CITISENSE

FROM REPORTING PROBLEMS TO UNDERSTANDING PLACES
DIGITAL TOOLS FOR INCLUSIVE URBAN SECURITY

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INNOVATION TRANSFER NETWORK

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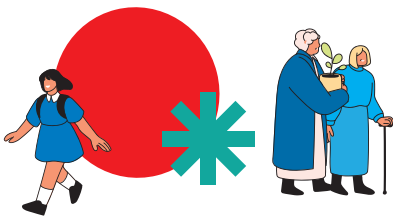> **Author:** Pietro L. Verga, URBACT Lead Expert

Urban safety is a complex and multi-layered issue that cannot be reduced to crime prevention or surveillance alone. Within the **URBACT Innovation Transfer Network CITISENSE**, cities work from a shared understanding that safety is deeply connected to how people **experience**, **use and feel** in public space.

In many European cities, what matters most is not only actual incidents, but the **perception of insecurity**. This perception often emerges in everyday situations and is shaped by social dynamics, unfamiliarity, diversity and conflicting uses of public space. People may feel unsafe, unwelcome or uncomfortable not because of a direct threat, but because certain activities, groups or behaviours do not align with their expectations of how public space "should" be used.

Perceived insecurity as a symptom, not a cause

Across CITISENSE partner cities, the situations most frequently associated with insecurity tend to be highly visible but structurally rooted. These include:

> Underused or abandoned public spaces.

> Vacant or deteriorated buildings, shops and housing.

> Lack of activity in certain areas or time periods.

> The presence of homeless people.

> Individuals facing addiction or mental health challenges.

> Groups of young people using public space as their primary place to meet.

It is crucial to stress that these phenomena are **not the root causes of insecurity**, but rather the **manifestation of deeper social and spatial issues**. Behind them lie limited access to employment, inadequate social and health support, lack of cultural, sporting or social opportunities, and insufficient inclusive spaces.

When opportunities are scarce, public space often becomes the only place where vulnerable groups can spend time, socialise or simply exist. This can lead to tensions and conflicts between different users of the city, reinforcing feelings of fear, discomfort and exclusion.

Digital tools for urban safety: potential and pitfalls

Within CITISENSE, several cities are experimenting with **digital tools and apps** to support urban safety policies. These tools aim to:

> Support informed and evidence-based decision-making.

> Monitor areas where insecurity is perceived to be higher.

> Improve coordination between multiple actors, including Local police, Emergency and response services, Social and health services, Street educators, Civil protection, Citizens and users of public space.

When used carefully, digital tools can help cities build a more comprehensive picture by combining different types of data, such as reports, interventions and user feedback. This can improve planning, prioritisation and cross-sectoral collaboration. However, these tools are **not neutral**.

The risk of bias, stigma and fear amplification

When digital solutions are explicitly framed as tools for "urban safety", there is a significant risk of **confirmation bias**. Users are implicitly encouraged to report what makes them feel unsafe, uncomfortable or annoyed. As a result:

> The same situations may be repeatedly reported.

> Certain behaviours or groups may be disproportionately flagged.

> Negative perceptions of specific areas can be reinforced.

> Stigma and scapegoating can increase.

> Fear can be amplified rather than reduced.

If citizens are only asked what makes them feel unsafe, the narrative inevitably becomes problem-focused. Over time, this can contribute to labelling neighbourhoods as "unsafe" and targeting specific users of public space, instead of addressing the structural conditions behind these perceptions.

A promising shift: the Naples case

A particularly interesting emerging practice within CITISENSE is currently being tested by the city of Naples.

Rather than asking users to report problems or unsafe situations, the city is experimenting with a **participatory digital mapping tool** that invites people to describe their **perceptions and emotions** associated with specific places. Users are encouraged to reflect on questions such as:

> How does this place make you feel?

> What emotions does it evoke?

> Why do you experience it in this way?

This approach deliberately moves beyond the binary of "safe" versus "unsafe". Alongside fear or insecurity, it allows other emotions to emerge, such as:

> Feelings of exclusion or abandonment.

> Anger or frustration.

> Conflict or unresolved tensions.

> Attachment, belonging or comfort.

By broadening the emotional spectrum, the tool captures a **more nuanced and inclusive understanding of public space**. It recognises that different groups experience the same place in very different ways and that insecurity is only one of many relevant emotions.

Starting from this shared emotional knowledge base, Naples aims to **co-create solutions** that respond to multiple needs simultaneously, rather than prioritising one group over another. This opens the door to more constructive dialogue and more balanced interventions.

From security to quality of life: changing the narrative

One of the key lessons emerging from CITISENSE is the importance of **reframing the narrative**. Instead of focusing exclusively on urban safety, cities can position digital tools as instruments to:

> Improve quality of life.

> Make public spaces more welcoming and inclusive.

> Support coexistence of different uses and users.

> Encourage mutual understanding and collaboration.

This shift reduces polarisation and moves away from a logic of control towards one of **care, inclusion and shared responsibility**.

Conclusion

Digital tools can play an important role in urban safety policies, but their impact depends on **how they are designed, framed and used**. If poorly conceived, they risk reinforcing fear and stigma. If thoughtfully implemented, they can support more inclusive, empathetic and effective urban governance.

The experience of Naples shows that starting from emotions rather than incidents can help cities move beyond a narrow security agenda and towards public spaces that feel safer precisely because they are **more lively, more inclusive and more humane**.

In CITISENSE, urban safety is not an end in itself, but a pathway towards cities where everyone can feel recognised, welcome and at ease.

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