

Risk Perception and the Psychology of Security

*From Theory to Action: A Handbook for Building Safer
Communities*

White Paper

Published by:

European Neighbourhood Watch Association – EUNWA
Via Terraglio 64
30174 Venice, Italy
www.eunwa.eu
head-office@eunwa.eu

Date of publication: November 2025

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Preface

Security, a fundamental pillar of quality of life and the social contract, is not a monolithic concept. Whilst often associated with objective data on crime and incidents, it is deeply intertwined with individual and collective perception. In an era characterised by rapid social, technological and environmental changes, understanding the dynamics that underpin risk perception has become more crucial than ever for building resilient and informed communities, and for maintaining the trust that underpins our wider society.

This White Paper, developed for EUNWA (European Neighbourhood Watch Association), serves as an operational tool and an awareness-raising instrument. It does not claim to be an academic research paper presenting original data but is instead a reasoned guide that synthesises established studies and concepts to translate them into concrete action. The objective is to bridge the gap between psychological theory and the everyday practice of security.

This initiative is based on the awareness that security is not solely the task of institutions, but a shared objective that requires the active and conscious participation of every citizen. This, however, does not diminish the fundamental responsibility of political leadership to create the conditions for this security, addressing both objective dangers and the perceptions that shape public life. EUNWA is an organisation that works to promote participatory security and collaboration between citizens and law enforcement; in this context, this document provides tools for understanding that go beyond statistics to touch upon the human and psychological dimension of security.

The text explores the complex relationship between risk perception and the psychology of security, analysing how individual, social, and cultural factors shape our sense of safety and our behaviours. The aim of the handbook is twofold: on the one hand, to equip citizens with the tools to develop a more critical assessment of the risks surrounding them; on the other, to provide security professionals, political decision-makers, and industry associations with insights and strategic directions for more effective communication and targeted interventions. The text acknowledges the important work already carried out by numerous law enforcement agencies and European institutions in this field and aims to serve as a stimulus for further reflection and collaboration.

The EUNWA Board – November 2025

Abstract

This White Paper serves as an operational handbook on the relationship between risk perception and the psychology of security. It does not present original research; instead, it synthesises established theories to provide practical tools for citizens, law enforcement and policymakers.

The document analyses how individual assessments of danger influence collective behaviours and responses. It explores the distinction between objective and subjectively perceived risk, examines the psychological factors (such as cognitive biases and the "Lifecycle of Feelings of Insecurity") and socio-cultural factors that shape this perception, and introduces the concept of "Indicators of Widespread Insecurity" (Signal Crimes), highlighting their disproportionate impact on a community's, and potentially all of society's, sense of security.

Particular attention is paid to the gender perspective, revealing how women perceive and experience security in a specific way, often with a discrepancy between the perception of the home as a safe environment and the reality of gender-based violence. The text illustrates the consequences of an altered perception of risk for citizens (anxiety, risky or overly cautious behaviours, poor prevention) and for institutions (communication difficulties, policy ineffectiveness). It then proposes differentiated practical strategies: for citizens, the importance of risk literacy, critical thinking, and awareness of biases; for institutions and associations, the adoption of strategic communication, the strengthening of community engagement (e.g., through models such as Neighbourhood Watch), the integration of a gender perspective, the targeted management of urban decay, and the adoption of evidence-based policies. The document concludes with strategic directions for a conscious and participatory approach to security.

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1 INTRODUCTION

We live in an era of rapid and interconnected change, where security has become a central concern for every citizen, from the neighbourhoods of large cities to the smallest towns. The threats we perceive, and face are increasingly complex and multifaceted: from traditional crimes to emerging risks in cyberspace, from environmental crises to the social challenges that undermine the trust and cohesion of our societies. This complexity, often amplified by a media narrative that can be sensationalist or fragmented, makes it difficult for each of us to distinguish objective risk from perceived risk.

Adding to this complexity is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has acted as an accelerator of social change. Global research (e.g., Nivette et al., 2021) indicates that while some predatory crimes decreased during lockdowns due to changed routines, social anxiety and the perception of insecurity in public spaces were deeply altered. This has created new challenges for societal trust and has made the distinction between objective risk and subjective fear even more complex.

It is crucial to clarify the nature of this paper from the outset. This is neither an academic essay nor an empirical study intended to present new findings. This work is an operational handbook, a White Paper that selects and organises established theories and studies from the fields of psychology and criminology (Slovic, 1987; Kahneman, 2011; Innes, 2004) with a pre-eminently practical purpose. The objective is not to contribute new knowledge to the scientific debate, but rather to make existing knowledge accessible and useful for practitioners in the field.

To illustrate the concepts discussed in a practical way, this document will refer to a recurring case study: the fictional 'Eastwick' neighbourhood, a mixed residential area chosen to represent the challenges related to perceived security. By analysing events in Eastwick from different perspectives, we will see how the principles of the psychology of security manifest in real life.

This initiative, developed by EUNWA, aligns with the principles of participatory security and collaboration between citizens and institutions. It also serves as a call to action for political leaders, whose responsibility is to foster an environment of security that goes beyond mere statistics and actively addresses the public's perceived sense of safety. The purpose of the text is twofold: on the one hand, to provide citizens with the tools to develop a more informed and critical assessment of the risks that surround them; on the other, to offer useful insights and analysis for law enforcement officers, policymakers, and associations working in the field of security. An analysis of how the human mind works when faced with danger can contribute to building safer, more resilient and more aware communities.

2 KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 What is risk perception?

Risk perception is, simply put, the way in which each of us evaluates the **probability** that a negative event (such as a theft, an accident, or an illness) will occur and the **severity** of its possible consequences. This is not a purely rational or mathematical assessment, but rather a process influenced by a series of personal, social, and emotional factors. It is like a "filter" through which we observe the dangers around us.

It is crucial to understand that our perception of risk does not always coincide with objective (or real) risk (Davey & Wootton, 2019). In-depth studies have shown that perception is often a phenomenon distinct from the statistical evaluation of danger, influenced by psychological and social factors (Slovic, 1987).

Objective risk is based on statistical data, scientific evidence, and rigorous analyses of the probability of an event occurring. A striking example of this dynamic is the comparison between road and air safety. According to preliminary data from the European Commission, there were approximately 20,400 road fatalities in the EU in 2023, equivalent to around 46 deaths per million inhabitants (European Commission, 2024). Over the same period, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) reported zero passenger fatalities on commercial flights within European airspace (EASA, 2024).

Despite the objective risk of travelling by car being enormously higher, the fear of flying (aviophobia) remains a widespread psychological phenomenon affecting a significant portion of the population. This discrepancy is fuelled by factors such as the spectacular and media-heavy nature of plane crashes (the availability heuristic) and the passenger's lack of perceived control. This demonstrates how our perception of risk is an emotional construct, not a purely statistical calculation. Understanding this difference is the first step towards approaching security in a more informed way and preventing our fears, or conversely, an excessive underestimation, from leading us to make poor decisions.

Table 1- Objective Risk vs. Perceived Risk

Objective Risk	Perceived Risk
Based on statistical data and scientific evidence.	Based on emotions, personal experiences, and cultural factors.
It is a mathematical and rational assessment of probability.	It is a subjective "filter" influenced by cognitive biases.
Stable and measurable.	Variable and difficult to quantify.
Example: The extremely low statistical risk of commercial air accidents.	Example: The widespread fear of flying (aviophobia).

2.2 What is the psychology of security?

The **psychology of security** is the discipline that studies how our minds and emotions influence **security-related behaviours**. It seeks to understand why people adopt (or fail to adopt) certain precautions, how they react to dangerous situations, and how their beliefs and perceptions shape their actions in the context of security.

It is not just about understanding fears or anxiety but also exploring how factors like **trust** (in institutions, in others, in oneself), **optimism**, **negligence**, or even **routine** can play a crucial role. The psychology of security helps us understand why, for example, some people do not wear seatbelts, do not regularly change their social media passwords, or underestimate the risk of an online scam, despite clear recommendations.

In practice, this branch of psychology seeks to answer questions such as:

- Why do some people feel safe even in objectively dangerous situations, while others feel anxious in relatively safe contexts?
- What are the psychological mechanisms that lead us to ignore danger warnings?
- How can we communicate risks in a way that makes people more likely to adopt protective behaviours?

