African Transport Studies 3 (2025) 100033

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

African Transport Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/aftran

Young men's daily mobility needs and practices in two low-income neighbourhoods of Cape Town: Reflections on first mile experiences, using an innovative community peer research methodology

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Young men
Peer research
Urban low-income neighbourhoods
Walking
Transport hubs

ABSTRACT

Understanding how young men navigate their journeys is important in the context of improving safe mobility for all, especially for those resident in city neighbourhoods with high rates of crime and poverty. Over the past decade, knowledge has been accumulating regarding the challenges faced by young women as they travel around urban areas across the African continent, but young men's lived mobility experiences have been largely ignored. This represents a major research gap. There often seems to be an (unwritten) assumption that men are invulnerable - free to travel wherever and whenever they choose - but there is a lack of specific knowledge of realities on the ground and how they impact on men's lives. In this paper we report recent research conducted with young men aged 18–35 years in two low-income neighbourhoods in Cape Town, utilizing a qualitative participatory Peer Research methodology. The focus is on understanding how young men resident in low-income areas experience and practice mobility, as they walk between home and local transport hubs (the 'first mile'), wait at the hub, then journey onwards on motorised transport. Our findings suggest that while men's perceptions of potential danger do not necessarily stop them travelling, they experience moments of considerable stress in such contexts, such that they have to engage with a diversity of tactics to try to ensure a safe journey. There are potentially significant impacts on young men's well-being.

1. Introduction

Women's fear of travel in hostile environments is widely recognised and increasingly documented. For many women, negative information and personal experience regularly impact their journey decisions and practices (Porter et al., 2017, 2021, 2022; Priya Uteng and Turner, 2019; Vanderschuren et al., 2019; Møller-Jensen and Agergaard, 2022; SuM4All, 2023). By contrast, the daily mobility experiences of young men have rarely been the focus of study: this is a major research gap globally.

As a contribution towards addressing that gap, this paper presents and explores data from a small qualitative study of young men's mobility in Cape Town. The focus is on understanding how young men resident in low-income areas experience and practice mobility, as they walk between home and local transport hubs (the 'first mile'),[1] wait at the hub, then journey onwards on motorised transport. The importance of gaining a better understand of male mobility experiences and practices in this city is supported by a recent quantitative survey of over 300 people (of diverse ages) in informal settlements in Cape Town that found Walking Safety to public transport to be the most concerning attribute affecting public transport experience for both men and women (Teffo et al., 2019). Mirroring this point, discussions with young women in two Cape Town townships in 2019–2020 Porter et al. (2021, 2022, 2025) pointed to their concerns around the journeys made by male family members, particularly the dangers their young male escorts often face, having accompanied them in the early morning walk to a train, bus or

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[1] First mile/last mile are terms used in diverse global contexts to refer to the spatial accessibility of public transport from an individual's origin or destination (see Tight et al., 2016; Venter, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aftran.2025.100033
Received 23 September 2024; Received in revised form 31 December 2024; Accepted 20 February 2025
Available online 26 February 2025

the local taxi rank, on returning home alone. It was this latter work with young women, and our identification of a key research gap regarding men's mobility practices globally, that prompted the decision to follow up with an investigation of young men's mobility practices in low-income areas of the city.

In our research with young men, we started from the premise that there often seems to be an (unwritten) assumption that young men, unlike young women, are invulnerable - free to walk wherever and whenever they choose. A recent small study of young men (18-35y, a majority Xhosa) in low income areas of Cape Town and Johannesburg exploring their perceptions of the 'ideal man' suggests that young men themselves promote this image: their expectations are focused round being responsible, protective and a provider for the family – an ideal "deeply influenced by cultural norms, gender dynamics, and historical factors" (Young et al., 2024:7). However, building from our previous research with women, we hypothesized that while many young men resident in low-income areas may present themselves as brave protectors when they walk their wives and girlfriends to transport hubs in the early morning, and may be widely in evidence on township streets at other times of day, they often walk with some trepidation. In essence, their perceptions of potential danger will not necessarily stop them walking, but they are likely to engage with a diversity of tactics to try to ensure a safe journey. Our aim has thus been to understand young men's experiences of travel: the kinds of travel concerns they identify and in what contexts; how they assess threats when they are on the move; and the tactics they employ to circumvent such threats, including dress choice, bodily comportment, and selection of walking route and transport mode. Young men's voices, drawn from direct interviews conducted by a small group of young male researchers we had recruited and trained from the same communities, offer particularly powerful evidence regarding such experiences and practices.

