*Original Article*

# Security and Perceived Security in Terni: A Sociological Analysis

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**Abstract**

This article examines the gap between objective and subjective security in Terni (Umbria, Italy) in the light of the current debates on risk society, moral panics and the culture of fear. Using the methodology worked out by Niccolò Cusano University (2023-2025), mixing deep analysis of the available data, surveys, interviews and direct observation, it points out that, in spite of the declining of criminal activities after the recent pandemic period, the fear of crime remains high, though unevenly distributed.

Qualitative findings attribute the persistence of fear to: (1) environmental outbreaks of disorder; (2) their amplification by mass media and social media, which increases their perception; (3) low trust in institutions, which increseases the demand for visible police control; and (4) advanced marginality, which erodes social cohesion. Private video surveillance is widely accepted, but it helps increase concerns about security. The authors advocate a participatory model of security integrating municipal police, urban regeneration, youth engagement and the use of digital tools with safeguards against exclusion and vigilantism. Their recommendations include clear and objective reporting of crime data, media literacy initiatives, improved public lighting and intersectoral coordination between police activities, social services, housing and education. Terni's experience shows how aligning objective security with its perceived need requires interventions addressed to structural inequalities and institutional trust, which could offer good lessons to other medium-sized European cities undergoing post-industrial change.

*Keywords*: Terni, security, urban policies, sociological analysys, risk society.

## Introduction

The distinction between objective and subjective security has become an increasingly prominent focus within urban sociology, particularly as scholars recognize that crime

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statistics alone fail to capture the full complexity of how safety is experienced in urban environments. Objective security refers to quantifiable measures such as crime rates and police reports, whereas subjective security involves the perceptions, emotions and social meanings individuals and communities attach to their sense of safety. As Ulrich Beck (1986) argued in his theory of the *risk society*, modern life is increasingly organized around perceived rather than actual threats, leading to new forms of anxiety and insecurity that are socially produced rather than directly tied to material danger.

The city of Terni, in central Italy's Umbria region, offers a compelling empirical case for examining this phenomenon. According to findings from an academic study carried out by the University Cusano of Rome from 2023 to 2025, Terni has not witnessed a notable rise in crime and institutional interventions have remained consistent throughout the period. Yet, a considerable portion of residents report heightened fear and a diminished sense of public safety. As Stanley Cohen (1972) noted in his classic analysis of *moral panics*, public anxieties often become decoupled from statistical realities, shaped instead by media representations, political rhetoric and symbolic interpretations of risk.

This article adopts a sociological lens to explore the multidimensional nature of urban security in Terni, integrating quantitative data with an interpretive analysis of public sentiment and institutional narratives. As Barry Glassner (1999) pointed out, modern societies frequently construct exaggerated threats that obscure more statistically relevant dangers, thereby distorting public priorities and deepening social divisions. In line with this perspective, the persistence of fear in Terni is examined not merely as a psychological state but as a socially embedded condition influenced by spatial inequality, trust in institutions, community cohesion and other factors.

Drawing on these theoretical insights, the paper seeks to answer a central question: Why does fear persist even in the absence of increasing crime? By unpacking this question, it contributes to broader sociological debates about the disjuncture between perception and reality in urban settings, while offering practical insights into how local governance and public policy might address both the measurable and perceived dimensions of security.

## 1. Terni. Industrial heritage, urban transformation and social challenges

Terni is a city with a complex modern history, making it an interesting social laboratory and, owing to its specific characteristics, a consolidated and privileged object of numerous historical and socio-political studies, focused on labour, trade unionism and politics (Bonelli, 1975; Canali, 2004; Covino and Papuli, 1998; Saltalippi, 2022). The major works of Portelli (2017) and Giustinelli (2022) are indicative of such attention. The testimonies collected by Portelli are not only an extraordinary example of oral history, almost concerning the entire twentieth century, but also a valuable archive documenting the voices of generations of Terni residents. In the transition from a rural world to a post-industrial one, they experienced the fragmentation of the city's industrial dream and, along with it, the political and labour cultures tied to that dream.

Terni was one of the key players in the country's industrial development, to the point of being nicknamed the "Italian Manchester"—an expression that reflects both the strategic centrality attributed to it by the State and the pride of the local community in this supposed centrality, in spite of its objective peripherality, or even satelliteness, in respect with both the regional capital, Perugia, and the nearby national capital, Rome. The "city of steel", another of its nicknames, underlines the dual identity underlying both the

representation and self-representation of Terni on the official website of its municipal authority (Vivi Terni, 2023).

Despite the deindustrialisation process of recent decades, steel still exerts a major impact on the area: Acciai Speciali Terni produces 37% of Umbria's regional GDP and 67% of Terni's provincial GDP. The city's industrial development was accompanied by remarkable building expansion and the definition of specific settlement patterns (Giorgini, 1998). Over the decades, this was matched by careful urban planning: from the 1962 Public Housing Plans to innovative interventions in the 1970s, aimed at controlling the growth of new suburbs, managing industrial areas and regenerating historic centres and disused industrial zones (Muratore, 2015: 13). However, a "widespread cultural subordination to the logic of expansion reproduced the models of the construction boom years, which often allowed mediocrity to prevail, sweeping away many of the quality elements that were nonetheless widely present" (Tarquini, 2015). As Muratore rightly pointed out, Terni was a place of experimentation, "where a certain left-wing politics in government succeeded in leaving a recognisable mark on the physical face of the built city" through a comprehensive vision of the territory and its dynamics (Muratore, 2015: 15). Over time, the city has seen modifications, substitutions, adaptations and the regeneration of large portions of its territory, accompanying both its industrial growth and the difficult and contested process of deindustrialisation.

The city's deindustrialisation was particularly dramatic for its social effects in the decade 1981-1991, when Terni lost around 35% of jobs in the entire industrial sector (Patalocco, 2013). Post-industrial Terni is a city shaken by an unwanted and resisted transformation, which has yet to find a balance or a strong project on which to build its identity. Since the 1980s, there has been an interesting attempt to visually narrate this transformation and to combine the memory of an industrial history based on steel with the expectations of a post-industrial present, seeking to embrace the postmodern culture of adaptive reuse, urban beautification and tourism, through art and museums. A good example is the 1993 relocation, to the station square, of the massive 12,000-ton press used in one of the city's steelworks from 1935 to 1993. Other examples include large steel artworks dominating the squares opening onto the city's outer boulevards—almost transitional spaces between the urban core and the popular neighbourhoods due to industrial expansion—such as Arnaldo Pomodoro's "Lancia di Luce" obelisk (1985-1995) and Giuseppe Maraniello's "E-terni" sculpture, not to mention the CAOS (Centro Arti Opificio Siri), the cultural hub housing the Archaeological Museum and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, created from the former SIRI chemical factory and inaugurated in 2001.

