



Factsheet #9

Spotlight on Designing and Managing Safe Public Spaces

Public spaces are profoundly important for cities as they represent places in which people come together, encounter differences and experience often fleeting social interactions. The quality of public spaces is central to their vitality and people's use of them, as they represent key attractions for visitors, residents and other users of all ages and backgrounds.



The importance of urban public spaces, not only for the prosperity of cities but also for both the health and wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities has been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, raising fundamental questions about how best to plan, regulate and manage urban spaces in the public interest. However, European cities face significant contemporary challenges and major threats, such as terrorism and organised crime, and also incivilities, petty crime and disorder which all affect citizens' feeling of safety in public spaces. In this light, striking a balance between managing public spaces as secure but also open to accommodate diverse use – including for example political protest and public expression – is a major task confronting municipal authorities.

Strategies for Effective Prevention

Crime prevention interventions in public spaces frequently focus on opportunity reduction measures, many of which are physical in nature. As the importance of elements such as design and aesthetics gained in prominence, the use of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) – a multidisciplinary approach incorporating physical security, surveillance, movement control, management and maintenance and defensible space – has become more widespread. Crucially, security is but one imperative in public spaces that sometimes collides with other public goods or private pursuits. Due regard, therefore, needs to be accorded to ensuring that safe public spaces remain open and welcoming to diverse users and visitors without becoming overly or overtly securitised.



Consideration needs to be given not only to technological solutions to design and management in addressing security concerns, but also to human solutions and the interaction between social and technological processes. Research highlights the value of compliance strategies that decentre the police and engage informal actors, civil society mediators and forms of persuasion, self-regulation and capacity building, rather than resort to coercive law enforcement, police, prosecution and punishment.



- Developing and implementing crime prevention strategies in public spaces requires a detailed and focused planning process – based on good quality scanning and analysis. Moreover, it is vital to gain valuable insights from numerous urban partners, stakeholders and local communities.
- Incorporating feedback and assessment from the community is a necessary element of any crime prevention strategy aiming to improve the design and management of safe public spaces. Many European cities are employing community-wide safety assessments with local citizens providing direct feedback on the safety and security of their neighbourhoods. Complemented by open-source data, this approach offers valuable insights into communities' perceptions and priorities.
- Using mobile-app and web-based programmes offer novel and low-cost platforms to engage large and diverse populations. Finding ways to include as many population segments as possible ensures a more comprehensive, inclusive, and ultimately successful outcome.

Devising long-term, holistic, and inclusive strategies for public spaces is more effective than implementing piecemeal prevention elements.



The Importance of Maintaining Public Spaces

Poorly maintained and managed spaces can feel unwelcoming and intimidating to legitimate users and may encourage disorder and disorderly behaviour. Interventions targeted at places and problems before they reach 'tipping points' in the escalation of risks and harms can impact positively on public perceptions and, hence, levels of use. Use of public space fosters perceptions of safety, whereas underused and desolate public spaces can be fear inducing. By putting the community back into public space, a sense of ownership and guardianship over the space can emerge. Popular activities placed at the heart of empty public spaces can reclaim the space for legitimate users. This increases natural surveillance and the risk of detection of criminal and harmful activities.

There are significant gender differences with regard to perceptions of safety in public spaces across Europe. Women and girls, as well as members of some minority communities, experience and confront particular risks, behaviours and threats in urban public spaces, which need to be acknowledged and addressed through design, regulation and management strategies. Throughout Europe, overall feelings of safety have generally improved for both genders, but women remain between 2.5 and 5.7 times more likely to feel unsafe than men in almost all countries. Overall, gender differences remain stubbornly persistent.



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The IcARUS project (Innovative Approaches to Urban Security) aims to rethink, redesign and adapt existing tools and methods to help local security actors anticipate and better respond to urban security challenges. This factsheet is based on the IcARUS Review of Accumulated Learning and cross-analysis of urban security.



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