

# Sports Cages as Social Infrastructure: Sociality, Context, and Contest in Hackney's Cages

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**Abstract:** The concept of social infrastructure has experienced a rapid rise to prominence in recent years, both in academia and in policy. In this article, we explore a case study of cages (also known as Multi-Use Games Areas) in Hackney, North-East London. We argue that cages are forms of urban infrastructure which can facilitate multiple forms of sociality—especially for young people—and can thus be deemed valuable social infrastructure. However, this value can only be understood in context—in relation to the joys and harms of growing up in Hackney—and as in contest—the status and meaning of the cage is different for different groups, and there are considerable tensions over their use, ownership, and management. In our examination of the cage, we aim to explore and build upon existing conceptions of social infrastructure.

**Keywords:** social infrastructure, urban infrastructure, young people, play, political economy

## Introduction

The concept of social infrastructure has swiftly risen to prominence in academia and in policy over the past decade (Middleton and Samanani 2022). This growing prominence is evident in academic journals such as *Antipode* and *Urban Geography*, and in reports produced by the UK Government (HM Government 2022), the European Union (Fransen et al. 2018), and the United Nations (UN 2023). “Social infrastructure” designates features of neighbourhoods or communities which have particular social value for their inhabitants—such as parks in London (Layton and Latham 2022), service hubs in Japan (DeVerteuil et al. 2022), American streets (Prytherch 2022), or informal relational practices in Myanmar (Roberts and Rhoades 2022).

Questions, contentions, and challenges surround the concept, however. In this paper, we explore the ways in which sports cages (also known as ball courts, Multi-Use Games Areas or MUGAs) can provide fruitful ground for further developing ideas about social infrastructure. Most commonly found within inner city areas, often on social housing estates, usually highly public, frequently unlockable and unsupervised, the characteristics of cages can invite social tension as much as “cohesion and support” (Klinenberg 2012). They provide space for children and young people to meet, play, and socialise, but could also signify the exclusion of children and young people from other spaces. At times, they are associated with violence and anti-social behaviour—with varying degrees of veracity. We foreground the voices of young people; a group thus far largely absent from literature relating to social infrastructure.

We note a discernible contrast in recent literature between approaches to social infrastructure which are “celebratory” in tone, highlighting the positive effects of social infrastructure for neighbourhoods, groups, and individuals (e.g. Layton and Latham 2022), and approaches which are more “critical”, questioning the role that particular pieces of social infrastructure play, especially in relation to inequalities (Horton and Penny 2023; Middleton and Samanani 2022). Through a case study of cages in Hackney, North-East London, we aim to both highlight the varied benefits that social infrastructure can bring to communities, and to stress the inherently contextual and contested nature of all social infrastructure. We therefore seek to suggest that these two apparently opposed “sides”—the celebratory and critical—can in fact be compatible, and even complementary.

We advance three specific arguments. Firstly, in the spirit of Layton and Latham (2022), we argue that cages can facilitate multiple forms of sociality, particularly for young people. Second, we argue that cages demonstrate the determining importance of *context*: no social infrastructure is inherently or universally valuable, but only has worth in relation to its social and historical context, particularly the “wider patterns of power” (Middleton and Samanani 2022:780) and the “socio-spatial inequalities” that it is situated within and may reproduce (Horton and Penny 2023:1712). Thirdly, we argue that cages illustrate the inevitability of *contest* over any social infrastructure: studying cages necessitates attending to “the enriching and diminishing possibilities of different forms of sociality” (Middleton and Samanani 2022:780), and to the way in which social infrastructure can be a site for “everyday ... attempts to negotiate between contending values” (Middleton and Samanani 2022:781), as well as “antagonism over who cities and infrastructures are for” (Horton and Penny 2023:1713).

Though primarily centred on the concept of social infrastructure, we also draw on scholarship around spatial tension and conflict in an era of neoliberal “enclosure”, through which the “urban commons” is endangered and eroded (Blomley 2008; Vasudevan et al. 2008). Our work speaks to established literature on youth geographies (Holt 2011; Skelton and Valentine 1998; Ward 1978) as well as more recent global literature on informal sport and issues of spatial belonging amongst marginalised groups (Aquino 2015; Book and Högdahl 2022).

The paper begins with a brief review of relevant literature, and a short methodological note, describing the community research which this paper is based on.

The remainder of the paper then explores the contextual and contested value of Hackney cages, in a succession of steps: after first providing a snapshot of life in Hackney for young people, based on relevant quantitative data and qualitative research, we then analyse how and why cages are valuable spaces—given the context of Hackney—and the ways in which they are contested. Lastly, we conclude by drawing out the wider conceptual and political ramifications of our study.

## What is Social and What is Infrastructural about “Social Infrastructure”?

Although the term infrastructure has generally been used to reference large-scale socio-material arrangements facilitating circulation through and between space(s) such as roads, railways, ports, or sanitation systems (Graham and Marvin 2002; Larkin 2013; Wiig et al. 2023), some scholars have argued that social practices are constitutive of infrastructures, and vice versa (Simone 2004, 2021). There has thus been a rise in the concept of “social infrastructure”, designating physical infrastructures which enable sociality, such as parks, libraries, and hospitals (Latham and Layton 2019, 2022). These developments are part of a wider “infrastructural turn”, which has sparked considerable theoretical and ontological debate, forming a growing subdiscipline of “infrastructure studies”.

