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Developing strategies to cope with socially constructed fears and insecurities.
Evidence from the MARGIN project

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Building further on current advances in the field of fear of crime studies, the MARGIN project (2015-2017) was aimed at the identification and analysis of factors influencing public and personal perceptions of insecurity. Taking up the idea of a "smart aggregation" of crime and criminal justice data as defined by Hunt, Kilmer and Rubin (2010), the MARGIN project's innovative character involved an approach that allowed for the collection of information about crime while at the same time considering contextual, definitional and methodological differences among five EU countries (Spain, France, Italy, Hungary and the UK). Over the course of the last two years, the MARGIN project provided evidence-based knowledge that allowed for a deeper understanding of the root causes of insecurity in contemporary societies. The main results of the multi-method approach implemented are presented below.

Determinants of people's perception of insecurity

From the beginning of the project the partnership identified a common interest in filling a gap present in the literature referring to the lack of research allowing for a **comparative analysis** between two kinds of sources that are usually studied separately: on the one hand, **police-recorded crime statistics** and, on the other, figures on perception of insecurity gathered through **crime victimization surveys**. Although it has been proven that crime victimization surveys and police statistics "both offer valuable and unique information about crime problems" (van Dijk *et al.*, 2007: 8), comparisons between these two sources are challenging due to the fact that they address similar problems in different ways. In the case of the MARGIN project such a comparison was even more challenging considering that this task involved five different EU countries with highly divergent national systems for police-recorded figures and victimisation surveys. In an attempt to reduce this complexity and offer a framework for the standardization of security-related information across the five EU countries, the partnership defined a set of categories for the harmonization of police statistics and survey-based data collection at the national level. Details on this process are publicly available[1].

The standardization process allowed us to account for small differences in question wording and find predictors of insecurity and victimisation within countries using multivariate models. We then compared predictors across countries, as explained in further detail in a document publicly available[2]. It was found that:

- **Female respondents** report higher levels of perceived insecurity and fear of crime compared to their male counterpart;
- **Younger people** are less trusting in police and tend to perceive higher levels of crime, yet typically feel safer in their neighbourhood;
- **Unemployed people** are more likely to feel unsafe in their neighbourhood and home;
- **Degree-educated respondents** tend to feel safer, yet are often concerned about crime levels (though there is no evidence that this concern affects their habits);
- **Single people** tend to rate the police highly and have fewer concerns about crime than those living with partners;
- **Owning a house** is associated with feeling safer in the neighbourhood;
- **People who have spent longer in the neighbourhood** are more likely to have high levels of perceived insecurity;
- **Poor health** is a strong indicator of all forms of perceived insecurity in the UK (this variable is not measured elsewhere);
- Being a **victim of crime** is associated with all forms of insecurity.

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[1] http://marginproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MARGIN-database.pdf
[2] http://marginproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Conceptual-report_MARGIN.pdf

The incidence of social causes on people's perception of insecurity

The cross-country analysis also revealed the availability of a much broader set of independent variables (i.e. information on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents) that would have substantially improved the insights that could have been obtained from the crime and victimization surveys. A thematic survey was designed in order to bridge this gap and test a number of hypotheses concerning perceived insecurity and also to enable a comprehensive assessment of how public perceptions of insecurity can be explained by different socio-economic and socio-geographic conditions that affect subjective perception. The *MARGIN Questionnaire on Perception of Insecurity*[3] has been used to carry out four small-scale surveys in the cities of Barcelona, Budapest, Paris and London with a total sample of 402 respondents. Furthermore, a large-scale survey in Italy (15.428 respondents) was also implemented. Italy was chosen for this trial because the use of victimization surveys there had been less common in the past than in the other five countries involved in the project.

Consistent with previous research, female respondents and the elderly report higher levels of feelings of unsafety compared to their male counterparts. At the same time, respondents displaying high levels of perceived disorder within the neighbourhood tended to show higher levels of subjective insecurity as well. Our analysis revealed the incidence of future-oriented anxieties and self-perceived stigmatization on people's perception of insecurity. In particular, the findings emerging from the analysis of the survey in Italy support the idea that **people's concerns about the deterioration of their health and/or economic situation coupled with the perception of being looked down upon by others due to religious beliefs, sexual orientation or ethnic background may, in turn, increase their feeling of insecurity**. As such, subjective insecurity appears to be increasingly associated with social causes or, paraphrasing Bauman (1999), insecurity is nowadays an "umbrella sentiment people develop to disguise their high levels of social and economic insecurity" (as reported by Vieno, Roccato and Russo, 2013: 521).