Understanding the psychology of security is fundamental for anyone who wants to promote a safer environment, from parents teaching their children road safety rules, to urban planners designing public spaces, to law enforcement agencies trying to prevent crime and associations raising awareness on important issues. It allows us to go beyond simply "knowing" what is safe, to understand "why" we act in a certain way when faced with danger.

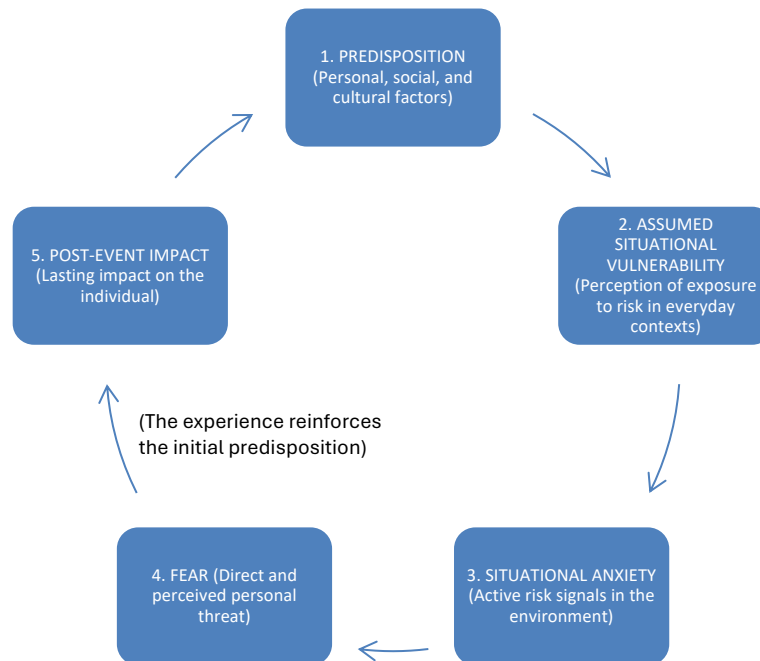
2.3 Factors that influence risk perception

Our perception of risk is neither static nor purely rational; it is, instead, the result of a complex interaction of different elements. Understanding these factors helps us recognise why we, or others, might evaluate a danger differently from reality. We can analyse these factors by considering two macro-categories: the mechanisms of the "Lifecycle of Feelings of Insecurity" and other fundamental socio-psychological factors that influence these mechanisms.

2.3.1 The Lifecycle of Feelings of Insecurity

This model, known as the CCI Insecurity Lifecycle Model, describes the different phases through which the perception of insecurity can develop and solidify, influencing our basic tendency to feel secure or insecure. It is a key concept developed by Davey and Wootton (2019) as part of the European project Cutting Crime Impact – CCI (www.cuttingcrimeimpact.eu), which aims to provide Law Enforcement Agencies and policymakers with practical tools to understand and address citizens' feelings of insecurity. The framework was then adopted and applied by project partners, such as the Generalitat de Catalunya, to analyse specific phenomena in their own territory.

Figure 1 - The Lifecycle of Feelings of Insecurity



Stage 1: Predisposition (contextual, social, and personal factors)

These basic elements influence our tendency to feel secure or insecure even before a specific event occurs. They include a person's mindset, the dominant public opinion on security, and individual beliefs about crime. *To understand how this cycle works in practice, let us follow the story of Klaus, a 68-year-old pensioner who lives alone in the Eastwick neighbourhood.*

- *Klaus's Story: Klaus has a baseline predisposition to feeling insecure. He lives alone (a personal factor), and the local Eastwick news frequently reports on scams targeting the elderly (dominant public opinion). His modest pension makes him anxious about potential financial loss (resources to cope with victimisation).*

Stage 2: Assumed Situational Vulnerability

This relates to how we perceive our exposure to risk in the specific contexts of our daily lives, such as the spaces where we live and move, the routes we take, and our housing conditions.

- *Klaus's Story: He experiences this daily. He lives on the ground floor of an old building (housing conditions) and, to get his daily groceries, he must walk through a poorly lit underpass (routes). These elements make him aware of his everyday vulnerability.*

Stage 3: Situational Anxiety

Anxiety becomes "situational" when risk signals actively manifest in our environment, for example when news of crime in our local area multiplies.

- *Klaus's Story: His anxiety becomes situational when he reads in the Eastwick local newspaper that two scams using the "fake gas inspector" technique have been carried out in his very neighbourhood (news of crime in his environment). The threat, once generic, has now become specific and proximate.*

Stage 4: Fear

Feelings of insecurity turn into fear when we are faced with a direct and perceived threat of being a victim of a crime or an attack.

- *Klaus's Story: This transforms into direct, immediate fear when, a few days later, a man in a boiler suit rings his doorbell saying he needs to check the meter. At that moment, anxiety transforms into fear as Klaus feels a real and personal threat. He refuses to open the door and calls the police.*

Stage 5: Post-Victimisation (or Post-Event) Impact

Once a threatening event has occurred, the experience can turn into shock, anger, or stress. The way we and those around us handle the consequences indicates the mark it will leave on us, modifying our initial perspective on security.

- *Klaus's Story: Even though the person at the door turned out to be a genuine technician sent by the building manager (a false alarm), the experience has a lasting post-event impact. Klaus now peers through the peephole with dread every time the bell rings. His experience, shared with Eastwick neighbours and family, modifies his initial perspective on security, making him permanently more suspicious and fearful.*

Klaus's story demonstrates that actual victimisation is not even necessary to complete the cycle and profoundly alter a person's perception of security.

Table 2 - The Stages of the "Lifecycle of Feelings of Insecurity"

Stage	Description
1. Predisposition	The basic elements that influence our tendency to feel secure or insecure even before a specific event occurs.
2. Assumed Situational Vulnerability	How we perceive our exposure to risk in the specific contexts of our daily lives (e.g., routes, frequented places).
3. Situational Anxiety	Anxiety that manifests when risk signals become active and concrete in our environment (e.g., news of crime in the neighbourhood).
4. Fear	The feeling of insecurity turns into fear when we are faced with a direct and perceived threat of being a victim.
5. Post-Event Impact	The lasting impact that a frightening experience (even without actual victimisation) leaves on our perception of security.

2.3.2 Other socio-psychological factors influencing perception

In addition to the lifecycle describing the phases of reaction to an insecurity event, there are specific factors that permeate and shape our perception of risk at every stage, acting as lenses through which we interpret the world. These factors, while they may include direct experiences of victimisation, go beyond the immediate reaction to influence a broader view of security.

- **Personal experiences.** Nothing influences risk perception more than what we have experienced directly. This includes not only victimisation suffered first-hand, but also witnessing events, hearing accounts from others, or our daily habits. This direct link between victimisation and subsequent fear has been a cornerstone of criminological research for decades (Garofalo, 1979). If someone has been burgled, their perception of the risk related to home security will likely be much higher, and they will tend to take more precautions than someone who has never had a similar experience. Positive experiences, on the other hand, can lead to an underestimation of risk ("everything has always been fine, why should it change now?").
- **Social and cultural factors.** We are social beings, and the opinions of those around us (family, friends, colleagues) or the values of our culture can profoundly shape our perception. As influential anthropologists like Mary Douglas have argued, what a society chooses to fear is often a reflection of its core values and social structures (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). If the community we live in is very concerned about a certain type of crime, it is likely that our perception of that risk will also increase, regardless of objective data. Social norms, whether implicit or explicit, also play a role: if "everyone does it," we might perceive risky behaviour as less dangerous.

Media and information. The way news is presented plays a huge role. Rare but spectacular and dramatic events (like a terrorist attack or a plane crash) tend to be over-represented and create an impression of greater probability, distorting the perception of real risk. Conversely, more common and systemic risks (like chronic lifestyle-related diseases) often receive less coverage, leading to underestimation. The constant flow of news, including false or exaggerated stories ("fake news"), can generate unjustified alarm or lead people to underestimate real threats. In the digital era, this effect is amplified by social media. Recent research (e.g., Gerell & Hale, 2021) has highlighted how online neighbourhood groups can create 'echo chambers,' where the perception of insecurity is exacerbated regardless of actual crime data, due to the rapid sharing of negative news.

