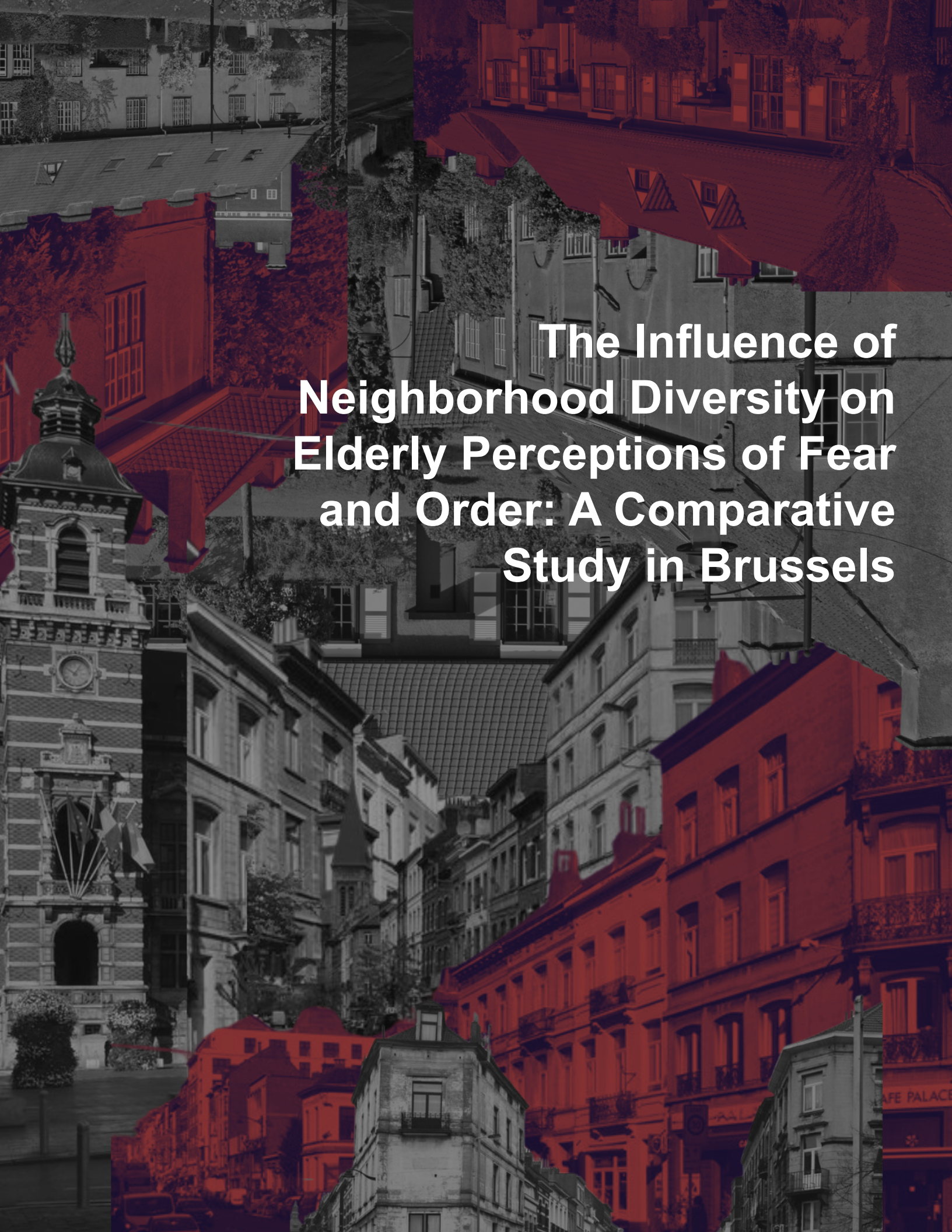


The background is a collage of various Brussels street scenes. On the left, a tall, ornate stone building with a clock face and flags is visible. To the right, there are several rows of multi-story residential buildings with many windows. Some parts of the image are overlaid with a solid red color, while others are in grayscale. The text is centered over the middle of the image.

The Influence of Neighborhood Diversity on Elderly Perceptions of Fear and Order: A Comparative Study in Brussels

Images used in the cover were sourced from the *Région de Bruxelles-Capitale Inventaire du Patrimoine Architectural*, supported by urban.brussels.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how neighborhood diversity influences perceptions of fear and order among elderly residents in two contrasting neighborhoods in Brussels. Through a qualitative, comparative case study approach involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the study investigates how elderly populations perceive and respond to social and physical disorder, and how their social embeddedness mediates these perceptions. Findings reveal that neighborhood diversity plays a complex role in shaping the sense of order and fear among elderly residents. In both neighborhoods, perceptions of disorder, such as nighttime disturbances, vandalism, and litter, were often linked to increasing cultural or generational differences, reinforcing processes of “othering.” While diversity itself was not inherently perceived as threatening, its intersection with signs of disorder often amplified negative perceptions. Social embeddedness became a significant factor in exploring fear (of crime). Daily or weekly routines involving third places increase confidence in navigating the environment. Behavioral adaptations, such as placing valuable items in different pockets, reflected both real and perceived threats, often influenced by community narratives. Furthermore, perceptions of local authorities varied. While some residents appreciated visible policing and community initiatives, others viewed specific institutional responses as disconnected from their lived realities. This research contributes to broader debates on urban aging, fear (of crime), and diversity by highlighting the interplay between the physical and social context, local networks, and institutional trust in shaping older adults’ experiences of neighborhood life.

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1. Introduction

Order or disorder? That is the question. For a long time, and still to this day, the influence of disorder in our understanding of the built environment has been debated. Order and disorder are subjective notions, and they can mean a variety of different things to different groups. From litter, graffiti, lack of lighting, public drunkenness, panhandling, etc., these elicit specific responses in how people may react to or perceive their surroundings. Space is an actor by itself, where multiple dynamics occur (Santos, 2021). There is a strong link between (dis)order, the built environment, and fear, for example. Soja (2010) states that space is filled with material and imagined forces that affect lived individual and collective experiences, both positively and negatively (the latter in the shape of exploitation, domination, discrimination, and injustice). Santos (2021) further categorizes space as systems of objects and actions, where objects condition how actions take place and how actions lead to the creation of objects. Then, if space is produced, culturally and socially, it goes beyond the simple distribution of services and instead involves spatial practices and connections. Ultimately, these render a space that is not neutral and generates a certain perception, readability, and behavior.

Perception here is an important term. The American Psychological Association (2018) gives a holistic definition of the term:

“The process or result of becoming aware of objects, relationships, and events by means of the senses, which includes such activities as recognizing, observing, and discriminating. These activities enable organisms to organize and interpret the stimuli received into meaningful knowledge and to act in a coordinated manner.”

Discussing how order and disorder are perceived goes beyond the simple notion of good versus bad. Often, disorders are seen as determinant or an indicator that more disorder is inevitable, leading up to crime (Wilson & Kelling, 2017). However, exploring the concepts of order and disorder offers more nuance. Both order and disorder are multi-layered concepts beyond being simply corrosive or mainstream, and cannot be separated from inequality, social divisions, and power relations (Mooney, 2005). Diversity within the built environment is key in creating these perceptions. Much like order and disorder, diversity is also a highly contested term. Factors such as multiculturalism and an intense urban environment have been seen as a threat (Eraydin, 2018), whereas urban vitality has been regarded as positive for neighborhood connectedness (Jacobs, 1961). Disorders can emerge from the intensity of urban life, but how a neighborhood is perceived from the outside can differ from how it is perceived internally (Mooney, 2005). Interpretations and perceptions of the implications of order and disorder are context-dependent and can differ across generations.

