

CSETE, DÁNIEL

No-Go zones and tourism security: law enforcement challenges and perceptions

Introduction

Tourism security¹ has become one of the most decisive dimensions of international tourism today, particularly given accelerating global mobility and urbanisation. In destination choice, beyond economic and cultural factors, the role of subjective safety perceptions and the images associated with a given place has gained increasing significance.² One of the most extreme manifestations of this is the phenomenon of so-called “no-go zones,” a term used in public discourse to describe urban or peri-urban areas that visitors perceive as dangerous or to be avoided, regardless of whether the actual public safety situation justifies such an assessment. As a result, these districts are relegated not only geographically, but also socially, economically, and in terms of tourism, to the periphery. The aim here is not to definitively settle the question of whether no-go zones exist, but rather to explore how their real or perceived safety influences tourists’ decisions.

The social narratives surrounding no-go zones often operate as self-fulfilling prophecies. Negative media coverage, political rhetoric, and fears spread via social media can substantially contribute to the stigmatisation of certain neighbourhoods, prompting tourists to avoid them. This process frequently unfolds independently of actual crime rates and stems instead from distorted perceptions of safety and shortcomings in public security

¹Michalkó, G. – Németh, J. – Ritecz, Gy.: Turizmusbiztonság [Tourism Security]. Dialóg Campus. Budapest, 2020. 463. o.

² Péter, E. – Németh, K. – Lelkóné Tollár, I.: Turizmusbiztonság, mint újonnan felmerülő fogyasztói igény [Tourism Safety as an Emerging Consumer Demand]. Turizmus Bulletin, 2. 2018. 30–37. o.

communication. The consequences extend well beyond a decline in tourism: social exclusion of residents and economic downturn also loom as risks.

Nevertheless, the relationship between tourism and no-go zones cannot be understood solely as a problem. Numerous examples demonstrate that districts once deemed unsafe can be successfully repositioned, and even transformed into attractive tourist destinations, provided the process is accompanied by community engagement, deliberate law enforcement strategies, and positive narrative-building. Alongside strengthening public safety, crime prevention, and rebuilding social trust, actors in the tourism sector—including security and law enforcement institutions—play a key role in dismantling stigma and fostering neighbourhood revitalisation.

The present study seeks to examine the tourism-related and security policy dimensions of no-go zones through the lens of law enforcement studies. Special attention is given to the role of subjective safety perceptions, the mechanisms by which negative images are formed and sustained, and how policing and community interventions can help reintegrate marginalised urban areas into the flow of tourism. By presenting international best practices, the article further highlights that no-go zones are not static or irreversibly isolated spaces, but urban environments that, with adequate policy attention and cooperation, can regain their social and touristic functions—outcomes that are both economically and socially desirable.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The concept of the “no-go zone” cannot be understood merely as a descriptive category; rather, it is a construct shaped by complex social processes, underpinned by political, sociological, and law enforcement dimensions. Although the term lacks a unified, legally codified definition, it is

generally applied to urban areas where the presence of authorities has diminished, public order has weakened, and the subjective sense of security³ among residents and visitors has significantly declined. Thus, no-go zones appear not only as geographical spaces, but also as peripheral areas in social, political, and symbolic terms.

From a law enforcement science⁴ perspective, three main dimensions can be distinguished: weakening normative control, symbolic stigmatisation, and structural marginalisation. The decline of normative control is reflected in the limited functioning of state institutions and law enforcement: police presence is sporadic, official intervention is inconsistent or even rejected, detection rates are low, while the level of hidden (unreported) crime remains high. Symbolic stigmatisation arises from the homogenised negative image produced by public opinion and the media, which ignores the internal diversity of these neighbourhoods. Structural marginalisation, in turn, stems from limited social mobility, restricted access to education and the labour market, as well as ethnic segregation.

In the context of tourism security, the notion of subjective safety is particularly important. Research confirms that travel decisions are shaped far more by perceived security than by objective data. Such perceptions are largely influenced by information derived from the media, social media platforms, travel blogs, or online reviews. The stigmatisation of a neighbourhood is therefore often less a result of actual events than of their interpretation, visual representation, and the repeated emphasis on negative incidents. Consequently, the image formed in tourists' minds may not necessarily reflect the security situation.

³ Boda, J. (ed.): Rendészettudományi szaklexikon [Encyclopedia of Law Enforcement Science]. Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó. Budapest, 2019. 544. o.

⁴ Lippai, Z. – Sallai, J.: Helyet kér a rendészettudomány [Law Enforcement Science Claims Its Place]. Belügyi Szemle. 2022. 1829–1852. o.

No-go zones and tourism

The relationship between tourism and no-go zones is complex and often ambivalent. Tourism traditionally relies on stability, predictability, and the provision of positive experiences; therefore, any factor that undermines these expectations directly diminishes a destination's attractiveness. No-go zones, even when they do not pose an actual physical threat, are frequently associated with negative stereotypes that discourage visitors. Such stereotypes often extend beyond a specific neighbourhood, adversely affecting the overall image of an entire city or even a country as a tourist destination. The media plays a decisive role in shaping and maintaining this stigma.