- **Psychological factors ("Cognitive Biases").** Our mind uses "shortcuts" (called cognitive biases) to process information quickly, and these shortcuts can lead us to systematic errors in risk assessment (Kahneman, 2011). Although useful for quick decisions, these mechanisms can distort our understanding of the reality of danger. To understand how these mental shortcuts work, let us imagine a scenario: **in the Eastwick neighbourhood, a few cars are broken into over a two-week period. The news is widely discussed on the neighbourhood's Facebook group.**
 - **Unrealistic optimism.** The tendency to believe that negative things are more likely to happen to others than to us. Even after reading about the break-ins in Eastwick, a resident might think, "My car is old, nobody would steal it," thereby underestimating the risk.

- **Availability heuristic.** This bias occurs when we judge an event as more probable simply because we can recall it easily. In the scenario of the car break-ins, even if official statistics indicated a year-on-year decline in such crimes, the recent flood of posts and photos on the neighbourhood Facebook group makes these events extremely "available" in residents' minds. As a result, the perception will be of a crime wave, because the memory of a shattered car window seen online yesterday is far more vivid and immediate than an abstract statistical report.
- **Confirmation bias.** This bias leads us to selectively favour information that supports our existing beliefs. A resident who is already convinced the Eastwick neighbourhood is "going downhill" will see the news of the car break-ins as definitive proof. They are likely to overlook a later post announcing that the culprits were arrested. Instead, they might interpret an unfamiliar car parked on their street as further evidence of danger ("they must be scouting for more cars to steal"), actively seeking out details that confirm their sense of insecurity whilst dismissing any that might challenge it.
- **Sense of control.** If we feel we have control over a situation, we tend to perceive it as less risky, even if the control is partial or illusory (as in the case of driving versus flying).
- **Trust in institutions.** The trusts we place in law enforcement, the government, health authorities, or other institutions responsible for security directly affects our perception of risk. If we trust them, we feel safer and are more likely to follow their recommendations; if trust is low, we may feel more exposed or sceptical of proposed security measures.

However, 'trust' is not a monolithic concept, but is composed of at least three distinct dimensions, which can sometimes conflict with one another:

1. **Trust in Competence:** Do we believe the institution (e.g., the police, the national disaster agency) has the technical skills and resources to manage a risk?
2. **Trust in Transparency:** Do we believe the institution communicates honestly and openly, even about its own limitations and failures?
3. **Trust in Intent (or Proximity):** Do we believe the institution is acting in our best interest and understands our specific, local problems?

Consider the scenario of a flood alert. A citizen might have high trust in the competence of the national Environment Agency (knowing they have advanced forecasting tools), but low trust in the intent of their local council ("they have never cared about our neighbourhood; they won't do anything to protect us"). They might also have low trust in transparency ("they'll only tell us the truth at the last minute to avoid panic"). In this situation, despite the high perceived competence, the lack of trust in the other two dimensions will lead the citizen to ignore official recommendations and rely instead on word-of-mouth or personal initiatives, potentially leading to a chaotic and ineffective response. Understanding which dimension of trust is lacking is therefore crucial for any institutional intervention.

Understanding these factors allows us not only to recognise the origins of our risk perception but also to develop a more balanced and informed view, which is essential for safer decisions and behaviours.

3 THE PERCEPTION OF SECURITY FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

A fundamental factor that influences the predisposition to feeling secure is gender. Women and men relate differently to people and their surrounding environment, and this has a direct impact on their perception of security. Classic studies in this field have highlighted how women's fear of crime shapes their use of space, creating distinct "social geographies of fear" that limit their daily freedoms (Pain, 1997).

Although not all women have the same perception of what is safe or unsafe (depending on factors such as their lived experiences, age, upbringing, etc.), they culturally tend to identify the home environment as the safest and public spaces as places perceived as more hostile and potentially dangerous. This view is often shaped by socialisation processes and cultural influences that manifest from childhood. This means that, particularly at night, in deserted areas, or when a stranger approaches or speaks to them, they may experience feelings of mistrust, anxiety, and fear.

Such fears, along with the self-protection measures women adopt to feel safer, limit their rights, their free enjoyment of public spaces, their mobility, and their social, personal, and professional lives. This phenomenon is part of a broader impact of the perception of disorder and decay which, as highlighted by Skogan (1986), can significantly alter the use and vitality of urban spaces.

However, it is crucial to highlight the potential discrepancy between this perception and statistical reality, which is supported by empirical data at the European level. According to the largest survey on violence against women conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), almost half of all women (45%) in the EU avoid certain places or situations for fear of being physically or sexually assaulted (FRA, 2014; confirmed by subsequent analyses). However, the same data reveals the paradox at the heart of gendered safety: for women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by any perpetrator, the perpetrator in 22% of cases was a current or former partner. Domestic violence remains one of the most widespread forms of assault, yet it is less perceived as an imminent risk compared to an attack by a stranger in a public space. Integrating this data does not invalidate the fear of public spaces, but rather reveals its complex psychological and cultural nature, underscoring the importance of addressing safety both inside and outside the home.

Beyond these classic studies, contemporary research also focuses on proactive strategies. More recent scholarship (e.g., Ceccato, 2021) analyses how urban planning and new technologies—from 'smart' lighting to personal safety apps—not only influence the perception of risk but also shape women's everyday strategies for managing fear and reclaiming public space.

To understand this paradox in practice, consider the case of someone like Mary, a 30-year-old woman walking home from work each evening. To avoid a poorly lit park, she chooses to add 10 minutes to her journey by walking along a busier main road. Her perception of risk leads her to identify a stranger in the dark park as the greatest threat to her safety.

However, statistical trends often show that a significant percentage of physical assaults against women occurs within the home, perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner. This paradox is at the heart of the gender perspective on risk: Mary's fear is focused on a public and unknown danger, whilst the higher statistical risk often lies in the very environment perceived as the safest—the home.

This discrepancy, illustrated by Mary's case, brings to light a contradiction between objective and perceived risk, reinforcing the importance of an informed awareness that overcomes cultural constructs and stereotypes.

To correctly analyse a situation involving an outbreak of insecurity, it is therefore essential to consider this different perception of security and to include a gender perspective in the questions we ask ourselves. This perspective must also inform the chosen research methodologies, the definition of policies, and the adoption of prevention and protection measures related to personal autonomy and the use of spaces.

4 SIGNAL CRIMES

When dealing with subjective security, it is crucial to consider that not all crimes or incidents have the same effect on citizens' perception of safety. Some events, while not always the most serious in terms of direct harm, are significantly more likely to influence the general population's sense of security. These phenomena were defined by the English criminologist Martin Innes as “Signal Crimes” (Innes, 2004). This concept builds upon the broader and highly influential “Broken Windows Theory” (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), which first argued that visible signs of disorder and decay, if left unaddressed, signal a lack of social control and can lead to an increase in both crime and fear.

Signal Crimes are not necessarily the most frequent crimes or those with the most devastating material consequences, but they are events that, due to their nature or the context in which they occur, send a powerful and often negative message to the community. They generally refer to behaviours that manifest a level of physical and moral decay, suggesting a breakdown of the social fabric and the inability or inattention of institutions to prevent them.

4.1 Characteristics and Examples of Signal Crimes

- **Violations of public order and decorum.** Common examples include public drug dealing and consumption, prostitution, and urinating in public. These behaviours, although sometimes classified as "incivilities" or administrative violations rather than serious crimes, openly violate social norms and can generate a strong sense of unease and a perception of insecurity.
- **Vandalism and decay of public spaces.** Vandalism against public structures, offensive graffiti, the accumulation of rubbish in public places, or poor maintenance of lighting and infrastructure are tangible signs of neglect. The presence of neglected spaces causes distress and demonstrates a presumed inertia on the part of institutions, making people reluctant to use them and perceiving them as unsafe. This leads to a vicious circle in which disuse increases the perception of insecurity, and vice versa.
- **Controversial or unfamiliar activities.** The presence of "different" or unknown people in an area can, for some, also act as a signal of insecurity, especially if this presence is associated with behaviours perceived as disorderly or threatening.
- **Specific incidents with a strong emotional impact.** Although not explicitly cited as "signal crimes" in the strict sense by Innes, events such as the occupation of empty flats for drug trafficking can take on the value of powerful "signals" that trigger outbreaks of perceived insecurity, even if the objective crime rate in that area is not the highest in the city.