There has also been an exponential rise in focus on infrastructure from governments, think tanks, and the private sector, ranging from macro-level discussions of economic development and state-building, down to the local scale and issues of health, wellbeing, and belonging (Buier 2023; Horton and Penny 2023). Despite—or perhaps, because of—this, there is little consensus around what “infrastructure” means and what forms of sociality might be considered infrastructural. Eric Klinenberg (2002, 2012), a prominent public sociologist, popularised the term in a 2013 *New Yorker* article, building on his earlier book *Heat Wave* about the 1995 heatwave in Chicago. The term has risen to prominence in geography, particularly through the work of Latham and Layton (2019, 2022) who, like Klinenberg, advocate for the value of spaces like libraries, parks, community centres, and youth clubs in London, articulating the roles that these can play in the production and vitality of public life. In the contemporary political moment, during which these spaces are subjected to disinvestment and processes of “managed decline” (Davidson et al. 2013; Watt 2021), these authors advocate for the critical role these spaces play in the health, wellbeing, and sustainability of communities, particularly in contexts of heightened precarity and inequality.

Horton and Penny (2023:1713) have suggested that further theoretical work needs to be done with the idea of social infrastructure, however: “the conceptual and political implications of coupling ‘social’ with ‘infrastructure’ are not self-evident and are still to be fully theorised”. In this paper, we seek to develop the concept’s theorisation through two frames: context and contest.

## Context

The concept of social infrastructure draws attention to the social value of particular places and spaces, but this value is deeply contextual; shaped by the strengths, assets, challenges, and problems of the communities they are situated within. The same facility can acquire different forms of significance in different neighbourhoods. In particular, infrastructures can both ameliorate and exacerbate structural inequalities. Horton and Penny (2023) stress this point, emphasising the embeddedness of social infrastructure within urban political economy. They critique the “civic-liberal” approach of scholars such as Klinenberg, Layton and Latham, who (they suggest) describe social infrastructure as a self-evident good, effectively ignoring wider socio-economic inequalities. A recent report by the Mayor of London (2021), which celebrates the capacity of social infrastructures to create “a safer, healthier, and more harmonious city”, but says little about concentrated wealth and marginalisation in the capital, demonstrates the policy influence of this civic-liberal paradigm (Horton and Penny 2023:1714). For Horton and Penny, such accounts presuppose the virtues of social infrastructure, insufficiently attending to the role that infrastructures can play in wider patterns of power and “structural antagonism” (Berlant 2016:396).

The simplistic deployment of “celebratory” geographic concepts by policy-makers to elide or even exacerbate societal inequalities has a long history. The idea of urban “encounter” arguably exemplifies this trend. Much vaunted since the 1970s through the work of scholars such as Sennett (1970) and Jacobs (1972), the concept of encounter highlights the importance of social contact between people of contrasting backgrounds and experiences for the life of a “good city”. Urban planners continue to cite this notion, but all-too-often without recognising that different forms of encounter are always mediated through power relations (Low and Smith 2006), as well as flattening out Sennett’s attentiveness to the structural determinants of atomisation, inequality, and difference. Jacobs’ work, in addition, has been mobilised in support of policing “broken windows” and “public nuisance”, practices which frequently result in the stigmatisation and criminalisation of marginalised communities (Andersson 2015; Ranasinghe 2012).

Horton and Penny (2023) suggest that a similar process is occurring with the idea of social infrastructure, describing how it has been enrolled in processes of gentrification, division, and displacement. For instance, housing developments across London invest in communal gardens and swimming pools, but often bar “affordable housing” tenants from using them, in what they describe as “micro-segregation” (Horton and Penny 2023:1716).

Evident here are Blomley’s (2007:16) “contemporary echoes” of 17<sup>th</sup> century enclosure: he argues that “gentrification, and related dynamics, can usefully be thought of as forms of enclosure” (Blomley 2008:311). Jeffrey et al. (2011:1250) similarly suggest that “physical walls and boundaries constitute the most rudimentary and geographically obvious form of enclosure” as contemporary “elite capitalist” cities “become increasingly polarised and fragmented, forming jarring archipelagos of wealth and poverty”. Thinking with the concepts of enclosure and commons can ensure that social infrastructure studies remain situated within particular political conjunctures. Blomley (2008:317) proposes a “need to extend

analyses of the commons” to include neighbourhood spaces and facilities, whilst Vasudevan et al. (2008:1642) argue for an “expansive notion of enclosure that seeks to uncover how spatialities of inclusion and exclusion” operate under contemporary neoliberalism. As we will go on to explore, these suggestions are helpful in thinking through exclusionary practices of enclosure in Hackney, and the ways that remaining common spaces are used and valued.

Hall (2020) argues that it is no coincidence for the rise of “social infrastructure” to coincide with several decades of austerity. The readiness of policy actors, developers, and politicians to latch on to the concept of social infrastructure—particularly in London and the rest of the UK (Greater London Authority 2023; HM Government 2022)—ought to be met with caution. Writing in the context of a cost-of-living crisis, replete with foodbanks, “warm hubs”, and various forms of what Power et al. (2022) call “shadow care infrastructures”, we recognise the danger in being romantic about social infrastructures, especially when they emerge out of contexts of survival. As Hall’s (2019) wider work on the rise of “making-do” and “do-it-yourself” initiatives in austerity suggests, the rise of social infrastructure could function as a superficial policy “fix”, detracting from the urgency of addressing deepening structural inequalities and material scarcity. Simplistic portrayals of social infrastructure as a convenient policy panacea also ignore the relational, predominantly gendered, labour undergirding the social value of these places (Hall 2020). Neither the social benefits nor the continued existence of social infrastructures can be assumed: their vitality and their maintenance often require substantial emotional work; work which is all the more invisible the more effectively that it is done (Gotby 2023; Hall 2020).