Negative news reports in the press and on social media have a particularly strong impact on tourists' perceptions. It is common for a single isolated incident, an exaggerated report, or a sensationalised story to create a collective image of a neighbourhood that does not reflect its actual security situation. The digitalisation of news consumption further accelerates this process: a single negative piece of content can spread globally within moments and become deeply embedded in public consciousness. As a result, certain destinations are stigmatised, and tourists—often without conducting any real risk assessment—choose to avoid them. This not only causes economic losses for local communities and service providers but also hinders long-term social development. Thus, the media not only transmits information but also actively shapes the collective narratives of tourism security, making the promotion of accurate, nuanced, and contextualised reporting particularly important.

One of the main drivers of tourist avoidance is the lack of subjective safety. Visitors tend to steer clear of neighbourhoods associated with crime, social tensions, or cultural unfamiliarity. This process not only harms the local economy but also deepens the area's structural marginalisation. As visitor numbers decline, investment interest decreases, development projects are postponed, and social exclusion is reinforced.

At the same time, the relationship between tourism and no-go zones should not be interpreted exclusively negatively. In certain cases, tourism

itself may become a catalyst for the renewal of peripheral urban areas. Community-based tourism, social enterprises, local initiatives, and targeted development programs can all help create a new tourist identity for stigmatised districts. Of particular note in this regard is the phenomenon of dark tourism⁵, which attracts a specific visitor segment to sites linked to violence, disasters, or social trauma. These may include the scenes of past crimes, abandoned prisons, migrant camps, or memorial sites in former war zones.

Responsible tourism development is of critical importance in such contexts. It cannot be exploitative, cannot rely solely on sensationalist narratives, and must not disregard residents' interests. If these principles are respected, tourism can provide not only economic opportunities but also foster social integration and strengthen law enforcement presence.

In sum, the connection between no-go zones and tourism should not be viewed as a one-dimensional process. Tourists' avoidance behaviours can indeed perpetuate a district's peripheral status, but well-designed development strategies that leverage local resources can contribute to regeneration and the creation of safe tourist environments. In this way, policing and tourism are not conflicting domains but rather mutually reinforcing systems in the re-positioning of urban spaces as viable tourist destinations.

The significance of law enforcement measures

Law enforcement interventions related to no-go zones extend beyond public safety, as they also involve socio-political and tourism-strategic dimensions. The role of policing extends beyond crime control; it also encompasses stabilising public order and restoring trust among residents and tourism stakeholders. Restoring a sense of safety is a complex, multi-level process

⁵ Lennon, J. (2017): Dark tourism [Dark Tourism]. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 41. o.

that requires close cooperation among state authorities, municipalities, civil organisations, and local communities.⁶

The preventive approach of community policing can be particularly important in this context. This model allows police officers to act as partners within local society rather than merely as controlling or sanctioning authorities. It is particularly relevant in neighbourhoods where a crisis of trust has previously developed between residents and law enforcement agencies. Regular and predictable police presence, transparent communication, and sensitivity to local needs all help strengthen public order and enhance tourists' subjective sense of security.

Improving the physical environment is also a fundamental component of successful law enforcement interventions. Modernised street lighting, the functional redesign of public spaces, the installation of surveillance systems, and the rehabilitation of transport hubs can all help reintegrate previously avoided neighbourhoods into the flow of tourism. Yet such measures alone are insufficient: involving community actors and maintaining continuous social dialogue are indispensable for achieving sustainable outcomes.

The role of law enforcement communication is likewise crucial. Not only the implementation of measures but also their public presentation shapes how tourists and residents perceive change. The deliberate shaping of narratives, the visibility of achievements, and the incorporation of community perspectives can reduce stigmatisation and enhance credibility.

Within this framework, law enforcement science should not be regarded merely as a repository of applied knowledge but also as a strategic tool for

⁶ Christián, L. – Szabó, C. (2016): A magánbiztonság, az önkormányzati rendészet és a polgárőrség szerepe a turizmus védelmében [The Role of Private Security, Municipal Policing and Civil Guard in the Protection of Tourism]. In: Németh, K. (ed.): I. Turizmus és biztonság nemzetközi tudományos konferencia tanulmánykötet [Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Tourism and Security]. Pannon Egyetem Kiadó, Nagykanizsa. 18–24. o.

shaping perspectives.⁷ It enables no-go zones to be seen not solely as areas of risk, but as urban spaces capable of rehabilitation and repositioning. Aligning tourism security with law enforcement presence thus serves not only to protect visitors but also to improve residents' quality of life.

International examples and best practices

Al-Abdali, Amman

The Al-Abdali project⁸ was launched in 2005 in the centre of the Jordanian capital, on land previously used for military purposes. The initiative aimed to create a modern, multifunctional urban centre, including the New Abdali district with hotels, office buildings, residential complexes, commercial units, and leisure areas. Opinions among residents, however, remain divided: while the project has introduced new infrastructure, modern public spaces, and increased investment in the area, many feel it does not adequately serve the local community's needs. One of the most frequent criticisms is that many offices and apartments remain vacant because their prices are unaffordable for the average Jordanian citizen. At the same time, public spaces—particularly The Boulevard—have become lively, safe meeting points, positively impacting the city's overall sense of security.

