to emerge out of debates between interviewees over the pros and cons of skate parks. Group interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes. Interviewers were two females (aged 33 and 37 years) and one male (aged 54 years). None was, or had previously been, a skateboarder. Two of the interviewers, plus a third person with no prior involvement in the project, coded the interview data. A three-phase process was employed. In the first phase, coders, acting independently, applied a descriptive coding approach (Saldana, 2009) in which they recorded the major categories of responses to each of the interview questions in turn. Between three and eight categories were identified by the coders in the 10 responses to each question. In phase two, the coders re-read and reflected upon each interview transcript as a whole, and recorded details of any broader, more pervasive themes that emerged. In the final phase, the coders met and discussed their observations and reflections. Discussion and cross-referencing continued until consensus was reached as to the major question-specific and broader themes evident in the interviews. Results and Discussion of the Interview Study Findings First thoughts. Interviewees were asked for their first thoughts about skate parks. Answers varied widely in content, direction (positive or negative) and strength of feeling.

Most interviewees who did not use the parks reported negative attitudes relating particularly to park unattractiveness, the negative qualities of some park users, and the frequency of anti-social behaviour associated with the parks.

For example, one parent commented: "From a mother's perspective, I have found skate parks to be quite threatening places, they are covered in graffiti which irks me and I find them really ugly", whilst another adult interviewee stated that "skate parks are sort of a concrete facility with little attraction for anybody besides skateboarders".

Reflecting on a decade of association with one local skate park, an elected member of the city council stated that skate parks produced "nothing but problems". This interviewee described instances of conflicts between skateboarders and bike riders, graffiti, paint being poured over the footpath, fires, beer bottles and spirit bottles left lying around, "vandalising our furniture, seats, rubbish bins, and all other things in there", and other antisocial acts. The interviewee did, however, acknowledge that most such incidents were not necessarily committed by dedicated skateboarders.

University of California research document Skateboard Parks.

In support of the argument that skate park use and skateboarding activities lead to adverse developmental outcomes is the body of research demonstrating different development consequences of youth involvement in structured, as opposed to unstructured, leisure activities (Barnes et al., 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004; Morris, Sallybanks, & Willis, 2003; Osgood & Anderson, 2004).

Skate parks are sometimes stereotyped as unsavoury if not outright dangerous places populated by graffiti artists, bullies and drug takers. Some see skateboarding as at odds with conventional attitudes and behaviours (Davis, 2004).

Structured activities are those that entail high levels of adult organisation and supervision, with rules imposed to regulate the behaviour of the young participants. Examples include school sponsored extra-curricular activities and team-based sports. Such activities are generally associated with positive developmental outcomes.

In contrast, participation in unstructured activities - particularly those involving free time spent in the company of peers – is related to 6 antisocial behaviours such as violence, public nuisance, property damage, and substance use. Most skate parks are unsupervised, and most skateboarding activities are unstructured. As such, this context and its associated activities present adolescents with peer models of, ample opportunities for, and few adult constraints over, rule breaking behaviours.

Webcams keep watch over St Kilda skate park

By Laura Banks: The Age December 29, 2013

In an Australian first, St Kilda's controversial skate park has been fitted with webcams so users can monitor the facility and deter vandalism.

Within 24 hours of its official opening in March, the world-class skate park was littered with graffiti, forcing Port Phillip City Council to spend thousands of dollars on removing the tags. But with the installation of webcams at the Marine Reserve last week, skaters and scooter riders who call the park home can keep their eyes on the facility day and night.