In our work with men, we have focused on precisely the same age cohort as in our previous mobilities research with young women – 18 to 35 years. For women this had seemed an appropriate choice since the likelihood of sexual victimization is particularly high among young women (Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021). Moving to research with their male escorts, it made sense to keep to the same age focus given the emphasis that young women place on risk to their boyfriends and husbands, many of whom are clearly of similar age. Moreover, other studies had suggested this as a particularly important cohort to research in African cities, in the context of concerns expressed around youth unemployment and young men's perceived potential as perpetrators of violence in Africa (Durham, 2000; Honwana, 2015). With specific regard to young black men in South Africa's informal settlements, Seedat et al. (2009) note their particular susceptibility to risk, with young men (15-29y) "disproportionately engaged in violence both as victims and perpetrators", an issue they link to high youth unemployment, common carrying of weapons, and misuse of substances. However, as Zweig (2021) emphasises, while young men are generally considered to generate many of the risks associated with informal settlement life, "yet their own vulnerability in these environments is seldom considered".[2]

The paper commences with a brief review of the literature on walking, gender and masculinity that frames this study, and background concerning the study context and the innovative peer research methodology utilised. This is followed by an exploration of the mobility practices and experiences—both positive and negative— reported by young men resident in the study neighbourhoods, examining the nexus of constraints within which these take place. A subsequent section identifies some of the specific tactics that young men employ on their neighbourhood streets. We close with concluding reflections on the study findings, their contribution and implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Walking as everyday mobility practice in African cities

Walking is an embodied mobility practice that is socially and materially coproduced (Middleton, 2022). As a mode of transport and everyday mobility strategy, walking is mediated by a range of subjectivities and temporalities. Weather, seasons and the shifting of darkness and light impact significantly on walking as on other active mobilities (Leposa et al., 2023). Yet there is a tendency to consider it as a recreational mobility practice—not one to which urban dwellers are restricted. Within African cities, walking is the dominant mode of transport (UN Habitat, 2013; Benton et al., 2023), yet is fraught with challenges of personal safety and walking distance. These challenges are complicated by a lack of investment in pedestrian infrastructure (Benton et al., 2023). For most urban dwellers of low-income neighbourhoods (including the neighbourhoods that are the focus of this study), residents are commonly captive to walking as a 'first-mile' strategy due to lack of other options; thus issues of safety and distance remain mediating factors (Teffo et al., 2019). While walking may provide a critical everyday mobility strategy for residents of African cities, there remain critical gaps in knowledge and in-depth research focused on walking in African cities (Behrens et al., 2016).

2.2. Gender, masculinity and walking

Studies of walking experiences have typically focused on girls and women and their walking journeys and practices (Porter et al., 2017, 2021, 2022, 2025; Priya Uteng and Turner, 2019; Vanderschuren et al., 2019). While the gendered aspects of walking are clear, there has been scant attention paid to the daily mobility experiences of men of any age. Some quantitative studies comparing men's and women's travel at the macro-scale through statistical analysis of major data sets exist (see Wachs, 1987; Turner and Fouracre, 1995; Rosenbloom, 2004; Venter et al., 2007; Elias et al., 2015; Vanderschuren et al., 2023), but qualitative explorations of men's daily mobility practices are very rare. Where male-focused mobility studies exist, the research is typically limited to questions of road safety, traffic injury and men's health. Those few qualitative studies that incorporate reference to men's walking include Haynes et al. (2019) who focus on commuting experiences in the UK; Stiegler (2021) on walking in New York City; and a study of male rape in South Africa which references men's travel (Mgolozeli and Duma, 2019). The present study builds upon a growing literature that is situated at the nexus of precarity, masculinity and the African context, albeit without specific attention to mobilities (e.g. Seedat et al., 2009; Fast et al., 2020; Esson et al., 2021; Zweig, 2021; Young et al., 2024). It is at this important intersection where our mobility-focused study makes its principal contribution.

