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Neighbourhood, Crime and Fear: Exploring Subjective Perception of Security in Serbia

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Abstract: The perception of (in)security plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' interactions with their environment and can have significant implications for the prevalence and persistence of criminal activity within communities. Perceived insecurity can lead individuals to fear becoming victims of crime and can affect the willingness of individuals to report crimes to authorities. Furthermore, it can undermine social cohesion within communities by eroding trust and cooperation among residents. The subjective security experience in the neighbourhood is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various determinants. Using data from the European Social Survey Round 10, the paper aims to scrutinise the potential factors contributing to feelings of security among the respondents in Serbia. We focus on the respondents' perceptions of security in four regions (Belgrade, Vojvodina, Šumadija and West Serbia, and South and East Serbia) operationalised through the question "How safe do you – or would you – feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?". By examining determinants such as age, gender, daily activity, area (rural or urban), social capital, interpersonal trust and perceived quality of society, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of security perception. The primary findings underscore the significance of individual vulnerability and social integration measures as critical indicators of security perceptions in the neighbourhoods. The study highlighted notable regional variations in predictors of security perceptions, emphasising the necessity of localised approaches to address security concerns. By comprehensively understanding the determinants of subjective security, policymakers and urban planners can develop targeted strategies to mitigate fear and enhance security perceptions.

Keywords: security, European Social Survey, neighbourhood, Serbia, fear of crime.

INTRODUCTION

Fear of crime represents a significant social problem that negatively affects the quality of life for individuals and communities. The perception of safety and security plays a crucial role in individuals' interactions with their environment. Insecurity can trigger fear of vic-

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timisation, reduce willingness to report crimes and undermine social cohesion by destroying interpersonal trust, as well as trust in the system. Perceived insecurity often leads to a higher concentration of criminal activities in certain areas. On an individual level, fear of crime has harmful psychological effects, restricts freedom of movement, and increases life dissatisfaction. At the community level, it diminishes social cohesion and participation in neighbourhood activities. At the societal level, it mainly affects those in disadvantaged socio-economic positions without sufficient resources for protection or relocation. Fear of crime can be defined in various ways, including concern for security, perception of risk, and likelihood of victimisation. Some focus on emotions directed towards criminal objects (narrow definition), while others include cognitive and behavioural aspects, such as avoiding nighttime walks (Đurić & Popović Ćitic, 2013b).

When moving independently through the neighbourhood where a person lives, the feeling of security is crucial for promoting an active lifestyle, directly affecting individuals' health and well-being (Velasquez et al., 2021). The perception of (in)security and danger is a product of social construction, collective agreement, and socialisation, meaning that the perception of danger does not always align with objective empirical indicators, but rather, the perception of (in)security can be mediated by different cognitive frameworks (Simpson, 1996). However, reducing the perception of (in)security solely to the cognitive dimension would represent a reductionist interpretation of complex social reality.

Literature addressing the fear of crime is abundant, especially on a global scale, with researchers intensively studying this social phenomenon since the 1970s (Visser et al., 2013). In the domestic context, Branislava Popović Ćitić and Slađana Đurić (2014) have made significant contributions (Đurić & Popović Ćitić, 2013b, 2013a). The authors utilised findings from a large regional study, "Fear of Crime in Big Cities", conducted in 2009 in the capital cities of the former Yugoslav republics. Research has also focused on students' attitudes on this topic (Ljubičić & Dragišić, 2010) and gender differences in the fear of crime in Niš (Konstantinović Vilić et al., 2016). However, to the knowledge of this paper's authors, no recent research in Serbia has examined the predictors of subjective perception of security in neighbourhoods, especially one that includes the entire territory of Serbia.

In this study, we utilise the data from the 10th round of the European Social Survey to explore the factors influencing the sense of security among the respondents in Serbia. We specifically focus on how individuals perceive security, using the following question "How safe do you – or would you – feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?" Our analysis considers various determinants, including age, gender, daily activities (indoor or outdoor), area type (rural or urban), social capital, and interpersonal trust. We aim to enhance the comprehension of security perception complexities.

