





ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE CHILD'S VIEW OF THE TERRITORY: PERSPECTIVES FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Territory has a direct impact on child development.
2. Children recognize poverty and violence as negative aspects.
3. Living in the neighborhood mitigates the problems of the area.
4. Listening to children means respecting them and promoting their protagonism.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to understand children's perspective on the territory in which they live. **Method:** a qualitative study carried out at a public university in northeastern Brazil in July 2023. Interviews with 15 children aged between seven and 12 were conducted after parental authorization and the children's consent. Content analysis used the Territorial Impact Dimensions model as a theoretical framework: Physical, Socioeconomic, Services, Social Network, and Governance. **Results:** the children recognize poverty (Socioeconomic Dimension), violence (Social Network Dimension), and the precariousness of the physical structure of the neighborhoods (Physical Dimension). Living with neighbors/friends (Social Network Dimension), the school (Services Dimension), and the playgrounds (Physical Dimension) make it easier to cope with the problems. They call for greater efforts from government officials to improve the area. **Final considerations:** considering the child's perspective shows respect and encourages their active role in planning strategic actions, favoring the effectiveness of actions to promote child health.

DESCRIPTORS: Child health; Child development; Neighborhood characteristics; Qualitative research; Nursing.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period for developing cognitive, psychosocial, and affective skills that will have lasting impacts throughout life¹. Neighborhood characteristics related to housing conditions, basic sanitation, access to public transport, green areas, leisure, and safety have a direct influence on the construction of the child's view of the world and the organization of their brain structure, showing that there is a strong correlation between the quality of the geosocial space and child development².

The World Health Organization's report on global challenges in child health, based on the Sustainable Development Goals, reveals that children from poorer families face greater obstacles to health care³, which imposes long-term human and economic costs on society as a whole. In Brazil, approximately 50% of children under five live in families whose per capita income is less than ¼ of the minimum wage⁴. More adverse conditions are observed in the Northeast, where in addition to poverty, access to essential basic sanitation, health, and education services is drastically limited⁴.

All children can face challenges in the first few years of life, especially those related to their environment, but those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less able to mitigate these adverse impacts⁵.

A study carried out in a small town in the interior of the state of São Paulo with children under the age of five found that family social exclusion is associated with poor motor and socio-emotional development⁶. In addition, there is evidence of a strong association between child development and aspects of the territory, such as exposure to green spaces⁷, social cohesion, and violence⁸.

Despite the growing interest in the subject and the fact that it is already well established in public policies aimed at early childhood that community coexistence, the space, and environment in which children live should be prioritized, as they determine child development⁹. Studies investigating the influence of the territory on child development from the child's perspective are still scarce. By considering children's views on complex issues such as this, which substantially interfere in their lives, it is possible to establish a continuous process of sensitive listening, which allows respect and enables children to achieve their leading role, their place of speech, and the peculiarities of their expression and existence¹⁰.

Bearing these considerations in mind, this study aimed to understand the child's perspective on the territory they live in. The assumption is that children's lives, experiences, and way of living in the place where they live can indicate the territory's potential and weaknesses for healthy child development.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, exploratory study, guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guide, translated into Portuguese¹¹, which guides qualitative research writing.

The study was carried out in the municipality of Salvador (BA), a coastal city in the northeast of Brazil with the fifth largest population among Brazilian municipalities, with more than 200,000 children under the age of six⁴. A center of Afro-Brazilian culture, more than half of the municipality's population is black. The urban area, tourism, and commerce are well-developed. The Municipal Human Development Index is 0.759, which places it in the high human development category, but there are major social inequalities, marked by poverty and violence¹².

The data was collected in July 2023, during a children's event held by a public university in the municipality. This periodic, permanent event brings students and teachers from various courses who carry out fun, interactive, and informative activities, using language accessible to children and their families. On the day the research was carried out, the event was attended by approximately 200 children accompanied by their families or guardians.

The interviews with the children were conducted by two undergraduate nursing students, and supervised by the project coordinator. Children between the ages of seven and 12 were included in the research, as it was felt that they would already have a better understanding of the questions and the answers they could give, and the approach was carried out individually, with one child at a time, at the venue itself.

So that the children would feel free to speak up and express their opinions, the approach was carried out in a very playful and relaxed way. The researchers imitated TV news reporters, wearing colorful clothes and props. The interviews took place at the venue itself, which was an open space, but we tried to guarantee the children's privacy. The interviews lasted around 15 minutes.