3. Background: the study context and our methodology

The study focuses on the lived mobility experiences of young men (c.18 to 35 years) in two areas with high rates of crime and poverty in Cape Town. Area 1 is located within the city boundary; Area 2 is located on the urban periphery of Cape Town in an adjacent municipality.[3] Both are locations where we have previously (2019–2022) undertaken research with young women aged c. 18 to 35 years (Porter et al. 2021, 2022, 2025), thus we keep our focus on the same age cohort. This current study was conducted over a one-year period in 2023.

[2] Keeping to the 18-35y age cohort in work with both genders will also enable us to undertake some subsequent comparative analysis of mobility experiences between the genders, and further comparison with regard to application of the innovative peer research methodology in research with both young men and young women [focus of a separate paper]

[3] Areas 1 and 2 can not be named. This was a requirement of the university ethics permission for the research project.

The research methodology for the study was built around a qualitative participatory Peer Research methodology incorporating experimental mobility-focused autoethnographies. These are approaches we have developed in African mobility contexts (Porter, 2016; Rink, 2020; Porter et al., 2023; Rink et al., 2025). Six young Xhosa men aged 20 to 31 years were recruited from the study townships, mostly through local non-governmental organisation (NGO) networks. They undertook four days of desk and field-based training in qualitative research methods – in-depth interviewing (focused on research with male friends, family members and neighbours in the same 18 to 35-year age group); writing personal mobility diaries; and participant observation- and associated ethics. The emphasis in the in-depth interviewing element on interacting only with known individuals (friends, family, neighbours) was a provision aimed at ensuring the safety of our Peer Researchers in neighbourhoods with high crime rates.

Each training day incorporated discussion sessions around emerging findings (which have also contributed to interpretation of the data collected). The training was followed by a minimum of ten further days' of data collection, in which the Peer Researchers continued with both their mobility diaries (reflecting on their personal travel experiences) and with interviewing male friends, family members and neighbours in their community in the 18 to 35 year age group. Some of their interviewees were students, others were employed, albeit often in temporary jobs and/or part-time and shift work; a small portion were unemployed at the time of interview. Approximately half of those interviewed by the Peer Researchers have spent most of their life in their current neighbourhood; the others are migrants, mostly from rural/small town Eastern Cape. The interviews were often conducted in a mix of isiXhosa and English. All this work was supported by the local (male) research team, with whom there was close, often daily contact. In total we have thus collected a) 60 in-depth interviews conducted by the Peer Researchers with other young men of similar age (18-35y) in their neighbourhood, b) 60 personal mobility diaries written by the Peer Researchers themselves, charting their own experiences, c) notes of meetings where discussions of data findings were reviewed and analysed. While our project focus was on walking to transport hubs, the interviews and mobility diaries often extended into wider observations of experiences on motorised transport, also reported in this paper. Subsequently data analysis was based around thematic coding of emerging key issues.

Some preliminary background regarding travel contexts in the study neighbourhoods is important. A key contextual point to note is that few young men interviewed in either of the two study settlements seem to have any access to a private car, nor do the Peer Researchers themselves. A small proportion of those interviewed live in households where other members own private cars, but only two seem able to use this on a daily basis; just one owns a bicycle. The vast majority of those interviewed are entirely dependent on public transport—mostly informal — and have to reach the nearest available motorised transport on foot. Walking between home and the nearest taxi rank or other transport hub is thus the only option, whether welcome or not. On those journeys between home and transport hub, time of day has critical significance, as we discuss further below. Once darkness falls the vulnerability of pedestrians increases substantially in these low-income areas – dangers experienced while walking in the dark include infrastructure failures (e.g. lack of pavements, blocked drains) but also traffic (traffic speeding through notoriously dangerous areas, pedestrian visibility issues) and threat of human attack. For this reason, many young men escort female household members to the nearest transport hub (as recounted in the introduction), especially on dark, early winter mornings. As one respondent noted,

> '*We work different shifts me and my girlfriend so I have to first walk her to the taxi and then drop my daughter by the creche on our way. She is leaving the house at 06.30… [This morning] the taxi guard was joking and asked if I don't want to take a taxi and see my woman arrive safe to work, and we both laughed… he always sees me walking with my woman to the taxi corner'* [A1:6].[4]

Another man who is not in work takes his daughter to school every morning and picks her up each afternoon, because *'the area is not safe… people get shot and robbed'*. He also keeps an eye on other [unescorted] children so they are not '*hit by the Avanza [local taxis] because sometimes they drive bad'* [A1B5]. Further to this point about travel after dark, lack of any lighting during load-shedding[5] adds substantially to the dangers experienced on the street at night. It also further complicates journeys even in daylight hours: without working traffic lights, congestion builds up and delays are inevitable.