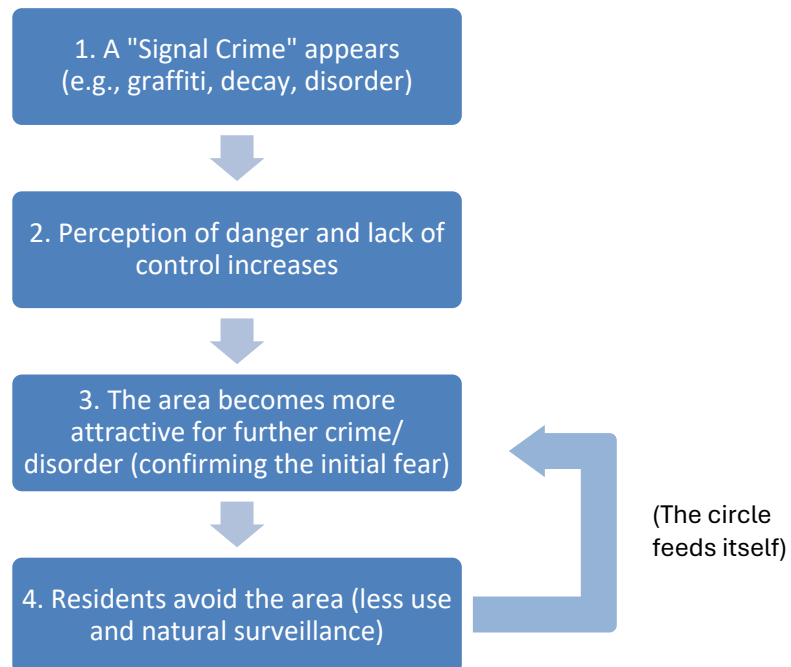
4.2 The Impact on Perception

The impact of a Signal Crime is not instantaneous but develops as a chain reaction that erodes a community's trust. Let us imagine a single event Eastwick: offensive graffiti appears on a shop wall on a quiet street.

- **The Signal:** Initially, the graffiti is just an act of vandalism. But if not removed quickly, it becomes a signal of neglect and a lack of control.

- **The Initial Reaction (Avoidance):** Residents, especially the elderly and families, begin to perceive that section of the street as "run-down" and potentially less safe. They might cross the road to avoid it or not walk there at night.
- **The Economic Impact:** A nearby café, which relied on evening customers, notices a drop in customers. The reduced footfall makes the street even quieter and more deserted.
- **The Crystallisation of Fear:** The space, now less frequented, becomes objectively more attractive for illicit activities, confirming the residents' initial fears. This is the vicious circle in action: a single piece of uncleaned graffiti has helped to alter behaviours, the local economy, and ultimately, the real and perceived level of safety of the entire street.

Figure 2 - The Vicious Circle of Signal Crimes



This is why responses to these phenomena must be rapid and targeted, as their impact on subjective security is immediate and significant.

5 RISK PERCEPTION IN DAILY LIFE: PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Having explored the fundamental concepts, let us now look at how risk perception manifests itself in our everyday lives. The following examples will help you recognise how the dynamics we have described influence our choices and behaviours, often without us even realising it.

5.1 Urban security: between facts and feelings

Urban security: Consider the case of the "Eastwick" neighbourhood. Official police statistics for 2024 show a 15% decrease in residential burglaries compared to the previous year. However, over the same period, posts on local social media groups about "suspicious activity" and alleged attempted break-ins have risen by 50%. This discrepancy between the objective data (fewer burglaries) and the social narrative (more alarm) has a direct impact on public feeling. A local survey reveals that 60% of residents now perceive security as "worse" than before and have changed their daily routines as a result. Instead of trusting the official data, residents are reacting to the availability heuristic (the social media posts are more immediate) and the "signal crimes" of a vandalised public bench or a poorly lit alleyway. This leads to tangible consequences: the residents' association demands more police patrols, overlooking the actual drop in crime, while families restrict their children's evening activities, negatively affecting the community's social life. Conversely, an excessive familiarity with an environment, or a lack of information about real risks, could lead us to underestimate the need to lock the door or pay attention to unusual situations.

5.2 Cybersecurity: the invisible digital danger

In the digital world, the perception of risk is even more complex because threats are often **invisible and abstract**. We do not "see" a computer virus or a phishing scam in the same way we see a pickpocket. This invisibility leads to a systematic underestimation of the danger, often exploited through sophisticated psychological manipulation. Let us take a common example: a **phishing email**. This is not simply a "suspicious link"; it is a carefully engineered psychological attack. Research on the 'human factors' in cybersecurity (e.g., Sasse et al., 2021) confirms that the most significant weak point is almost never the technology itself, but human psychology, which is exploited to manipulate behaviour and induce errors.

The Scenario: You receive an email that appears to be from your bank or a courier service. The logo is perfect; the language is professional. The text warns you that "an unusual sign-in has been detected" or that "a parcel is awaiting delivery" and invites you to click a link to "verify your details" or "schedule the delivery."

The Psychology Behind the Attack:

- **Urgency and Fear:** The email is designed to bypass your critical thinking by inducing a strong emotion. Phrases like "your account will be suspended within 24 hours" create a sense of urgency that pushes you to act impulsively.
- **Trust and Authority:** The use of a familiar logo (your bank's) exploits your pre-existing trust, lowering your defences against the threat.

- **Curiosity and Desire:** The notification of a "parcel awaiting delivery" preys on your curiosity or anticipation of a purchase, compelling you to click without thinking.

The discrepancy between perception and reality is enormous. Your perception is that you are performing a trivial, low-risk action ("I'm just clicking a link"). The reality is that you are handing your credentials to criminals, with potentially devastating consequences like identity theft or significant financial loss. **The danger is not in the link itself, but in the attacker's ability to manipulate your perception of reality.** This illustrates how the perception that the "online world" is less dangerous than the physical world exposes us to significant vulnerabilities.

5.3 Road safety: the illusion of control

The road is an environment where **risk perception** is constantly put to the test. Many drivers tend to feel safe because they believe they have "control" of the vehicle, even when they engage in risky behaviours. Common examples include:

- **Driving above the speed limit** because one perceives their own ability as superior to the risk ("I'm a good driver; I can handle it").
- **Using a mobile phone while driving**, underestimating the resulting distraction and the exponential increase in the risk of an accident.
- **Not wearing a seatbelt** for short journeys or on familiar roads, perceiving the risk of an accident as remote in those specific conditions.

This sense of control, often illusory, can lead to a dangerous underestimation of the objective risks associated with driving.

5.4 Emergencies and natural disasters: reacting to the unexpected

In the face of rare but potentially devastating events such as earthquakes, floods, or fires, **risk perception** directly influences people's preparation and reaction. If one has never experienced such an event, or if collective memory fades, the risk is often perceived as very low, leading to:

- **Not preparing an emergency kit** or a family evacuation plan.
- **Ignoring weather warnings** or official recommendations.
- **Underestimating the importance** of civil protection drills.

Only after a traumatic event does risk perception sharpen dramatically, but it is essential to promote preventive awareness.

5.5 Public health: the fight against the invisible and the widespread

Even in the healthcare field, risk perception is crucial. Consider pandemics, vaccinations, or disease prevention.

- **Pandemics.** During an epidemic, the perceived risk of infection can vary enormously. Some may develop excessive anxiety, while others may severely underestimate the threat, refusing preventive measures like masks or social distancing because they do not perceive the virus as a real danger to themselves ("it only affects the elderly," "I have a strong immune system").

- **Vaccinations.** The decision to get vaccinated is strongly influenced by the perception of the disease's risk compared to the perceived (and often exaggerated) risk of the vaccine. If the disease is no longer widespread, or its real consequences are unknown, the perceived risk of the disease decreases, and that of the vaccine may seem disproportionate.
- **Lifestyles.** The risk associated with sedentary lifestyles, smoking, or poor diet is often underestimated because the consequences are long-term and not immediate, triggering unrealistic optimism ("it won't happen to me," "there's time to change").