Initially, parents/guardians and children were approached and informed about the objectives, methods, potential benefits, and risks of the research, as well as the possibility of interrupting and withdrawing from the interview at any time, without causing any harm to the participants. If the parents/guardians gave their consent and the child agreed, the interview began with the following guiding question and its consequences: "Tell us a little: what is the place where you live like? What do you think is good or bad about where you live? If you could send a message to the mayor, governor, or President of the Republic, what would you ask for to change or improve the place where you live?"

The interviews were recorded using a cell phone voice application and then transcribed, organized, and submitted to Content Analysis so that, after an exhaustive reading of the material in search of the nuclei of meaning, the empirical categories of the material obtained could be identified¹³. To preserve the anonymity of the participating children, the letter "e" was used for the interview, followed by numbers from one to 15, according to the order of the interview.

The data obtained was analyzed based on the theoretical model of the Dimensions of Territorial Impact¹⁴, which postulates the influence of five dimensions of the territory on child development: 1) Socioeconomic Dimension: refers to the socioeconomic level of the population living in the neighborhood, or the level of poverty of the territories, the living and working conditions of the community; 2) Social Network Dimension: which deals with the social dynamics of the neighborhood, including the existence of bonds and support networks, the social cohesion between residents or the connection between them and their willingness to help each other, the length of time they have lived in the neighborhood and how child-friendly it is. Also included here are residents' perceptions of safety and elements related to violence in the neighborhood; 3) Physical Dimension: includes the physical characteristics and ownership of the houses that make

up the neighborhood, as well as the green areas there. The proximity and accessibility of public transport are also part of this dimension; 4) Services Dimension: includes the existence, quality, and easy access to services and public facilities that cater to young children, such as schools and health centers; and, 5) Governance Dimension: considers the participation of citizens in public decisions and the governance characteristics of the initiatives taking place in the neighborhood.

The themes identified empirically were organized into subcategories referring to each of the five dimensions of the territory.

This study is aligned with a larger project, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Nursing School of the Federal University of Bahia (CAAE: 64750722.0.0000.5531, Opinion No. 5.800.539). All aspects of research ethics were respected. The parents' consent and the children's assent were recorded audibly, in accordance with CNS/ CONEP Resolution 510/2016.

RESULTS

Fifteen children aged between seven and 12 took part in the study, seven girls and eight boys. They all lived in Salvador (BA), in neighborhoods close to the university where the event took place.

Based on the Content Analysis, it was possible to organize three thematic categories: 1) the potential of the territory for child development, from the child's perspective; 2) the negative aspects of the territory that affect child development, from the child's perspective; 3) the children's desire for improvements in the territory to promote child development.

The subcategories were defined based on the theoretical model of the Territorial Impact Dimensions¹⁴, which are: Socioeconomic Dimension, Social Network Dimension, Physical Dimension, Services Dimension, and Governance Dimension.

In category 1 - the territory's potential for children's development, from the child's perspective - it can be seen that the children referred most to the themes of the Physical Dimension and the Social Network Dimension, as shown in Table 1.

When asked what was good about the neighborhood, the children talked mainly about the parks, playing in the street, sports courts, and games, which refers to the Physical Dimension of the territory. According to the excerpts below:

[...] there's a playground, there's a court, we can play in the street [...]. (e4)

[...]there (in the street) we play tag and various things, dodgeball...and there's a court to play soccer, basketball, volleyball [...]. (e6)

Chart 1 - Subcategories and themes related to the category: "Potential of the territory for child development, from the child's perspective". Salvador, BA, Brazil, 2023

Category 1 - The territory's potential for child development, from the child's perspective	
Sub-categories	Themes
Social Network Dimension	Family Friends Neighbors
Physical Dimension	Parks Squares Sports courts Cinema Beaches
Services Dimension	Schools Health facilities

Source: The authors (2024).

In addition, many children highlighted the presence of family, friends, and neighbors (Social Network Dimension) as a positive aspect of where they live. Essential services, such as the health center and school, were also mentioned as something beneficial in the area (Services Dimension).

[...] what I think is the best thing about school is the teachers' love, the people who look after us. The friendship and relationship we have at school with our classmates [...]. (e1)

[...] at school I like the teachers, the activities, the trips [...] I've been to Pelourinho twice with the school, it's great to meet historical artists [...]. (e9)

In category 2, regarding the negative aspects of the place where they live, table 2 shows a summary of the subcategories and themes extracted from the speeches.