Social infrastructure can only be understood, then, in the context of local, national, and international political economy. Whilst certain infrastructures can buffer and protect communities from inequalities and injustices, enlivening sociality, others can become enlisted in processes of gentrification and enclosure, when superficially “social” infrastructure takes an exclusionary form. The social value (or social harm) of infrastructures is thus contingent upon the role that they play in either diminishing or entrenching structural marginalisation; either enriching or belittling social life.

## Contest

No piece of social infrastructure, then, can be understood in isolation, abstracted from its socio-historical context, untethered from political economy, or separated from the relational processes which shape its value and meaning. Approaching social infrastructure in context in turn necessitates analysis of its contestation.

The sociality of social infrastructure is never pre-given, but in tension. Middleton and Samanani (2022:780) note that researchers need to “keep a sharp focus on both the enriching and diminishing possibilities” of different forms of social activity for different people. Bringing the concepts of enclosure and commons into dialogue with social infrastructure can again be helpful here, drawing attention to contested claims to space. Ferreri (2024:2) conceptualises the commons “not as pre-existing ‘resources’, but rather as spaces and ways of inhabitation that

have to be ‘carved out’ from competing claims to place and use dominated by the concentration of interest by capital and the state”. Social infrastructure, likewise, is never “pre-existing”, but produced through contesting assertions of value and ownership. Children and young people can be significant figures in this contestation. Far more than just the passive recipients of top-down social control and ordering (Ward 1978), they “are not only *in* the city, but they are *of* the city ... significant actors in, and creators of, the city” (Skelton and Gough 2013:457).

Hackney—like many areas in British cities—is a place in which the very presence of young people gathered in public space can be viewed as a threat to public safety (Skelton and Gough 2013; White 2020). The spatial practices of young minoritised residents in particular are used to justify the increased presence of police and the regeneration of entire communities (Quinn 2024; Wallace 2014). Thus, young people’s navigation and cultivation of social infrastructure(s) occurs in the context of expanding “anti-social infrastructures” (Horton and Penny 2023:1720), gentrification, and enclosure, eroding young people’s spatial mobility and belonging. Commoning in the cage can thus be a form of resistance to the growing privatisation of space and heightened suspicion of youth.

After a note on methodology and a short description of Hackney as a place, we draw on these theoretical streams to explore and contextualise the value that cages can have for young people in Hackney, and to examine the ways in which this value is contested.

## Methodology

The findings and analysis presented in this paper draw on a participatory community research project aimed at better understanding the value of cages in Hackney, and the resulting report, “The Difference a MUGA Can Make” (Billingham 2022, henceforth “DMCM”). Seven local young people were trained and paid to help lead the research activities, augmenting their role as local sports ambassadors. They co-designed the interview schedule and undertook the interviews with children, young people, and parents, supervised by the project’s lead researcher.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 19 children and young people aged between 10 and 15, and three parents. These interviews took place alongside a sport session occurring in cage, with the support and facilitation of the local organisation delivering the session, and parents. Alongside the local organisation, we carefully considered the ethical ramifications of involving under-18s in the research, weighing up the vital importance of giving children and young people a voice on their own lives with any risk of potential harm to participants. In consultation with the local organisation, it was agreed that short interviews with children and young people who were interested in taking part, undertaken by peers, and in the presence of youth workers and parents, was an appropriate and ethical way of conducting the research.

Three young adults aged between 20 and 30, recruited through a local youth charity, were also interviewed in person. In addition, 13 staff members from seven community sports organisations who deliver sessions in over 50 MUGAs across

Hackney and other London boroughs were interviewed, online. All participants consented to participation in the research, and the local organisations involved also supported the research.

All interviews covered four main topics: Hackney as a place to grow up in; activities occurring on Hackney's cages; the benefits of Hackney's cages; and issues with or on Hackney's cages. All of the interviews were recorded, with the permission of the participants, and then transcribed by the first author. Transcripts were manually coded according to key themes across different respondent groups—belonging, ownership, safety, gender, freedom, “cage coach” role, togetherness, and dangers of improvement. For the analysis presented in this paper, the data from the community research report was re-coded, in order to draw out data related to the themes of context and contestation.

## Hackney as Home for Young People

Hackney is a borough in the North-East of London. Home to approximately 260,000 residents, it is a young borough—its inhabitants have an average age of 32, compared with 35 in London, and 40 in England. Around 65,000 Hackney residents (24%) are 19 or under (Hackney Council 2020). Drawing on publicly available statistics, academic and community research, here we briefly sketch what growing up in Hackney can entail.

Hackney is among the world's most “super-diverse” areas (Wessendorf 2014), with at least 89 different main languages spoken in the borough (Hackney Council 2020). From both academic ethnographies (e.g. Wessendorf 2014) and recent community research focused on youth (e.g. Hackney Quest 2018; Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020), it is apparent that this diversity is viewed positively by the vast majority of residents, especially young people.