While these interventions have made the urban space more interesting and demonstrated the city administration's post-industrial awareness, they have not succeeded in addressing the city's social fabric or the quality of life of its citizens, both heavily affected by deindustrialisation. The were some efforts to integrate the CAOS into the city's fabric, with cultural activities organised within the neighbourhood (Tarquini, 2015), but, as our interviews have brought to light, even two decades after its inauguration, the community still does not perceive it as an integral part of its experiential space.

Equally significant is the case of the Papigno industrial plants, which were founded in 1902 by SICCAG (Società Italiana per il Carburo di Calcio Acetilene e Altri Gas) and absorbed in 1922 by the Società degli Alti Forni, Fonderie e Acciaierie di Terni, which closed in 1973. Afterwards, in the late 1990s, they were acquired by the

Municipality of Terni to be transformed into a film production centre, where, among other things, Roberto Benigni shot scenes from his *Life is Beautiful* (1997), which received three Oscar awards in 1999, and *Pinocchio* (2002). Benigni invested in these studios, hoping they could become a kind of anti-Cinecittà (Giulivi, 2010), and some began to speak of a "Hollywood on the Nera". But this dream, merging industry and post-industrial imagery, lived a short life: after the commercial failure of *Pinocchio* (2002), Benigni sold the studios to Cinecittà, which eventually abandoned them.

Post-industrial Terni remains a complex reality, as numerous studies have shown. Cristofori (2009) explored the processes of re-signification linked to the new post-industrial dimension, in which workers—now part of a "global factory"—find themselves in a context that has moved beyond, or ignores, the class paradigm, though the factory continues to be a strong identity marker, where meaningful relationships take shape. Cristofori (2014) worked out an interesting comparison with Bilbao, another steel city that was heavily affected by deindustrialisation. Bilbao, thanks to an extensive process of urban renewal and regeneration centred on the opening of the Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, one of the most creative starchitects, and inaugurated in 1997, has managed to transform its image from a declining industrial city into one of the hubs of new European cultural (and youth) tourism. In contrast, Terni remains firmly anchored to its identity as a factory city, despite significant investment in culture, innovation and the knowledge-based economy. Since 1974, the University of Perugia has been present in Terni, with a Science and Teaching Hub opened in 1997. However, according to Portelli (2017: 304–305), the University remains a "separate space" that struggles to identify with the city, which seems reluctant to acknowledge this new reality.

Guercio (2020), in a study conducted for the University of Perugia, examined the social effects of deindustrialisation, analysing drug use in the Terni area and the relationship between security, fears and urban policies. Saltalippi (2022), in an ethnographic analysis starting from the city's last two major strikes (in 2004 and 2014), recounted the transformations of the local working-class culture and the difficulties in identifying new forms of struggle in the face of a profoundly changed scenario, including altered relationships between workers, trade unions and political representations. Saltalippi also analysed the effects of the pandemic on the city: the plant, which had continued to operate even during the bombings of World War II, was closed for the first time in March 2020, prompting fears among the workers that it might never reopen, owing to the effects of globalization. Striking appeared to be the only possible reaction.

Portelli (2023) narrated the recent endpoint of the city's long process of deindustrialisation, linking its cultural and identity disorientation to politics' inability to respond to the community's new fears. In this sense, Terni—a working-class city shifting from "red" to "black"—becomes a kind of privileged "laboratory" for understanding the cultural and political dynamics accompanying the rise of new populisms as a response to a crisis in a national context of social, political and cultural impoverishment. Portelli's interviews portrayed a fragile city, with an ageing population and young people navigating between anti-politics and post-politics in what he called a "cultural apocalypse", with widespread problems of violence and drug use (which the community perceives not as internal issues but as "manifestations of an alien threat"). The loss of a factory- and labour-based identity, according to him, turned into a kind of refusal, in which, for decades, local elites have sought to replace the memories of the turbulent twentieth-century with the purity and nobility of more ancient history and myth. Thus Tacitus (actually without connection with the city) and Saint Valentine became tools of a new

myth-making that conceals the lack of a genuine project to reactivate the city's identity and economy.

In this light, we can read the attempt to make Terni a tourist city. Its area, already appreciated at the time of the Grand Tour, is suitable for the development of an experiential kind of tourism based on nature and sport, easily integrable with the cultural tourism already present in the region and, particularly, in some nearby towns, such as Narni. For Portelli (2023), however, this ambition confirmed the inability of the city to conceive a "solid" future. More generally, in Italy tourism has been often considered an activity capable of compensating, in an almost magical way, for territorial weaknesses, ensuring well-being to many people, even if it often entails environmental degradation and changes in the social and cultural context, which could cause a deterioration in quality of life. Anyhow, tourism development could help reposition and re-centre the city, enabling it to overcome its double peripherality. It should be remarked, however, that—at least in its self-presentation for tourism purposes—the city does not deny its industrial past and even seeks to enhance it in terms of industrial archaeology (Vivi Terni, 2023).

Greco and Panico (2025) offer an interesting comparison between Terni and Taranto, the other Italian steel hub, which, like Terni, suffers a serious economic and social crisis. They underline that the environmental and health impacts of the industrial activities in Terni are largely overlooked by political and media narratives, which, in contrast, stress these problems in the case of Taranto. For these two authors, Terni—at least in terms of ecological transition—represents a remarkable model, for its ability to transform "from within" its economic structure. In the absence of a strong public player, it is the production system itself (led by Confindustria Umbria) that has managed to initiate a market-oriented transition toward sustainability, through an adaptation of the industrial system, in which sustainability operates as a lever of industrial competitiveness.

The picture outlined above might suggest a community in crisis. Recent data, however, offer a more complex picture (Sole 24 Ore, 2025, based on ISTAT 2022-2024 data). For the quality of life of children aged 0-14, Terni ranks 44th (behind several central Italian municipalities, with Perugia in 37th place). topFor the quality of life of young people, it is 36th (in a ranking where top 20 positions are almost exclusively occupied by northern cities and Perugia is in 26th place), although it ranks 54th for youth unemployment, 69th for perceived insecurity and 71st for youth entrepreneurship. For the quality of life of the elderly, however, it is 101st, near the bottom of the ranking, alongside a dozen southern cities, with a position of 105th for users of municipal social services and 107th for the average amount of old-age persons. This reflects a "median" quality of life, but—as our interviews have confirmed— with a series of critical issues affecting the most vulnerable groups and forming the basis of fears and insecurity.