4. Findings: travel pleasures and perils

Our findings point to a diversity of perils and pleasures that young men perceive and experience as they walk to and from transport hubs, wait at these hubs, and subsequently travel out of their neighbourhood to other city locations. These findings suggest that, while young men in the low-income areas under investigation often walk with trepidation, most are also captive walkers with few opportunities to link-up to other transportation options in their 'first-mile' mobility practices. Walking is rarely a choice, and often has to be accomplished in the face of danger. For these young men, walking is a complex negotiation with their (mostly) informal environments, infrastructure, and fellow urban dwellers.

4.1. Pleasures

If hubs are relatively close to home, walking to and from transport hubs may be seen, at times, as a pleasurable activity. The positive experiences of walking reported by some young men mostly revolve round its perceived physical and mental health benefits, though sometimes incorporating reference to its essential value as an economy measure. Some pointed to specific physical health benefits: one man spoke of walking being '*good for the lungs'* [A1:2]; another, who says he has *'spent most of my life walking'*, sees walking as '*an exercise that helps my respiratory system'* [A2:9]. A third walks, runs and cycles *'because I like to exercise a lot and I'm very good when it comes to using my legs'*: he has a bicycle which he uses to get to work in the summer, but in the winter prefers to walk to the taxi rank [A2:13]. Perhaps surprisingly, only a few men directly referenced money saved as a positive feature of walking.

Wider mental health benefits of walking were also observed. An unemployed man emphasised how: '*The advantages of walking is that I get to breathe fresh instead of just sitting in the house and be thinking about being unemployed and stuff. I get to see people and be healed*' [A1:5]. Another man who lives just five minutes from the nearest taxi rank explained how he enjoys his morning walk en-route for work, *'because it is a sort of meditation to get peace of mind to actually think about my objectives of the day*' [A2:8]. A student, who has moved recently into Area 2 from Eastern Cape, was similarly reflective: he finds walking gives him '*the freedom to feel the environment, the humidity of it and the beauty of it. You get to see things that you can't see when you [are] roaming around in a vehicle'* [A2:11].

Pleasure may accompany arrival at the hub too, especially if there are friendly familiar faces around and the queue for transport is short. Further positive travel experiences will follow if a seat is available on the vehicle, the minibus taxi fills quickly, passenger fare payments to the

[4] Identifiers are used to indicate the area where the interview took place [A1 or A2] followed by the code number assigned to that interview. Thus A1:6 indicates that this interview took place in Area1 and was the 6th interview listed for Area 1.

[5] i.e. Scheduled electricity power supply cuts. These were a regular feature across the city at the time of our research

taxi driver are accomplished smoothly (i.e. when money moves up the vehicle to the driver in the correct amounts and is accepted without argument), and (once underway) the traffic flows freely and the stops made to pick up passengers are few. A number of the young men interviewed emphasise how music, video games, smart phones and a pleasant travel companion can all help relieve the boredom of lengthy journeys: *'as soon as I got to the taxi [yesterday] I took out my phone and headphones and listened to music until it was time to get out'* [A1:1]. The Peer Researchers' own mobility diaries tell similar stories.