Following the literature review, the subsequent chapter delves into the methodology, providing essential details about the data used for analysis and the necessary data preparation steps before modelling. We developed four models for different regions in Serbia: Belgrade, Vojvodina, Šumadija and Western Serbia, as well as Eastern and Southern Serbia. A detailed presentation of the statistical analysis will be included in the results section. Finally, in conclusion, we will summarise the findings while considering the study's limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been widely documented that certain demographic groups tend to experience higher levels of fear of crime. These groups are typically characterised by sociodemographic indicators related to social vulnerability, disorder, and integration. Social integration, which refers to individuals' connections to their community and sense of belonging within the social environment, is linked to fear of crime. This fear's key factors include household structure, social and interpersonal trust levels, and social capital. Higher levels of social disorder and lower social cohesion are associated with increased crime rates and heightened fear of crime, as well as feelings of insecurity (Visser et al., 2013). The breakdown in social order can be seen in a range of disrespectful behaviours and physical decay within communities, leading to feelings of insecurity and unsafety and fear of crime. Those who are socially vulnerable can include women, older individuals, those who feel physically weak, individuals with limited financial resources, those with lower levels of education, and anyone who perceives their environment as unsafe or feels at risk of discrimination (Đurić & Popović Ćitic, 2013a). Popović Ćitić and Đurić (2014) have shown, using the example of Belgrade, that in order to understand the phenomenon better, the sociodemographic model needs to be supplemented with socio-psychological factors, which are otherwise related to components defined as attractiveness, malicious intent, strength, and criminalised space.

Research has indicated that individuals residing in urban areas tend to experience higher insecurity levels than those living in rural settings. The sense of insecurity in one's living environment has been linked to perceptions of health status. However, some researchers caution that the connection between functional limitations, such as disability, and feelings of insecurity may not always be direct, as situational factors, such as the perception of physical disorder, can play a mediating role (Velasquez et al., 2021). The correlation between specific characteristics of respondents and the perception of security may not always be clear, which is also demonstrated by the link between victimisation experiences and the perception of security, which can also be ambiguous (Visser et al., 2013).

Scholars exploring the complex concept of well-being point out that the perception of the quality of society or social well-being significantly influences personal well-being (Harrison et al., 2016), which is closely related to the social integration of individuals in society and its dimension of citizens' rights and protection (in studies, one of the indicators for measuring protection is also the question of citizens' security while walking in the dark in their neighbourhood) as an indicator of a decent society (Abbott et al., 2016). In other words, social integration reduces the fear of crime and the feeling of vulnerability, positively affecting the sense of control over one's life and life satisfaction (Adams & Serpe, 2000).

METHODS

The European Social Survey is a highly regarded international academic research initiative that has set the standard for data collection in social research. This survey has been carried out in 40 countries since 2001. Serbia participated for the first time in 2018 during round 9, which included 28 other European countries. The data used for our analysis

come from the subsequent round 10. Up until round 10, data collection relied on face-to-face interviewing techniques. However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during round 10, a total of 9 countries, including Serbia, alongside the face-to-face method, adopted self-completion approaches (web and paper), while 22 countries continued with face-to-face interviews.

Additionally, the round 10 fieldwork took longer than usual due to pandemic conditions, and the data collection in Serbia occurred from January to May 2022. Our data analysis was based on the Serbian database (version 3.1, production date: 2023-11-02), which included 1505 respondents. We ensured the accuracy of our analysis by weighting the data using post-stratification methods, which adjusted the probability of sampling individual respondents and accounted for differences in respondent selection, sampling errors, and potential non-responses (European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, 2023).[3]

Statistical Analyses

The dependent variable in question was the subjective perception of security in the neighbourhoods, measured using the question "How safe do you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?". An initially ordinal variable (ranging from very safe to very unsafe) was recoded into a nominal variable for binary logistic regression, with two attributes – feeling of security and feeling of insecurity. The statistical analyses were conducted using the Social Package for Social Sciences (IBM, SPSS statistics, version 23).

In preparing the data for binary logistic regression to identify the predictors of feelings of security in the neighbourhoods, we also conducted additional data preparation for the independent variables used in the model. All dichotomous dependent variables were encoded with labels 0 and 1. We constructed three composite indicators through factor analysis (principal component analysis) (tables 1, 2 and 3). The perceived quality of society (PQS) indicator was created using specific subsets of relevant variables that measure three different aspects of the perceived quality of society: social satisfaction (satisfaction with the current state of the economy, democracy, and government work), political trust (trust in national institutions), and attitudes towards public services (assessment of the state of healthcare and education) (Harrison et al., 2016). The social capital indicator was created based on principal component analysis. It included statements about the frequency of encounters with friends, relatives, or colleagues, the existence of individuals with whom they can discuss intimate and personal matters and participation in social activities. The indicator of interpersonal trust was formed based on statements about whether most people can be trusted, whether people try to take advantage of others, and whether people mostly help each other or only care about themselves. The data underwent principal component analysis (PCA) in all three cases. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p = .000$) indicated the factorability of the variable matrix, and in all three cases a single component emerged with a factor loading value greater than 1 (tables 1, 2 and 3).