## 2. Conceptual framework: actual security vs. perceived security

Within the field of urban sociology, the concept of security transcends the mere statistical absence of crime. It is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional and socially embedded condition, encompassing individuals' subjective feelings of safety, their trust in public institutions and their broader sense of well-being in urban contexts. The analytical distinction between *objective* and *subjective* security—often framed as the difference between *actual safety* and *perceived safety*—has become a cornerstone of critical debates concerning urban governance and public space (Beck, 1986; Glassner, 1999).

Objective security has some quantifiable indicators, such as crime rates, arrest figures and emergency service reports, which are grounded in empirical data, often used by public authorities to assess safety levels. Instead, subjective security refers to individuals' perceptions, beliefs and emotions related to exposure to potential harm. These perceptions are influenced not solely by personal experiences but also by collective imaginaries, cultural narratives, environmental cues and institutional interactions (Glassner, 1999). This distinction is vital, as subjective insecurity can persist even in the absence of actual threats and can shape behaviour and policy in significant ways.

Our recent research conducted in Terni foregrounds this conceptual divergence. The research asserts that "security is an inherently relational and social construct", shaped by dynamic interrelations between media representation, neighbourhood cohesion and the perceived legitimacy and efficiency of institutional actors. Importantly, it reveals that fear of crime often emerges not from direct experiences of victimization but from broader socio-symbolic processes, such as the visibility of disorder (e.g., graffiti and public loitering), socioeconomic precarity and urban decay. These elements function as *signals* that trigger heightened insecurity, particularly in marginalized areas.

Drawing on Emile Durkheim's (1894) notion of *social facts*, subjective security may be viewed as an external, coercive force that influences individual and collective conduct, regardless of whether the underlying perceptions are empirically accurate. Stanley Cohen's (1972) work on *moral panic* is particularly pertinent in this context. Cohen illustrates how media amplification and moralized political discourse can generate disproportionate public reactions to localized or isolated criminal events. In Terni, as in other European urban contexts, such dynamics have contributed to a pervasive narrative of decline, despite the relative stability of crime rates. This supports the argument that urban insecurity is often more discursively produced and symbolically mediated than due to actual and measurable threats.

Ulrich Beck's (1986) theory of the *risk society* further elucidates the modern shift from managing concrete dangers to anticipating abstract and uncertain risks. In such contexts, perceived security increasingly depends on institutional trust and the management of symbolic order. When public institutions—such as the police and the municipal authorities—are perceived as ineffective, unresponsive or biased, even minimal incidents may provoke anxiety disproportionate to their real significance. This is quite evident in Terni, where resident narratives reflect a dual concern: not only with the occurrence of crime, but also with the perceived inefficacy and inconsistency of institutional responses.

The social distribution of subjective insecurity is also profoundly unequal. As numerous studies indicate, vulnerability to fear does not map neatly onto actual crime exposure. Rather, certain social groups—including women, older adults, ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged populations—consistently report higher levels of perceived insecurity (Glassner, 1999; Innes and Roberts, 2008). This phenomenon is due in part to the *culture of fear*, which in public discourse exaggerates or distorts the risk faced by some specific groups, reinforcing social divisions and symbolic boundaries. In Terni, our survey shows that residents in peripheral neighbourhoods—often characterized by infrastructural neglect, poor lighting, abandoned spaces and limited social services— experience greater fear, regardless of the local crime data.

The role of the built environment in shaping perceptions of safety is also of paramount importance. Sociologists and urban theorists, drawing on Jane Jacobs' theory "eyes on the street" (1961), have argued that socially vibrant, well-maintained and

interconnected public spaces can promote informal surveillance and community engagement, thus improving both real and perceived safety. In contrast, urban fragmentation, deindustrialization and spatial isolation erode social capital and increase insecurity. In Terni, areas affected by post-industrial decline show the effects of physical degradation and socio-economic marginalization on the perceptions of safety. Institutional trust—particularly in the police, local governance and public services—emerges as an additional factor affecting subjective security. Innes and Roberts (2008) introduced the concept of *signal crimes* to describe how certain events or visible markers (some forms of disorders, such as broken windows) are, for the residents, signs of broader systemic failure. This can induce amplified responses to fear and widespread requests for intensified police actions. In Terni, the research has singled out a cyclical pattern: perceived disorder fuels demand for security interventions, which can disproportionately affect marginalized groups. This, in turn, intensifies social tensions, compromising the outcomes of long-term security actions. From a policy perspective, the disjunction between objective and subjective security challenges the effectiveness of strategies mainly relying on surveillance and law enforcement. Over-emphasis on punitive or securitarian measures risks neglecting the deeper social, spatial and symbolic factors of insecurity. As the Terni report highlights, effective responses require a more holistic approach—one that integrates community engagement, spatial regeneration, equitable access to services and transparent governance mechanisms. Such interventions address both the material and immaterial dimensions of security and are more likely to foster sustained perceptions of safety.

Therefore, the conceptual differentiation between objective and subjective security is not merely theoretical but has tangible implications for urban policy and sociological research. Understanding why fear persists in statistically safe environments requires attending to the complex interplay of structural inequality, symbolic cues, institutional legitimacy and collective memory. By foregrounding these dynamics, sociologists and urban practitioners can better navigate the tensions between crime control and social justice and develop interventions that enhance both real and perceived security in contemporary cities.

## 3. Crime statistics in Terni: a mixed picture

Empirical data collected during the 2023-2025 research carried out by our team offers a nuanced view of crime trends in Terni. While overall crime rates have declined in the post-pandemic period, the findings indicate a complex landscape marked by divergent patterns across crime categories. Quantitative analyses, based on official police reports and longitudinal data sets, reveal that total reported crimes in Terni decreased in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic baselines. In particular, property-related offenses such as theft, robbery and vandalism saw notable reductions, echoing broader national trends of declining petty crime in medium-sized Italian cities (ISTAT, 2023).

However, this overall decline masks increases in some categories of crime, especially drug-related offenses and domestic violence. Our study has identified a statistically significant uptick in incidents involving narcotics, particularly among younger people in urban peripheries. Similarly, domestic violence reports have increased, a trend attributed both to heightened awareness and reporting mechanisms and to pandemic-era stressors that have persisted in the aftermath of lockdowns. These findings suggest that,

while street-level crime may be waning, more concealed and relational forms of violence are becoming increasingly salient in the urban security discourse.