Young people in recent community research projects have emphasised the neighbourliness and community spirit in Hackney (Hackney Quest 2018, 2022; Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020). Particular youth programmes, facilities, and spaces are important facilitators of this community connectedness among young people (Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020). It is notable that Hackney Council has protected its youth services budget more effectively than many other boroughs in recent years—its youth budget dropping only 19% between 2010 and 2022, compared to 100% in neighbouring Waltham Forest and 76% in neighbouring Tower Hamlets, for instance (Berry 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Despite these assets, Hackney is not always an easy place to grow up in. Its young residents can encounter a range of interpersonal and structural harms (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers 2022)—injurious experiences deriving both from other people and from particular institutions, systems, and policies. Poverty is a significant problem for the borough's young: Hackney has the seventh highest rate of Free School Meal eligibility of England's 317 Local Authorities (Hackney Council 2022), and in 2020, 48% of children in Hackney were growing up in poverty after housing costs—the fourth highest rate among London boroughs (Trust for London 2020). The multi-faceted effects of poverty on Hackney's children and

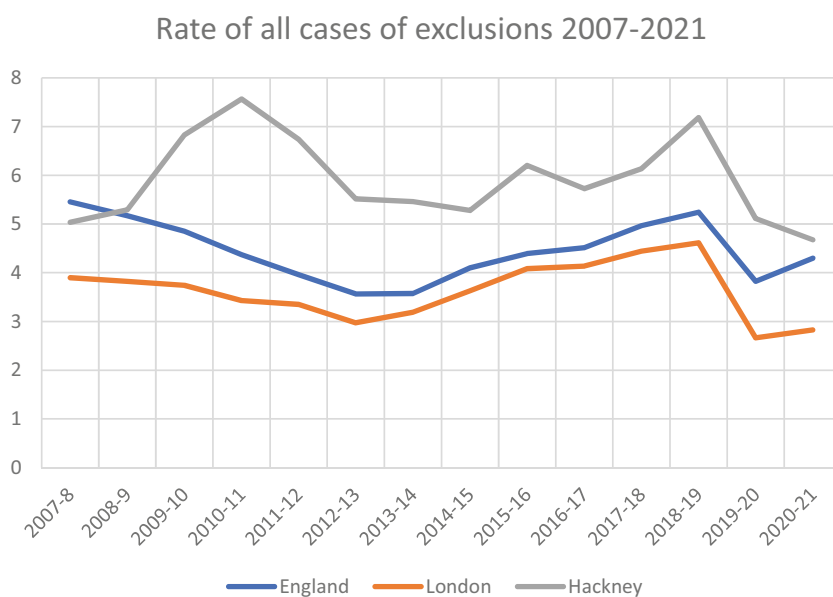
young people were a major theme of recent community research (Hackney Quest 2018, 2022; Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020).

The effects of poverty on the borough's young are exacerbated by the deepening inequality brought about by gentrification. Almeida's (2021) analysis of gentrification across London showed that Hackney had experienced some of the highest rates of gentrification of all London boroughs between 2010 and 2016. Relatedly, Butcher and Dickens (2016) found that many young people in the borough are experiencing "affective displacement": an undermined sense of belonging due to feeling progressively displaced by other, wealthier demographic groups. This was powerfully expressed in community research focused on the Hackney Wick neighbourhood (Hackney Quest 2018), in which young people said that they "don't belong anymore", that "the area is not really ours anymore", and that "Hackney is no longer the Hackney I grew up in". Young people in Hackney's Young Futures Commission expressed similar concern about gentrification: "expressing feelings of no longer recognising parts of the borough they used to identify with" (Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020:14). As is common across London's inner cities, many of Hackney's young people feel that their way of life is being marginalised, in order to "make way for homes, retail and leisure spaces designed to attract whiter, wealthier populations" (Horton and Penny 2023:1716, discussing Haringey, a borough which borders Hackney). Processes of enclosure and exclusion through gentrification are thus substantial shaping forces in the lives of Hackney's young people—heightening the significance of their commoning practices and the value of remaining social infrastructure.

Exacerbating this sense of marginalisation, particularly in public places, are issues with local policing. One respondent in the Young Futures Commission report stated that the police "racially profile us, especially young black men" (Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020:16). This statement is borne out by data: in 2019/20, young black men aged 15–19 were six times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts, despite the fact that searches for young white men had a higher rate of "positive outcomes" than searches for their black counterparts (22% compared with 18%; Account Hackney 2020). Research undertaken by the Account project (Account Hackney 2020) concluded that mistreatment by Hackney's police results in trauma and distrust.

Within the education system, exclusionary regimes negatively affect significant numbers of Hackney's young people. Though exam results in the borough have substantially improved in recent years (Hackney Council 2022), the borough has consistently had a markedly higher rate of exclusion than the London average for the past 15 years (see Figure 1). The negative impact of school exclusion is well evidenced. Excluded students tend to acquire fewer academic qualifications (HM Government 2019), and it has been demonstrated that school exclusions have a significantly detrimental, independent effect on mental health (Ford et al. 2018). Exclusion can heighten vulnerability to criminal exploitation (Commission on Young Lives 2022; HM Government 2018), and entail increased risk of violence perpetration or victimisation (see Arnez and Condry 2021; Holt 2011; McAra and McVie 2010). The damaging effects of exclusion are a common theme in recent community research in Hackney—the Young Futures Commission, for instance,





**Figure 1:** Rates of all cases of exclusion per 100 students in England, London, and Hackney 2007/8–2020/21 (source: author-created chart, based on data from the Department for Education; <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>)

highlighted that “exclusion has many consequences on a young person’s life” (Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020:18).