3 For additional details regarding the questionnaire, methodology, the European Social Survey (ESS), including core and rotating modules, as well as supporting documentation, please refer to the ESS website at https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org

Table 1. *Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Perceived Quality of Society*

Statements…	Components
Trust in the Parliament	.870
Trust in the judiciary	.706
Trust in the police	.762
Trust in politicians	.840
Trust in political parties	.755
On the whole, how satisfied are you with the present state of Serbia's economy?	.789
Now, thinking about the Serbian government, how satisfied you are with the way it is doing its job?	.848
How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Serbia?	.870
What do you think overall about the state of education in Serbia nowadays?	.681
What do you think overall about the state of health services in Serbia nowadays?	.688
KMO .912; Sig .000; % 61.492, Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Factor eigenvalues	6.149

Table 2. *Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Social Capital*

Statements…	Components
How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?	.778
How many people, if any, are there with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?	.683
Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?	.763
KMO .624; Sig .000; % 55.142, Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Factor eigenvalues	1.654

Table 3. *Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Interpersonal Trust*

Statements…	Components
Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?	.842
Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?	.848
Would you say that most of the time, people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?	.785
KMO .686; Sig .000; % 68.095, Extraction method: Principal component analysis; Factor eigenvalues	2.043

To capture a more detailed understanding of predictors influencing security perception in the neighbourhoods, we have chosen to analyse four separate models based on regions (Belgrade region, Vojvodina, Šumadija and Western Serbia, Eastern and Southern Serbia) rather than using a single model for the entire country of Serbia. These models all utilise the same dependent and independent variables commonly employed in studies on fear of crime, as provided in our research instrument. We have assessed the predictive capacity of various independent variables, including gender, age, education, income, size of place of residence, daily activities, self-perception of physical vulnerability (due to illness or disability), political awareness, social capital, interpersonal trust, perception of societal quality, and experiences of victimisation.[4]

RESULTS

Before delving into the created models for identifying significant predictors of feeling safe in our neighbourhood, it is valuable to begin by showcasing the basic distribution of responses. In response to the query "How safe do you – or would you – feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?", 28.7% of participants felt more or less unsafe, while 71.3% reported feeling somewhat safe or safer (see Figure 1). Within the overall sample, 24.5% of respondents come from the Belgrade region, 26.5% reside in the Vojvodina region, 27.8% in the Šumadija and Western Serbia region, and 21.2% in the Eastern and Southern Serbia region (see Figure 2).

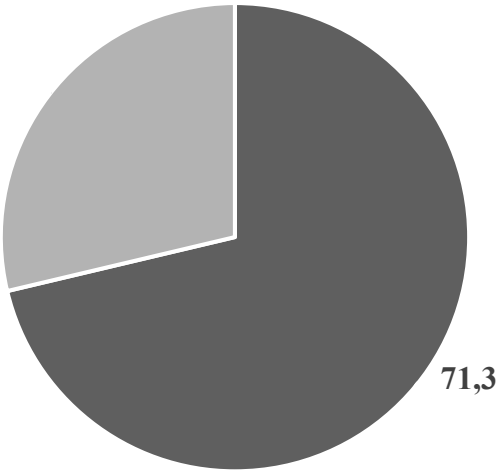

Figure 1. *How Safe Do You – or Would You – Feel Walking Alone in Your Neighbourhood After Dark? (%)*

4 The reference categories are gender – female, income – finding it difficult/very difficult on present income, settlement – a big city, daily activity – predominantly household activities, perception of oneself as a physically weaker person - respondents whose chronic illness or disability hinders daily functioning, the experience of victimisation – burglary victims. Age, education (number of years spent in education), daily political information (number of hours spent following news about politics and current events), social capital, interpersonal trust, and perception of the quality of society are continuous variables. It is important to note that the variable rel