Despite the reduction in certain types of crime, public anxiety about safety remains conspicuously high. This persistent fear, as articulated in survey responses and focus group data, does not correlate neatly with statistical evidence, thus reinforcing the core argument that perception of insecurity often diverges from objective measures. This phenomenon aligns with criminological literature emphasizing the "paradox of fear," wherein feelings of unsafety endure even in relatively secure contexts (Farrall et. al. 2000). As Beck (1986) noted in his well-known work on the risk society, such disconnections are symptomatic of modern urban life, where risk is increasingly managed through affective and symbolic registers rather than through practical rationality.

It is essential, therefore, to interpret crime data not as such but in their broader sociocultural context. The presence of low-level disorder, visible drug use and marginalization in specific neighbourhoods may amplify perceptions of insecurity far beyond what the actual risk would suggest. Moreover, our research stresses the interpretive flexibility of crime statistics themselves, which are not neutral reflections of reality but are shaped by reporting practices, policing strategies and institutional priorities. As Garland (2001) argued, the politics of crime data are embedded within broader frameworks. Our research places significant emphasis on the affective and experiential dimensions of urban security. Through a mixed-methods approach including structured surveys, in-depth interviews and participatory observation, the study explored how residents of Terni experience and narrate their relationship to safety in their urban environment. The findings point to a critical disjuncture between statistical trends and public sentiment, a phenomenon that confirms the theoretical insights presented in the first section of this paper.

## 4. Quantitative data collected during the research

The perception of security among Terni's residents emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon, deeply rooted in both subjective experiences and observable social indicators. Quantitative data from a recent empirical study involving 27 residents—stratified by age, gender, education and geographic location—reveal significant disparities in how security is experienced across different social groups. Women, particularly those aged 51-65 and 18-25, reported the highest levels of perceived insecurity, especially during nighttime hours, with 87.5% expressing fear or discomfort when moving through certain urban areas after dark. This sense of vulnerability is closely related to structural conditions, such as inadequate public lighting, the visible presence of drug dealing in public parks and signs of urban decay—factors frequently cited by our interviewees as amplifiers of perceived danger.

The analysis of reported crimes further contextualizes these perceptions. Among the 62 incidents recorded during the study, drug trafficking emerged as the most reported concern (41.9%), followed by acts of vandalism (25.8%) and incidents of bullying or harassment (17.7%). More traditional forms of crime, such as theft (9.7%) and robbery or assault (4.8%), were reported less frequently, suggesting that the most impactful contributors to insecurity are those that are both visible and socially disruptive. For instance, despite the relatively low number of thefts, the city reports 266.8 incidents of theft from dwellings per 100,000 inhabitants—significantly above the national average of 206.3—underscoring the gap between official statistics and personal experiences.

Demographic data from the sample also reveal that educational level and place of residence significantly influence security perceptions. Respondents with higher educational attainment tended to interpret risks through broader socio-political lenses, whereas those with less formal education emphasized direct, tangible experiences. Similarly, residents in peripheral areas—who made up the majority of the sample (16 out of 27)—reported heightened feelings of insecurity compared to those in the historic centre. This spatial disparity aligns with theories of urban marginality and perceived disorder, particularly those articulated by Wilson and Kelling's (1982) "broken windows" theory, which posits that visible neglect and disrepair contribute to heightened fear, even in the absence of major crimes.

Perceptions of insecurity among residents of Terni appear to be shaped less by objective crime rates and more by subjective feelings of vulnerability and mistrust in institutional efficacy. Over 60% of respondents reported feeling unsafe when walking alone at night—a sentiment particularly acute among women and elderly citizens, who expressed heightened fear even in areas statistically considered low-risk. This disconnection between actual crime trends and public perception is further highlighted by the widespread belief that criminal activity in Terni has increased, despite official data indicating a decline in most categories. Such findings echo the broader sociological insight that fear of crime is often socially constructed, influenced by personal experiences, media narratives and neighbourhood conditions rather than empirical realities. Furthermore, the moderate level of trust expressed in local institutions—especially the police and municipal authorities—points to a deficit in perceived institutional responsiveness. While residents did not report outright hostility toward these entities, there was a consistent call for greater police visibility and a more active, relational presence in local communities. This suggests that beyond enforcement, what many residents seek is reassurance: a visible commitment from authorities to fostering safety, order and dialogue within the urban fabric.

## 5. Public perception: fear beyond the numbers. A qualitative analysis

These patterns mirror those observed in other European urban contexts, where fear of crime tends to be socially stratified and spatially uneven (Pain, 2000). Women's heightened fear, for instance, is not necessarily indicative of higher victimization rates, but reflects gendered socialization, experiences of harassment and structural exclusion from certain public spaces (Stanko, 1990). Similarly, the elderly often report fear due to perceived physical vulnerability and diminished capacity to respond to threats, rather than from direct experience with crime. These insights complicate the assumption that fear is a straightforward function of risk and instead highlight its embeddedness in broader social inequalities.

Media representations also play a decisive role in shaping perceptions. As Cohen (1972) argued in his seminal work on moral panics, the media's framing of deviance often amplifies fear by focusing on sensational incidents and symbolic threats. In Terni, respondents frequently cited news reports and social media posts as sources of concern, even when they had not personally experienced crime. This aligns with the notion that urban fear is mediated and affectively charged, sustained by a constant flow of information that often prioritizes dramatic narrative over proportionality or statistical realism (Glassner, 1999).

Institutional trust—or lack thereof—is another key variable influencing public perception. Our research found that residents who reported low confidence in local authorities also tended to perceive their neighbourhoods as more dangerous. This finding supports the mentioned theory of "signal crimes" (Innes and Roberts, 2008), wherein certain events (or non-events) are viewed as indicators of broader social breakdown. For example, the presence of loitering youths, neglected infrastructure or visible signs of drug use were commonly cited by respondents in our research as evidence of insecurity, regardless of actual occurrence of criminal facts.

Moreover, spatial and socioeconomic contexts deeply mediate fear responses. Residents of peripheral neighbourhoods in Terni, often characterized by deindustrialization, high unemployment and limited public services, reported the highest levels of anxiety. These areas, marked by physical degradation—broken streetlights, abandoned buildings, neglected public spaces—embody what Wacquant (2008) defined as "advanced marginality", where material deprivation converges with symbolic exclusion. The result is an environment in which fear becomes normalized, routinized and internalized as a feature of daily life.

At the same time, calls for increased security are often framed in exclusionary terms. Some respondents advocated for greater surveillance, policing, or even the removal of perceived "undesirables", such as immigrants or unhoused individuals. These discourses raise important ethical questions about how fear can be used to justify repressive or discriminatory urban policies. As Foucault (1975) suggested, regimes of security operate not only through control of space and population, but also through the production of normative distinctions between the "safe" and the "dangerous".

