

# NOWHERE LEFT TO GO

HOW + WHY ADULTS FORCED  
YOUNG PEOPLE OUT OF PUBLIC LIFE

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Young people in the US no longer have unsupervised, unstructured access to public spaces. As a downstream response, we're seeing moral panic after moral panic about their phone use and mental health, but it's only making things worse. This is a problem a *long* time in the making, and most people are unaware about its root causes. So, let's get into it: what does the history of youth spaces look like, and what battles around them are going on today?

Note: this piece is mainly from an urban/suburban US perspective. Obviously, experiences of childhood vary a lot depending on the region, class, race, gender, etc. of the child.

## **300-10,000+ Years Ago: Pre-Agricultural/Agricultural Societies**

For most of human history, children were thoroughly integrated into everyday life. This was especially true for hunter-gatherer societies: childbearing rates were low because of a variety of practical constraints, and from a very young age, children were considered to be part of society rather than property of an individual family unit.

“[In hunting and gathering societies, there were] tremendous constraints on childhood as a result of frequently limited resources, and the need to travel regularly in search of food. Among other things, it was very difficult to carry more than one fairly small child per family as a small band moved to a new location to find game, which placed definition limits on the permissible birth rate. Few families, in fact, had more than four children during their entire reproductive span, because of the prolonged burdens each child placed on the available food supply.

[...] The importance of constraints, and the fact that children must have been seen as a burden to some extent, particularly in contrast to what would come with agriculture, should not overshadow the opportunities for children in hunting and gathering societies. In the first place, while work was vital, it was not boundless even for adults. Many hunters and gatherers labor, on average, only a few hours a day. This leaves considerable time for, among other things, play with and among children. In many contemporary hunting groups, children and adults often play together, limiting the space for children by themselves but providing great opportunity for wider interactions.

[...] Finally, while childhood was undoubtedly a time of play and occasional work assistance, adulthood typically came early [...] The notion of a prolonged waiting period between childhood and maturity, common to subsequent societies both with agriculture and with industry, was usually absent in this original version of human organization.”

— *Childhood in World History*, 2nd ed., by Peter N. Stearns, pages 18-19

With the advent of the agricultural revolution, children came to be treated as assets of their family units. Since the family was the main unit of production, children still played an important and immediate role in society. As such (especially in the US), they had a lot of autonomy relative to children today.

"[...] the vast and increasing size of the country, its free market, broad-based white male suffrage, and available land did set American experiences apart from those of Europeans (and almost everyone else) in the nineteenth century, and allowed a cultural style to develop that privileged the future, and with it the next generation.

This did not necessarily transform Americans into solicitous parents or protect children from harsh treatment and brutal household regimes. Rather, social and economic circumstances in the United States made it easier to transfer responsibility to the young, providing earlier autonomy to young people, whose judgment would be required to wrestle with the open-ended conditions accompanying the economic potential and landed vastness."

— "The Child-Centered Family? New Rules in Postwar America" by Paula S. Fass,  
from *Reinventing Childhood After World War II*, page 3

"In the North and the South, African Americans children were some of the last recipients of emancipation. In both settings, the legal, economic, and social process of emancipation delayed freedom for Black children. Many places used age (adulthood) as a marker for freedom. In the North, the first emancipation law, Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation law of 1780 freed African Americans after age twenty-eight. Other northern states enacted similar measures using age and entrance into adulthood as a marker for freedom including Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey. These measures prolonged legal slavery in the North, especially for Black children, until the end of the Civil War. Northern Black children were also vulnerable to kidnapping and sale into southern Slavery.

Black children's lives existed at the boundaries between slavery and freedom as they were considered dependents and appropriate subjects of adult intervention in ways that intervened on full emancipation."

— "African American Children: Some of the Last Recipients  
of Emancipation" by Crystal Lynn Webster

## **200-300 Years Ago: Industrial Revolution & the Modern Model**

That changed dramatically with the industrial revolution and the shift to the "modern model" of childhood. Schools developed around the same time as most white adults shifted from agricultural to industrial wage work (18th-19th century). Though the transition was slow and uneven, the effect was pronounced. Instead of being a part of public society from a young age, white children were funneled into segregated spaces starting in the mid-18th century. Black children were still forced into chattel slavery until the mid-19th century, but during the Reconstruction era, hundreds of schools were created for them as well. The vast majority of these schools were primary schools; most young people did not attend secondary school before the high school movement (1910-1940).

“The idea that children should begin to assist the family economy at a fairly young age, and then should be able to cover their own support and perhaps add resources to the family economy by their mid-to-late teens, had been a core element in agricultural societies. In the modern model, this now gave way to the notion that young children should not work at all, in favor of going to school; more gradually, this extended to the notion that even mid-teenagers should not work, again with schooling as the new substitute.”