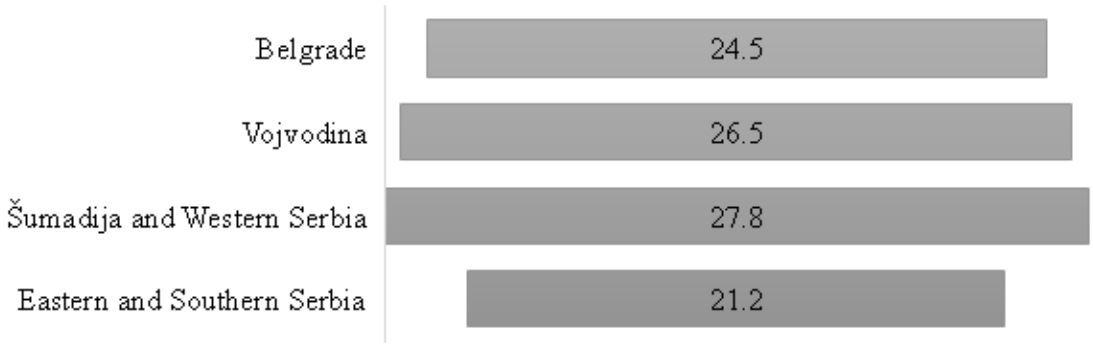

Figure 2. *Share of Respondents by Region in Serbia (%)*

The data indicates that a slightly higher percentage of female participants (56.6%) is present in the sample than male participants (43.4%). 17.7% of the respondents reported that they live comfortably on their current income, while 49.2% can cope, and 33.1% find it difficult or very difficult to make ends meet with their current income. About 36.1% of the respondents primarily focus on activities at home (housewives, unemployed individuals, the chronically ill/disabled, and retirees), while 63.9% are engaged in activities outside the home (such as employed individuals and students). The majority (85.4%) have not experienced victimisation, while 14.6% report being victims of burglary or physical assault. Lastly, 23.4% of the respondents perceive themselves as physically weaker, experiencing hindrance in their daily activities due to long-term illness, disability, weakness, or changes in mental health.

Model 1 has demonstrated statistical significance ($\chi2 = 73.295$, $p = 0.000$). The model accurately accounts for 22.7 to 32.4% of the variance and correctly categorises 76.2% of the cases. Additionally, models 2 (Vojvodina), 3 (Šumadija and Western Serbia), and 4 (Eastern and Southern Serbia) have also exhibited statistical significance. Their respective indicators are as follows: model 2 ($\chi2 = 62.201$, $p = 0.000$, explains 18.6 to 26.7% of the variance and correctly classifies 71.5% of the cases); model 3 ($\chi2 = 66.802$, $p = 0.000$, explains 19.1 to 27% of the variance and correctly classifies 74.5% of the cases); model 4 ($\chi2 = 69.634$, $p = 0.000$, explains 25.4 to 38.8% of the variance and correctly classifies 82% of the cases). Tables 4 and 5 (highlighted cells) show that only certain predictors have reached statistical significance.

In the Belgrade region (Model 1), six independent variables have made a unique and statistically significant contribution to the model. The most influential predictors of feeling safe while walking alone at night in one's neighbourhood are gender and victimisation experience, with probability ratios of 3.7 and 3.6, respectively. This suggests that men in the Belgrade region feel 3.7 times more secure than women when walking alone at night in their neighbourhood and that this feeling is 3.6 times more frequent among the respondents who have not experienced victimisation (burglary or physical assault). Additionally, age, education, income, and PQS are significant predictors. The variable measuring the

ated to the size of the place of residence has been adjusted to the models by recoding (redistribution into other categories) considering the distribution of responses by regions so that we do not work with categories that contain a small number of cases. There is no multicollinearity between independent predictors.

age of the respondents has a negative beta coefficient, indicating that as the number of years increases, the probability of feeling safe decreases (for each additional year of age, respondents are 0.9 times less likely to report feeling safe). The other significant predictors show a positive direction – for each additional year spent in the educational system, respondents are 1.15 times more likely to report feeling safe; those who say they can somehow manage with their current income are twice as likely to report feeling safe compared to those who struggle (very much) to make ends meet with their current income; as PQS increases, the probability of reporting feeling safe while walking alone at night in one's neighbourhood also increases.