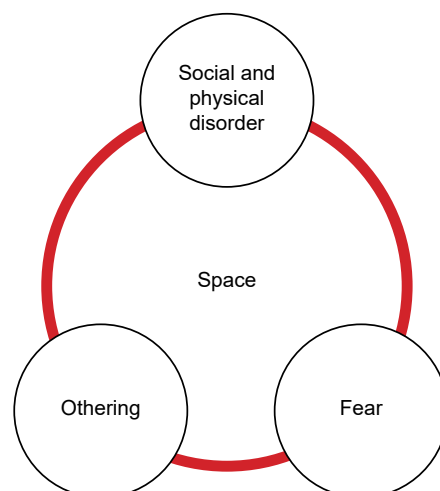


Figure 1. Conceptual thematic diagram. Elaborated by the author.

On the one hand, cities are increasingly growing more diverse and older. According to the World Health Organization (2024), by 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. On the other hand, this unfolds an interplay between the social interactions in the urban space and the reasons behind them. With an aging population, it is important to consider how impactful the built environment may be on the behaviors, exposures, and perceptions of those currently experiencing it. This study merges these fields, which are embedded in urban processes.

The elderly are a particular social group defined as “neighborhood-bound,” due to spending more time at home and being dependent on the quality of their immediate surroundings (Ceccato & Bamzar, 2016; Oh, 2003). Often considered a minority, their input in diverse urban dynamics is valuable to understand their perceptions and neighborhoods better. They can provide insights on aspects such as diversity, disorder, fear, mobility, etc. For the elderly and even centenarians, finding the “right tribe” can influence their daily behavior and mobility (Buettner, n.d.). These concepts are intertwined with each other and can offer more complex outcomes than simply positive or negative ones.

The aim of this thesis is, in part, to contribute to a gap identified by Gau et al. (2014). They mention that research needs to focus more on the social processes that supposedly bridge disorder and crime. Social embeddedness and fear resulting from either crime, social interactions, or disorder must be included in the analysis. Likewise, the ideal or construct of cohesion and social ties (a common denominator of cohesion) is key in understanding how a community or neighborhood can be perceived. Regarded as inherently positive, the main notion is that an increased number of social ties leads to greater cohesion, which is the ultimate goal to be achieved. If we see this from the elderly’s point of view, this group highly depends on the social ties they build in their neighborhoods. Much like order and disorder, cohesion has to be deflated and open up to contestation (Swain & Urban, 2024), so as not to ignore the underlying causes for it manifesting in different ways. In considering disorder and fear perception, few studies provide a comparative and qualitative study among neighborhoods of the same city. By taking these approaches, greater focus can be given to the social dynamics happening across different neighborhoods, but within the same framework.

Therefore, this thesis engages with the following research questions:

Main Research Question: How does neighborhood diversity shape perceptions of fear and order among elderly populations in two contrasting neighborhoods in Brussels?

- **Sub-Question 1:** How do elderly populations perceive the impact of social and physical disorders on their experience of their neighborhood?
- **Sub-Question 2:** To what extent does their social embeddedness influence perceptions of fear (of crime)?

This introduction will be followed by a literature review where topics shortly addressed here will be explored and complemented with others. Concepts used in the research questions, such as neighborhood diversity, fear (of crime), social embeddedness, and (dis)order will be explained in more detail as well as their implications. The third chapter will focus on the case studies, or the two contrasting neighborhoods. These are Cureghem in Anderlecht, and Trois Tilleuls in Watermael-Boitsfort, both located in the Brussels Capital Region. That chapter will provide historical context and outline the neighborhoods’ relationship with order and disorder. The fourth chapter refers to the methodological approach. More specifically, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a mapping exercise were chosen to answer the research questions. Also, how data collection and analyses were carried out will be explained in said chapter. The fifth chapter elaborates on the results around common themes found

during the data collection. After the results, the discussion chapter will interpret the findings and connect with the relevant literature. In other words, the discussion will position the findings within criminological theories and studies regarding fear (of crime), disorder, diversity, and social embeddedness. The discussion will also be structured thematically. The seventh and final chapter, the conclusion, will synthesize the significant findings of this thesis by answering the research questions.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter will combine key theories on the concepts relevant or connected to the research intentions of this thesis. It will revolve around three main topics. First, an overview of the key aspects of urban disorders and their supposed resulting fear (of crime). Second, the processes of othering that are tied to perceptions of disorder and diversity that impact how one can make sense of their surroundings. Third, neighborhood embeddedness and social ties, not only to understand their significance, but also within diverse contexts. Key aspects of older age will be linked throughout these three topics. Finally, a small section will bridge and synthesize these elements together. These concepts are interconnected with each other and stem from the fields of gerontology, urban criminology and geography. Some concepts may be repeated across the main topics, showing the complexity of the literature and subject.

2.1 Disorder and Fear (of Crime)

2.1.1 Social Disorganization Theory: Main Ideas

There have been many approaches and changes in conceptualizing social disorganization. Initially, ecological models were referenced to make assumptions about social problems in certain neighborhoods of a city. According to Shaw and McKay's framework for social disorganization, the neighborhoods with the highest crime rates, typically those surrounding the central business district, had three major characteristics: physical dilapidation, poverty and heterogeneity (i.e. high cultural mix) (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Tibbetts & Hemmens, n.d.). In the 1960s, sociologists and criminologists set out to find relationships between sociodemographic characteristics and crime, but not necessarily including or focusing on social organization. For instance, stating that higher delinquency neighborhoods are less cohesive than low-crime neighborhoods, or that there is a causal relationship between racial-ethnic heterogeneity and crime, thereby impeding social organization (Bellair, 2017).

Social disorganization theory is centered around the premise that concentrated disadvantage fosters crime by exerting a corrosive impact on a neighborhood's social fabric (Bellair, 2017; Gau, 2014). In general terms, social disorganization refers to the (negative) relationship between social groups and the direct environment, determined through different dimensions. Combining Shaw and McKay's model and their own proposals in Great Britain, Sampson & Groves (1989) tested the endogenous dimensions: the ability to supervise and control teenage peer groups, informal local friendship networks, and local organizational participation; and the exogenous: socio-economic statistics, residential stability, race/ethnicity, family disruption, and urbanization. Briefly, all exogenous dimensions directly affect local friendship networks, and communities with sparse friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups, and low organizational participation had higher rates of crime and delinquency. Organizational participation was defined as local participation in formal and voluntary organizations, where these organizations are seen as the structure of local community solidarity (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Yet, newer developments on the concepts of organizational participation and solidarity tell us there is more to them, because the good of societies goes beyond "volunteering at your local organization" (Swain & Urban, 2024).

The links between ethnic heterogeneity and disorders and fear are not entirely definitive. As mentioned before, much has been discussed about whether there is a causal relationship between racial-ethnic diversity and fear of (crime), thereby affecting social processes. Intergroup threat theory suggests that majority groups become hostile in the face of increasing minority proportions due to perceived economic and social threats minorities are believed to have (Swart et al., 2023). This can be explained due to correlations between ethnic diversity and delinquency, as Sampson & Groves (1989) argued, but it is also reasonable to infer that stereotypes about specific populations contribute to this sense of group threat (De Silva et al., 2021). In this way, perceived diversity, but not the actual size of the outgroup

population, predicts a greater perceived threat and exclusionary attitudes towards the outgroup. In other words, this suggests that perceived threat is fed by perceived diversity profiles of the social context (Swart et al., 2023). For instance, a study conducted in Belgium examined the relationship between fear of crime with actual and perceived ethnic diversity of immigrants and the occurrence of crime from police records and local government surveys. Hooghe & de Vroome's (2016) findings indicate that despite no statistical significance between reported crime and fear, the community level of ethnic diversity is significantly related to fear of crime. Their findings suggest that applications of group threat theory should not only focus on economic and cultural threat, but also on the perceived impact of diversity on crime and safety.