— *Childhood in World History*, 2nd ed., by Peter N. Stearns, page 72

The gradual shift of children to schools was one of the most significant restrictions on their freedom of movement, but during non-school hours, they were still generally able to participate in public life. Largely unsupervised, they would frequent parks, shops, and movie theaters, as well as public facilities such as rec centers. Many young people, especially teens and preteens, would work low-wage or freelance jobs to earn spending money. The types of jobs and spaces available to them would differ a lot based on race, gender, and class.

## **50-75 Years Ago: Cities to Suburbs (to Cities)**

Suburbanization, urban decay, and gentrification affected youth spaces enormously. The space taken up by single-family developments in the suburbs meant that public facilities had to be further apart, and the racism/classism of residents led to low density of public transit in those areas. Although suburbs were billed as safer for (white) children, the car-centric infrastructure made them much more difficult and dangerous for young pedestrians to access. White flight led to lack of municipal revenue in urban areas, resulting in the closure or neglect of public recreational facilities. With the lack of facilities, urban children would often play in undeveloped spaces. However, during the push for urban renewal starting in the 1970s, cities incentivized the abandonment of older buildings in favor of building new ones – causing children to lose those play spaces as well.

“Urban environments and residents often absorb the brunt of laws, policies and programs promoted and financed – or not financed – at the national scale. Under state-led forms of development in the United States during the Fordist era, for example, numerous federal policies designed to facilitate the movement of interstate goods, encourage suburban development, and aid homeownership were key factors in the abandonment and deterioration of inner city neighborhoods. These included the legislation and subsidization of highways through the National Defense and Interstate Highway Act and its successors, the availability of federally subsidized home mortgages to returning veterans (white only) for new homes, and changing tax codes that encouraged businesses to abandon older structures by giving greater tax benefits for the construction of new buildings on greenfield sites.”

— *Making Workers* by Katharyne Mitchell, page 17

## Now – 50 Years Ago: Neoliberal Childhoods

The neoliberalization of the US economy starting in the 1980s also revolutionized the landscape of childhood. Under neoliberal governance, each worker was considered responsible for making their own rational choices in the market; education was recognized as central to that process. Wealth stratification began increasing rapidly, which raised the stakes for all working-class families. Neoliberal education reform ushered in a new era of metrics-based education and school marketization/privatization.

All this led to the increasing compartmentalization of childhood. Structured activities replaced free play; sports, gym, and dance classes replaced roaming the neighborhood. Facing increasing academic pressure, more and more students enrolled in tutoring outside of school, further reducing their available leisure time.

The culture around children shifted dramatically, too. Although the shift began around the 1940s, infrastructural and technological developments have continued to sharply restrict children's autonomy. "Stranger Danger" rhetoric inspired many parents to further control their children's movement.

“By mid-century four major influences had converged to establish the developmental paradigm as the new creed of parenthood into the foreseeable future: (1) the abandonment of faith in children's innate resiliency for one in which children were seen as fragile and requiring constant attention; (2) a growing body of research that mapped out the development of children by stages that built one upon the another with consequential outcomes, and which reinforced the importance of intervention at earlier ages; (3) the emergence of a corps of professionals – academic psychologists, psychiatrists, and pediatricians – who stressed the need for parental vigilance and; (4) an expanded, well-educated cadre of middle-class mothers eager to apply the lessons of the most up-to-date parenting techniques.”

— "Ten is the New Fourteen: Age Compression and 'Real' Childhood" by Stephen Lasseonde, from *Reinventing Childhood After World War II*, page 57

Although Supreme Court decisions in *Coates v. City of Cincinnati* (1971) and *Papachristou v. City of Jacksonville* (1972) introduced some restrictions on loitering and vagrancy laws, they did not rule them to be fully unconstitutional, and anti-loitering policies proliferated heavily among private businesses. These laws and policies targeted "undesirables" in public spaces,<sup>1</sup> including adolescents. It's become increasingly common for parents to be arrested, jailed,<sup>2</sup> and charged with crimes<sup>3</sup> for allowing their children unsupervised time outside. As seen in the cases of Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin, unsupervised Black youth face even harsher consequences in terms of brutality or murder at the hands of police. In short, unsupervised children (or their parents) are increasingly criminalized, whether through public law enforcement, private business policies, or the actions of rogue individuals.