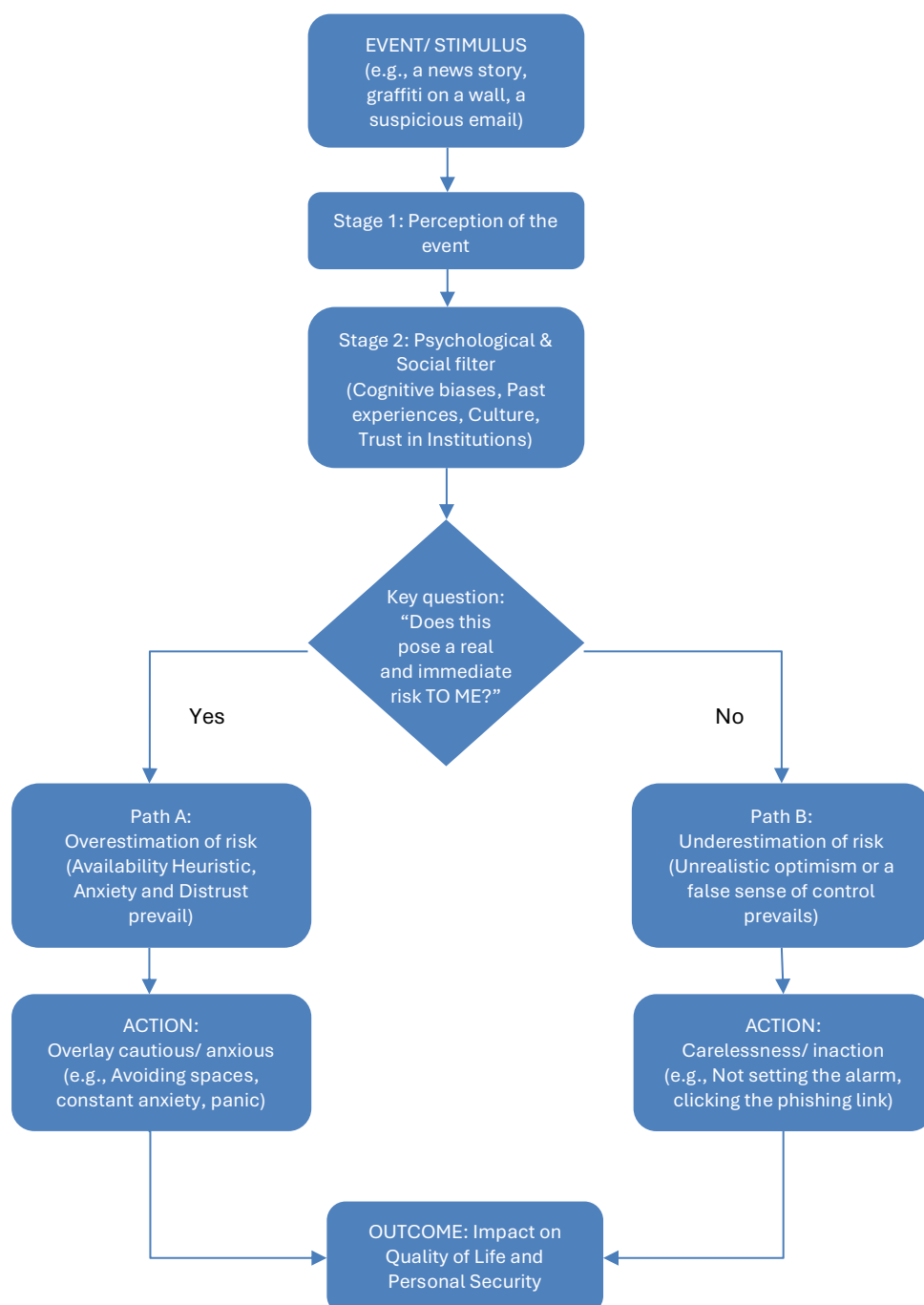
The analysis of these everyday scenarios unequivocally reveals the pervasiveness and fallibility of our risk perception. We have seen how visible and tangible dangers, such as urban decay, can generate disproportionate alarm, while abstract and invisible threats—be it a computer virus or the long-term consequences of a particular lifestyle—are systematically underestimated. The illusion of control makes us feel erroneously safe on the road, while unrealistic optimism convinces us we are immune to the dangers that threaten others. This constant discrepancy between perceived and actual risk is not a simple miscalculation, but a psychological mechanism with profound implications. The resulting decisions, ranging from excessive caution to recklessness, have a direct impact on our lives, as will be explored in the following chapter.

6 CONSEQUENCES OF AN ALTERED PERCEPTION OF RISK

Understanding how risk perception works is crucial, but it is even more important to analyse the **consequences** that a perception not aligned with reality can have. Whether it is an underestimation or an excessive amplification of danger, the effects impact both the lives of individual citizens and the effectiveness of the security policies and actions of institutions.

6.1 For citizens: from worry to inaction

Figure 3 - Altered perception of risk



When our perception of risk is distorted, the resulting behaviours can be problematic and compromise our safety and well-being.

- **Excessive anxiety or underestimation of danger.** An exaggerated perception of risk can lead to a sense of constant anxiety, irrational fear, and a negative impact on quality of life. People might feel trapped, avoid social situations, or develop a generalised mistrust. Conversely, an underestimation of danger creates a false sense of security, leading people to ignore precautions and expose themselves to unnecessary risks. Consider someone who doesn't bother to update their computer's software, leaving it vulnerable to cyber-attacks.
- **Risky or excessively cautious behaviours.** A distorted perception can lead to poor decisions. Those who underestimate a danger might adopt reckless behaviours, such as riding a motorbike without a helmet or ignoring hygiene rules during an epidemic. Those who overestimate it, on the other hand, might become overly cautious, unnecessarily limiting their freedoms or forgoing opportunities for fear of unlikely events.
- **Lack of prevention.** If we do not perceive a risk as real or imminent, we are unlikely to take the necessary preventive measures. This applies to home security (not setting the alarm), health (not having regular check-ups), or digital security (not backing up important data). Effective prevention stems from an awareness of risk.
- **Impact on Quality of Life and Community Well-being.** An excessive perception of danger can generate stress, social isolation, and a decrease in general well-being, preventing people from fully living their daily lives. A striking example is the significant disuse of public spaces by children and the elderly in areas perceived as unsafe, a phenomenon well-documented in studies on the fear of crime (Skogan, 1986).

This impact has measurable social and economic costs. Take the case of a town square that is perceived as unsafe due to antisocial behaviour in the evenings.

- **Social Cost:** A neighbourhood survey might reveal that 70% of elderly residents have stopped visiting the square after 6 p.m., increasing their isolation. Families with children might avoid it at weekends, reducing opportunities for socialising and play.
- **Economic Cost:** The café and ice cream parlour facing the square could see a 30% drop in their evening turnover, putting jobs at risk. The property value of flats overlooking the square could decrease by 5-10% due to its poor reputation.

In this way, a 'perception' translates into concrete, quantifiable harm to the community's well-being and economy.

It thus becomes clear how a risk perception misaligned with reality becomes a tangible obstacle to a citizen's well-being. On the one hand, a disproportionate fear can trap people in a state of constant anxiety, leading them to avoid social situations and forgo spaces and activities, with a direct and negative impact on their quality of life. On the other hand, an illusory sense of invulnerability leads them to ignore the most basic preventive measures, exposing themselves to tangible and easily avoidable risks. Both extremes—the paralysis stemming from worry and the recklessness stemming from inaction—undermine individual security in different but equally significant ways.

6.2 For law enforcement and policymakers: obstacles to collective security

For those who deal with security professionally, a distorted public perception of risk can create significant difficulties in their work and in the implementation of effective strategies.

- **Difficulty in risk communication.** If citizens perceive a risk very differently from how authorities describe it, communication becomes ineffective. Public announcements about a decrease in crime might be met with scepticism if the common perception is of an increase, and conversely, warnings about real dangers might be ignored. A lack of information generates uncertainty, and the absence of public actors perceived as guarantors of the public interest accentuates feelings of insecurity.
- **Ineffectiveness of prevention campaigns.** Information campaigns based solely on objective data, without considering the psychology of perception, can fail. This can lead to a significant waste of public funds. Consider a municipal campaign to promote cycling, based on data showing the safety of new cycle lanes. If citizens still perceive the roads as dangerous due to a few highly publicised accidents (the availability heuristic), the campaign will be ineffective. An investment of €50,000 in posters and adverts that quote safety statistics will not change behaviours, because it fails to address the emotional root of the fear. Consequently, resources are wasted, the sustainable mobility target is not met, and worse, a credibility gap is created: citizens will feel that the administration "doesn't understand the real problems," undermining trust in future initiatives.
- **Unexpected or exaggerated public reactions.** An inflated perception of risk can lead to excessive demands for repressive interventions or to unjustified panic reactions. This can divert valuable resources to less urgent problems or generate mistrust if expectations are not met. Conversely, underestimation can lead to indifference and a lack of support for necessary measures.
- **Difficulty in implementing new security policies.** The introduction of new laws, regulations, or security measures (such as the installation of surveillance cameras or traffic restrictions) may face resistance if the public does not perceive their urgency or necessity, based on their own distorted view of the risk. This makes it more complex to obtain social consensus and adherence to new rules.

