CITISENSE

RETHINKING URBAN SECURITY

The CITISENSE Approach
to Safer, Inclusive Cities

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Pietro L. Verga, URBACT Lead Expert
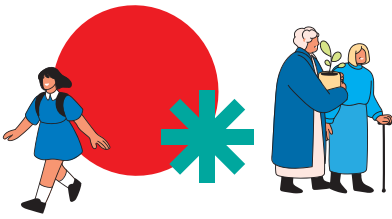
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INNOVATION TRANSFER NETWORK

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> **Author:** Pietro L. Verga, Lead Expert

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As citizens' concerns around perceived insecurity in urban areas increasingly dominate political and media agendas across Europe, there is a growing demand for innovative policies and approaches to tackle the issue holistically, addressing the different causes and dimensions at their root.

The **Be Secure – Feel Secure** Urban Innovative Actions project tested between 2019 and 2022 by the Municipality of Piraeus, went in this direction by introducing new participatory approaches to both crime prevention and the mitigation of perceived insecurity. It focused on three core pillars: new governance framework, novel digital tools, as well as social and spatial interventions. The CITISENSE Innovation Transfer Network intends to build upon, adapt and transfer this experience to five European cities currently seeking to foster innovative, participatory, and integrated approaches to urban security.

Led by the Municipality of **Piraeus**, the CITISENSE network partners span from **Manresa** in central Catalunya to **Liepāja** on the Baltic Sea; from **Geel** in Belgian Flandres to **Naples** in the Campania region, representing a range of urban contexts, from bustling port cities to smaller towns and historic centres. Each city addresses specific issues such as public safety, socio-economic inequalities, urban degradation, and public nuisance/antisocial behaviour, while the common thread among all cities is a growing perception of insecurity, often in spite of a general reduction in crime rates.

Between November and December 2024 I had the opportunity to visit each of the partner cities, and observe first-hand their main urban security issues.

With more than 80,000 inhabitants, **Manresa** is one of the major centres of Catalunya, yet it is currently facing the difficulties of transitioning to a post-industrial economy and the progressive abandonment of its city centre. While wealthier residents moved to decentralised neighbourhoods, several buildings in the centre have been abandoned and are suffering from severe degradation. This has facilitated the settlement of

vulnerable populations and thereby a high concentration of social issues. In particular, the presence of people facing economic hardship, low levels of social integration – especially regarding people with a migrant background, refugees, and unaccompanied migrants – and mental health issues often results in public disturbances, antisocial behaviours, and small-scale crimes. This, fuelled by media rhetoric, ultimately led to the stigmatisation of the city centre as a dangerous area and a growing perception of insecurity among citizens and business owners.

Similarly, **Geel** – a mid-sized town of 42,000 inhabitants in the functional urban area of Antwerp – is dealing with the effects of a changing socio-economic framework on various levels. On the one hand, the crisis of small retail businesses and local entertainment struggling to compete with malls and online services has resulted in several closures, reducing the variety, diversity, and quality of the city centre's recreational, commercial, and gastronomic offerings. This lack of an attractive and accessible urban environment has not only weakened the centre's vibrancy but also turned public space into the main gathering point for youth and middle-aged men, leading to public disturbances and undesired behaviours, especially overnight.

On the other hand, recent years have seen demographic changes due to the influx of migrants and refugees, somewhat destabilising the status quo and habits of long-term inhabitants, resulting in widespread mistrust and a lack of integration with the newly settled residents. This situation, again fuelled by media and social-media narratives, has generated a growing perception of insecurity among the population, even as crime rates continue to decline.

The lack of a vibrant, attractive, and accessible socio-cultural and recreational scene emerged as a key issue in **Liepāja** – a city of nearly 67,000 inhabitants on the Baltic coast. Here, this issue particularly affects teenagers and youth, who end up gathering in public spaces or abandoned buildings, engaging in illicit and/or undesired/antisocial behaviours such as public drinking, unauthorised graffiti, and vandalism. In addition, a second critical dimension concerns various violations and undesired activities (e.g., littering, illegal camping and bonfires, public nuisance) committed by tourists, especially in natural and environmentally protected areas.