In addition, negative perceptions of social disorganization can lead to territorial stigmatization. This can stem from the residents of a neighborhood and be triggered by media or local authorities. Schwarze (2021) defines territorial stigmatization as a symbolic devaluation of neighborhoods, picturing these as "no-go zones" or vortexes of social disintegration. He discusses two discursive practices of territorial stigmatization. *Naming* is using language to frame a place's realities, often overlooking structural reasons for prevailing crime, for instance. This language is simple and can diminish socio-cultural and economic struggles by painting a picture that everyone in said place is good or bad. *Hyperbole* reinforces the mental image of a place, often through labelling, which attaches a negative character to the neighborhood and may reproduce racist stereotypes of its community. Locals and residents can also be unintentionally harmed through decreased property value or more securitization (Galdon Clavell, 2018). Specific cues in the environment can prompt these perceptions.

2.1.2 Social and Physical Disorder

Much of the literature surrounding social disorganization theory refers to two specific types of disorder in urban spaces, the social and the physical. First, social disorder relates to *behaviors* that suggest a lack of order and control, such as public drinking, drug use, and loitering (Gibson, 2014, emphasis added). Not only do social isolation and poor social networks affect the elderly's perceived safety, but fear is maximized where there is social disorder, commonly in the form of incivility (Ceccato & Bamzar, 2016). Civility, or lack thereof, has been seen as a positive, ultimate state of passive behavior and common values, much like cohesion. While all residents of a neighborhood could prefer an existence free from crime irrespective of the level of crime associated with their neighborhood (Bellair, 2017), incivility is a link between social disorder and fear (Hunter, 1978). Hunter (1978) even adds that incivilities, a manifestation of social disorder, have a larger impact on fear than crime itself. Incivilities can affect both personal and collective perceptions of the urban environment. As Jackson et al. (2007) explain, public beliefs about crime come from the visible signs of what users regard as disorderly and disreputable behavior.

Physical disorder refers to *cues in the physical environment* that connote a lack of order and control (Gibson, 2014, emphasis added). In this case, perceived physical disorder involves visual signs of negligence and decay (i.e. abandoned buildings, broken urban furniture, garbage, and litter) (Ceccato & Bamzar, 2016; Gibson, 2014; Oh, 2003). Others include blind spots, the number of people in a public space, empty streets, and noise (Jackson et al., 2007). Physical disorder in the immediate environment is deeply connected to elderly mobility. Beyond the attractiveness of the environment, studies have indicated that older people with higher levels of fear of crime walk less (Köber et al., 2022). Accessibility to basic services, street connectivity, sidewalk condition and their perceived safety, etc., and the overall fear of experiencing crime, illustrate variances in neighborhood walking patterns. Additionally, this fear of crime among the elderly stems from the fear of the unknown and the changes their neighborhood might be undergoing (Ceccato & Bamzar, 2016). This is especially heightened if the elderly are long-

time residents of their neighborhood (Jackson et al., 2007). However, social changes experienced in a neighborhood should not be routinely seen to cause a loss of social order (Hunter, 1978).

When discussing disorders, relevant literature brings forth Wilson and Kelling's (2017) Broken Windows theory. In a nutshell, this theory posits that low-level (mostly physical) disorders lead to more serious crime and erode the social fabric of a neighborhood (Jackson et al., 2007). This way, disorder indicates weakened social control, lack of concern for an area, and neighborhood deterioration (e.g., decay, empty buildings, vandalism, open drug use) that causes fear (De Donder et al., 2005). It is pointed out that fear increases as low level disorders proliferate, not because there is anything inherently frightening about graffiti, litter, panhandlers, etc. but because these cues cause others to believe that people within the neighborhood do not hold values that challenge unkempt surroundings and unmanageable public spaces (Gau et al., 2014). A step further, Gibson (2014) states that these minor annoyances of urban life, which begin a spiral of urban decline and decay, make law-abiding citizens retreat into their homes to avoid unruly public spaces, giving way to criminals after concluding that if authorities cannot handle small-scale incivilities they will fail to deter more violent crimes. However, the causal relation between minor physical and social disorders and serious crime has been contested. More specifically, the lack of attention towards the social mechanisms that bridge disorder and crime is debated. According to Gau et al. (2014), there is an absence of research on how disorder may impact aspects of the social environment and how these may, in turn, increase fear. Their study in Illinois found that disorders cause more problems than just fear, and that fear is the outcome of more issues than just disorder, because social processes impact fear. Additionally, they concluded that genuine social control lies less in informal connections among neighbors and more in collective action and secure external resources, such as willingness to call the police (Gau et al., 2014). Known as collective efficacy, it is the mutual trust and expectations of social control (Sampson, 2012). In other words, social control doesn't do much by itself, and it is not the same as social ties, but rather the willingness to act and have shared expectations over the urban environment. Likewise, it has been debated that more attention should be given not only to how people's movement and behavior are affected by the physical environment, but also how people affect places (De Backer, Forthcoming).

Responses to social disorganization have taken different shapes, commonly through place-based prevention. This has been done primarily through tackling crime hotspots, whether through policing, mapping, a combination of these, or other tactics. A hotspot is a sensitive area where crime is a recurring and serious problem, and it can vary in scale (street, block, neighborhood view) and is represented through a specific amount of time (Galdon Clavell, 2018). Even though hotspot policing has been praised as effective in reducing crime and disorder (National Research Council, 2004), the tactic has been criticized. First, there is little evidence to support that intensive police interventions negatively impact police legitimacy in the community; second, scaling up interventions cannot capture underlying processes that generate crime in an urban area (Weisburd, 2018). Tactics like mapping must be context-specific to avoid falling into policy imitation and be justified to prevent illegal profiling based on socio-cultural traits (Galdon Clavell, 2018). Still, claims have been made that police do not prevent crime due to their strategies having little to no effect on crime, or that spatial crime displacement is not reduced only to nearby areas (Weisburd, 2018).

As societies age, older adults experience a decrease in the size and scope of their social ties and networks (Galinsky et al., 2012; Oh, 2003). Loneliness and lack of community attachment are sources of fear in the urban elderly (Jackson et al., 2007). Ceccato and Bamzar (2016) further explain that fear among older adults can be multidimensional regarding social ties and interactions. Perception of fear can be individualistic, due to factors such as health and physical vulnerability, but it can also be due to others' victimization, social contacts, media, and neighborhood participation (De Donder et al., 2005).

Similarly, Galinsky et al. (2012) state that perceptions of neighborhood norms and views towards the elderly impact their perceptions of fear. In both types of disorder, social and physical, neighborhood-level disorder hinders social bonds and control, fostering suspicion (Oh, 2003). The following subsection will discuss fear (of crime).