4.2. Perils

It is the perils of walking and waiting at transport hubs in low-income neighbourhoods, rather than the pleasures, that dominate many young men's accounts. A majority say they have not themselves been robbed but most have observed robberies as they have been walking on the streets. This is especially the case with regard to night-time and early morning journeys in darkness, when load-shedding (scheduled power supply cuts) makes those on the street particularly vulnerable to criminal acts, as almost every interviewee pointed out. Late morning and afternoon seem to be regarded as the safest times for walking in these neighbourhoods. A young man in Area 2 who had spoken about enjoying his meditative walks to the taxi in the morning in daylight, pointed to the great contrast he feels taking the same journey in the dark, when there is load-shedding: '*I fear for my life'* [A2:8]. Another respondent from Area 2 who has lived in the community all his life commented similarly. Although never personally robbed, he knows many people who have been attacked. He observed that robberies are mostly committed when it is dark and the perpetrators will not easily be identified, so he tries to pick up a collecting taxi to take him to the taxi rank during load-shedding. If there are no taxis around he simply runs: '*When there is load-shedding I often think about my safety because I have a child that still needs a father, so I can't go around risking with my life'* [A2:9]. Yet another young man who lives nearby talked about the walk to the taxi rank being *'the difference between life and death…. Once I get out of* [specific high-density area] *unharmed in the morning then I know I'm safe afterwards.*' [A2:12].

Area 1 respondents made similar comments. A man who had migrated 5 years previously from rural Eastern Cape admitted, '*I often fear to be robbed by these young boys in the morning*' [A1:29]. Load-shedding, as in Area 2, is a particular hazard, '*it is very hard and scary to walk when the big lights are off*' [A1:36]. Robberies are common in such circumstances: one man described how he had been robbed the previous December on his way to the bus, '*They took everything, my cell phone, my money, and my backpack which had my uniform and my lunchbox*'[A1:30]. Another from this neighbourhood who had been robbed twice in the year, while walking to the bus stop in the early morning, described himself as '*still traumatised'* by these incidents: his cell phone and money were taken on both occasions, though he observed that, surprisingly, they didn't take his bus ticket so he could still continue on his journey to work [A1:16]! A Peer Researcher who is a resident in Area 1 described, in one of his mobility diaries, his 20 min walk one day, around 5 pm, to meet with a friend, six streets away from his home. His observations as he walks into what he considers a particularly unsafe informal settlement area give a strong flavour of the street scene. He is carrying a pen and paper, '*nothing else'* (so there is nothing to attract attention from potential thieves). He has already told his friend over the phone that he is on his way (in order to ensure immediate access to the house on arrival and thus reduce the likelihood of being robbed). Water and sanitation is very poor in this area and he has to walk through unclean water running across the street because the drains are blocked. Approaching his friends house he first has to pass a *'group of guys'* [around the same age]…He isn't *'really afraid'* he writes, because he has noticed that he knows a few of them. They are smoking '*dagga'* [cannabis], as he can smell from some distance away… He greets them, passes into the house, and that is the end of his account, but we can imagine his quiet sigh of relief.

There are, of course, other more mundane negative experiences of first mile travel. One young interviewee said he simply doesn't like walking; he describes himself as an introvert who doesn't care for the outdoors [A2:14]. Another, who still lives with his parents, stated firmly*: I walk because I am forced to… if I had a car or enough money [to pay taxi fares] I wouldn't be walking* [A1:1]. Contrary conditions that were reported as making journeys particularly unpleasant include bad weather on the walk to the bus/taxi, lack of shelter at transport stops, long waits in the cold for delayed buses (when robberies can occur), long queues for taxis and minibus taxis that cannot move for long periods (reported as up to one hour in Area 2) because they must wait until more passengers arrive. If it's raining, a long wait at the stop can prove very uncomfortable: '*the bus stop is only made for like three people so when it's the six of us, some will get wet.*' [A: 8]. Another man in this area complained about the bus shelter leaking, even if standing under cover. On the bus, rain may leak through the windows on these wet days. In Area 1, where collecting taxis operate (Rink, 2022), delays in their appearance are reportedly often associated with the traffic police checking driving licences. And once in the vehicle, there may be arguments over passenger fare payments, dangerous drivers/driving speeds and traffic accidents. Even selecting a taxi may require care, with the presence of women passengers seemingly taken as a sign that it may be safe to enter: *'[yesterday] I had to wait and see who was on that taxi before I stop it. I could see that it was like four people inside it, plus I notice that there was a female sitting in front [so]… I got inside and greeted and paid the money'*. [A1: 4].