An altered perception of risk is not a simple mental "error"; it is a factor that can seriously undermine both individual security and the effectiveness of collective strategies to protect the community.

7 STRATEGIES FOR A MORE INFORMED PERCEPTION AND SAFER BEHAVIOURS

It is important to stress that the following perception-based strategies achieve maximum effectiveness when they rest upon a solid foundation of objective security, guaranteed by appropriate law enforcement action and structural investment. The goal is not to replace traditional security measures, but to integrate them with an approach that accounts for the human dimension. The aim is to create a virtuous circle where real interventions in objective security improve perception, and a more accurate perception, in turn, supports and legitimises those interventions.

After understanding the importance of risk perception and the consequences of its distortion, it is time to explore **practical strategies** to promote a more informed view of dangers and encourage proactive and safe behaviours. This section offers concrete suggestions, differentiated for citizens and for institutional and associational actors.

7.1 For citizens: developing a critical and proactive mind

The first step towards greater security starts with each of us. Being aware does not mean living in fear but acquiring the tools to better assess reality and act accordingly.

Developing Risk Literacy and Critical Thinking

- **Learn to read the world.** It is essential to develop the ability to read and interpret information about risk critically. This includes:
 - **Verifying sources.** Always ask yourself who published the news, what their credentials are, and if there are any underlying interests. Rely on authoritative and recognised sources (e.g., institutional websites, verified press organisations, industry experts).
 - **Distinguishing between opinion and fact.** A news story may report an opinion, but that is different from a verifiable fact. Learn to recognise the difference.
 - **Understanding data.** Do not be frightened or misled by numbers. Try to understand the context, the proportions (e.g., "X events per Y people"), and whether the data is up-to-date and complete. A 100% increase in thefts from 1 to 2 is not the same as an increase from 1,000 to 2,000.
 - **Avoid sensationalism.** The media often amplifies rare and dramatic events. Maintain a balanced approach and try to understand the real risk behind the emotional narrative.
- **Do not take anything at face value.** Do not passively accept all the information you receive, regardless of its source, especially that which generates alarm or seems "too good to be true."
- **Ask yourself questions.** "Is this logical?", "Are there other explanations?", "What is the evidence?". This will help you unmask fake news and resist emotional manipulation.

Recognising Your Own Biases

- **Know yourself.** Be aware of your own "mental shortcuts" (cognitive biases) that can distort risk perception.

- **Ask yourself:** "Am I underestimating this risk because I feel invincible (unrealistic optimism)?", "Am I giving too much weight to this news because I've heard it a lot recently (availability heuristic)?" . Being aware of these mechanisms is the first step to correcting them.

The Importance of Prevention

- **Prevention is better than cure.** Once you understand the risk, act on it. Adopt proactive behaviours that reduce your exposure to dangers, even when you do not perceive them as imminent. This includes simple actions like locking the door, not clicking on suspicious links, maintaining your car, or following health recommendations. Prevention is the most effective form of security. It is an active process of empowerment and 'help for self-help', where individuals are encouraged to take responsibility not only for their own safety but for those around them. A key example is the resumption of residents' usual activities that were abandoned due to feelings of insecurity.

Informed Trust

- **Build solid relationships with institutions.** Develop trust in law enforcement and institutions based on transparency and data, not on hearsay or prejudice. Seek dialogue, participate in public meetings, and inform yourself about their security efforts. Trust based on knowledge fosters collaboration and a sense of collective security. Social contact and interaction in public spaces reduce isolation and increase the perception of security.

Adopting a **critical and proactive mind** is, in short, the most significant investment we can make for our personal and collective security. It is not about living in a constant state of alert, but rather about improving our ability to evaluate information, recognise our own conditioning, and act preventively. This approach allows us to transform uncertainty into awareness and anxiety into constructive action, strengthening not only our individual protection but also the **trust and cohesion within our communities**, which are fundamental for a safer environment for everyone.

7.2 For law enforcement, policymakers, and associations: communicate, engage, train

The challenge of aligning public perception with objective data is a central theme in the science of risk communication (Fischhoff, 1995). Institutions and associations have a fundamental role in shaping a healthy perception of risk and promoting safe behaviours.

Effective Risk Communication

- Speaking the citizens' language and managing the flow of information.
 - **Clear and simple language.** Avoid technical jargon and complex statistics that can be confusing. Use metaphors, concrete examples, and direct language.
 - **Transparency and honesty.** Do not hide problems but contextualise them. Acknowledge the challenges and explain what is being done to address them. Transparency generates credibility and builds trust. A lack of transparency, or the perception of misinformation, is lethal to prevention efforts, as it breaks the fundamental trust required for community collaboration. Transparent, flexible, and direct communication from the government provides information that clarifies uncertainty and shows the presence and support of public authorities.

- **Adapting to the audience.** Messages must be calibrated according to the target audience. A message for young people about online risks will be different from one for the older generation, who may need specific support in navigating digital information, identifying fake news, and avoiding sophisticated scams.
- **Consistency and constancy.** Messages must be consistent over time and disseminated through different channels (media, social networks, public meetings) to reach a wide audience.
- **Active role of Government in communication.** The government must take an active, not just reactive, role in the communication process, especially in the face of "outbreaks of insecurity." This shifts the focus not only to the current situation but also to the future.
- **Managing current information flows.** The immediacy and virality of information dissemination, the difficulty in corroborating news (fake news), and the presence of multiple voices require a strategic approach.
- **Radar and monitoring systems.** Implement systems to detect unease that could lead to outbreaks of insecurity and mechanisms to monitor and redirect this unease.
- **Two-way communication channels.** In addition to one-way communication, it is crucial to establish instant messaging systems (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) and suggestion boxes to allow citizens to provide immediate information on security problems.
- **Bots for frequently asked questions.** Having a bot system available to answer the most frequent questions offers a sense of being heard and gathers data on citizens' concerns.

Community Engagement

- **Embracing a 'bottom-up' philosophy.** Citizen participation should be the starting point of security policy, not an afterthought. Instead of merely informing, institutions should actively involve citizens in security processes. This can be done through:
 - **Neighbourhood Watch programmes.** As promoted by EUNWA, these programmes create a network of collaboration between residents and law enforcement, increasing the perception of control and cohesion. The effectiveness of such programmes can be understood through the lens of 'Routine Activity Theory' (Cohen & Felson, 1979). By increasing informal surveillance and a sense of collective ownership, residents act as 'capable guardians,' a key element that, according to the theory, deters potential offenders by reducing the opportunity for crime.
 - **Public meetings and debates.** Create spaces where citizens can express concerns, ask questions, and receive direct answers.
 - **Training and workshops.** Organise courses or workshops on specific topics (e.g., self-defence, basic cybersecurity, first aid).
- **Facilitating inter-neighbourhood communication.** Encourage citizens to visit and carry out activities in neighbourhoods other than their own to defuse rumours about

insecurity and improve mutual trust. This strategy is grounded in a well-established principle of social psychology known as the 'Contact Hypothesis' (Allport, 1954). The theory posits that direct, positive contact between members of different groups, under the right conditions, can significantly reduce prejudice and stereotyping. In the context of urban security, this means creating structured opportunities for residents of different neighbourhoods, especially those separated by rumour or mutual distrust, to interact in cooperative settings. Effective initiatives often include the co-organisation of events such as community markets, youth sports tournaments, cultural festivals, or shared gardening projects. Such activities foster direct, informal interaction, which helps to dismantle negative narratives based on hearsay and replace them with positive, personal experiences. The result is a strengthening of social cohesion and a tangible reduction in mutual fear and suspicion.