Hackney has a higher rate of interpersonal physical violence than most London boroughs. Between January 2018 and February 2023, Hackney had the fourth-highest rate of knife crime and the third-highest rate of gun crime of all 32 boroughs (Metropolitan Police Service 2023). It had the third-highest number of total homicide prosecutions among London boroughs between 2003 and 2020 (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers 2022:31). Again, these statistics were reflected in recent community research. Crime and violence were among the most prominent concerns raised by young people in the “Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes” report (Hackney Quest 2018). The Young Futures Commission reported on young people’s experiences “of gun, knife and gang crime, acid attacks and fights, alongside anti-social behaviour, robberies, burglaries and theft” (Hackney Young Futures Commission 2020:16). The Commission report conveyed substantial fear among young people, and stated that “exposure to serious youth violence has created a culture of fear and anxiety that was reported by all age groups, all demographics and all areas of the borough” (ibid.).

This is only a very partial snapshot of life for young people in Hackney. Whilst conveying the rich benefits of diversity, community spirit, and neighbourliness in the borough, this overview has also portrayed the stark difficulties for many of the borough’s young people. For some of Hackney’s young people, growing up in the context of these challenges, sports cages are pieces of urban infrastructure which—in a variety of ways—facilitate and enable the development of their social

identities. In the face of multiple, intersecting forces which can make them feel that Hackney is not “for” the likes of them or that Hackney is not “theirs” anymore, in cages some young people can carve out a sense of ownership, value, and freedom. They can be, in van den Bogert’s (2023:65) words, “important spaces of belonging”.

## **The Value of Hackney’s Cages, in Context and in Contest**

### ***Cages in Context: Facilitating the Joys and Counteracting the Struggles of Growing Up in Hackney***

There are over 60 cages in Hackney, with hundreds more spread out across London. In physical terms, most cages amount to little more than a concrete surface, rudimentary goalposts or basketball hoops, and some metal fencing. They are not inherently significant spaces, yet in the context of contemporary Hackney, and through the nature of their activation and inhabitation, they can act as valuable forms of “urban commons” (Blomley 2008). Hackney’s cages play a crucial role for many young people as sites for various forms of sociality (Layton and Latham 2022); but these socialities can only be understood by situating them within the borough’s “wider patterns of power” (Middleton and Samanani 2022:780).

Respondents frequently referred to the politics of public space in Hackney; young people’s use of neighbourhood cages is part of a much broader negotiation of space. In much of the borough, young people are surrounded by prohibitions, such as “no ball games” and “no skateboarding” signs, are fearful of encounters with the police, and may be treated as a general nuisance by adults—especially if committing the cardinal sin, habitual among youth, of “hanging around” (see van den Bogert 2023:61). Particularly for racially minoritised young people from working-class backgrounds, experiences of public space in Hackney can be dominated by the sense of scrutiny and suspicion from adults. In addition to this, especially given the borough’s issues with interpersonal violence, Hackney’s young people often carry an anxious awareness of territory—their navigation of public space can be circumscribed by concern about harmful interaction with peers. (Depending on a young person’s background and experiences, this concern may be greater than, equal to, or less than their concern about such encounters with police.)

The hyper-local, youth-dominated character of cages can provide a sense of security, identification, and ownership—insulated from these spatial tensions and anxieties. As one youth worker put it, a significant aspect of estate cages’ value is that young people are “only going downstairs to play ... [they] feel comfortable in their local area rather than having to travel far ... it’s *their* space”. The sense of collective youth ownership over the neighbourhood cage is palpable among young adult interviewees: one mentioned that “we bring our own speakers, it becomes our own ... you’re creating your own stadium”. Another recounted a story about how the council took down the basketball nets in their cage during the pandemic, so they and their friends bought and installed new ones. As they

concluded, “it’s like, we need this, so we’ll do it ourselves”. For these respondents, then, the cage becomes a form of urban commons that they “carve out” together (Ferreri 2024:2), set apart from other spaces in the neighbourhood, in which risk and surveillance can predominate. This sense of common ownership fosters an expressive freedom and a range of “kinesthetic practices” (Layton and Latham 2022:766), vividly captured by another young adult:

The best thing about playing in the cage growing up was being free, being allowed to just have fun, you could do so many different things—people would play-fight, play football, people would do racing, it was just like a free space that you had. At those ages [childhood and adolescence] you cherish that...

Palpable here is the sense of unrestricted, unsupervised play among peers—an unconstrained youthful sociality which is not possible within tightly controlled school spaces, or adult-dominated neighbourhood localities. Cages thus facilitate a form of play which is increasingly rare, given sharp declines in unsupervised outside play in Britain (Rixon et al. 2019).