5. Tactics towards a safer travel experience

The tactics that young men employ in these circumstances are varied but are often built around ***appearing at ease*** in the street environment, ***while keeping a careful look-out*** for trouble: *'My strategy is that I walk very confident and bold in the road so that whoever wants to try a chance can see that I am not new in this place….I will never be afraid because my family looks up to me so, if I am afraid, who is going to protect them?'* [A1:6, 31-year-old man, who lives with his girlfriend and daughter]. A 21-year-old who grew up in Area 2, where he still resides, takes a similar approach: '*When I walk to the taxi stop it is given that I am going to bump into amaphara* [thieves] *but I have to be bold and stand firm so that I don't display any sign that I'm scared.'* [A2: 11]. This accords with recent research (noted in the introduction) regarding idealized gender norms and expectations of male control, protective stances and emotional stoicism that prevail among young men in South Africa (Young et al., 2024).

5.1. Eyes out

As one of our Peer Researchers observed in an early project discussion, *'I'm looking forward when I'm walking… your eyes must be there before you!'* Another Peer Researcher in his early 30s, who had been born in a small town in the Eastern Cape but has been resident in his current neighbourhood for eighteen years, described his own tactics as follows: '*I walk in the afternoon to the bus [to get to my job in a distant neighbourhood]. It takes 10 minutes. It's not safe. I've not experienced it but I've seen others robbed at gunpoint. You can get robbed waiting at the bus. I don't interfere if others get robbed… If I see criminals, I pretend I'm tying my shoelace'*. This tactic prompted much discussion in a subsequent Peer Researcher group review: '*Yes, it's so you don't look scared, get time to look back and check if it's safe to go on or run back. If it looks dangerous you can pretend you've forgotten stuff and run back the way you've come!'* The importance of careful attention to the street scene had been raised by many of the Peer Researchers' interviewees.

5.2. Walking (and) talking like a gangster

Within the environment of low-income (township) neighbourhoods, crime is often rife, and gangsters, known colloquially as *tsotsis,* can

mediate the experience of walking. Knowing the gangsters can help, as a few men who had grown up in each of the study neighbourhoods noted, but even so it's not wise to take chances, *'because when they are craving for drugs it doesn't matter whether they know you'*; in this particular case the young man being interviewed had a brother who is an ex-convict so, '*when they try to rob me I just tell them if you take it then my brother will come…and most of them are afraid of him'* [A2:15]. One of the peer researchers resident in Area 1 observed that not only has he known the local criminals in his area for a long time, but still plays sport with them. Not simply knowing the gangsters, but also speaking like a gangster, can also help to provide a safer walking experience: the role of language in safe mobility cannot be underestimated. As another resident of Area 1 noted when interviewed, '*I don't face any obstacles /challenges …since I was also a gangster in the oldest days coming from [XXX another notorious township] and even the way I speak and dress you could see also and sometimes I see the guys on the street robbing people, but I was never a victim'* [A1:21]. Being able to assimilate and blend in to the environment is a thus a key tactic for safe walking employed by some young men.

5.3. Walking with others: people and objects

The experiences of walking for young men are also mediated and mitigated by tactics of walking with others (people and objects), and through the ways that the walking body is dressed and comported. Walking with trusted others is a fairly common strategy (as it is also for young women in these neighbourhoods). One 19-year-old, for instance, who has only recently moved to Area 2 and describes himself as 'a village boy', walks with his uncle to work (they are working at the same place) [A2:17]. Another, from Area 1, who has been resident here all his life walks across to his neighbour's house and they walk together to the bus station whenever he needs to leave the house early in the morning. However, in the absence of safe companions, others preferred to walk alone: '*I always walk alone because I don't trust anyone in the dark'* [A1: 31].

At the same time that walking with others is useful, so too is the choice of dress, as discussion with our Peer Researchers during the initial training phase indicated: '*Headwear means a lot … You can't rob a rasta [in my neighbourhood] [Peer Researcher from Area 1]*. This theme was also taken up by a number of their interviewees. One, for instance, stressed, '*I don't wear big brands because you are simply making yourself a target to be robbed'* [A2:12]. Others made similar observations about not wearing expensive clothes and sneakers, *'because criminals also take clothes when they are robbing people'* [A1:30]. One man pointed out that if he could choose, he would wear clothes that are good for running in, but he has to wear a uniform for his job [A2:9]. Many young men spoke of running to avoid danger, and unsurprisingly referenced the value of wearing shoes that are comfortable for running: sandals are difficult in such circumstances.