Psychology-Based Awareness Campaigns

- **Messages that work.** Campaigns must not only inform but also persuade, using psychological principles.
 - **Appeal to emotions, but with responsibility.** Emotions can capture attention, but it is essential that the message is then anchored in data and concrete solutions, avoiding panic.
 - **Focus on the benefits of prevention.** Emphasise the advantages of safe behaviour (e.g., "sleep peacefully," "protect your savings," "save a life") rather than just the negative consequences of the risk.
 - **Use authentic testimonials.** Stories of people who have acted proactively or benefited from prevention can be very effective.

Training for Practitioners

- **Understanding the human mind.** Law enforcement officers and security practitioners should receive specific training on the psychology of risk perception. This would help them to:
 - Understand public reactions and manage them with empathy.
 - Communicate more effectively during crisis situations.
 - Build greater trust with the community. The presence of community police officers, for example, increases subjective security and public trust in law enforcement.

Evidence-Based Policies

- **Informed decisions.** As comparative research on crime prevention shows, the most effective strategies are those that integrate different approaches, from law enforcement action to urban planning and community engagement (Crawford, 2009). Policymakers should base their decisions on objective data and scientific analysis, rather than being guided solely by public perception or emotional pressures. This does not mean ignoring citizens' concerns but balancing them with evidence to create policies that are truly effective and proportionate to the real risk. It is important to address the deterioration of public spaces, as they generate unease and are perceived as unsafe. The presence of public authorities providing services in an area helps citizens feel supported and protected.
- **Urban reforms.** The principles behind removing spaces with limited visibility and designing areas that facilitate coexistence are rooted in Oscar Newman's (1972) 'Defensible Space Theory'. This theory argues that urban design can empower residents to take ownership of their surroundings, naturally increasing surveillance and deterring crime, thereby enhancing both real and perceived security.

By adopting these strategic approaches, law enforcement, policymakers, and associations can not only enhance the effectiveness of security measures but also strengthen community trust and promote a more informed and realistic perception of risk. Active collaboration and targeted communication are the key to transforming the challenges related to perceived insecurity into opportunities for building more resilient and participatory urban environments.

8 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES FOR INVESTIGATING PERCEIVED SECURITY

For those involved in security at an institutional or associational level, a thorough understanding of the roots and manifestations of the perception of insecurity is fundamental for developing effective responses. Research in this field, such as that conducted within the European project **Cutting Crime Impact (CCI)**, uses various methodologies that allow us to go beyond objective crime data to capture the complexity of human emotions and behaviours. The CCI project itself produced specific reports on how to integrate the analysis of feelings of insecurity into traditional security audits, providing a clear framework for practitioners (Davey et al., 2020). This chapter is inspired by the methodological approaches promoted by this project (such as focus groups, interviews, and "exploratory walks") and applied by partners like the Department of the Interior of the Generalitat de Catalunya, which has developed specific tools based on these techniques.

Here are some useful methodological approaches for investigating feelings of insecurity:

- **Process Mapping.** This technique allows for the visual tracking of key activity sequences, the roles of people involved, decision-making processes, and turning points in an operation or initiative. It is an effective tool for deciphering "how" security-related dynamics unfold, such as information flows or responses to critical situations. It helps identify inefficiencies or points of friction in the management of perceived security. This tool would be ideal for answering questions such as: *What were the exact steps taken by law enforcement and the local council in response to the rise in social media posts about car thefts in Eastwick, and where were the bottlenecks in the communication flow?*
- **Stakeholder Mapping.** This method aims to identify and visualise the individual roles, interactions, relationships, and needs of all actors involved in each system, both central and peripheral. It offers a complete view of the human ecosystem, overcoming limited individual perception. It is useful in the early stages of requirements gathering to explore who is involved, what their interests are, and what influence they exert. This method is perfect for exploring questions like: *Beyond the residents and the police, who are all the actors involved in the perceived insecurity of the Eastwick town square (e.g., business owners, youth groups, urban planners), and what are their conflicting interests?*
- **Focus Groups.** This involves bringing together a small group of stakeholders to discuss and explore their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding a problem, service, or idea. This approach allows for obtaining more detailed information on people's feelings and perspectives. It is advisable to include individuals from under-represented groups to promote a rich and useful discussion. This approach is particularly useful for investigating issues such as: *What are the shared beliefs and underlying fears among parents in Eastwick regarding their children's safety in local parks after school hours?*
- **Insta-ethnography.** This is a rapid method for developing a direct understanding of the circumstances, environments, motivations, and meanings related to the activities and experiences of stakeholders. It helps build trust with stakeholders and gain a better understanding of the issues at hand. It involves observing the context, activities, and interactions of stakeholders in their work roles. This would help answer questions like: *How do teenagers actually use the "unsafe" areas of Eastwick in the evenings, and what are their real activities and social norms, beyond the perception of adults?*

- **Interviews.** This consists of collecting information through a direct dialogue with an individual, guided by a defined set of questions. It is particularly useful when one wants to obtain an in-depth perspective or an individual's insight on issues relevant to the problem under consideration. In the context of subjective security, it is useful to distinguish perception from actual victimisation, for example, by asking the person to describe the last time they were the victim of an attack if they refer to frequent assaults in the area. This is essential for in-depth understanding of questions like: *What is the full personal story behind Klaus's fear? Which specific past experiences have shaped his current perception of security?*
- **Observation.** This field research approach adopts the discreet perspective of a passive observer. Careful and non-intrusive observations can provide valuable insights into social situations and activities. People, when left at ease, may exhibit behaviours they are not aware of or would not be able to verbalise. It is useful in situations where one does not wish to interrupt the flow of the observed activities. This method could provide insights into questions such as: *How do pedestrians' non-verbal behaviours (walking speed, phone use, route choices) physically change as they approach the street corner with the uncleaned graffiti in Eastwick?*
- **Immersion.** This method allows for building empathy through direct experience. It involves immersing oneself in another person's reality with the aim of seeing and feeling a situation from their perspective. It is particularly useful when one wants to gain a deep understanding of a specific aspect of a stakeholder's experience through direct experience, rather than just through observation or other methods. This is invaluable for exploring questions like: *What does it actually feel like to walk Mary's route home from work at night? What are the specific sensory experiences (light, sound, shadows) that contribute to her feeling of insecurity?*
- **Journaling.** This is a method for understanding the experiences of stakeholders (users) from their own point of view. Selected individuals are asked to record their personal experience of a process, activity, or journey, using diaries, photos, videos, or audio recordings. The recorded material is then shared with the researcher. This tool is suited to answering questions like: *How does an Eastwick resident's feeling of security fluctuate over a single week, based on the local news they read, the people they talk to, and the situations they encounter?*
- **Exploratory Walks.** These consist of a walk through an area already identified as unsafe, accompanied by people who regularly frequent the area. The objective is for participants to identify the elements, places, and moments that generate feelings of insecurity. This approach has historically been used to understand women's perception of security and allows for specifying the exact causes of feelings of insecurity. This method is ideal for answering questions such as: *Which specific physical elements (poor lighting, blind spots, abandoned storefronts) do residents like Mary and Klaus identify as the primary sources of their fear during a guided walk through Eastwick's park and main square?*

The application of these methodologies allows for the collection of qualitative data and in-depth perspectives, which are essential for a holistic understanding of perceived security. They enable us to go beyond the numbers, revealing the emotional, social, and behavioural nuances that influence a community's sense of security. Integrating these tools into the practice of analysis and intervention is a fundamental step towards developing security strategies that are more effective, targeted, and truly responsive to the needs and perceptions of citizens.

9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We have journeyed through the complex mechanisms of **risk perception** and the **psychology of security**, exploring how these profoundly influence our daily lives and security policies. It has become clear that the way we perceive a danger is often more decisive than the real danger itself, shaping our behaviours, our actions, and our interaction with the community.

We have examined how "**outbreaks of insecurity**" can arise quickly, not always in direct correlation with an increase in objective crime, but fuelled by psychological, social, and media factors. We have also highlighted the relevance of concepts such as "**signal crimes**" which, although not always serious in themselves, can drastically alter the perception of security due to their impact on the sense of order and decorum.