“In addition to the push factor of declining vacant lots, playgrounds, and other open spaces, there was a simultaneous pull factor that began to keep many children closer to home. The discourse of "stranger danger" – the fear of unknown assailants – influenced a growing parental wish to keep children closely supervised. This fear increased with the highly sensationalized coverage of attacks on children that became standard media fare during the

Reagan and Bush I regimes. Although statistics indicated that abuse and abduction by acquaintances and family members was (and remains) the highest cause of injury to children, many parents nevertheless reacted to the implied danger of violence from strangers by curtailing the movements and free play of their children in public spaces.

Indeed, the culture shifted so rapidly during these decades that unsupervised children in public spaces began to be seen as something abnormal or even deviant. Parents who were oblivious of or resistant to these changing norms became increasingly at risk of state intervention in various forms. White parents who allowed their children to ride the subway or go to the park without an adult present could find the police called in and their parental values and rights under attack. For the parents of minority children, the outcomes could be far worse. In the case of Tamir Rice, the twelve-year-old African-American boy brandishing a toy gun in a park in Cleveland, the outcome was death. The policeman who had been summoned waited less than two seconds after getting out of his car before gunning him down.

For middle-class children, the loss of spatial freedom associated with the privatization and development of space and the fear of unknown assailants was accompanied by a loss of free time. A study by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan showed, for example, that between 1981 and 1997, study time for children rose by almost 50 percent. This was paralleled by a marked increase in scheduled activities. As a result of these twin pressures, children experienced a decline of 12 hours per week of free time and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities.”

— *Making Workers* by Katharyne Mitchell, pages 32-33

## **Now – 20 Years Ago: The Rise of Digital Spaces**

With the loss of autonomy in public spaces and the rapid proliferation of social media, many young people shifted to socializing in digital spaces instead of physical ones. The nature of these spaces changed rapidly, from Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and forums in the 90s/00s to “traditional” social media networks (e.g. Myspace/Facebook/Instagram/Twitter) to today’s short-form video platforms (e.g. TikTok/Reels/Shorts). Each popular new platform welcomed massive amounts of new users, and each found new ways to monopolize their attention and gather/sell their data. The share of teens who have access to smartphones went from 73% in 2014-2015 to 95% in 2022, and 97% of teens reported using the internet daily in 2022.<sup>4</sup> In the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey administered by the CDC, 77 percent of all high school students reported using social media “at least several times a day.”<sup>5</sup>

For LGBT, neurodivergent, and/or abused youth, the option of digital socialization was life-changing. Online groups provided psychological and sometimes material support to many who could not access it in their lives offline. And as unchaperoned in-person socializing became increasingly cost-prohibitive as well as socially unacceptable (in the eyes of adults), many young people were forced to rely more and more on digital spaces for day-to-day socialization.

As with any emerging technology, a massive moral panic accompanied the rise in teens' phone use. In his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt blamed phones for a meteoric rise in psychopathology among young adults. As of writing, it has spent 80 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. There are serious flaws in its methodology<sup>6</sup> and several meta-analyses contradict the most basic thesis of the book.<sup>7,8,9</sup> But that doesn't seem to have made much of an impact on the book's enormous global popularity.

A global political and legal movement to curtail youth social media use has gained steam in the last few years. *The Anxious Generation* directly inspired a campaign to ban social media for children under 16 in South Australia, which spread to a nationwide ban just 6 months afterward.<sup>10</sup> Norway and Denmark are considering similar bans. The US is no different. Thirteen senators introduced bill S. 278 (Kids Off Social Media Act, or KOSMA) to ban children under 13 from social media and restrict targeted ads for children under 17; it advanced out of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in February 2025 and is now on the Senate Legislative Calendar. Twelve US states have passed or are in the process of passing laws regarding youth social media use. The 2024 Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act demanded TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, to sell the app to a US company or face a nationwide ban. While the legislation didn't explicitly target young people, TikTok's userbase is disproportionately young. Major US politicians have directly blamed the platform for young Americans' support of the people of Palestine<sup>11</sup> and cited that as inspiration for supporting the ban.<sup>12</sup> These discriminatory laws open up a ton of new concerns regarding legality and data privacy,<sup>13</sup> but they continue to spread rapidly.

Wherever young people spend their time – whether physically or digitally – they are surveilled, judged, mocked, and threatened by adults. Regardless of their consent, their personal data is used for the benefit of advertisers and law enforcement. Youth social media bans may claim a paternalistic concern for kids' mental well-being as the inspiration for passing legislation, but as we can see with the TikTok ban, they are also motivated by a desire to censor young people politically and socially. The legislative restrictions for young people in digital spaces closely mirror the longstanding restrictions they've faced in physical spaces as well.

