

# NEED FOR PLAY 01

## PLAY DEPRIVATION IN LONDON



Children in London are more seriously deprived of space, time and freedom to play than elsewhere in the country. This resource looks at these three barriers to play across London. You can find stats more specific to your area using Census data (see Need for Play 03)

### SPACE to play

There is no doubt about it, London is crowded. Lack of space to play is the barrier which sets the capital apart.



#### Overcrowded homes

Around 1 in 3, or [560,000 children](#) in London is growing up in an overcrowded home: many live in flats with poor or no access to outdoor space.

SOURCE: [National Housing Federation, 2023](#)

#### Temporary accommodation

In 2023, over [83,000 children](#) in London were living in temporary accommodation including hotels and b&bs. There is often [no space to play](#), limiting their current and future health and happiness.

SOURCES: [Trust for London, 2023](#) and [London Councils, 2023](#)

#### Fewer playgrounds

On average one playground in London serves [866 children](#). In Scotland that figure is 196. Access is also patchy so in; and children with disabilities are seriously underprovided for. Nearly a [quarter of the capital's kids](#) live more than 10 mins walk from a playground.

SOURCE: [Equal Play, Association of Play Industries, 2022](#)

#### Threat of development

In London, it can feel like you are never more than a few feet from a greedy-eyed developer. School and sports playing fields are disappearing as developers snaffle up plots of land for housing or other development.

SOURCE: [London Playing Fields Foundation](#)

#### Fewer families have gardens

Some 21 per cent of London households have no garden, compared with 12 per cent across the UK. The figure is even lower in inner London boroughs and for black households.

SOURCE: [Office of National Statistics, 2020](#)

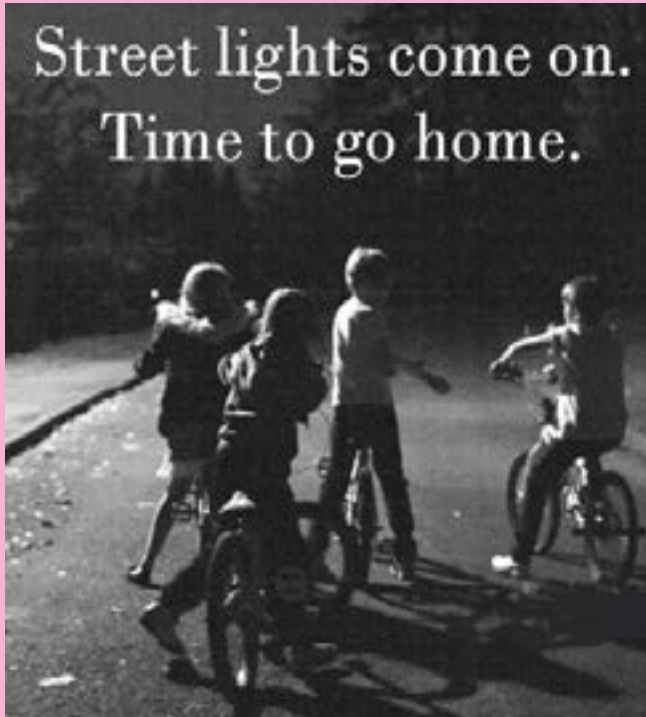
#### Less green and open space

London's residents have the least amount of green space per person of any region. And while the population has grown by 11.2 per cent over the last ten years, spending on green space has decreased by nearly a third.

SOURCES: [Green Space Index, Fields in Trust](#) and [England's Green Space Gap, Friends of the Earth, 2020](#)

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### Freedom to play

Gone are the days that children were encouraged to get outside with the only instruction being 'be back by the time the street lights go on', or 'make sure you are home in time for tea'.

Freedom to play is being eroded for children across the country as fear of traffic and crime - and increasingly judgement from neighbours - restricts opportunities for play. In London where traffic is heavy and people live close to one another these are no doubt exacerbated.

### Traffic danger

Traffic is the number one barrier to play and the danger is real. Streets make up [80 per cent of public space](#) in London but children are largely excluded from this part of the public realm because of the threat posed by cars. They are also prevented from independently accessing parks and playgrounds across busy roads.

SOURCE: [Mayor's Transport Strategy, TfL 2022](#)

### Intolerance

The [sights and sounds of children playing](#) has become [less tolerated](#). This appears particularly true in crowded cities and since more people have begun working from home since the pandemic.

SOURCE: [Trends in Children's Street Play, Play England 2023](#)

### Fear of crime

We know fear of crime is one of the reasons parents keep children indoors. But perceptions do not match reality. The 2023 Crime Survey for England and Wales revealed that on average, [Londoners are less likely to be the victim of a crime than elsewhere](#) in the country; and that experience of antisocial behaviour is among the lowest in the country.

Despite this, nine per cent of Londoners believe there is a high level of antisocial behaviour where they live, against 7.8 per cent of people elsewhere. 'Stranger-danger' is still a very real fear although the likelihood of child abduction is extremely rare. That said, knife crime, county lines and grooming are all real concerns for children and young people in London.

SOURCE: [Crime in England and Wales, Office for National Statistics 2023](#)

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### Time to play

Free play used to be what happened naturally during those long periods when nothing much was going on, nor anything expected of children. Now everyone has a phone in their pocket and the results-driven pressures of school and 'safe' organised activities have removed the creative potential of time, unfilled. [One report](#) suggested that UK kids spend less time outdoors than prison inmates.



### Playtime at school

The British education system has become increasingly narrow in focus and children are subject to extensive testing as soon as they start school. Break times in English primary schools have reduced by 45 minutes a week since 1995. Removing play as punishment in schools is also sadly common – despite evidence that it improves behaviour, concentration and academic performance.

SOURCE: [The Case for Play in Schools: A review of the literature, OPAL, 2021](#)

### Homework

The emphasis on academic performance and the failure to recognise the crucial role of play in child development means that even primary school children are routinely given homework. This is despite evidence suggesting that it does nothing to boost children's academic achievement before they reach secondary level. Homework cuts into time that might otherwise be spent in unstructured play - shown to build brains and boost academic performance.

SOURCE: [The Conversation, 2022](#)

### Screen-based entertainment

The rise of screen time is not unique to London kids and battles rage in families across the UK. [The pandemic certainly gave this a push](#) and suggestions are that this came at a cost to children's physical and mental health.

SOURCE: [Assessment of Changes in Child and Adolescent Screen Time During the COVID-19 Pandemic, JAMA Pediatrics, 2022](#)

### Overscheduling

There is a modern pressure for children to be 'constructively occupied' at all times. In families that can afford it, outside school you will often find children attending multiple 'enrichment' activities - from competitive sports to violin lessons or mandarin. Common to all is that they are adult-directed and outcome-focused. Dangerous roads, fear of crime or judgement from neighbours and the competitive nature of school and society all play a role.

SOURCE: [Psychology Today, 2014](#)