Our research therefore underscores the importance of addressing urban fear as a multidimensional and socially embedded phenomenon. Rather than focusing exclusively on crime suppression, policymakers should consider the symbolic economy of security—the ways in which people interpret their environments, assign meaning to space and relate to institutions. Therefore, efforts to improve public safety in Terni ought to be as attentive to subjective perceptions as to objective indicators, recognizing that safety is co-produced through the interaction of people, places and power.

## 5.1. The role of the urban environment

The physical and spatial configuration of urban areas is a critical determinant in shaping residents' perceptions of safety. Urban design, encompassing elements such as street lighting, the maintenance of public spaces and the presence or absence of abandoned structures, profoundly influences subjective security. Our research corroborates a robust body of sociological literature that links the quality of the built environment to fear of crime (Newman, 1972; Jacobs, 1961).

In Terni, neighbourhoods characterized by poor lighting, neglected infrastructures and visible signs of decay—including abandoned buildings and graffiti—were consistently associated with heightened fear among residents. This phenomenon aligns with Wilson and Kelling's (1982) "broken windows" theory, which posits that visible signs of disorder can foster an environment conducive to both actual crime and the perception thereof. The presence of urban decay functions as a symbolic cue, signalling neglect, lack of social control and diminished safety, thus reinforcing residents' vulnerability.

Conversely, areas that benefit from targeted urban revitalization—characterized by well-maintained parks, pedestrian streets and active community spaces—tend to increase a

sense of security. Jacobs' (1961) argument that "eyes on the street" contribute to informal social control is particularly salient here. Public spaces that facilitate social interaction and community engagement not only discourage criminal behaviour but also reassure residents, reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the spatial distribution of services and conveniences significantly impacts the perception of safety. Our research highlights that Terni's peripheral parts, often neglected as concerns urban investment and service provision, are the areas where fear is more reported. This confirms the effects of "urban divide" (Soja, 2010), which tends to concentrate economic and social marginalization in some areas, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and insecurity. It is important to emphasize that the urban environment also interacts with social identities and inequalities. For example, women and the elderly may perceive spaces differently, owing to concerns about physical vulnerability, visibility and escape routes. Such differentiated experiences point out the need to adopt a more comprehensive approach to urban planning and security policy (Valentine, 1989). Therefore, urban design should pay attention not only to the physical environment but also to the different needs and perceptions of the community.

## 5.2. The influence of media and social discourse

Mass media and social media emerge as powerful factors in the construction and perpetuation of fear in urban contexts. Our qualitative data reveal that perceptions of insecurity of many residents in Terni is based less on their personal experiences than on mediated narratives circulated through the traditional media and the new social media. This observation aligns with Glassner's (1999) concept of the "culture of fear", wherein media selectively highlight and amplify threats, often disproportionately to their actual prevalence.

The amplification effect is particularly visible in crime reporting. News stories frequently focus on sensational or violent crimes, reinforcing a narrative of urban decline and disorder that does not reflect what statistical data suggest (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). Residents often cited specific crime stories encountered in the media as sources of anxiety, even if they have no direct experience of victimization. This underscores the social transmission of fear, which appears a form of collective emotion transcending individual experience (Garland, 2008).

Social media platforms further complicate this dynamic by enabling rapid and wide dissemination of information, rumours and subjective interpretations of crime incidents. The participatory nature of these platforms allows for the co-construction of fear narratives, often blending fact and speculation, and sometimes fostering moral panics (Cohen, 1972). In Terni, as in many contemporary cities, digital environments have become central arenas where perceptions of urban safety are negotiated and contested.

Additionally, public discourse on security is often commixed with broader social anxieties, including concerns about immigration, economic instability and social cohesion. These themes, frequently intertwined with crime narratives, contribute to the stigmatization of some groups and neighbourhoods, reinforcing social divisions (Fassin, 2013). Our research highlights how media representations influence not only individual fear but also collective attitudes and demands, shaping the security policy in the city.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that addressing urban insecurity requires engagement not only with material conditions but also with the symbolic and communicative dimensions of fear. Efforts to improve media literacy, promote balanced

reporting and foster inclusive public dialogue may be as important as the traditional forms of crime prevention in mitigating fear and enhancing community trust.

## 5.3. Vulnerable groups and disproportionate fear

Urban insecurity and fear of crime are not experienced uniformly across populations as well as vulnerability and subjective insecurity are distributed unevenly, along social, demographic and spatial lines. Our research highlights that certain groups—particularly women, elderly persons, young people and immigrants—demonstrate heightened perceptions of insecurity that far exceed objective rates of victimization.

Women, for example, report significantly greater fear, especially related to gender-based violence, such as harassment, assault and domestic abuse. This aligns with broader sociological findings on the gendered nature of urban fear, with women's concerns deeply linked to everyday spatial practices and power relations (Farrall et al., 2000).

Similarly, elderly persons express heightened anxiety about crime, partly due to their physical vulnerability, often increased by social isolation and reduced mobility. Their fear is also amplified by perceptions of declining social cohesion and inadequate institutional support (Farrall et al., 2000).

Perceptions of insecurity among young people are often linked to concerns about gang activity, territorial disputes and social exclusion. Urban youth living in deprived neighbourhoods often confront both real and perceived threats from peer violence, while simultaneously face societal stigmatization (Bursik and Grasmick,1993). This creates a complex dynamic where young people are both feared and fearful, complicating policy responses.

In Terni, immigrant populations face some challenges, but immigration is not regarded as a major issue. While sometimes immigrants may be less likely to be victimized, they may report feelings of fear related to social exclusion, discrimination and mistrust toward authorities. Marginalized groups occasionally experience compounded insecurity, due to structural disadvantages and symbolic stigmatization (Wacquant, 2008). However, these dynamics are less pronounced in Terni compared to larger urban centres, where ethnic minorities and migrants often feel more vulnerable both inside and outside their communities and, particularly, in their interactions with policemen responsible for law enforcement.

Collectively, these findings show that fear of crime is shaped not only by actual risks but by social identities and inequalities, reinforcing Glassner's (1999) idea that the "culture of fear" disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Recognizing these different situations is critical for developing targeted and equitable security policies.

## 6. Institutional responses, policy gaps and the role of private surveillance

Our research reveals that institutional responses to urban insecurity in Terni have primarily focused on reactive measures, such as increased policing and surveillance, while interviewees also call for more pro-active prevention strategies and greater community engagement. This approach, as Tyler (2006) stated, risks undermining public trust and fails to address the deeper social factors of crime and fear. The emphasis on visible vigilance aims primarily to reassure the public through symbolic gestures of security, rather than addressing the roots of insecurity through structural interventions.