2.1.3 Fear (of Crime) and its Dimensions

But what is fear (of crime), and what comprises it? It is an emotional response to a perceived threat (De Donder et al., 2005) or a reaction of dread to symbols associated with crime (i.e. physical and social disorder) (Jackson et al., 2007). There is much controversy regarding the criminological significance of this term. A highly subjective concept, fear of crime often refers to public feelings, thoughts, and behaviors regarding one's risk of falling victim. Still, distinctions can also be made between the proclivity to perceive a wide range of situations as fearful, experience in those situations, and broader expressions about the cultural and social significance of crime and its neighborhood cues. In other words, "fear of crime" is an umbrella term linked to many anxieties beyond crime, e.g., fear of darkness, strangers, loneliness, falling, etc. (Enhuis, Forthcoming). Fear of crime is a type of fear amongst the many different fears experienced in urban space, to which we respond or react. Specifically, there are responses to fear perception among the elderly, which Ceccato and Bamzar (2016) identify as avoidance behavior, protective behavior, behavioral lifestyle adjustments, and collective activities. These responses and behaviors can be found in what are called the three dimension of fear of crime: the affective, the cognitive, and the behavioral (De Silva et al., 2021; Köber et al., 2022).

a. The Affective Dimension

De Silva et al. (2021) mention that such emotional responses are elicited from the prospect of victimization stemming from everyday moments when a person feels threatened. It can also be due to a more general diffused atmosphere of risk. Imagined victimization can also explain high levels of fear among the elderly. The idea is that serious consequences are expected to occur against the elderly due to their physical conditions, reduced social support networks, and in deserted areas where no help is available immediately (Jackson et al., 2007). Furthermore, neighborhoods are symbolic for elderly residents and their effect on fear. Residential stability and long-time residency can reduce levels of fear among the elderly due to the development of place attachment, which acts as a psychological buffer (Köber et al., 2022).

b. The Cognitive Dimension

In contrast to the affective aspect, which is more personal, the cognitive dimension treats the collective perceptions of the possibility of becoming a victim and a sense of control over said possibility (i.e. helplessness) (De Silva et al., 2021). In a certain way, the construction of social ties can be seen as a double-edged sword. Strong ties and connections among residents can also lead to an overall state or perception of fear and community concern. Sharing information and narratives about local fear and occurrences can increase perceptions of fear over a specific area (De Silva et al., 2021).

c. The Behavioral Dimension

Finally, the behavioral dimension determines the actions people undertake as a defense in response to fear. For example, avoiding areas, protecting particular objects, and other preventive measures (De Silva et al., 2021). Lupton (1999), regarding fear in public spaces, found that older women from different Australian cities felt less at risk because "they do not put themselves in those situations." It can be said then that fear triggers certain behaviors in urban space, rendering it functional.

Overall, perceived diversity has an impact on disorder perception and fear. Jackson et al. (2007) suggest

that increased ethnic diversity may lead to group conflict by intensifying competition for living space and resources, which may lead to more crime. Again, the causality between ethnic heterogeneity (not composition) to delinquency, which generates conflict among residents, is one of the bases of social disorganization theory (Bellair, 2017). Similarly, whilst the effects of crime and disorder on localized fear are mixed, studies have found robust associations of ethnic minorities as an indicator for neighborhood social disadvantage (Köber et al., 2022). Gibson (2014) suggests that policymakers should not address residents' fears about ethnic diversity and even social disorder, because it can lead to coercive acts that should drive all citizens away from a liberal society. Still, this could potentially lead to distorted perceptions of who is increasing perceptions of fear and disorder.

2.2 Processes of Othering

Santos (2021) states that people construct values through continual interaction processes, meaning that other people play a role in personal subjectivity: the idea of others itself implies the idea of a world. Among the causes of fear is the presence of the stigmatized "other," where research has shown study participants respond according to stereotypes regarding perceptions of fear in diverse neighborhoods (Gibson, 2014). However, proximity to diversity can help value "the other," leading to higher feelings of tolerance, moments of exchange, and solidarity based on situated knowledge (Ahmadi, 2017). Diversity and solidarity can also create, or be created by, social challenges, such as stigmatization and prejudice, which can be a propeller of solidarity among small-scale or minority groups (Ahmadi, 2017; Yoltay 2021). In other words, diversity of the environment can help create networks, but existing social structures can keep conditioning perceptions. For instance, it has been shown that weak networks can effectively suppress crime, and strong networks could hamper security efforts where crime and insecurity are embedded in the fabric (Gau, 2014). Finding spatial justice goes beyond the simple category of we/they, but in bringing diverse movements from unequal power relations into a common project (Santos, 2021).

Hence, othering can also be defined as the process of labelling who is associated with danger, threat, or unpredictability, resulting in negative expressions amongst differences between residents (Ceccato, 2017). There is a link between fear (of crime) in urban space and the people who inhabit such space. First, "the other" can represent a scapegoat to deposit individual fears and anxieties related to conflict. Classified as the unpredictable stranger, this figure is someone unknown we encounter in public space that goes beyond our circle of family and acquaintances and for whom we cannot determine how they will act (Lupton, 1999). The unpredictable stranger can look different among subjects. Furthermore, othering is tricky because it can help strengthen notions of identity and group membership. In her study, Lupton (1999) also concludes that in defining "the other," we define ourselves, allowing us to make sense of social order and cultural coding in space. In other words, by projecting our fears in "the other," we neutralize space by determining where it is safe and where it is not.

Likewise, because othering is ultimately subjective, it is difficult to objectively say who the elderly might other or fear. According to Søråa et al. (2020), the process of creating "the other" is constantly active throughout our lives, and it is an individual process subject to historical-cultural changes. Factors such as age, diversity, and who they choose to meet can affect these processes. Ageism refers to the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards others or oneself based on age, and it affects everyone (World Health Organization, 2025). Intergroup contact can effectively reduce prejudice and threat, under the right circumstances. Swart et al. (2023) explain that diversity can facilitate intergroup contact because people may adapt to social diversity over time and begin to view social groups as more similar. Their study in South Africa found that cross-group friendships mitigated the adverse effects of perceived diversity on perceived realistic threats. Also, frequent intergenerational contact can yield

positive outcomes and reinvent identity tensions, i.e. value activities and roles usually reserved for different age groups (North & Fiske, 2012). Regarding fear, Köber et al.'s (2022) study in Germany and Australia found that younger people were almost as fearful as older people in disadvantaged neighborhoods whilst older people were considerably more frightened than younger people in better-off neighborhoods. The study also found that the elderly's safety perception is less connected with objective neighborhood conditions than younger ages. So, they concluded, they must be influenced by other factors specific to their age group.

2.3 Neighborhood Embeddedness and Social Ties

By itself, the term cohesion is loaded, yet increasingly contested. There is a current need to critique how the term is regarded. Swain and Urban (2024) express that it is imperative to contextualize the term, as it does not necessarily have to be intrinsically positive for all. These authors treat cohesion as a singular element flexible enough to be tracked and applied in various ways or places, due to its strong link with diversity and the built environment. Previous research has set social cohesion as a "state" or a "tool," i.e. something to create or be created. Ahmadi's (2017) study places social cohesion as a device to manage conflict, rather than a tool to solve and erase conflict when diversity is seen as a threat. Furthermore, social cohesion has been seen as the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society, linked to social organization, norms, trust, and networks that improve efficacy through coordinated action (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020).