Apparent here is a striking paradox at the heart of what cages represent within the spatial politics of the contemporary city. Playing in a cage, young people are by definition caged—hemmed in by metal fencing. This fencing could be seen to exemplify the physical boundaries which Jeffrey et al. (2011) describe as sustaining enclosure and polarisation in the “jarring archipelagos” of elite capitalist cities. Particularly when considered alongside the historical neglect and territorial stigmatisation of the social housing estates on which cages are often sited, this caging could be seen as “containment”; marking out young people as “spatial others” unwelcome elsewhere (Rosen 2024). However, from the perspective of young people involved in the DMCM study, this encaging is—paradoxically—an enabler of freedom: it allows an exuberance of unconstrained play, facilitates a sense of spatial ownership, and provides a canvas for collective creativity. The cage is a piece of the city that is theirs: a space in which they can be “significant actors in, and creators of, the city” (Skelton and Gough 2013:457). Thus, “thinking from the cage” can help to illuminate the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory practices that encompass contemporary urban social life (Ho 2022).

Cage play is not always informal and unsupervised, however. Attending more formalised, organised sessions on cages can weave young people into a supportive neighbourhood social network. As a parent put it:

Now every corner they go, they see someone they know. Older guys looking out for him, as well as staff. He now goes to school on his own. [Staff member] and [staff member] love kids, there’s no safer place to send your child—he’s loved when he comes to the sessions.

As well as encouraging informal community guardianship, cage sessions can be significant sites of “professional love”—a form of deep care which can enhance both agency and safety (see Purcell 2024). These caring professional relationships forged in the cage can then extend to a wider role in the neighbourhood:

One young person we work with was mugged on the street one day. They spent the day in their headteacher's office because they were so distressed by it. But they came straight to the cage straight after school. They felt safe in the cage, and talking to [staff member]. [The staff member] took him to school for a while after that. (Youth worker)

In an area in which the threat of physical harm can blight young people's lives, the "cage coach" can become a significant source of safety. The vital significance of trusted adult relationships for young people across a range of settings is well-evidenced (see e.g. Brierley 2021; Harris 2017; Wong et al. 2018), and, for some, cages can be an important setting for these relationships. "Cage coaches" can also play the role of "credible messengers"—respected members of the community able to resolve potential tensions (see Martinez and McGilton 2022):

When we first started running sessions on the cage, there were some "olders" who didn't like the fact we temporarily took over the cage for younger kids. This changed when one of them recognised me, though—it turned out we went to the same school, so we had a catch-up and I was able to explain more about what we were doing. Once I explained, they fully respected what we were doing. (Youth worker)

Thus, though freedom from adult intervention is a source of value for many young cage-users, it is not the case that any adult presence is experienced as a diminishment of freedom by all: a recurrent theme of the research was complex dynamics of freedom and safety within both open-access free play on cages, and more organised, adult-supervised sessions.

Friendships and bonds were another significant theme: cages can be sites for sociability and friendship, care and kinship (Layton and Latham 2022:766). Young adults who have been using cages for many years captured the peer relationships they've built:

You know people are going to be there, it's very social. You come, someone's there, you may not even know them, but you just jump in and play a game, so yeah, it's very social. (Young adult)

The relationships I've built through it—there's people I would never have met anywhere else. It takes me out of other areas of my life ... I found people who are like-minded [and] from there we became consistent friends ... everyone in there was of the same accord, like we're all friends. (Young adult)

The cage's role as a facilitator of friendships comes through equally strongly from those describing the benefits of organised sessions. A youth worker described the regular group of young people at their session as "like a little family within the community", and a parent evocatively conveyed a similar point about togetherness—particularly emphasising its multiculturalism:

[Since sessions on the cage started] all the kids in the community come into the cage now, everyone wants to be in the cage now to practice ... we have every colour here and I love that ... [It's] a place where it don't matter if my child is mixed, white, Black, Indian.

In a variety of ways, then, the study demonstrates the *contextualised* value of cages for young people in Hackney: they are spaces which can both support the navigation of Hackney's difficulties, such as territorial tensions and a lack of freedom in public places; and facilitate the joys of growing up in Hackney, such as neighbourly social capital and "super-diversity". They can enrich the social life of those experiencing structural marginalisation, countervailing the effects of exclusionary gentrification.

The findings therefore align with points raised by Layton and Latham (2022) about the different "registers of sociality" that social infrastructure can promote, as well as reaffirming the importance of issues raised by more "critical" social infrastructure scholars, such as Horton and Penny (2023). Especially in our account of the role that "cage coaches" can play for young people, our study echoes Hall (2019) in drawing attention to the relational labour that sustains social infrastructure, and highlights the need to "[extend] our analysis from the spaces of social infrastructure to account for the people, relationships, and costs of doing the work of supporting, caring, and maintaining" (Horton and Penny 2023:1730).

The fact that usage of neighbourhood cages usually does not come with a financial cost—whether using them for unsupervised play or when participating in organised sessions—is a vitally important component of their value, especially in the context of declining public provision. One young person alluded to this when saying that their favourite thing about attending sessions on their cage is that "I don't pay anything, and I can still play". A youth worker highlighted that they can "break even" as an organisation when providing sessions on cages, without needing to charge. This exemplifies another point raised by Horton and Penny (2023:1713), that social infrastructure is especially important for those "unable to afford market-based options or who face barriers to exclusionary and depleted public provision", particularly those from "underserved and minoritised populations". They express concern about the destruction of social infrastructure that benefits such groups, and this is a worry that we would echo regarding estate-based cages, at a time when their demolition is a real and present threat—particularly to make way for "in-fill" housing (see e.g. Grant 2021).