This trend towards the securitization of urban governance often results in uneven enforcement and may exacerbate social tensions, especially in marginalized

neighbourhoods. Garland (2001) criticized this "culture of control", arguing that an over-reliance on surveillance and punishment can alienate communities and further entrench insecurity. Consequently, there is a pressing need to move beyond reactive policing towards more comprehensive urban policies.

A significant policy gap identified in our research is the insufficient integration between security measures and urban regeneration strategies. As Newman (1972) asserted, the design and maintenance of urban spaces profoundly influence both actual crime rates and residents' perceptions of safety. Neglected urban areas characterized by poor lighting, abandoned buildings and spatial fragmentation contribute to heightened fear and vulnerability. In contrast, revitalization efforts—through, for example, improved public lighting, mixed-use development and active public spaces—can enhance informal social control and foster a stronger sense of community safety.

### 6.1. Private surveillance in Terni: a contested but accepted reality

An increasingly visible aspect of security in Terni is the growing use of private surveillance technologies, such as CCTV cameras installed by business plants and residential complexes. Generally, this private surveillance is well received by most citizens, who view it as an important complement to public security efforts. Residents appreciate the increased visibility and deterrence these measures provide, which help create a sense of safety in public and semi-public spaces.

However, certain community members emphasize that security should primarily remain the responsibility of public institutions to guarantee accountability and protect civil liberties. They warn against over-reliance on private security mechanisms that may lack transparency and operate without adequate oversight (Tyler, 2006). Nevertheless, there is a shared consensus that an effective security framework requires an open dialogue and interconnection between private surveillance and public security agencies. This collaboration should balance individual privacy rights with collective safety needs, ensuring data protection and preventing misuse (Meijer and Thaens, 2013).

In this regard, Terni stands at an important crossroads, where integrating private surveillance into a broader participatory security model can enhance community safety while safeguarding democratic principles. Transparent policies regulating the use of private surveillance, along with community input and oversight, are essential to maintaining trust and legitimacy (Chermak et al., 2006).

### 6.2 Trust and institutional legitimacy

Trust in law enforcement agencies and broader public institutions is a basic element of urban security and public confidence. Sociological and criminological literature consistently stresses that the legitimacy of institutions, particularly the police, critically shapes residents' perceptions of safety and their willingness to cooperate with authorities. As Tyler (2006) stated, institutional legitimacy rests on the perceived fairness and justice of organizational actions, fostering voluntary compliance and deeper civic engagement. When institutions are seen as legitimate, citizens are more likely to trust that their rights will be protected and that social order will be effectively maintained.

Our research highlights that in Terni there is a moderate level of trust in institutions, but a significant deficit remains.

This deficit contributes to persistent fear and insecurity despite stable or declining crime rates. Distrust in law enforcement often engenders feelings of vulnerability, social

isolation and civic disengagement—conditions that undermine social cohesion and impede crime prevention efforts that rely on community cooperation and information sharing.

Institutional distrust frequently stems from perceived inconsistencies in policing practices, lack of transparency and experiences of discrimination or neglect. Wacquant (2008), elaborating on these points, observed that marginalized communities often experience police actions that are more punitive than protective and increase alienation and fear. These facts can engender a vicious cycle: distrust reduces cooperation with police, which undermines law enforcement and further entrenches public perceptions of insecurity.

Effective communication strategies are essential to fostering institutional legitimacy. Transparent, consistent and responsive communication reduces uncertainty, demonstrates reliability and builds trust. In contrast, opaque or contradictory messages can generate rumours, misinformation and anxiety, fuelling fear beyond the level justified by the real risks of crimes. Chermak et al. (2006) emphasized the critical role of careful media and official communications in maintaining public confidence and avoiding fear amplification.

Community policing offers a practical means to rebuild trust and enhance legitimacy. Innes and Roberts (2008) argued that police officers embedded within communities, actively engaged in dialogue, can cultivate relational trust—a more durable form of trust than that based merely on occasional presence. This relational trust enhances perceptions of fairness and procedural justice, reduces fear and increases residents' willingness to report crimes and cooperate with investigators.

Institutional legitimacy extends beyond policing to include local governments, social services and judicial bodies. Coordination among these institutions, combined with transparent governance and equitable service delivery, strengthens collective trust in urban governance. Garland (2001) cautioned, however, that a "culture of control" focused solely on surveillance and punishment risks alienating citizens and delegitimizing institutions, if it neglects underlying social issues.

Importantly, trust is unevenly distributed across social groups. Vulnerable populations—including ethnic minorities, immigrants and economically marginalized residents—often report lower institutional trust due to historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination and exclusion. This unevenness contributes to social and spatial fragmentation, complicating the development of comprehensive and inclusive security policies.

Therefore, trust and institutional legitimacy are indispensable for bridging the gap between objective security and subjective perceptions of safety. Enhancing legitimacy requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes fairness, transparency, community participation, institutional coordination and the reduction of structural inequalities. Only by fostering robust institutional trust, urban centres like Terni could reduce fear, strengthen social cohesion and promote sustainable urban security.

## 7. Participatory security: toward a community-based model
Community policing emerges as a particularly promising alternative, fostering partnerships between law enforcement and residents. Innes and Roberts (2008) emphasized that this model promotes institutional trust through dialogue, transparency and inclusive engagement. However, an effective community policing requires sustained

institutional commitment, including comprehensive training and genuine responsiveness to diverse community needs.

Collaboration between social services, housing authorities, education and health providers is crucial to tackle the socioeconomic factors underpinning insecurity. Ericson and Haggerty (1997) highlighted the complexity of contemporary urban risk, stressing that effective policy responses must transcend traditional law enforcement limitations and address issues such as economic inequality, social exclusion and public health.

Finally, public awareness campaigns that disseminate accurate crime data, promote safety practices and combat discrimination can recalibrate public perceptions and mitigate unjustified fear. Chermak et al. (2006) stressed that balanced media coverage and enhanced media literacy are vital to counteract sensationalism and its amplification of fear.

Thus, our research proposes a paradigm shift: moving away from punitive, visibility-driven security measures toward integrated, preventive and participatory actions that acknowledge the social complexity of urban insecurity and prioritize the needs of vulnerable populations.