Walking in urban areas is not simply mediated by the objects encountered en-route (Vergunst, 2010), but also by the objects that accompany a walking journey. As such, leaving valued items at home is a common strategy. Many young men spoke about the care with which they selected the items they will need to take with them to work each morning, where possible leaving the most valuable at home. One student reported, for instance, how he tends to take his phone with him in the morning, but leaves his laptop at home if he thinks he can manage without it that day. Students are reportedly regularly targeted by robbers because they often carry big backpacks with laptop computers and other expensive equipment, so while most young men still take a phone (unless they are learners at a high school where there is a phone ban), despite its attraction to robbers, this is necessary due to its crucial role in connectivity with others (for instance updating of module information on WhatsApp groups or, in the case of workers, letting their employer know if they are delayed en route and will be arriving late at work). Other equipment is carried only when essential. It is considered unwise to listen to music when walking, especially when it is dark, because you need to always be on your guard. '*When I get off at my stop I take my earphones off [as they].. always attract attention [of] criminals'* [A1:33]. Another man said he would never use his phone or play music when walking *'because it would be like I am ..inviting these boys to rob me*' [A1:36]. A young unemployed man did not even carry his phone when he was leaving the house early in the morning looking for jobs because of the danger of theft: he observed that he loved walking *'but here I cannot walk free [in the early morning] because … I fear of being robbed'* [A1:2].

Few men interviewed by the Peer Researchers in either study location admitted to carrying a weapon. One man in Area 2 in his early 30s who had had a bad experience of robbery said he feels *'intimidated*' to the extent that he now takes '*a hammer or pepper spray for self defence… but it will depend how many there are. If there are many of them then I will run'* [A2:13]. Another man of around the same age admitted that he had *'once thought about purchasing a deadly weapon to protect myself against the challenges but then I thought, what if I could be arrested when I had this weapon on me, so I decided not to buy it'* [A2: 14]. A student who is a native of Cape Town, but newly resident in Area 1, says he is so distrustful of people on the streets that he carries a knife, but *'even with the knife I can never be totally safe'* [A1: 14].

5.4. Temporalities and route

Selection of travel time and route can also be important. If they have flexibility, there is a common preference among the young men who were interviewed for delaying walking till the afternoon (since criminals are observed to target workers and students in the morning) and avoiding Sundays, when the streets will be quiet. Diversion to a safer walking route is a common tactic, in both areas. (But may also be required in Area 1, whenever it is raining, because the passages between houses there often get flooded). There are so many passages between the houses in some parts of Area 2 that, on a short cut, it is easy to be hijacked. Consequently, many young men take what are seen as longer but safer routes to and from the taxis, especially during load-shedding – the main road to the rank is particularly favoured because cars pass by with their lights on. In Area 1 there were also references to keeping to a longer route because it has street lights (when there is no load-shedding), so it is possible to see people at a distance as they approach; a habit of changing route routine for reasons of safety was also noted occasionally. Lack of police on the streets was a complaint raised by a number of interviewees, though a few limited areas seem to have instituted neighbourhood watches that are working. One foreigner (from another African country) talked about feeling particularly vulnerable to attack. In the past he had carried a weapon. He still takes what he considers the safest route to the taxi rank, but observed that in his particular neighbourhood there is now '*a neighbourhood watch in the morning that accompanies people going to work or towards the taxi rank on foot'* [A2: 16].