From a security perspective, the project has produced several positive outcomes. Modern street lighting, increased police presence, the installation of advanced surveillance systems, and the revitalisation of urban life have collectively helped transform a previously avoided district into an attractive tourist destination. Nevertheless, an important lesson is that such

⁷ Keller, K. – Tóth-Kaszás, N.: A turizmusbiztonság megjelenése az EU tagállamainak turisztikai stratégiáiban [The Appearance of Tourism Safety in the Tourism Strategies of EU Member States]. *Vezetéstudomány*, 6. 2021. 32–43. o.

⁸ Kadhim, M. – Al-Akiely, F. (2015): Al-Abdali Mega Project: Assessment of Socio-economic and Cultural Impacts on the Peripheral Edges [Al-Abdali Mega Project: Assessment of Socio-economic and Cultural Impacts on the Peripheral Edges]. In: Aboutorabi, M. – Zalloom, B. (eds.): *Transformation of the Urban Character of Arab Cities since the Late Last Century*. Birmingham. 239–255. o.

developments can only be sustainable in the long term if physical renewal is accompanied by social integration. In the case of Al-Abdali, the lack of inclusivity and affordability raises serious questions about the project's actual social utility.⁹

Molenbeek, Brussels

Molenbeek came into the international spotlight in a highly negative context following the 2015 Brussels attacks and its association with ISIS-linked terrorist networks.¹⁰ The media frequently referred to the district as a “*jihadist hub*”, which significantly contributed to the formation of the no-go zone stigma. Its case illustrates how terrorism can exert both direct and lasting impacts on tourism.¹¹

In recent years, however, civil organisations, artists, and local initiatives have been working to reposition Molenbeek. Guided tours are organised that not only address the conflicts but also highlight the district's industrial heritage, cultural diversity, and vibrant community life. Drawing on elements of dark tourism, the aim is to present not only negative narratives but also positive stories of local resistance, cooperation, and identity.

In parallel, law enforcement and community programs have been launched to rebuild trust. One notable example is a theatre project designed to foster dialogue between local youth and the police, which helps break down prejudices and strengthen both security and community cohesion.

Molenbeek's example demonstrates that even a heavily stigmatised neighbourhood can achieve a positive turnaround if local communities are empowered to shape the narrative and law enforcement agencies focus on building trust. The stories of Al-Abdali and Molenbeek together indicate

⁹ Rama Al Rabady, “Territorial Heritage Gentrification in Abdali in Amman, Jordan,” *Built Heritage* 2024, no. 1: 1–19. o.

¹⁰ Leman, J. (2016): The history, motivations, framing and processes of Belgian jihadism: the Molenbeek case [The History, Motivations, Framing and Processes of Belgian Jihadism: The Molenbeek Case]. In: Giusto, H. (ed.): *Daesh and the terrorist threat: from the Middle East to Europe*. FEPS & Fondazione Italianeuropei, Brussels/Rome. 126–134

¹¹ Ritecz, Gy. (2018): A terrorizmus hatása a turizmusra [The Impact of Terrorism on Tourism]. *Rendőrségi Tanulmányok* 2018/4. szám.3–61. o.

that no-go zones are not irreversible conditions. With appropriate institutional development, conscious social participation, and the thoughtful integration of security measures, such urban spaces can be transformed into areas that are both safe and attractive from a touristic perspective. The key to shared success lies in renewing physical infrastructure, engaging communities, creating positive narratives, and credibly embedding law enforcement presence.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of no-go zones, situated at the intersection of tourism and law enforcement studies, represents both a challenge and an opportunity, raising new research and practical questions alike. This article has sought to demonstrate that such urban spaces are not marginalised solely by objective security risks, but rather by the combined effects of social perceptions, media representations, and prior negative experiences. As a result, districts are often stigmatised even when their actual security situation no longer justifies such a negative assessment.

Bridging the gap between subjective perceptions of safety and objective risks requires complex, multi-level interventions. Successful examples—such as Molenbeek and Abdali—show that law enforcement presence by itself is insufficient. Strengthening community participation, reshaping narratives, repurposing urban spaces, and achieving symbolic repositioning are all necessary to ensure sustainable regeneration.

It is therefore essential that policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and tourism professionals jointly develop integrated urban development and tourism security strategies that take into account the local social structure, historical experiences, and the area's symbolic significance. Such strategies may be grounded in the principles of community policing, ethical tourism development, and conscious, responsible cooperation with the media.

In conclusion, no-go zones should not be regarded as permanent conditions, but rather as social constructs that can be redefined through appropriate policy, law enforcement, and community interventions. The future of tourism security will depend on our ability to responsibly reinterpret, reintegrate, and sustainably develop these urban spaces.