### ***Cages in Contest: Who and What are Hackney's Cages For?***

Cages can be valuable pieces of social infrastructure. The extent and nature of that value is shaped by both the animating activities occurring within the cage, and the local neighbourhood context surrounding it. The question remains, however: valuable *for whom*? As Middleton and Samanani (2022:779) point out, the same social infrastructure can engender both "enriching" and "diminishing" experiences for different people, and as highlighted by Horton and Penny (2023:1715), social infrastructure scholars must attend to the questions of "how and for whom infrastructure is designed, financed, and governed". Though in some cases, for some people, cages can offer protection or insulation from the socio-spatial inequalities and social harms they may be exposed to in other places in Hackney, for others, the inequalities and harms of the neighbourhood can

intrude all too readily into its cages. As with all social infrastructure, cages are subject to “competing claims to place and use” (Ferreri 2024:2).

Firstly, the availability of a cage for any individual’s or group’s play is not inevitable or straightforward—it has to be achieved, representing a particular form of “struggle for the commons” (Jeffrey et al. 2011:1254). Often, this struggle is with formal power holders: this was evident in the case of young adults re-netting a hoop de-netted by the council, and the DMCM study also includes examples of cages being locked or badly maintained in ways that can considerably undermine their usage. At the root of these problems is perhaps a lack of recognition among authorities or adult residents of the value that cages have, meaning that they inadequately consider the damage done by preventing a cage from being used, or from organised sessions being run on them. In the latter case, the last-minute cancellation of sessions can be detrimental to the relationships formed between “cage coaches” and young people, undermining the consistency and trust of those relationships. One form of contestation over cages, then, is quite a straightforward one: between those who recognise their value, and those who don’t (with significant consequences).

Contestation over cages between those with different forms of informal social power are far more complex. As one young adult put it, “it tends to be the biggest group that gets to play, that ‘owns the cage’”. Thus, the sense of ownership over a cage is not guaranteed; it’s won. The phrase “biggest group” is ambiguous; it could refer to the group of the biggest number, or it could refer to the physically biggest group, with clear connotations in terms of age and gender. As the brief reference to “play fighting” in a cage mentioned in the preceding section might suggest, “claiming” a cage may in some cases entail direct or indirect physical assertion. The preceding section’s reference to “olders”, similarly, can carry particular connotations: though often used generally to refer to older young people or young adults, it can also refer more specifically to older or more senior members of “gangs”. Though discourse around “gangs” and “youth violence” can often slip into generalisation, racism, and demonisation (see e.g. Gunter 2017), it is undeniable that Hackney is an area affected by relatively high rates of violence between young people, as discussed above. Cages can have a particular status within Hackney’s “on road” culture (see Levell et al. 2023), and can be implicated within social codes of territorialism and “postcode pride” (Earle 2011). The possession of “road capitals” (Bakkali 2022) within this culture can affect the degree of authority and credibility with which different individuals and groups lay claim to a cage. The complex and ambiguous spatial politics of the cage are thus crucial to attend to: whilst they can be both significant sites of safety and belonging, they can also be places in which “martial masculinity” holds prominence (Earle 2011)—they can be insulators from or vectors for a neighbourhood’s social conflicts. Honouring this complexity is vital to prevent cages from being mobilised to reinforce simplistic racialised stereotyping or the stigmatisation of inner-city communities (Crossley et al. 2023).

Gender is an especially significant component of cage contestation. The *Make Space for Girls* campaign argues that “[f]acilities for teenagers in parks and public spaces are almost entirely designed for and used by teenage boys. Teenage girls

are rarely considered” (Make Space for Girls 2022, cited in Billingham 2022:118). This echoes the findings of van den Bogert (2023), whose study of teenage Muslim girls’ football in Schilderswijk, Netherlands explores the ways in which participants’ play in public spaces was prevented, stigmatised, and marginalised. In marked contrast to teenage boys, the girls did not have an “automatic right” to play football in the town’s neighbourhood pitches, but had to gain “permission” from their male peers, especially through displays of skill (van den Bogert 2023:72–73). Van den Bogert reports a participant being chased away from a pitch by young men, which occurred when the pitch was accessible to anyone, rather than when there was an organisation present to run a session (ibid.)—another, more specific case in which adult presence can facilitate freedom, rather than diminishing it, especially for those who may otherwise be excluded from a facility by their peers.<sup>2</sup> There is always potential contestation in the process of commoning in the cage, then, as it can involve navigating multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities and logics (Olsen 2024).

Lastly, alongside these questions of who cages are for, there are questions about *what* cages are for. As Horton and Penny (2023:1712) suggest, academic work examining social infrastructure should not just be limited to a “pragmatic politics of provisioning”—concerned about who gets to benefit from provision (as important as that is)—but should also address the questions of “how, for whom, and to what ends social infrastructures are assembled and maintained” (ibid.). As we have argued elsewhere (Crossley et al. 2023), there is a growing problem of the commercial exploitation of these facilities: especially due to their classed and racialised connotations of “edgy urbanism”, brands can be eager to use cages for filming adverts (occupying them for hours at a time in order to do so), and companies can be keen to turn a profit through the management of cages (on the privatisation and commercialisation of social infrastructure and sports facilities, see also Horton and Penny 2023; van den Bogert 2023:62). When the latter occurs, particularly if cages become only usable when hired for a fee, all of their benefits as pieces of freely accessible social infrastructure melt away. In a subtler way, young adults included in the research raised concerns about the effects of refurbishing cages:

If you try to overdo it and make everything so perfect, put astroturf and that kind of thing, I feel like you take away from the authenticity of it.