Putting in/security into context: Analysing when and where fears take place

The overwhelming tendency to research fear of crime and perceived insecurity using quantitative survey methods is a key deficit for this area of study and may be resulting in a gross misrepresentation of fear of crime as a major social problem. In an attempt to overcome this limitation, we carried out an anthropological fieldwork across 10 neighbourhoods in five cities (Barcelona, Budapest, London, Milan and Paris). We used and compared three different qualitative techniques, including: 50 in-depth interviews, 6

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[3] The questionnaire is publicly available in six languages (English, Catalan, Spanish, French, Italian and Hungarian): http://marginproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/MARGIN-questionnaire-on-perception-of-insecurity.pdf

months of participant observation (5 days per week/8 hours per day) and 10 focus groups.

The in-depth interviews were aimed at collecting information on the problems that affect the selected neighbourhoods, the know-how that citizens deploy in dealing with these problems, and their assessment of public intervention. Then, when conducting the participant observation (between July and December 2016), the research team contrasted the information previously gathered through the interviews by interacting with people in the real-life environments in which they live. The participant observation was particularly concerned with exploring people's lifestyles, the consequences they have on risk perception, and how people interpret and deal with situations that are seen as threatening. During the last phase of data collection involving focus groups, the direct involvement of citizens offered a deeper understanding of victimization in a number of selected scenarios and, what is more, permitted a structured discussion on bottom-up practices that people develop in their daily life to cope with insecurity.

The research material produced during the fieldwork highlights **the incompleteness of a strictly criminological definition of urban insecurity**. The constant and noteworthy renewal of the socio-demographic composition of the neighbourhoods, the transformation of the economy and the local businesses, and the conflicts among people who have different access to public spaces are all intertwined. They generate a diffuse sensation of lack of control over one's own daily life in urban settings. The concept of urban safety is actually more complex than typically understood both theoretically and politically. Not only does it strictly pertain to public order, law enforcement and crime control, but it also includes notions such as urban, physical and social quality. In other words, the wellbeing within the city and in social relations.

Overview of results

Contrasting quantitative and qualitative approaches to research perceived insecurity across five EU countries allowed us to offer a comprehensive picture of factors that influence subjective feelings of unsafety, how these feelings alter people's routines, and which strategies residents develop to deal with the problems that affect their neighbourhood. Theories of vulnerability and victimisation and their relation to perceived insecurity and victimisation are largely supported by the data in five European countries. Despite the different purposes respectively pursued by the quantitative and the qualitative analysis carried out within the MARGIN project, both approaches led to a similar conclusion: **people's perceptions of insecurity are increasingly linked to social causes**. Specifically, the analysis points to the emergence of an ontological dimension in the fear of crime and perceived insecurity and sustains a conceptualization of the perception of insecurity where socially-constructed and future-oriented anxieties (due to health and financial precariousness) and social exclusion play a prominent role in determining people's feeling of insecurity.

Cities represent the concrete expression of various processes: urbanization, individualization, social and economic changes, new incoming residents, etcetera. Such processes generate potential conflicts that are increasingly loaded with security issues. What is more, since the urban *milieux* has become less familiar, people are no longer capable of relying on traditional social ties. It is under these specific circumstances that the very notion of community turns controversial. Sennett (1970: 34) already noted that "insecurity as such is at the root of this need for an image of community […] During periods of social change and displacement, the desire grows strong to define a common 'us' so that men may forge a bulwark for themselves against disorder". Our findings endorse Sennett's intuition by revealing **the precarious nature of the notion of community in contemporary European cities**. The sense of insecurity seems to derive from a sort of ambivalence. On the one hand, the crisis of the traditional networks of protection (family, local community, neighborhoods) has contributed to a weakening of the networks involved in identity-making processes. On the other hand, there is a regressive return to violent and destructive forms of identity among citizens. In fact, despite the undeniable differences existing across the neighbourhoods analysed, the neighbours tend to recognise certain social groups as a source of disorder within their respective place of residence. The young, homeless, immigrants, etc., are identified as "troublemakers" that alter the *status quo* of the neighbourhood. As such, the identification of troublemakers that, in some cases, leads to actual stigmatization, allows the neighbours to operate a sort of "reduction of complexity" (Luhmann, 1995) of the social causes of disorder. In turn, the presence in public spaces of people that are considered hostile (e.g., young people smoking marijuana and speaking loudly), visually unpleasant (e.g. homeless) or outsiders (e.g. immigrants) erode the community's capacity to elaborate a meaningful interpretation of the social life within the neighbourhood.