It can be seen that the Physical Dimension is also highlighted as a negative aspect. The children were also very upset about environmental issues, referring to garbage in the streets, pollution of the sea, and deforestation:

[...] what I think is bad about where I live is that there's a lot of garbage in the streets and on the beach too [...]. (e11)

[...] there's a lot of deforestation, we need to stop cutting down trees [...]. (e9)

Chart 2 - Subcategories and themes related to the category: "Negative aspects of the territory that affect child development, from the child's perspective". Salvador, BA, Brazil, 2023

Category 2 - Negative aspects of the territory that affect child development, from the child's perspective.	
Sub-categories	Themes
Socio-economic Dimension	Poverty High food prices
Social Network Dimension	Violence Shootings Police and thieves
Physical Dimension	Potholes in the streets Too many hills Few squares Unmaintained parks Dirty beaches and sea pollution
Services Dimension	Lack of school places Long waiting times at health centers

Source: The authors (2024).

The precarious conditions of the streets are also problems pointed out by the children, according to the examples below:

[...] The other day I was riding my bike and I fell into a pothole, my bike wheel broke and I couldn't play with it anymore. The streets have a lot of potholes where I live [...] (e4)

[...] where I live there are a lot of hills, and it's very bad, I get very tired, you can't play ball in the street [...] (e3)

In the Service Dimension, what most draws children's attention is the lack of places at primary schools and the waiting times at health centers:

[...] I wish they'd build more schools from 6th grade upwards, there are very few, and it's difficult to get into them, so we have to go to a school that is far from home [...] (e13)

[...] the postinho (Basic Health Unit) is very bad, because you have to wait there a long time to be seen [...] (e7)

They also complained about the price of food (Socioeconomic Dimension):

[...] the worst thing is the price of food, my mother wanted to get a basic food parcel, but it's hard for her to get one [...] (e8)

In the Social Network Dimension, violence is the negative aspect most pointed out by the children. Assaults and shootings are part of the children's routine, according to the excerpts below:

[...] the city is violent. [...] I would ask for the streets to be safer [...] (e12)

[...] there's a lot of theft, various things [...] (e8)

[...] if there weren't people who steal and are bad [...], I can't go out much because there are these people who are bad and steal, even a toy, sometimes I can't take it because they steal it [...] (e2)

[...] there's a lot of muggings, there's a long corridor that's deserted and muggings always happen, it even happened to my neighbor [...] (e6)

[...] our neighborhood gets shot at a lot, but I've gotten used to it. (e3)

Table 3 summarizes the subcategories and themes relating to the category: "Children's wishes for improvements in the area". The requests for improvements in the territory's Physical Dimension stand out, such as renovating streets and parks, building more squares and combating beach pollution.

Chart 3 - Subcategories and themes related to the category: "Children's desire for improvements in the territory to promote child development". Salvador, BA, Brazil, 2023

Category 3 - Children's desire for improvements in the area to promote child development	
Sub-categories	Themes
Socio-economic Dimension	Distribution of basic food parcels Reducing the price of food
Social Network Dimension	Improving security
Physical Dimension	Renovate streets and parks Build more squares Reducing deforestation Combat beach pollution
Services Dimension	Increase the number of school places

Source: The authors (2024).

The Socio-Economic Dimension was represented by requests to reduce food prices, such as:

[...] lower the prices of things, I'm tired of people just complaining about prices [...]. (e9)

[...] we need to improve the price of things [...]. (e2)

[...] I would ask for food parcels to help everyone who needs them [...]. (e13)

Improvements to the structure of the streets were also requested by the children to the authorities:

[...] remodel my street, which is collapsing, and make better playgrounds [...]. (e9)

[...] the hills around my house are dangerous, I'd like that to improve [...]. (e5)

[...] increase the number of buses on the streets and lower fares [...]. (e9)

DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand, through the eyes of children, how the dimensions of the territory can have implications for children's development. The results showed that the children recognize poverty, which refers to the Socioeconomic Dimension of the territory, violence (Social Network Dimension), and the precariousness of the physical structure of the place where they live (Physical Dimension) as negative aspects, but that living with neighbors and friends (Social Network Dimension), school (Services Dimension) and the presence of parks and sports courts (Physical Dimension) seem to alleviate the problems they face. The children also demand attention from government officials concerning the problems presented, especially concerning the price of food and improvements to the physical structure of the neighborhoods.

For the children, the Socioeconomic Dimension takes the form mainly of a lack of food at home and the high price of the basic food basket. In fact, limited access to food is a reality of Brazil's economic and social structure¹⁵. The country's last census revealed that almost half of all children under the age of five live in families earning less than ¼ of the minimum wage per capita⁴, which puts them in a highly vulnerable social situation.

Food insecurity, determined mainly by family income, prevents children from having access to healthy food, regularly and in adequate quantity¹⁶, causing nutritional disorders¹⁷⁻¹⁸. These conditions of poor nutrition directly affect children's development, reducing their learning, increasing the risk of chronic diseases in adulthood, and perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of poverty^{5,19}. A study of almost 30,000 children under the age of five in the United States showed that there was an association between food insecurity and a higher risk of delayed child development²⁰.