The concept of *participatory security* introduces a significant shift in urban governance, emphasizing the active role of residents in shaping and sustaining security within their communities. Unlike traditional top-down policing models, participatory security advocates for a collaborative approach in which citizens are empowered to become co-producers of security alongside institutional actors. This model not only addresses crime prevention but also tackles the deeper social and relational factors that influence perceptions of safety (Rosenbaum, 1988; Skogan, 2006).

At its core, participatory security is rooted in the recognition that security is not solely a product of formal law enforcement but also depends on the social fabric and collective efficacy of neighbourhoods. Collective efficacy refers to the capacity of community members to control public space, intervene in problematic situations and maintain shared norms (Sampson et al. 1997). When residents feel connected, supported and responsible for their environment, informal social control mechanisms become effective deterrents against crime and disorder.

Our research highlights the potential of participatory security initiatives in enhancing both objective safety and perceived security. As Rosenbaum (1988) noted, residents who engage in neighbourhood watch programs, community patrols or local forums report a greater sense of empowerment and reduced fear of crime, even when statistical crime rates remain unchanged. This underlines that a safety policy implies not only the reduction of criminal incidents, but also the promotion of a sense of belonging and active participation.

Neighbourhood watch schemes are among the most established forms of participatory security, where residents organize to monitor their local environment and report suspicious activities to authorities. According to Skogan (2006), such programmes can increase informal surveillance and strengthen communication between police and the community. However, their success depends heavily on sustained resident participation, trust in law enforcement and inclusivity.

For instance, in Glasgow, Scotland, Community Safety Partnerships have integrated neighbourhood watch efforts within broader multi-agency frameworks to enhance social cohesion and crime prevention in economically disadvantaged areas (Skogan, 2006). Similarly, in Cape Town, South Africa, informal neighbourhood patrols

have emerged as vital community-led responses to high crime rates, where formal formal policing is, or is perceived to be, insufficient (Wacquant, 2008). These groups provide critical vigilance and build local solidarity, although they must be carefully managed to avoid vigilantism and exclusion.

In Terni, neighbourhoods with active watch groups show higher levels of social cohesion and trust, as well as improved cooperation with police efforts. These programs not only act as deterrents, but also serve a symbolic role, signaling that residents are vigilant and concerned about community welfare. This visibility can discourage potential offenders and reassure residents, thereby reducing anxiety associated with perceived insecurity. However, it is crucial to avoid potential pitfalls, such as vigilantism, exclusion of marginalized groups or reinforced social divides. Community patrols must be based on principles of fairness, transparency and collaboration with official agencies to prevent abuses and build legitimacy (Innes and Roberts, 2008).

Another critical dimension of participatory security involves educating and engaging youth as stakeholders in community safety. School-based civic education programmes that incorporate themes of social responsibility, conflict resolution and crime prevention can foster early awareness and positive attitudes towards lawfulness and cooperation (Wilson, 2004). Such initiatives equip young people with skills to manage disputes peacefully, recognize signs of criminal behaviour and actively contribute to neighbourhood well-being.

In Bogotá, Colombia, Citizens' Security Councils have successfully involved young people in community discussions and interventions to reduce youth violence and social exclusion, promoting a sense of ownership of local safety challenges (Garland, 2001). In Terni, pilot programs that link schools, families and local authorities have reported promising outcomes, including reduced youth delinquency, improved school attendance and greater youth participation in community projects. These programmes help counter social exclusion—a known factor in fostering insecurity—by creating supportive networks and alternative pathways for at-risk youth (Sampson, 2012).

In the contemporary urban landscape, participatory security increasingly leverages digital technologies to facilitate communication, coordination and community mobilization. Social media platforms and mobile applications provide real-time alerts, foster neighbourhood dialogue and allow residents to report concerns efficiently. According to Meijer and Thaens (2013), such digital tools can democratize security governance by enhancing transparency and broadening civic participation.

For example, Chicago's "Nextdoor" platform enables residents to share information about suspicious activities, community events and safety resources, effectively enhancing informal social control and trust (Meijer and Thaens, 2013). The Terni case reflects this trend, where online neighbourhood groups serve as forums for sharing safety tips, organizing joint patrols and coordinating with local police. However, challenges such as misinformation, privacy concerns and digital divides must be managed carefully to maximize benefits and minimize harms.

## 8. Institutional support and policy integration

Participatory security, to be effective and sustainable, requires strong institutional support and integration into broader urban security policies. Our research highlights that fragmented or symbolic engagement initiatives lacking resources and clear mandates often fail to deliver lasting impact. In contrast, institutional frameworks that formalize citizen participation, provide training and support, and allocate adequate resources to create

conditions conducive to meaningful involvement (as Ericson and Haggerty already noted in 1997).

Moreover, cross-sector collaboration is essential to address the multifaceted nature of insecurity. Social services, education and urban planning sectors should coordinate closely with law enforcement to support community initiatives, address the root causes of crime and foster inclusive environments. Garland's (2001) vision of holistic urban governance emphasizes that integrative policy approaches ensure that participatory security complements rather than replaces formal policing efforts.

While participatory security holds significant promise, challenges remain. One major concern is the uneven capacity of communities to engage fully, owing to socioeconomic disparities, cultural differences or prior experiences of marginalization. Vulnerable groups often lack the time, resources or trust needed to participate. This can lead to exclusion or reinforce existing inequalities (Wacquant, 2008).

Furthermore, an excessive reliance on community-based security risks shifting responsibility away from the state onto citizens, potentially obscuring institutional accountability and diverting attention from necessary systemic reforms. Balancing community engagement with state responsibility is imperative to ensure equitable protection and uphold the rule of law.

Finally, the effectiveness of participatory security is closely related to the quality of relationships between communities and law enforcement. In contexts where historical distrust exists, building mutual respect and cooperation is a gradual process that requires transparency, cultural sensitivity and genuine empowerment (Tyler, 2006).

Participatory security marks an important evolution in urban security paradigms focusing on residents as active agents in fostering safety and social cohesion. Through neighbourhood watch programs, youth engagement and the use of digital platforms, communities can enhance informal social control, reduce fear and improve relations with institutions. Yet, success depends on inclusive practices, strong institutional support and the integration of participatory models into comprehensive urban governance strategies. Our research suggests that participatory security can bridge the gap between objective crime reduction and subjective perceptions of safety, while empowering citizens and strengthening the social fabric, an essential fact for sustainable urban security.