Similarly, institutions dealing with public security activate a process of reduction of complexity as well in an attempt to reinforce their legitimacy. They tend to favour the citizens' security by protecting the "good" citizens (i.e. the included) from the potential threats stemming from the weak segments of society (i.e. the marginalized). These kinds of policies are technocratic means with the *de facto* aim of preserving the *status quo* of society. What is more, such an approach neglects that: "the obsessive violence of the macho street gang and the punitive obsession of the respectable citizens are similar not only in their nature but in their origin. Both stem from dislocations in the labour market: the one from a market which excludes participation as a worker but encourages voraciousness as a consumer, the other form a market which includes, but only in a precarious fashion. That is, from tantalizing exclusion and precarious inclusion. Both frustrations are consciously articulated in the form of relative deprivation*" (Young, 1999: 8-9). Building further on the knowledge produced thorough the MARGIN project, it is possible to argue that enforcing policies inspired by criminal prosecution cannot remove the original causes that feed and sustain citizens' insecurity. Considering security merely in terms of threats emerging from a criminal *milieux* configures a population of undesirables that are forced to (social and geographic) marginalization.

As argued by Vera Telles (2014), the management of security based on the criminalization of the conflictive uses of public spaces is ultimately responsible for **the creation of an increasingly larger population of "urban refugees"**.

It is our belief that addressing social problems on which insecurity is grounded is more urgent than coping with the sense of insecurity that obsesses one part of the population. Local governments should enact political, social and cultural strategies of intervention, rather than just enforcing the militarization of public spaces. They should deal with security from multidimensional and complex perspectives by acting on the objective causes and aim to empower the weak groups facing marginalization and increasing exclusion. Moreover, they should be concerned with the specificities of each local context to activate forms of social participation. **The revitalization of neighbourhoods and their social life should take place along with the re-claiming of endogenous and community-based forms of social control and the re-claiming of public spaces**. In both conclusion and summary, we can agree with Sennett (1970: 138-139) on the urgent need "to recognize conflicts, not to try to purify them away in a solidarity myth, in order to survive".

Policy implications and recommendations arising from MARGIN

Up-to-date sources in the field of criminology show that despite a decreasing trend of crime at the EU level, people are hugely concerned with crime-related issues (De Wever, 2011). This was precisely the starting point of the MARGIN project. After two years of work we have been able to provide solid arguments offering a more convincing explanation for the mismatch between the drop in crime and increases in the perception of insecurity: **fears and insecurities are increasingly grounded in social causes and downward social mobility.** Accordingly, although crime and victimization are relatively uncommon events in people's life, fear of crime and the perception of insecurity become a pressing issue as urgent as crime itself. With this in mind, it seems crucial to design and implement strategies "targeting fear" (Cordner, 2010: 10) through an in-depth measurement and analysis of the determinants of insecurity. The international, multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder collaboration undertaken in the framework of the MARGIN project represented a rigorous research-oriented attempt aimed at deepening our understanding of the root causes of insecurity in contemporary society. Based on the encouraging results achieved, we discuss below a number of recommendations, possible avenues and theoretical perspectives for further research.

Gap 1

One of the main obstacles towards a comprehensive analysis of crime-related issues is the scarce availability of publicly accessible data on crime trends and survey-based measures of insecurity.

Recommendation 1

As stated in 2012 within the joint EC/EU Parliament Communication on *Measuring Crime in the EU*, statistics on crime and criminal justice are indispensable tools for developing evidence-based policy at EU level. Nevertheless, the work carried out in the framework of the MARGIN project demonstrates that publicly available statistics on crime, including survey-based data, are still very rare and incomplete, and in most cases specific and difficult to obtain authorizations are needed to access data. When available to the general public, data usually refer to a whole country, which means that it is impossible to analyse crime trends at finer geographical levels (regions, cities, districts and/or neighbourhoods). The lack of data at the sub-city level clearly prevents a comprehensive analysis of the social roots of crime-related issues (i.e. connecting crime statistics with socio-economic and socio-geographic features of a given area) and reduces the effectiveness of policy intervention to reduce risk factors and potential causes of disorder. Accordingly, the first recommendation targets the owner of crime-related data (e.g. police forces, institutions designing and/or implementing surveys at the local, national, EU and international level) and concerns the need to **make up-to-date data publicly available at the finest geographic level possible to enhance knowledge-based activities to reduce insecurity**.

Gap 2

There is a lack of independent variables (i.e. information about the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents) in current crime and victimization surveys that could substantially improve the insights that could be obtained from them.