Santos (2021) states that organization is a product of solidarity (and vice versa) when neighboring populations of objects are brought together by and in space (i.e. social ties). A social mechanism, social ties revolve around the connections between people in a given community, assuming that the more social ties and networks there are, the better (Gau, 2014). Equally so, there is a constant debate about the role of (physical and social) diversity in either strengthening or weakening social ties. On the one hand, diversity is mainly seen as a threat to building and maintaining meaningful social relationships, due to factors as multiculturalism or high residential mobility, suggesting they reduce intra-neighborhood cohesion (Eraydin, 2018; Glas et al., 2021, Sampson & Groves, 1989). However, understanding this suggestion may risk simplifying "high levels of social cohesion" and "strong ties" as reserved for homogeneous groups. Still, increased density and local amenities are linked to low social cohesion, but urban vitality is positively associated with social cohesion, suggesting that local initiatives increase residents' walking and social activity within their neighborhood (Jacobs, 1961; Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). On the other hand, much research has examined diversity mostly from an ethnic and racial composition standpoint, yet aware that it is not an overarching factor for defining the quality of social ties among citizens (Ahmadi, 2017; Glas et al., 2021; Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). In other words, diversity is not a synonym of racial composition, but it may affect social networks.

Neighborhood cohesion could be mostly closely defined as a combination of residents' embeddedness into particular spaces and the community's positive (and functional) social ties. It avoids perceiving space as sole background to these interactions. By focusing on the spatial dimension of cohesion, social interactions appear as an outcome of a specific distribution of opportunities in space (Damurski, 2021). This ties back to Swain and Urban (2024), who also account that social ties could be strong among groups but do not necessarily constitute a cohesive whole.

Involvement in activities and organizations plays a vital role in the construction of the elderly's social ties. Urban environments undoubtedly create opportunities (or challenges) to become involved in their communities. More specifically, social infrastructure constitutes the physical spaces and organizations that allow us to maintain connections and form social networks, from public services to commerce to

green spaces to organized social activities (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024). Social infrastructure is sometimes called a *third place*, or places hosting regular, voluntary, and informal anticipated gatherings beyond home and work.

Similarly, when services and supports can no longer adequately accommodate a person's needs, the aging-in-place experience becomes negative (Fang et al., 2022). Because the elderly are also a heterogeneous group, with different backgrounds and experiences, diversity in and of the social infrastructure is vital. Even though social infrastructure is mainly seen as beneficial for aging-in-place, it also has the potential for social exclusion (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024). Some places are perceived as more welcoming than others. Hence, it is also critical to be aware of weakening ties and their effect on the relationship between the elderly and social infrastructure.

2.4 Bridging Diversity, Disorder and Fear (of Crime)

Social ties, disorder, and fear of crime are strongly linked. Much of the literature on these three topics connects the terms in one way or another. However, for this thesis, an active decision is made to not focus on social cohesion. The term is vast and unstable, and only trying to define the term in itself can be considered a single line of study that would go beyond the scope of this thesis, both in time and resources. Swain and Urban (2024) do a noteworthy job in contesting the term and how to shape the discourse from this point on, but then again, there is no concrete conclusion on what social cohesion really means, nor an exact path to follow. In other words, we may have ideas on *how* to contest, but not exactly *what*.

Therefore, the relationship between disorder, diversity, and social ties in relation to fear (of crime) will be the primary focus. If we were to summarize the relationship between these two concepts and where their literature falls together, it would be broken down in the following way:

- Relation to the physical environment
- Inner personality and experiences (what constitutes their fears?)
- Social ties
- Socio-structural embeddedness

3. Case Studies

From a wider view, the researcher chose Brussels as the city of analysis. This is due to the availability of resources at hand and its diverse and multicultural neighborhoods. Brussels is regarded as one of the most multicultural and diverse cities in the world, home to 184 nationalities and 104 languages (Eurocities, 2023). The scale of analysis for the study will be two neighborhoods. Plenty of research has been done on the importance of the neighborhood in exploring social ties among the elderly and how it impacts perceptions of fear. As previously stated, much of this deals with the physical environment and the opportunities it has for bridging its residents. Hence, the neighborhoods of study and comparison in Brussels are Cureghem, in Anderlecht, and the Trois Tilleuls in Watermael-Boitsfort.



Figure 2. Location of Case Study Neighborhoods in the Brussels Capital Region. Elaborated by the author.

3.1 Cureghem: A “Pathologically Run Down” Neighborhood

Cureghem is located southwest of Brussels’s pentagon in the municipality of Anderlecht. It is bordered by the South Station and the railway lines, the boulevards of the pentagon, and the Brussels-Charleroi canal. The district comprises three sub-neighborhoods: Cureghem Bara, Cureghem Rosée, and Cureghem Veterinaire. Historically, Cureghem underwent heavy industrialization processes that marked its physical and social landscapes. The commissioning of the canal meant a significant drop in coal prices, which paired perfectly with the proximity of the railways and the use of steam engines. In the 17th century, allotments were drawn to build homes for factory owners, the town hall, roads, and the veterinary school. Many important factories settled in Cureghem from the second half of the 19th century until the first half of the 20th century. The presence of factory workers increased, resulting in houses built amongst the factories to accommodate them. The first immigrants to establish themselves in the neighborhood included Flemish citizens who left due to famine and failed crops in the countryside. Others included leather workers, mostly from Jewish origin who fled from persecution before Nazism (De Caluwé, 2012).

Deindustrialization processes significantly accelerated in the 1970s. The oil crisis of 1973-74 led to many factories shutting down, and by 1988, almost half of all jobs in manufacturing disappeared (De Caluwé, 2012). Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the Belgian population in Cureghem halved, Italians and Spaniards left the neighborhood during that period, while the Moroccan and Turkish population increased (Liekens, 2025). Shortly after the oil crisis, the settlement of foreigners began to worry municipal authorities. Between 1985 and 1995, the government banned the residence and settlement of foreigners for specific periods in six Brussels municipalities, including Anderlecht. After 1995, this measure was no longer renewed (De Caluwé, 2012). For a long time, Cureghem was left out of the spotlight of municipal interest due to the combination of high unemployment rates and the concentration of people with migrant backgrounds. The neighborhood was of little political and electoral interest, with foreigners having the right to municipal vote until 2006 (Sacco, 2016; Liekens, 2025; De Caluwé, 2012). This ultimately has an impact on the built environment.

Figure 3. Ropsy Chaudron, one of the busiest and commercial streets in Cureghem. Photo taken by the author (December 2024).



Cureghem has repeatedly been referred to as a “problematic,” “immigrant,” or “rundown” neighborhood. In the 1990s, there were plans to demolish a portion of the neighborhood for new motorways or housing and office towers based on the North Quarter. Multiple municipal projects illustrated the institutional and political racism at the time, which ultimately categorized Cureghem’s population as dangerous and undesirable. It wasn’t until 1997 that the first neighborhood contract (out of six so far) was granted to Anderlecht, which shifted the idea of demolition to revitalization (Sacco, 2016).

Still, in the 1990s, Anderlecht fell under multiple security contracts that impacted its landscape. Security contracts have two components: policial and preventive. Budgets were allocated to municipalities at risk; since 1992, seven municipalities have fallen under these contracts (Legrand et al., 2021). Preventive refers to fighting against weakening formal control and enhancing connections between the local population and law enforcement. Situational actions included sensibilization and surveillance training, while socio-preventive actions included actions in favor of “marginal youth” and illicit drug prevention (Legrand et al., 2021). Nevertheless, opposition was expressed by the then mayor of Anderlecht to the reinforcement of social prevention policies, stating that financing integration programs should be ended and instead allocated to policial efforts (Sacco, 2016). In 1993, 4.5m high steel plates were placed where housing and industrial buildings once stood (De Caluwé, 2012). Accompanied by surveillance cameras from the police, these plates were placed in Lemmens Square to protect apartments from vandalism and prevent drug dealers from escaping. Similarly, steel plates were placed in the Albert Ier Square area “destined to protect the apartments of mainly Belgian pensioners from theft and vandalism by young people of foreign origin” (De Caluwé, 2012, p. 20).