Table 4. *Predictors of Security Perception in the Neighbourhoods, Statistical Indicators for Logistic Regression Model – Belgrade Region (Model 1) and Vojvodina (Model 2)*

	Belgrade (Model 1)			Vojvodina (Model 2)		
	B	Sig.	Exp (B)	B	Sig.	Exp (B)
Men	1.325	.000	3.763	.451	.165	1.570
Age	-.025	.043	.975	.031	.007	1.032
Education	.141	.001	1.152	.020	.620	1.021
Suburbs/outskirts of a big city, town/small city, village (Belgrade)	.380	.265	1.463			
Town/small city (Vojvodina)				.635	.091	1.888
Village (Vojvodina)				1.760	.000	5.812
Living comfortably on present income	.498	.257	1.646	.505	.269	1.658
Coping on present income	.870	.024	2.388	.159	.648	1.172
Daily activity - outdoor	-.490	.282	.613	.185	.681	1.203
Daily activities are not hindered by physical/ mental problems	-.592	.150	.553	.869	.020	2.384
Interpersonal trust	.126	.487	1.135	.446	.015	1.562
Social capital	.045	.790	1.046	.117	.496	1.124
Perceived quality of society (PQS)	.633	.003	1.883	.203	.185	1.225
No experience of victimisation	1.305	.000	3.689	.463	.275	1.589
Daily information	-.001	.820	.999	-.002	.354	.998
Constant	-.799	.432	.450	-2.709	.008	.067

In the second model, the model for the Vojvodina region, four independent variables have been identified as significant predictors of perceived security: age, settlement, perception of oneself as physically weaker, and interpersonal trust. The strongest predictor is residence settlement, with individuals living in rural areas feeling up to 5 times more secure than respondents living in large cities. Those who do not perceive themselves as physically weaker feel 2.3 times more secure than those who do. Additionally, an increase in inter-

personal trust leads to a 1.5 increase in the feeling of security, and with each additional year of age, the feeling of security increases by 1.03. This demonstrates an opposite trend compared to the Belgrade region.

Let us review the models for the Šumadija and Western Serbia and Eastern and Southern Serbia regions (Table 5). In both models, three independent variables have shown a statistically significant impact. Gender emerged as the strongest predictor in both regions – men in the Šumadija and Western Serbia (Model 3) region feel 3.7 times more secure than women when walking alone in the dark in their neighbourhood, while in the Eastern and Southern Serbia region, they feel 8.1 times more secure compared to women. Additionally, in the Eastern and Southern Serbia region (Model 4), place of residence is also a strong predictor – the respondents living in small towns or villages feel eight times more secure than those living in big cities. Furthermore, in this region, daily activity is significant as well, with the respondents who spend most of their daily activities outside their homes, such as students and employed individuals, feeling three times more secure compared to those who spend most of their daily activities at home, such as housewives, retirees, disabled individuals, and the unemployed. In the Šumadija and Western Serbia region, income is also a significant predictor of security perception – the respondents who live comfortably from their current income feel 2.4 times more secure, while those who manage to get by feel twice as safe compared to those who struggle to make ends meet. Finally, an increase in PQS corresponds to a higher probability of feeling safe while walking alone in the dark in one's neighbourhood, increasing by 1.6.

Table 5. *Predictors of Security Perception in the Neighbourhoods, Statistical Indicators for Logistic Regression Model – Šumadija and Western Serbia (Model 3) and Eastern and Southern Serbia (Model 4)*

	Šumadija and Western Serbia (Model 3)			**Eastern and Southern Serbia (Model 4)**		
	B	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**	**B**	**Sig.**	**Exp (B)**
Men	1.312	.000	3.713	2.103	.000	8.188
Age	.014	.144	1.014	.008	.566	1.008
Education	-.069	.067	.934	-.009	.852	.991
Suburbs/outskirts of a big city, town/small city, village (Belgrade)	.090	.865	1.094	-1.101	.080	.332
Town/small city (Vojvodina)	.620	.107	1.859	2.154	.000	8.617
Village (Vojvodina)	-.267	.539	.766	.775	.145	2.172
Living comfortably on present income	.880	.049	2.411	-.816	.256	.442
Coping on present income	.738	.029	2.092	.000	.999	1.000
Daily activity - outdoor	-.460	.176	.631	1.178	.034	3.248
Daily activities are not hindered by physical/ mental problems	.250	.473	1.283	.105	.834	1.111
Interpersonal trust	.086	.604	1.090	-.329	.131	.719

	Šumadija and Western Serbia (Model 3)			Eastern and Southern Serbia (Model 4)		
	B	Sig.	Exp (B)	B	Sig.	Exp (B)
Social capital	-.219	.199	.803	.058	.799	1.060
Perceived quality of society (PQS)	.509	.001	1.664	.243	.314	1.275
No experience of victimisation	.708	.104	2.029	1.369	.078	3.932
Daily information	-.001	.257	.999	.002	.242	1.002
Constant	-.526	.515	.591	-2.630	.064	.072