Naples – Italy's third-largest city, with more than 900,000 inhabitants – is a major port city characterised by its welcoming attitude and diverse sociocultural fabric. Yet it is affected by a high unemployment rate (29%), with nearly one in ten families living below the poverty threshold, as well as by a strong presence of organised crime, all of which contribute to various urban security challenges. Given the size of the city, the CITISENSE project will limit its focus to the Vasto/Buvero area and the axis connecting Piazza

Garibaldi (the main square in front of the central station) and Piazza Carlo III. Here, youth involvement in criminal activities is an escalating issue, with increased participation in theft, drug trafficking, and violent behaviour. The presence of marginalised groups, combined with antisocial behaviour and aggressive attitudes, particularly among certain youth groups, exacerbates the perception of insecurity in public spaces. The concentration of poverty, homelessness, and migration-related vulnerabilities further shapes public concerns.

What became evident through the city visits and discussions with partners and local stakeholders – often supported by the problem tree methodology – was that all the aforementioned urban security issues are the product of broader and more complex dynamics. Undesired, antisocial, and aggressive behaviours – when not linked to mental disorders – often stem from disadvantaged socio-economic conditions and the lack of educational, professional, socio-cultural, and recreational opportunities available to residents.
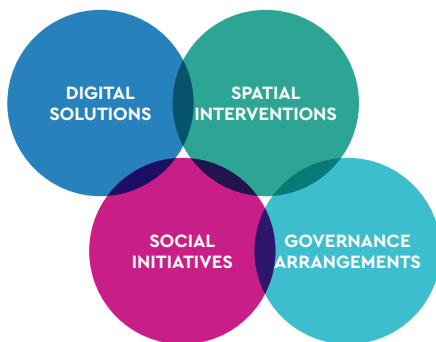
Indeed, if we understand security as the unity of emotions and behaviours to which the experiences of personal safety, assurances, and certainties are attributed (Bauman, 2001), urban security issues concern not only the prevention and repression of potential harm but also the creation of a safe and welcoming city (Pajno, 2010).

It is therefore very clear that we need to act at the root causes, pursuing a shift away from traditional, individual security and law-and-order policies

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that are often implemented as stopgap measures for the absence of other policies. Instead, CITISENSE aims to foster a new, participatory, and integrated approach to address the multitude of factors that may affect the perception of security in urban areas.

Accordingly, CITISENSE will support cities in adapting and transferring the BeSecure-FeelSecure approach, whose integrated and holistic model allows cities to tackle perceived security challenges from multiple angles, ensuring tailored responses that address the root causes of insecurity. BSFS placed a strong emphasis on fostering a participatory approach to urban security, recognising that a safe city is one where residents actively engage in shaping their environment.

FROM BSFS TO CITISENSE

Four integrated **transfer modules** that can be **adapted and combined** according to each Partner's context and needs

Operationally, BSFS can be unpacked in four integrated transfer modules that can be adapted and combined according to each Partner's context and needs:

> **Digital Solutions** leverage data integration and real-time analysis to support evidence-based policymaking and transparent communication.

> **Spatial Interventions** focus on designing inclusive and adaptive public spaces that foster safety and collective ownership.

> **Social Initiatives** address fear and insecurity by strengthening community ties, promoting integration, and tackling socio-economic drivers of vulnerability.

> **Governance Arrangements** ensure long-term impact through multi-stakeholder collaboration, participatory policymaking, and trust-building among institutions and communities.

Urban security is far more than a question of law enforcement—it is deeply intertwined with socio-economic conditions, spatial dynamics, and community trust. The CITISENSE network, building on the BSFS approach, highlights the need for integrated and participatory solutions that move beyond traditional crime prevention. By fostering inclusive governance, leveraging digital tools, reimagining public spaces, and addressing the root causes of fear and insecurity, CITISENSE offers cities a pathway to long-term resilience. As urban areas continue to evolve, security must be understood as a shared responsibility, where local authorities, stakeholders, and residents work together to create safe, welcoming, and thriving environments for all.

CITISENSE Innovation Transfer Network Partners. source: Municipality of Piraeus