Conflicts between youth, drug trafficking, and local authorities are still present in Cureghem. A preventive curfew for under-16-year-olds was placed on New Year’s Eve 2024 in the Cureghem district. Young people under 16 could not leave home from 19h until 5h the next morning, unless accompanied by a parent or guardian (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024). Otherwise, they would be arrested. The measure aimed at curbing and preventing the disruption of public order and protecting young people. It was established based on the neighborhood’s previous New Year’s Eve disruptions, which included setting off fireworks with the power of half a hand grenade. Additionally, 20% of the people arrested by the police on New Year’s Eve 2023 in Cureghem were minors (Post, 2024). Regarding the aftermath, 30 people were detained in Cureghem by the Brussels South Police, no minors included, according to the Mayor of Anderlecht (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2025). However, many residents challenged the effectiveness of the measure, stating that on that night there were still drug dealers present and that young people threw fireworks at each other. It was reported that after 22h, groups of adults confronted emergency services by throwing Molotov cocktails at them, with similar events occurring in other municipalities in Brussels such as Forest, Saint-Gilles and Molenbeek (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2025). From the start, the measure was highly criticized by activists and residents for criminalizing youth before having done anything or for not implementing long-term alternative solutions such as offering a wider range of facilities for younger people (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024; The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2025).

Faits de trafic de stupéfiants enregistrés par la police localisables au niveau des quartiers bruxellois (94% du total des faits) (2022) [43]

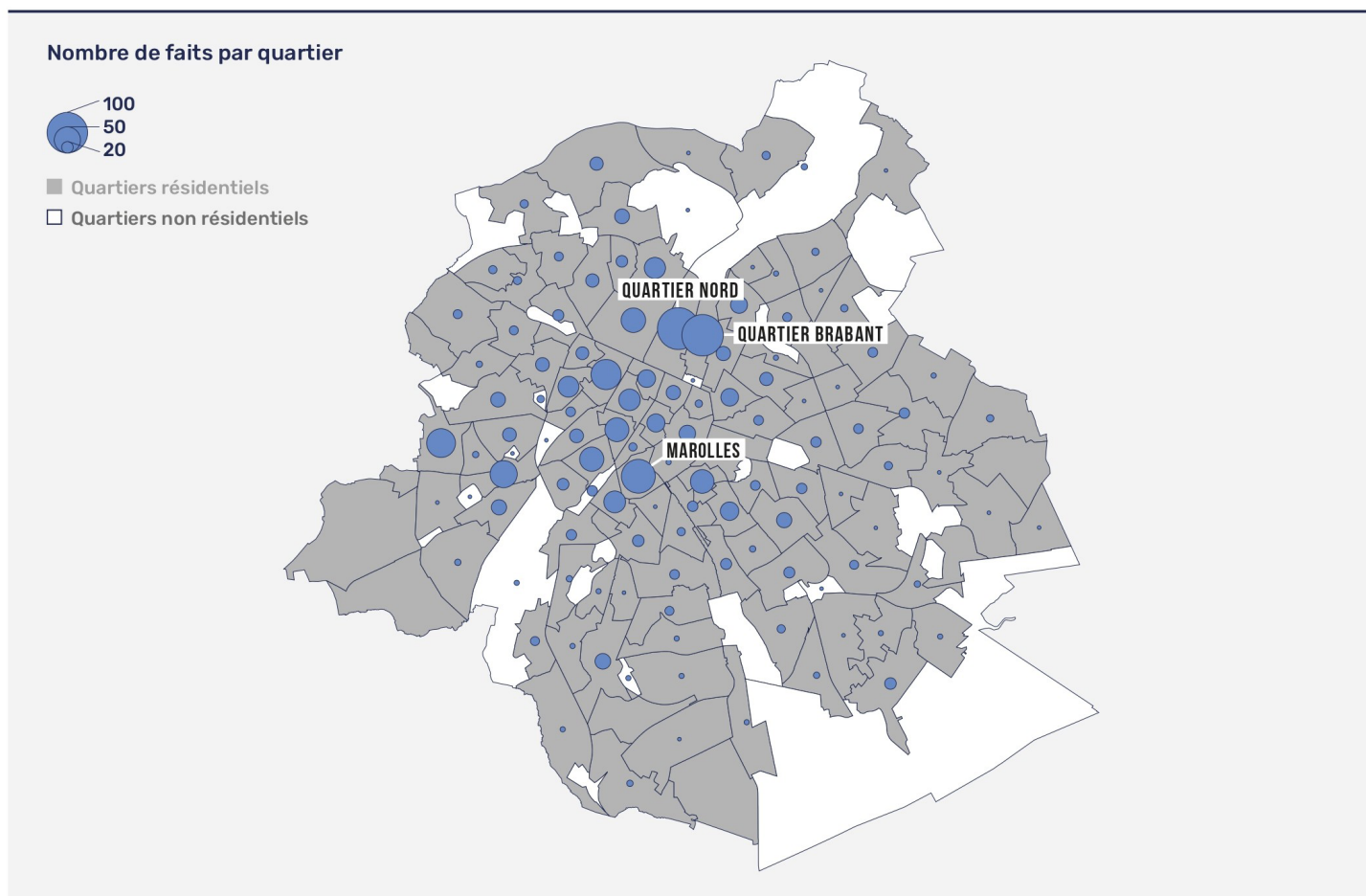


Figure 4. Police-recorded drug trafficking offences in Brussels neighborhoods (94% of total offences) (2022). Source: (safe.brussels, 2022).¹

Moreover, Cureghem has been hit by a wave of shootings since February 5th, 2025. Five shooting incidents took place in less than twenty days (February 5th, 6th, 16th, 19th, and 23rd), where one person was injured and another was killed. These shootings have been associated with territorial conflicts between drug gangs (Liekens, 2025). Since February 23rd, seven more shooting incidents have occurred (March 17th, April 11th, April 17th, April 19th, April 30th, May 6th, May 17th), with the March 17th incident leaving one person injured, and the April 17th incident two injured (BRUZZ, 2025a, BRUZZ, 2025b, Verhaeghe, 2025). Four incidents have happened at Clemenceau Square, with the others occurring on the surrounding streets (Figure 6). As a preventive measure, the square has not been accessible since February 5th due to fencing placed by the police. Similarly, the metro exit to Chaussée de Mons was closed due to police orders, except during market days. Police presence increased at the square following the shootings, with police on site, blinded police cars, and briefly an armored personnel carrier.

As of 2023, Cureghem is characterized by a working-class population marked by: a high percentage of unemployment (33% of the active population); a highly international population where one in two residents has no Belgian nationality (46%); and a centrality of services and economic activity (Van Criecken, 2021). These two values are higher than those corresponding to the Brussels Capital

¹ Legend translation: Number of offences per neighborhood. Residential neighborhoods (gray fill), non-residential neighborhoods (white fill).

Region (21% for unemployment, and 34% for non-Belgian nationality). This can be seen in its intense urban landscape, which is defined by international commerce (meatpacking, car dealerships, African and Eastern European goods, etc.), which have resisted gentrification. Age-wise, the share of 65-79 year-olds in Cureghem in 2023 corresponds to a 5.93% median, against the regional median of 9.29%, suggesting a younger population (Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse, 2023).