## **Why Are Children's Spaces Always Under Threat?**

Young people represent an existential threat to established structures of power. In the context of the US, children must be socialized "correctly" so that they buy in to the logic of racial capitalism and agree to reproduce it. Adults are generally terrified by the idea that, when left to their own devices, young people might engage in subversive pursuits like premarital sex, underage drinking, drug use, or radical political organizing. This fear is the driving force behind the constant surveillance and control of youth spaces and activities.

Young people are also the most economically powerless demographic. Their lack of money persists because of the historical segregating/disenfranchising process I've outlined here, and is enforced through a whole network of legal, social, and political mechanisms. But it's also a major factor perpetuating their own lack of power. Youth have little ability to fundraise to build and maintain their

own spaces. They can't financially lobby for their own political interests. They need permission from their parents to monetarily contribute to any cause, which serves as an implicit restriction to the types of efforts they can support. Most socially acceptable forms of political and legal activism are inaccessible to young people as a result.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

There are some established groups seeking to allow young people more freedom of movement in physical spaces. Let Grow, founded by Lenore Skenazy, Jonathan Haidt, Daniel Shuchman, and Peter Gray, is one of them. The nonprofit offers a legislative toolkit including model bills, sample testimony, and fact sheets advocating for Reasonable Childhood Independence bills. They also have a repository of current state policies regarding childhood independence, and they explicitly invite teens to contribute to their mission. However, they are by no means a youth liberation organization. They lean very heavily on parents' rights rhetoric in their advocacy, and the work of co-founder Jonathan Haidt sparked many of the age-discriminating laws regarding digital spaces we discussed earlier.

The Yes Loitering project was a youth-led initiative in South Bronx. The team documented local signage discriminating against young people and enumerated the structural barriers they face in public. They compiled a list of actionable ideas<sup>14</sup> for making public spaces more youth-friendly. This project took place in 2017 and unfortunately has not updated since then.

“We need to develop inclusive spaces that welcome youth from every background and allow them to be free without fear of being shamed, bullied, or harassed for their identity. We must acknowledge how certain groups have been historically oppressed and continue to be excluded. This includes but is not limited to youths who identify as a person of color, woman, LGBTQIA, low-income, homeless, immigrant, non-English speaking, religious minority, and/or person with disabilities. We must create spaces that center the experiences of those who have been systematically marginalized.”

— "Social Equity" by The Yes Loitering Project

These existing organizations have strong ideas, but in my opinion they are lacking in implementation. I would love to see more organizations adopt the principles outlined by the Yes Loitering project. I'd also like to see a greater diversity of tactics from Let Grow and a reduced reliance on parental "ownership" in their work. Too many of the organizations advocating for youth independence (Let Grow, ScreenSense, Kids IRL) support the censorship and exclusion of youth in digital spaces.

Radical geography<sup>15</sup> is a crucial aspect of youth liberation theory. We have to understand what spaces children have access to and how they continue to change over time. This perspective helps illuminate many aspects of overlapping (class, gender, racial) marginalization. I hope that going forward more organizations adopt this form of analysis and, most importantly, put it into practice to give young people real autonomy. In my “Swings in the Living Room” series, I discuss in depth why/how to put these youth-centered design principles to work.<sup>16</sup>



## Footnotes

1. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-21/what-is-loitering-really>
2. <https://reason.com/2024/11/11/mom-jailed-for-letting-10-year-old-walk-alone-to-town/>
3. <https://www.wsocvtv.com/news/local/parents-plead-guilty-after-boy-fatally-struck-by-car-gastonia/4VZLZCZDFJFLXDIBJDRWOYB5RQ/>
4. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>
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10. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australian-social-media-ban-started-with-call-act-by-politicians-wife-2024-11-29/>
11. <https://www.thefp.com/p/tik-tok-young-americans-hamas-mike-gallag>
12. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/why-pro-palestinian-content-is-at-the-center-of-the-tiktok-ban/ar-AA1zF3d2>
13. <https://theconversation.com/is-childproofing-the-internet-constitutional-a-tech-law-expert-draws-out-the-issues-240430>
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15. <https://antiparent.com/introduction-to-radical-geography/>
16. <https://antiparent.com/swings-in-the-living-room-volume-1/>

## About the Author

**chorui halim** writes about childhood, parenting, history, and youth liberation at antiparent.com. chorui has always been passionate about children; they grew up taking care of the children in their community as well as working as a freelance supplemental educator for well over a decade. They are in their late 20s with 2 children of their own. Their own experience with child abuse, disability, feminist and LGBT issues, and racial marginalization convinced them of the need to develop a holistic approach to understanding children's oppression. They are also a former NASA engineer.

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