The Social Network Dimension is one of the most important for children, as it is related to bonds and support networks between residents, as well as the perception of safety and the availability of mutual help, with a focus on the care and protection of children in the neighborhood².

Other studies have shown that feelings of social cohesion are associated with better mental health outcomes for residents when compared to neighborhoods with low collective efficacy²¹. This is explicit when the children point to their friends, family, and neighbors as positive aspects of the place where they lived. It is possible that the perception of support and safety in the neighborhood, as mentioned by the children, allows them to make greater use of the community space and nature's resources for play activities, promoting their motor, cognitive, sensory, and emotional development.

Some studies have shown a negative relationship between neighborhood social disorder and integral child development, measured by the existence of internalizing behaviors (depression, phobias, anxiety, illness, withdrawal) and externalizing behaviors (tantrums, rule violations, aggression)²². These findings highlight the need for policies and interventions that promote social and inclusive environments to improve children's well-being and holistic development.

If, on the one hand, the feeling of trust and affection shared with family, friends, and neighbors was highlighted by the children as a potential, on the other hand, insecurity, violence, and different perceptions of police authority were perceived as weaknesses in the territory.

In this study, we observed a fear of the violence to which they are exposed on a daily basis, with a worrying naturalization of this context on their part. It should be noted that this research was carried out in the capital of a state in the Northeast region of Brazil, which has the highest incidence rate of homicides by firearms among children and adolescents aged zero to 19 (5,495 of the country's 11,700 cases)²³.

In addition to this concern, the participants had different views on the police force. This body, created to preserve order, protect people and property, as well as control violence, was considered positive and necessary by some, while others spoke of the fear they felt in the face of frequent truculent and unfair approaches.

The number of children and adolescents killed by the police has increased throughout the country. The United Nations Children's Fund Report, which gathered data from the period between 2016 and 2020, identified that, of the 34,918 intentional violent deaths of children and adolescents in Brazil, 787 of these deaths were due to police intervention. This number represents 15% of the total intentional violent deaths in this age group and indicates an average of more than two deaths per day throughout the national territory²⁴.

Violence is a serious and worrying problem and has been the subject of national and international debate. There is an urgent need to tackle it, which involves, in addition to combating drug trafficking, policies and strategies to reduce social inequalities.

Another area of the territory that the children highlighted was the playgrounds, squares, and sports courts. These social facilities refer to the Physical Dimension of the territory and are responsible for the 'play' space, an important factor in the child's development process in an integral way²⁵.

A study that investigated sociodemographic and contextual factors in relation to the frequency of outdoor play in the neighborhood in early childhood, of a sample of 2,280 children aged four to five in Canada, revealed that only 35% of children played outdoors every day, and the greater the parents' trust in their neighbors and the higher the family's socioeconomic status, the more likely this event was to occur²⁶.

Play is based on the development of imagination and the interpretation of reality. They become the authors of their roles, choosing, elaborating, and putting their fantasies and knowledge into practice, being able to think and solve problems freely²⁵. What's more, it's not just a question of having fun, but also of education, construction, socialization, and developing their potential. After all, playing is first and foremost a child's right²⁷.

School, which refers to the Service Dimension, was also valued by the children. It is important to emphasize the fundamental role of school in children's development, as this learning environment also stimulates creativity, knowledge, play, culture, and socio-affective interactions²⁸.

The aspects relating to the Governance Dimension were not mentioned by the children, perhaps due to their immaturity. However, it is understood that when management is inclusive and sensitive to the specificities and needs of the population, this provides more opportunities for children².

A possible limitation of this study was the fact that the interviews were conducted during a children's event, which may have shortened the children's testimonies. However, considering the scarcity of studies that take the child's perspective into account, especially with regard to the territory and child development, this study contributes with results that can support other studies, as well as the planning of strategic actions to promote children's comprehensive health.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study showed that children's perception of the territory basically refers to 'eating' (socio-economic dimension), 'playing' (physical dimension) and relating (services and social network dimension). The main negative point was 'violence' (socio-economic dimension).

Creating, maintaining, and guaranteeing an environment conducive to healthy integral development throughout childhood means investing in actions to reduce social inequalities, combat violence, and guarantee access to health and education.

The contributions of this study go towards understanding the territory from the children's point of view. Showing respect and encouraging the active role of children in the planning of strategic care actions, as well as in the development of public policies that can favor the effectiveness of actions and promote comprehensive child health.

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