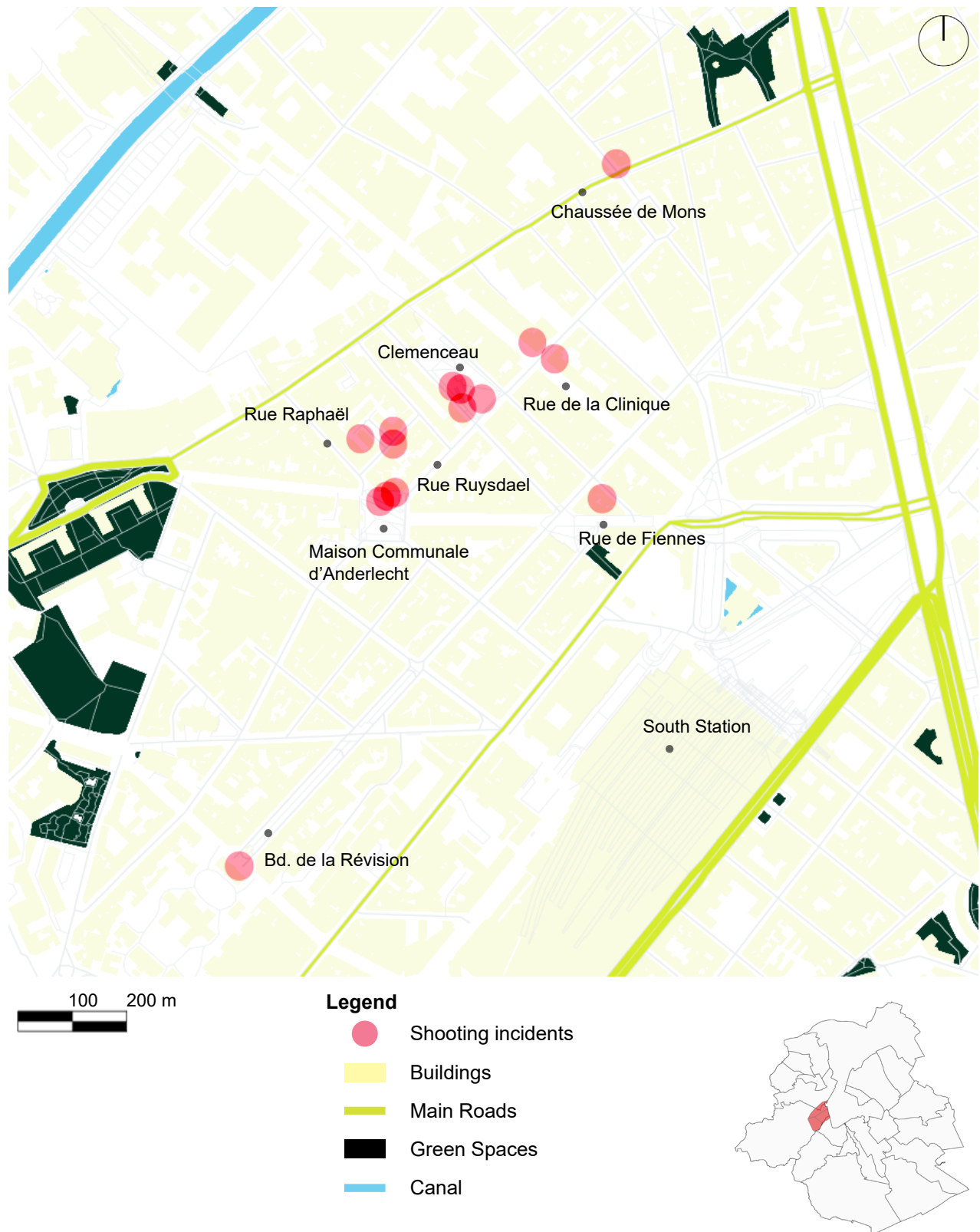


Figure 5. Wave of shootings in Cureghem since February 5th, 2025. Modified from BRUZZ (2025).

3.2 Trois Tilleuls: The “Postcard” Garden City

As mentioned above, the second neighborhood of study is Trois Tilleuls. It is located south, in the municipality of Watermael-Boitsfort. The neighborhood is bordered by the Herrmann-Debroux station and the neighborhoods Watermael center to the North and Boitsfort center to the South. Wiener Square and tram line 8 are located south of Trois Tilleuls. The neighborhood mostly comprises two garden cities, the Logis and the Floréal. The following paragraphs will explain the origin and development of these two garden cities. Ideas about garden cities started to be diffused in Belgium from 1908 onwards. The concept of a cooperative was central to planning these garden cities to prevent land speculation, overcrowding, and the rise in rent prices. From the 1920s onwards, the garden city ideology was determinant in the new low-cost housing policy (Les Compagnons du Quartier Floréal, 2022).

Within a few years, Brussels began constructing garden cities in the periphery, where the terrain was large, cheap, and green. Designed according to their context, Brussels’s garden cities differed in size, organization, inhabitants, and architectural and urban style. Still, certain architectural and urban planning principles were followed, such as establishing low-density zoning, merging nature and construction, unifying in diversity, and building through cost-effective and standardized fabrication. At the Logis and the Floréal, large buildings are characterized by their rough, gray exterior and the small houses are distinguished by their English cottage style. The complex is appreciated for its abundant vegetation, including Japanese cherry trees, orchards, wisteria and jasmines (*Un Site Classé*, n.d.) The social cooperative Le Logis, characterized by its green frames, was founded in 1921 by civil servants and was destined for employers. Its counterpart, the social cooperative Le Floréal, was founded in 1922 and was destined for workers (Les Compagnons du Quartier Floréal, 2022). Contrary to Le Logis, Le Floréal’s frames are yellow.



Figure 6. Logis’s houses (left), and Floréal’s houses (right). Photos taken by the author (March, 2025).

Since the start, the Logis and the Floréal were structured around measures that impacted the social life in the garden cities. Cooperatives were usually constituted by members of a specific political affinity (e.g., socialists) and professionals. This model was not intended for the “poorest” of the city, but for the lower middle classes who had some capital to become members. Furthermore, community cohesion is strongly related to the concept of garden cities. On the one hand, Logis-Floréal develops collective social initiatives for residents, in partnership with local actors (*Qui Sommes Nous?*, n.d.). Some collective spaces and actors include the Chant des Cailles farm, Les Compagnons de Quartier Floréal, La Maison de Quartier des Cités-Jardins, L'Espace Mosaïque, and L'Antenne Scolaire. On the other hand, order appears as a means for community cohesion. To maintain this cohesion, the Logis-Floréal watches over resident selection (based on financial abilities, convictions, professional status, etc.), respect for order, and the smooth running of daily life. Additionally, internal regulations aim to adjust behavior to an ideal model, but also foster the emergence of a group conscience. They do not, however, define what these terms mean. Likewise, order reminders (cleanliness, planting, outdoor cabling, etc.) are periodically communicated in both cooperatives' newsletters, plus individual calls for responsibility on this matter (Les Compagnons du Quartier Floréal, 2022). In Watermael-Boitsfort, orange and black garbage cans are mandatory for food waste and residues respectively, due to the presence of wildlife (foxes and crows) in the municipality. Households can also obtain these garbage cans at the town hall free of charge (*Poubelles Rigides : Équipez-Vous !*, n.d.).

