

Comparing countries, regions or cities in terms of security

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It is tempting to compare countries, regions or cities when studying security. Such comparisons are, however, complex and call for great caution. Based on the case of the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR), this note reviews the conditions required to enable methodologically rigorous comparisons (Sections 1 to 3) and discusses some existing indices and rankings as well as their limitations (Section 4).

1. Similarity of the territories compared

Comparisons between countries, regions or cities in terms of security can only be made if the entities being compared share similar typological characteristics; otherwise, the analysis risks highlighting differences that are more closely linked to territorial characteristics than to security phenomena. The BCR is, however, a unique entity: a city-region, a national capital, and an international metropolis hosting numerous institutions, summits and events, and acting as a major hub for students, tourists and commuters. These specific functions have a structural impact on the number of recorded incidents, independently of the underlying level of crime.

2. Similarity of the legal framework

Legal standards vary from one country to another, and, as a result, so do the incidents that constitute "recorded crime". Certain acts are criminalised in some countries but not in others, and the scope of offences bearing similar names may differ, as may recording practices, priorities and modes of handling incidents (criminal, administrative or preventive). Consequently, official crime figures cannot be compared mechanically without a refined analysis of both content and context.¹

Even within a single country, the legal framework is not completely uniform. In Belgium, for example, general police regulations (GPR) may differ depending on the police district or even the

municipality. Since 2020, the BCR has applied a single, harmonised GPR shared by all 19 municipalities. However, offences recorded on this basis and liable to municipal administrative sanctions (SAC/GAS) are not necessarily identical to those subject to similar treatment in other major Belgian cities.

3. Similarity of the social context

Social, demographic and economic contexts also vary between countries, regions, and, in some cases, cities. These differences influence how crime is perceived by the population and the willingness of victims to report incidents to the authorities. Infrastructure, the organisation of security management, trust in public authorities and the existence of data collection on the "dark figure" – i.e. incidents not known to the authorities – are all elements that must be taken into account when comparing geographical entities in terms of crime.

4. Existing indices

Despite these structural limitations, numerous tools seek to compare security levels between countries, regions or cities. Many online rankings exist (for example, the Crime Index and Safety Index on numbeo.com, or rankings of tourist destinations). Alongside such initiatives – whose methodologies are often insufficiently transparent or based on very small samples – there are also more robust indices relying on the standardisation and weighting of indicators in order to enable comparisons despite contextual differences. Each index pursues its own specific objective and focuses either on countries or on cities. It should be noted that the larger the entity considered, the more local specificities within that territory tend to be masked, even though taking them into account is essential to fully grasp security challenges in all their complexity.

The [Global Organized Crime Index](#) ranks countries – including Belgium – according to scores for criminality and resilience to organised crime. It is based on standardised indicators ranging from 0

to 10 and on confidence scores assigned by experts. Despite a solid, multi-stage methodology, this index is subject to bias, notably due to the judgements of the experts involved and the uniform weighting of its components across different contexts.²

The **Crime Harm Index** weights offences according to the harm caused to victims, measured indirectly through applicable penalties. It distinguishes between incidents reported by victims or witnesses and those proactively detected by the police, and is based on a methodology developed by researchers at the University of Cambridge.³

At city level, comparisons are even more challenging, given the difficulty of obtaining comprehensive and reliable data. The **Safe Cities Index** (SCI) aims to benchmark security across major cities, including Brussels. In its most recent edition (2021 – it has not been updated since), it relied on 76 quantitative and qualitative indicators, divided into input indicators (policies, resources, legal framework, etc.) or output indicators (results), covering digital security, health security, infrastructure security, as well as personal and environmental security. Because indicators are standardised on a scale from 0 to 100, variations in scores over time cannot be interpreted as genuine changes in security levels, and significant threshold effects may be observed – whereby small changes in indicators lead to large variations in scores).⁴ For the SCI, as for the *Global Organized Crime Index*, it is therefore preferable to analyse disaggregated scores by category rather than overall composite scores.

By way of illustration, some cities have recently overhauled their approach to building security indices. The city of Amsterdam⁵, for example, has abandoned the use of a single composite score in favour of several distinct indices (recorded crime, victimisation, perceived nuisance, and feelings of insecurity). This choice is based on the observation that a single aggregated score tends to obscure different realities, and may lead to overly simplistic interpretations. Taking into account the population present (workers, students and visitors), rather than residents alone, further illustrates the extent to which the standardisation of indicators influences results. Such methodological choices, while coherent at local level, further complicate direct comparisons between cities or regions.

Conclusion

Constructing and standardising indicators that allow for meaningful comparisons of security levels between countries, regions or cities remains extremely challenging

While indices can serve as tools for contextualisation or benchmarking, they cannot be used to steer security policies. Without critical analysis, they may even result in erroneous interpretations and a distorted picture of security, as similar figures do not necessarily carry the same meaning across different countries, and aggregated indices may assign identical overall scores for very different underlying reasons. Any attempt at comparison therefore requires a high degree of caution, and the specific characteristics of the BCR make it particularly difficult to compare with other regions of the country or with other major cities.

It is nevertheless possible to observe trends by focusing on specific indicators rather than on composite index scores. Trends can also be analysed within a single territory, provided that measurement methods remain stable over time and that the necessary data are collected consistently. The availability of accurate quantitative and qualitative data series is a prerequisite for any attempt at comparison and indicator development. This constitutes one of the core missions of the safe.brussels Observatory for the Brussels-Capital Region.

¹Cf. (French and Dutch) Observatory, *Considérations méthodologiques sur les chiffres de la criminalité – Notes méthodologiques de l'Observatoire*, Brussels: safe.brussels, 2025, p. 2.

²https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/english/ocindex_methodology.pdf.

³Sherman L. et al., *The Cambridge Crime Harm Index: Measuring Total Harm from Crime Based on Sentencing Guidelines*, in *Policing* 10/3, pp. 171-183, 2016.

⁴The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Safe Cities Index 2021*, p. 50ss.

⁵Hesseling, N. & Smeets, H. (2022). *Verantwoording veiligheidsindexen 2021*. Onderzoek en Statistiek, Gemeente Amsterdam.

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D/2025/14.168/16

Last update: March 2026