DISCUSSION

It was found that although each model included the same set of assumed security predictors, different factors contributed to the perception of security in various regions of Serbia. In the Belgrade region, six predictors were identified, with gender and experience of victimisation being the most significant. The region of Vojvodina revealed four significant predictors, with the residential area being the most important. Gender emerged as the most important predictor in the Šumadija/Western Serbia and Eastern/Southern Serbia regions (each with three significant predictors). Residential areas also stood out as a significant predictor in the Eastern and Southern Serbia regions.

The discovery that gender is the most significant factor in predicting feelings of security (with men generally feeling more secure than women) across almost all regions, except for the region of Vojvodina, aligns with previous research on security perceptions, indicating that gender is a strong and consistent predictor of feelings of insecurity (Đurić & Popović Ćitić, 2013a). Various social and situational factors have already been identified as contributing to women's heightened sense of insecurity in the neighbourhoods (Konstantinović Vilić et al., 2016). Despite these findings, the so-called "paradox of fear of crime" persists, wherein women exhibit greater fear despite being at a lower risk of victimisation (Đurić & Popović Ćitić, 2013a).

The concept of vulnerability has proven to be the most influential factor contributing to our models' perception of (in)security. Namely, individuals associating with the "wrong people" (Evans & Fletcher, 2000) tend to perceive lower levels of security in the neighbourhoods. In addition to gender, limited access to resources emerged as a significant predictor in three out of four regions in Serbia (except Vojvodina). This suggests that higher-income respondents feel safer than those struggling to make ends meet. In Vojvodina, the respondents' self-assessment of being physically weaker was a notable predictor. Education also played a significant role in the Belgrade region, indicating that individuals with more formal education feel more secure in the neighbourhoods. Lastly, age emerged as an important vulnerability characteristic and was a significant predictor in both the Belgrade region and Vojvodina. In the Belgrade region, the perception of security decreases with age, while in Vojvodina, it increases. These contrasting findings are consistent with those of other researchers, highlighting the need for further study, particularly involving situational factors.

It is essential to consider the measures of an individual's social integration as significant predictors in Vojvodina, the Belgrade region, and Šumadija/Western Serbia. In Vojvodina, an increase in interpersonal trust is associated with a rise in the perception of security. In contrast, in the other two regions, an increase in the perceived quality of society leads to a higher perception of security. Specifically, the experience of victimisation is only significant in the Belgrade region, where the absence of this experience corresponds to a greater sense of security. Popović Ćitić and Đurić (2014) have highlighted that social-psychological variables carry more predictive power than sociodemographic ones in Belgrade. While we did not have the data to test this finding, we acknowledge the significance of integrating "defensible space" variables and parameters of perception of physical and social disorder, as emphasised by these authors. Unfortunately, we were unable to incorporate these variables into the models. However, this work has several limitations, including its scope, which prevents a more detailed presentation of previous findings. Additionally, the analysis utilised a global measure, a single variable that lacks specificity (i.e., it does not specify the type of crime). Despite concerns about its reliability and validity, the question used to assess the perception of security in the neighbourhoods has been widely employed in other studies, enhancing comparability (Visser et al., 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

The authors of this paper sought to identify the various factors influencing the subjective perception of security in the neighbourhoods in Serbia, emphasising the multidimensional nature of fear of crime and its relationship to perceived security. Our research revealed that perceived security is intricately linked to factors such as gender (which emerged as the most influential), age, income, experience of victimisation, place of residence, perceived quality of society, interpersonal trust, and self-perceived physical vulnerability. Individual vulnerability and social integration measures were identified as critical predictors of security perceptions in the neighbourhoods.

The study highlighted significant regional variations in predictors of security perceptions, emphasising the need for localised approaches to address security concerns. It also underscored the importance of considering social and psychological factors in addition to sociodemographic variables when assessing the sense of security. A comprehensive understanding of the determinants of subjective security in a regional context can inform targeted strategies aimed at reducing fear and improving security perceptions, offering valuable insights for decision-makers and urban planners.

Acknowledging the study's limitations, it is important to replicate the findings and conduct further research to address situational factors and perform a more specific assessment of crime types, enhancing the reliability of the conclusions.

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