In summary, we have learned that:

- **Risk perception** is a subjective filter, often influenced by emotions, personal experiences, and mediated information, which does not always coincide with objective, data-based risk.
- The **psychology of security** helps us understand why we act in certain ways when faced with dangers, exploring the role of trust, cognitive biases (like unrealistic optimism and the availability heuristic), and our habits.
- The **gender perspective** is crucial, as women and men perceive and experience spaces and risks differently, with women often limiting their freedoms due to fears related not only to crime but also to non-criminal behaviours.
- A **distorted perception** of risk can lead to negative consequences for both **citizens** (anxiety, reckless or overly cautious behaviours, poor prevention, disuse of public spaces) and **institutions** (communication difficulties, ineffectiveness of campaigns, resistance to policies).
- It is possible to cultivate a **more informed perception of risk** through risk literacy, the development of critical thinking, and awareness of one's own biases.

As **EUNWA**, we firmly believe that **participatory security** and an **informed citizenry** are the pillars of a stronger, more resilient community. Our mission is to promote collaboration between citizens and law enforcement, and this research underscores how crucial correct information and a realistic perception of risks are for building such collaboration. This is not about eliminating fear but about transforming it into awareness and proactive action. We want every citizen to feel not only protected but also able to contribute actively to their own security and that of their community. It is essential that institutions do not limit themselves to a passive-reactive role but take an active part in communicating and managing the perception of security.

9.1 Strategic Directions for Informed Security

To build a future in which security is not only guaranteed but also perceived in a more informed way that is aligned with reality, it is essential that all actors involved continue to invest and collaborate. EUNWA, in its mission to promote participatory security, identifies several strategic areas for intervention and development, acknowledging the significant progress already made in many European contexts and the constant commitment of law enforcement and policymakers.

The directions we consider crucial for a positive impact on the perception of security include:

1. **Enhancing risk literacy and critical thinking.** Continue to educate citizens, starting from the younger generations and through targeted public campaigns, so they acquire the tools to interpret data, evaluate sources, and distinguish between facts and opinions. A priority objective is to help the public discern objective risk from perceived risk, providing skills for a more critical analysis of information. This process is already underway in many places and strengthening it is a shared priority.
2. **Establishing strategic and transparent communication.** *The discrepancy between the official crime data in Eastwick and the residents' perception* underscores the need for institutions to adopt proactive, transparent, empathetic, and psychology-based communication approaches, using simple and direct language. The implementation of two-way communication systems, allowing citizens to report immediate concerns, is essential for building trust and mitigating feelings of insecurity. Many countries have already made great strides in this direction.
3. **Integrating a gender perspective into security strategies.** A sustained commitment is necessary to recognise and address the specific perceptions and fears related to women's security. This involves designing public measures and spaces that promote their freedom of movement and safe use, considering the discrepancies between perception and the objective reality of risks.
4. **Managing "Signal Crimes" with targeted and communicated interventions.** *As the chain reaction triggered by a single piece of graffiti in Eastwick demonstrates,* it is crucial to continue intervening quickly and visibly on behaviours that denote decay or disorder (such as public drug dealing, vandalism, or deteriorating spaces). These interventions, when effectively communicated to the public, help restore a sense of order and decorum.
5. **Reinvigorating dialogue and community engagement.** It is vital to create and support opportunities for discussion between citizens, law enforcement, and policymakers. Promoting Neighbourhood Watch programmes and initiatives that facilitate contact and understanding between different groups and neighbourhoods, can significantly reduce mistrust and promote social cohesion. *The tensions that emerged in Eastwick between the social media narrative and official data demonstrate how vital it is to create spaces for dialogue.*
6. **Supporting the training of security practitioners on the psychology of perception.** The importance of providing officers and professionals in the sector with the tools to understand and manage the psychological dynamics of risk perception is increasingly recognised. A community policing approach, already adopted in many best practices across Europe, which increases subjective security through empathy and understanding of citizens' fears, is fundamental.
7. **Encouraging decisions based on evidence and in-depth analysis.** Policymakers are called upon to balance perceived concerns with objective data and advanced qualitative research methodologies (such as mapping, focus groups, exploratory walks). This approach ensures the implementation of security policies that are truly effective, proportionate to the real risk, and accepted by the community.
8. **Continuously improving the quality of public spaces.** Timely intervention on the deterioration of spaces is crucial. Ensuring cleanliness, good lighting, and the absence of "blind spots" or architectural barriers are elements that directly and positively influence citizens' sense of security. These efforts, already part of many urban agendas, require continuity and coordination.

Only through a joint effort, based on knowledge, effective communication, and active collaboration between citizens and institutions, can we navigate the complexity of current and future threats, transforming the perception of risk from a potential obstacle into a driver of widespread and informed security for all.

Finally, it is worth remembering that a well-calibrated risk perception is not a weakness to be eliminated, but a fundamental human strength. An accurate awareness of real dangers is what drives preparedness, innovation, and community resilience. The ultimate goal is not a society free from risk, but a society equipped with the critical awareness to face risks intelligently, transforming fear into proactive and constructive action.

10 GLOSSARY

- **Availability Heuristic.** A cognitive bias that leads to judging the probability or frequency of an event based on how easily examples or information about that event come to mind. If an event is vividly present in our memory (e.g., due to a recent, widely discussed news story), we tend to perceive it as more probable.
- **Broken Windows Theory.** A theory formulated by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, which posits that visible signs of disorder and decay in an environment (such as an unrepaired broken window) signal a lack of social control and can encourage more serious crime and increase fear.
- **Cognitive Biases.** Patterns of thought or "mental shortcuts" that our brain uses to process information quickly. These patterns can, however, lead to systematic errors in perception, judgement, and decision-making, including risk assessment.
- **Contact Hypothesis.** A theory in social psychology, formulated by Gordon Allport, which holds that prejudice and hostility between different groups can be reduced through direct, interpersonal contact, provided it occurs under optimal conditions (equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support).
- **Defensible Space Theory.** A theory by the urban planner Oscar Newman, which argues that architectural and urban design can influence residents' behaviour. Spaces designed to increase a sense of territoriality, natural surveillance, and control by inhabitants can actively reduce opportunities for crime.
- **Indicators of Insecurity (Signal Crimes).** A term coined by criminologist Martin Innes to refer to events or behaviours that, regardless of their objective severity, have a strong impact on a community's perception of security. They act as "signals" of disorder, decay, or vulnerability, influencing citizens' sense of security and behaviours.
- **Lifecycle of Feelings of Insecurity.** A model describing the different stages through which an individual's perception of insecurity develops and solidifies. The stages include a baseline predisposition, assumed situational vulnerability, situational anxiety, fear in the face of a direct threat, and the post-event impact.
- **Objective Risk.** Risk based on statistical data, scientific evidence, and rigorous analysis of the probability of an event occurring. It represents the real danger of a situation, independent of individual perception.
- **Outbreaks of Unsafety.** Situations where a group of people (or their representatives) publicly declares that certain spaces or contexts are not safe for their daily activities. This leads to a change in their behaviours and often a request for intervention from the authorities. They do not always correspond to an objective increase in crime.
- **Participatory Security.** An approach to security that emphasises active collaboration between citizens, law enforcement, local authorities, and other organisations. The goal is to build a sense of shared responsibility and work together to identify and solve security problems.

- **Perceived Risk.** The subjective and often emotional assessment of how dangerous a situation is. It is influenced by personal experiences, received information, and cognitive biases, and does not always correspond to objective risk.
- **Psychology of Security.** The discipline that studies how psychological, emotional, and cognitive factors influence people's behaviours and reactions in relation to security, danger prevention, and threat management.
- **Risk Literacy.** The ability to understand, evaluate, and use risk-related information to make conscious and informed decisions in daily life. It implies the ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources and to interpret complex data.
- **Risk Perception.** The subjective way in which an individual evaluates the probability of a negative event occurring and the severity of its potential consequences. It is a process influenced by personal, social, and emotional factors, not always aligned with objective risk.
- **Routine Activity Theory.** A criminological theory by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson, which states that a crime occurs when three elements converge in time and space: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a "capable guardian" (e.g., police, but also ordinary citizens).
- **Socialisation.** The process through which individuals learn and internalise the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours of their culture and society. This process, which begins in childhood, can profoundly influence risk perception, including the gender perspective.

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Contacts

EUNWA- European Neighbourhood Watch Association

www.eunwa.eu

head-office@eunwa.eu

Via Terraglio 64, 30174 Venice, Italy, CF 90194770278