When you do something like Paris [where they did a paint job on a cage], or even Yinka Ilori [who redesigned a Canary Wharf cage], it becomes a spectacle ... that court becomes more of an Instagram hotspot than an actual court. It takes away from the people who want to play. You want to improve it, but it doesn’t cross this kind of threshold, where it’s no longer serving the people who were originally there ... essentially, gentrifying it to a point where it’s no longer accessible for the local community.

This is another sense in which cages could intensify rather than insulate people from marginalising forces that are all-too-prominent for Hackney’s young people—if they become well-decorated “spectacles”, especially if this is combined with becoming hire-only, putative improvements to cages could in fact amount to

exclusionary “gentrifying”. Even apparent enhancements to surfacing could subtly, but significantly, alter the “authenticity” and sense of ownership that young people have developed in a cage. Thus, there can be dangers in attempts to augment cages’ value for their users, as well as, more obviously, in attempts to extract (corporate) value from them.

## Discussion

Though they are often some of the simplest structures to be found in a city, the social life of a sports cage is a complex thing. The value of Hackney’s cages for young people can only be considered *in context*, and cannot be understood without reckoning with what growing up in Hackney entails: the area’s cages are significant social infrastructure because they can facilitate some of the great joys available to the young of the borough, and can insulate them from some of its challenges. Drawing attention to the value of cages is particularly important given that they are often neglected, marginalised, “grey” spaces (O’Connor et al. 2023), and there has been little academic attention focused on the role of sports cages outside of the US (cf. van den Bogert 2023).

Hackney’s cages are also *contested*, however. Their value is not recognised by all relevant decision-makers, meaning that their maintenance often has to be campaigned for. Different groups can “lay claim” to a cage, potentially to the detriment of others. And whilst at best, cages can buffer young people from the inequalities and harms of their neighbourhood, at worst, they can reflect or intensify them. The gender dynamics of cage spaces require particular scrutiny.

These issues are particularly significant given that the Football Foundation is currently investing tens of millions of pounds into “PlayZones” across England, a next generation of cage-style community sports facilities. All of the key tensions discussed here are especially important for consideration in this programme—these facilities could provide a well-balanced mix of open-access play and structured provision; meet the diverse needs of different local groups and communities; achieve gender equity; and facilitate different forms of sociality. Or, at the opposite extreme, they could amount to the gentrification of community facilities: if they become hire-only with a charge; if their design is off-putting; and if they are seen as elite spaces dropped into neighbourhoods, they could alienate and dispossess those they are intended to cater for. Ensuring that “PlayZones” operate as equitable social infrastructure, rather than new forms of enclosure, will thus require the facilities to be carefully tailored to the needs and tensions of each local community, in their design, activation, and management.

## Conclusion

Our case study of cages has wider ramifications for debates about social infrastructure. We would suggest that—especially in grossly unequal societies such as Britain, and particularly in momentarily inequitable cities such as London—any social infrastructure can only ever be understood with due attentiveness to spatial inequalities and tensions. We have sought to demonstrate the value of both



“celebratory” accounts of social infrastructure (e.g. Layton and Latham 2022), and more “critical” approaches (e.g. Horton and Penny 2023). As we have illustrated, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive: the multiple kinds of sociality facilitated by social infrastructure can be examined whilst also considering and accounting for the differential benefits of this sociality for different groups, and the ways in which inequalities and harms can also intrude upon any social infrastructure. In addition, we have sought to highlight the relevance of scholarship around contemporary enclosure and commons for discussions of social infrastructure, particularly for drawing out the ways in which it is contested.

In an era of austerity and “extractive capitalism” (Lansley 2021), it is vital to support the maintenance of significant social infrastructure, and to recognise the relational labour which sustains it. We should remain wary, however, of how the notion of social infrastructure is mobilised in urban policymaking. As others have suggested (e.g. Hall 2020; Horton and Penny 2023), there is a risk that social infrastructure can be seen as a policy panacea. Deepening inequalities of resources, recognition, risk, and state retribution in Britain (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022) cannot be addressed merely through the provision of social infrastructure, or through the “activation” of existing social infrastructure, much as this may ameliorate the effects of those inequalities. There is perhaps some danger in the potential convenience of social infrastructure as a focus for decision-makers: a stated preoccupation with enriching an area’s social infrastructure—beneficial as this may be—could serve as an expedient route to circumventing a more direct confrontation with structural inequalities and harms. Developing valuable social infrastructure should be part of a wider drive to create a more equitable political economy and just society, rather than being mobilised as any kind of societal silver bullet.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data in this study is drawn from a publicly-available community research report. The full dataset is not publicly available.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Part of Hackney Council’s youth services budget is spent on funding activities occurring in cages.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth emphasising that youth workers demonstrated a keen awareness of this, describing measures taken to ensure that the participation of both younger players and girls was ensured—this included having girls-only sessions, designing activities which “flatten out” ability differences, and bringing less male-dominated sports onto cages.

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