A few men have been able to organise pick-ups from/close to home by work transport. One man in his early 30s who had once been attacked by robbers with a knife on his way to work (losing a cell phone and a R50 note) explained how he now has transport organised by his employer to pick him up when he's travelling to his part-time job, around 6 am in the morning. He waits for the driver to call before he leaves home and meets it at the robots (traffic lights): '*the driver calls me when he is close to my stop so I always predict the time he will get there.*'[A1:37]. However, a 30-year-old told how his company had stopped this work transport last year, after the work bus was robbed in his neighbourhood: *'It was those small boys. They were carrying a gun but they didn't shoot or beat no one. They did take all of our phones and money. So now no driver wants to come to my place'* [A1: 4]. But even entering the bus does not mean safety is guaranteed on the ensuing bus journey, a point made by a few respondents.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study supports and elaborates on the finding reported by Teffo et al. (2019) that walking safety to public transport is the most concerning attribute for men (as well as for women) in the low-income neighbourhoods of Cape Town they studied. Our focus has been specifically on the experiences of young men – a particularly valid emphasis, as we argued in the introduction to the paper, given the concerns expressed in so many African urban contexts around youth unemployment and young men's perceived potential as perpetrators of violence. At this point, however, we can perhaps usefully reflect briefly as to how young men's mobility experiences in the study settlements compare with those of the young women with whom we originally started research in the same locations, and perhaps even further speculate as to what extent the experiences of older men (whose movements we have not researched) might differ.

So far as comparison with young women is concerned, there is a surprising degree of similarity between many of the stories young men relate regarding the nuisances of daily travel, and those reported by women in these same neighbourhoods (Porter et al. 2021, 2022, 2025). The big difference, however, is that for women there is concern associated with sexual harassment that pervades all elements of travel (and may extend beyond the street into a home environment of systematic harassment and abuse). This is rarely experienced by men in the same age cohort. For young men, however, fears are concentrated around threat of robbery and violent attack: looking for routes that will avoid the *skollies* [criminals or gangsters]; wearing shoes that allow you to run; even carrying a knife. But attacks do happen, and as one young man in our study emphasised, this can have a significant impact on men's confidence: *I've been a victim of crime: at that time I felt useless, weak and vulnerable* [A2: 8]. As this respondent's comment suggests, negative walking experiences have potentially significant impacts on young men's well-being, especially given the idealized gender norms and expectations of male control, emotional stoicism and power still prevailing in South Africa (Young et al., 2024:1). Many of the experiences recounted in this paper link back to themes in the recent literature (cited earlier) regarding young men's vulnerabilities. While the stories we recount have tended to emphasise their experiences as victims, regular references to unemployment (and occasional references to weapons and drug misuse) also hint at a wider picture incorporating young men's perceived potential as perpetrators of violence (Durham, 2000; Seedat et al., 2009; Honwana, 2015).

As men age, moving beyond 'youth', into their 40s and 50s, they seem to be less in evidence walking the streets of the two study neighbourhoods: simple observation suggests their performances are not only sparser but less flamboyant (with only occasional displays of toxic masculinity), perhaps in some cases because better paid work and greater access to resources enables more motor mobility, but in other cases possibly more a matter of responding to resource constraint, even disillusionment with life in the city. Disability may add further mobility challenges, especially with advancing age. Over time such negative factors may well encourage retreat into the home or even back to the village. But only expanded research into older cohorts to explore how mobility practices and experiences are reshaped with age and experience will resolve these speculations. This is further research that is urgently needed as we try to build a more nuanced intersectional understanding of mobility practices in the city.

Finally, it is important to reflect back on the peer research methodology through which we have built some understanding of the complexity of challenges that young men face in low-income city neighbourhoods of Cape Town and consider its potential for wider application. Engaging with the marginalised requires careful listening and deep attention to detail. This takes time and effort, but is crucial if we are to fully appreciate how mobility experiences and practices are embedded in people's lives. Peer research can offer a particularly valuable complement to conventional transport studies in contexts of precarity, enabling us to draw on the voices of individuals who may be reluctant to engage with outsiders. Their contributions are arguably essential if interventions are to be designed that offer some prospect of bringing positive change to marginalised groups. We hope that through this small study we have not only drawn attention to a significant mobilities research gap regarding young men's experiences and practices, but also promoted interest in the application of a community-based peer research methodology when working with marginalised groups in other African mobility contexts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Gina Porter: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Bradley Rink:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Bulelani Maskiti:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Sam Clark:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Caroline Barber:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

Acknowledgements

We owe an enormous debt to Siyamkela Jucwa, Baphelele Malangabi, Sisonke Mpiliso, Siyabonga Ntozini, Thobinceba Siyatha and Bonginkosi Sosanti, our peer researchers in this study. We also wish to acknowledge the generous commitment of time from their respondents in the study communities.

The research was funded by the Volvo Research and Educational Foundations, project no. EP-2022-WK-01.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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