## 9. Comparative framework: situating Terni within broader urban security debates

To understand the complex issue of urban security and perceived insecurity in Terni, may be useful to consider the city's experiences in a broader comparative context. Urban insecurity transcends geographical boundaries and is shaped by common social, economic and political processes. Urban sociology and criminology offer valuable insights into the ways in which similar dynamics operate in different contexts, helping us identify the presence of the same basic patterns beyond their specific expressions. In fact, as Wacquant (2008) highlighted, urban insecurity often reflects the existence of structural inequalities and their transformations. Terni shares several characteristics with other medium-sized European cities that have experienced remarkable post-industrial transformation. Like Sheffield in England or Essen in Germany, Terni has faced economic restructuring that affects employment, social cohesion and urban infrastructures. Such shifts influence both objective crime rates and subjective perceptions of security. Research in these cities often reveals a common trend: declining crime rates accompany persistent, or even increasing, fear in certain demographic groups. Farrall and others (2000) observed

that, in Sheffield, despite decreasing violent crime, fear remained high, particularly in its deprived neighbourhoods—exactly as in Terni. This fact recalls Bursik and Grasmick (1993) concept of social disorganization, worked out to define the situations where, owing to the weakening of public institutions and social networks, informal social control decreases and sense of vulnerability increases. Comparative studies also highlight the pivotal role of institutional trust in mediating the relationship between crime and fear. Some northern cities, like Copenhagen and Malmö, where public trust in police and local governance is high, report lower perceived insecurity, even when crime rates are similar to those in other cities. Skogan and Hartnett (1997) argued that institutional legitimacy plays a fundamental role in reducing fear of crime and Tyler (2006) remarked that, when and where citizens perceive institutions as fair and trustworthy, the sense of safety improves. Conversely, cities where trust is eroded by perceived corruption or inefficiency usually experience heightened fear, disproportionate to actual crime levels.

Innes and Roberts (2008) asserted that community policing and transparent governance are essential to rebuilding institutional trust and mitigating urban insecurity. Cross-national research also confirms the powerful role of media in shaping urban fear. While sensationalist crime reporting is a global phenomenon, its impact varies depending on media regulation and journalistic standards. Chermak, McGarrell and Gruenewald (2006) observed that media coverage can distort public perceptions of crime, often exaggerating the threat. In contrast, countries with more accountable media practices present less distortion in public fear.

Italy's complex media landscape and the rise of digital platforms reflect broader European trends, albeit with specific local nuances. Garland (2001) argued that urban insecurity is a product of both social narratives and crime statistics, a point echoed by Young's (1999), in his work on moral panics and securitization. Our research supports these statements, showing how media narratives in Terni intertwine with national debates on immigration and security, intensifying fear beyond what crime realities alone would suggest. Anyhow, the moderate trust of citizens in local institutions in Terni reflects a pattern common to many peripheral urban areas, not only in Italy.

As concerns urban planning, comparative studies emphasize the importance of context-sensitive design. Cities such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen prioritize inclusive, human-scale urban environments that promote safety and social interaction. Gehl (2011) noted that well-designed public spaces enhance both real and perceived security by fostering community engagement. Conversely, cities experiencing rapid or unplanned urbanization encounter challenges similar to those present in Terni, including spatial segregation and neglected public areas. Marcuse and van Kempen (2000) observed that urban marginalization is spatially inscribed, exacerbating social exclusion and insecurity. Participatory urban regeneration efforts that involve residents are advocated as means to strengthen social cohesion and collective efficacy, a model championed by Putnam (2000). These examples offer valuable lessons for Terni's urban planners as they seek to integrate social and physical strategies for enhancing urban security.

In sum, as Wacquant (2008) emphasized, many sociological processes shaping urban insecurity are widespread, but they assume locally specific forms. Economic restructuring, institutional trust, media influence and urban form interact in complex ways across cities facing similar challenges. Comparative analysis enriches understanding by highlighting structural commonalities alongside local particularities, informing more nuanced and contextually tailored interventions. Our research, according to this view,

underlines that integrated strategies addressing economic, social, institutional and spatial dimensions are essential to understand and face urban insecurity.

**Conclusions: toward an integrated understanding of urban security**

The case of Terni provides a valuable microcosm for examining broader theoretical and practical issues in urban sociology and criminology. It underscores that urban security cannot be adequately captured by crime statistics alone. Instead, perceptions of safety and insecurity emerge from a complex interplay of symbolic signals, environmental factors, media representations, institutional legitimacy and social inequalities, all of which contribute synergically to shape the lived experience of urban residents.

This multifaceted understanding has significant implications for both scholarly inquiry and policy making. Sociologically, it reinforces the necessity to conceive security not as a fixed or purely objective condition but as a relational and culturally mediated phenomenon, dependent on social contexts and collective meanings. This perspective challenges reductive narratives that isolate crime rates from the broader social and spatial dynamics influencing fear and community cohesion.

As concerns policy, the findings from Terni warn against over-reliance on reactive and punitive measures, such as intensified policing and surveillance, which often fail to address underlying structural issues and may unwittingly exacerbate mistrust and social fragmentation. Instead, what is needed is an integrated approach, combining urban regeneration, transparent governance, participatory security models and community engagement. Such a strategy fosters resilience by empowering residents, improving environmental design and enhancing institutional trust.

Importantly, recognizing fear as a structurally conditioned and socially distributed phenomenon—rather than merely an individual psychological response—allows for more humane and effective interventions. Our research exemplifies how efforts to bridge the divide between objective security and its subjective perception must address the social determinants of insecurity, including economic marginalization, spatial segregation and historical experiences of discrimination.

To bridge the gap between perception and reality, it is crucial to ensure data transparency through the dissemination of accurate crime statistics and clear communication by public institutions, which can reduce misinformation and undue fear. Improving urban environments through thoughtful planning and maintenance, with enhanced lighting, mixed-use spaces, the revitalization of neglected areas and other measures, fosters informal social control and community pride. Concurrently, launching media literacy campaigns that educate the public to critically engage with crime reporting and sensationalist narratives helps recalibrate fear and supports balanced public discourse. Moreover, engaging marginalized groups in inclusive dialogue and empowerment initiatives is vital for building institutional legitimacy and cohesive, community-driven safety efforts.

Ultimately, the insights drawn from Terni provide important lessons for urban centres throughout Europe and beyond. They highlight that sustainable urban security depends not only on controlling crime but also on cultivating trust, social inclusion and shared responsibility. These are the pillars on which to build safer and more equitable cities in an era of complex social challenges.

**Authors contributions**

The manuscript is the result of the joint work of the three authors, who are collectively responsible for the conceptualization and methodological design of the research. Data collection was carried out by Laura Guercio. Fieldwork, including interviews and meetings, was conducted by Marxiano Melotti, together with Vincenzo Mini, in 2023 and 2024, and by Laura Guercio, in 2024 and 2025. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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