Recommendation 2

Future initiatives aimed at designing questionnaires to be used in crime and victimization surveys should consider the inclusion of **more independent variables in order to measure fear of crime and its correlation with sociological variables**. Our results clearly endorse a multifaceted conceptualization of subjective insecurity while, at the same time, indicating that social exclusion and socially constructed anxieties influence people's perception of insecurity. **Enhancing participatory processes for survey design** appears to be particularly suitable for following through on this recommendation. In the case of the MARGIN project we designed a new thematic survey using the Delphi method. Specifically, a panel of international experts on the topic of insecurity assessment were involved in an iterative design process in order to define a number of indicators enabling the assessment of insecurity among different social groups.

Gap 3

Crime victimization surveys are still not fully exploited as a tool informing policy intervention.

Recommendation 3

It is our strong belief that identifying and analysing factors that may determine variations in terms of perceived insecurity among citizens does not simply mean gathering new knowledge but, more importantly, recognizing a number of risk factors that could be addressed by policymakers in order to tackle insecurity more effectively. It seems crucial for policymakers to overcome the understanding of crime victimization surveys as mere statistical exercises. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) endorses this position as stated in the *Roadmap to improve the quality and availability of crime statistics at the national and international levels*. The report encourages, among other measures, "**the promotion of a wider implementation of victimization surveys within the scope of official statistics** to enhance the knowledge base on crime for the design of effective crime and criminal justice policies and better targeting of crime prevention measures" (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2012, p. 16). In addition, **victimization surveys should focus on specific age groups (young vs. elderly) or demographic groups (female, foreign-born, etc.) in order to produce targeted diagnoses**.

Gap 4

The overwhelming tendency to research fear of crime and perceived insecurity exclusively based on quantitative survey methods is a key deficit for this area of study.

Recommendation 4

Although Recommendation 4 is essentially academically oriented, policymakers should also duly take into account the relevance of applying mixed-method approaches to **investigate the social phenomenon of perceived insecurity through the combination of quantitative and qualitative data**. Developing alternative approaches is crucial to deepening our understanding of the root causes affecting people's perceived insecurity. Although we are aware that such approaches are time-consuming and require the availability of a considerable amount of resources, they remain the only way to develop critical reflective analysis that addresses social inequality and fosters bottom-up strategies to cope with insecurity.

Gap 5

Citizens' involvement is security research is sporadic even though it could enhance the potential of bottom-up practices of resilience.

Recommendation 5

In line with the above-mentioned recommendation, qualitative approaches to insecurity have the added value of opening up possibilities for the direct involvement of citizens in security research. In the case of the MARGIN project, for instance, the structured discussions undertaken during the focus groups have been proven to offer an opportunity for participants (e.g. neighbours, representatives from marginalized communities, civil society actors, police officers, etc.) to share their views on existing problems in their neighbourhood and, more importantly, on which solutions could be implemented in order to solve them. In line with the inputs coming from the restorative justice practices, **citizens' involvement in security research and decision-making is likely to generate meaningful community-driven strategies to cope with insecurity.** Successful experiences could not only improve understanding but also enhance a transformative process by empowering the parties involved.

Gap 6

Further research is needed in order to overcome existing deficits in the literature.

Recommendation 6

Fear of crime – and, by extension, feelings of insecurity – is a dynamic phenomenon, being influenced by particular locations, times and activities. Future research should **explore the link between times and places where victimization and feelings of insecurity are more likely to occur**. The role of social networks in people's beliefs and feelings of insecurity needs to be further explored. The **indirect victimization hypothesis** suggests for instance that feelings of insecurity can increase when close friends and family members experience victimization. Conversely, some studies have demonstrated that **social networks and informal social ties** can have a positive effect on the fear of crime. Cybercrime is an emerging crime type whose relationship with fear and insecurity has to date been understudied. This is an important question because it is not clear that many of our existing theories regarding fear of crime – such as vulnerability or neighbourhood effects – also hold in the context of cyber-victimization. Furthermore, very little research has been conducted on **the influence of marginalized communities on the relationship between cybercrime and perceived insecurity**. Finally, we should develop an analysis for understanding how different country contexts affect people's assessment of their risks or their likeliness to become anxious about victimization. As demonstrated by our analysis, when people move country they do not always experience security issues in the same way as those born there. If these variations remain after controlling for other influencing factors, then it is reasonable to

assume that there are potentially **cultural differences between countries in terms of what is and isn't a concern and what is and isn't acceptable**.

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