In recent years, there have been additional changes. All constructions (houses and apartment buildings) built before 1940, as well as landscaping elements (setback areas, roads, alleys, public squares, etc.), were listed in 2001 by the Brussels Capital Region to preserve their architectural heritage (Les Compagnons du Quartier Floréal, 2022). Naturally, a heritage management plan for listed buildings followed, thereby imposing provisions for conserving real estate heritage and prohibiting work that modifies the architectural appearance of properties (*Un Site Classé*, n.d.). Since 2018, both garden cities joined into one sole framework, the Public Service Real Estate Cooperative (Société Immobilière de Service Public in French) Logis-Floréal. When someone becomes a cooperator, they must want to have a home in the cooperative for the rest of their life. The cooperator is a co-owner of the complex built, as well as a tenant. However, until 1992, members' children were no longer prioritized in allocating cooperative housing, and since 2012, new tenants must sign a 9-year contract. Since 1993, a mutation system has been established for households occupying a house where the number of bedrooms exceeds the number of people in the household by at least one. This means that if the size of the family decreases (e.g., children move out, etc.), those remaining (i.e., parents) must move into a smaller house (Les Compagnons du Quartier Floréal, 2022).

Even though the Logis-Floréal has evolved in recent decades, its cooperative model still falls between social housing and speculative private housing. For example, to prevent squatting in housing with longer renovation deadlines, and to encourage cohesion, the Logis-Floréal initiates temporary occupation projects combining housing and socio-cultural activities. This type of occupation is authorized until the renovation work begins (*Les Occupations Temporaires*, n.d.). Such model aims to boost resident responsibility by engaging residents in the caretaking of their homes, the cooperative itself, and strengthening neighborhood identity (Les Compagnons du Quartier Floréal, 2022). Regarding age, the share of 65-79 year-olds in the total population of Trois Tilleuls for 2023 corresponds to a 13.85% median, against the Brussels's regional median of 9.29%, suggesting an older population (Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse, 2023).

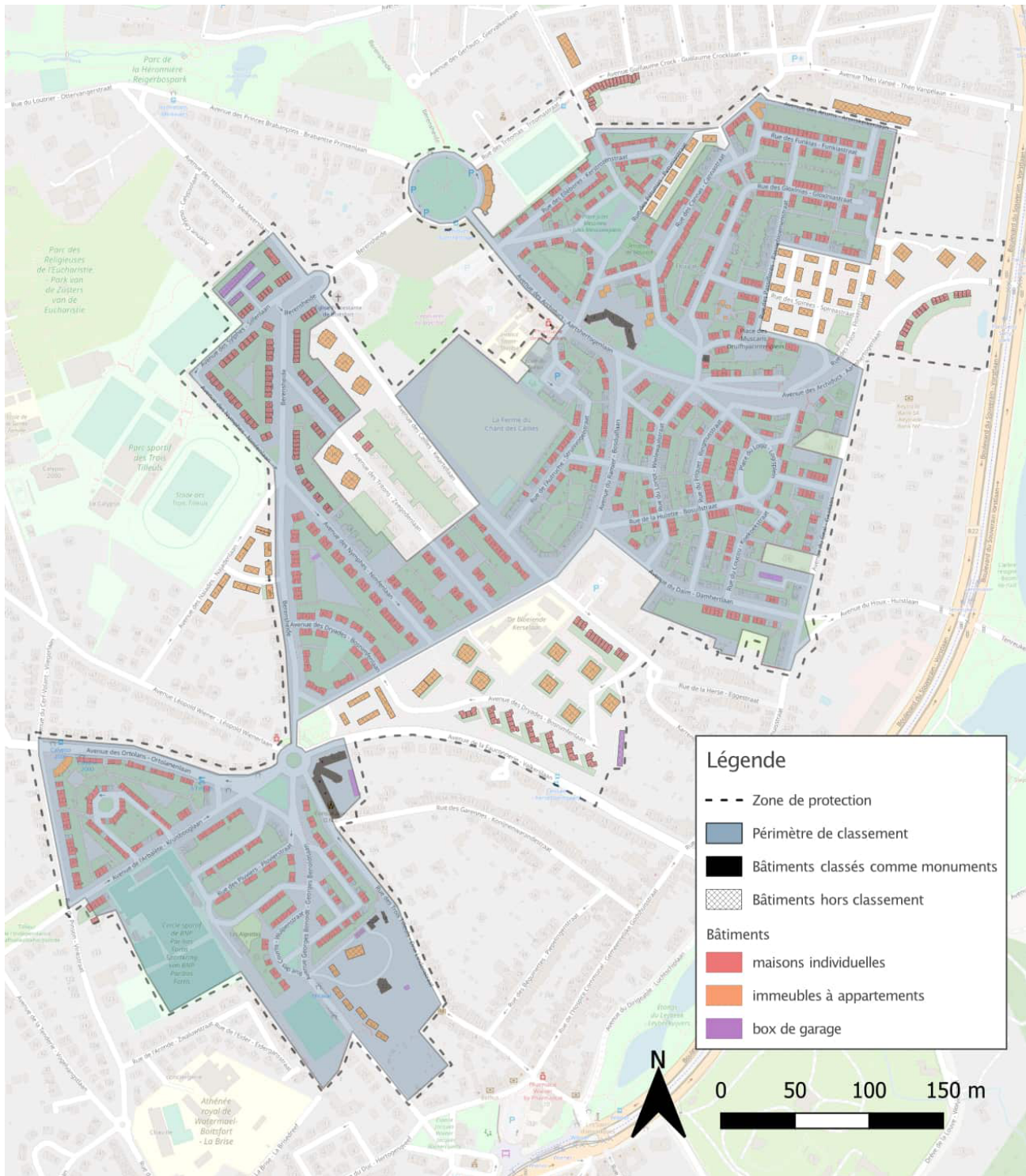


Figure 7. Heritage and Preservation Zone Logis-Floréal. Source: (Carte Du Patrimoine, 2022).²

² Legend translation (read top to down): protection zone, listed perimeter, buildings listed as monuments, non-listed buildings. Buildings: individual houses (red), apartment buildings (orange), garages (purple).

4. Methodology

“The boundary between consulting a map and interacting with the world outside is blurring.”
(Kindynis, 2014, p. 9)

The following chapter will discuss the methodological approach selected for this thesis. First, the chapter will open with the reasoning of why a comparative study was chosen. Second, two qualitative methods have been selected for data collection: semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups using mapping methods. Broadly, both methods were selected according to the research questions, the participants and how both methods complement each other. Participants for both methods were recruited via organizations active in the selected neighborhoods. A recount of how these methods unfolded will follow, including an overview of all participants. Third, the data analysis will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will close by reflecting on the researcher’s positionality.

4.1 Comparative Research with an Elderly Population

Overall, the neighborhoods were chosen for being extreme cases. If there is an intention to research the elderly’s perception regarding fear and social disorder, having very different physical fields of analysis can help further nuance these experiences and see if and where they merge. This allows to explore physical and cultural diversity and its possible impact on perceived fear, social disorganization, and accessibility. In Boswell et al.’s (2019) account of decentered and comparative research, the goal is to unpack the beliefs and actions of individuals, assuming they act for reasons that the researcher tries to uncover and explain, but not understand as their own. Choosing very “different” cases was a decision from the start, because it cannot be expected that Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls will be entirely different. The aim in comparing these neighborhoods is to present several pictures of a contested “reality.” The empirical task is then to explore, compare and contrast these overlapping narratives as the angle from which they are investigated changes (Boswell et al., 2019). In both cases, the data collection was approached in the same manner.

Conducting research with an elderly population has its distinctive features. Kammerer et al. (2019) mention that healthy older people are easier to access, either because they are retired and their time is more flexible, or because they are more interested in participating in research than younger people. In this sense, elderly living in a nursing home were not recruited, but instead those who live in private homes and who are more mobile daily, providing a wider range of activities and observations. Similarly, participants must be mobile enough to travel to places outside their immediate living environment or willing to do a visit (Kammerer et al., 2019). Moreover, a crucial strength of the mapping method is the accessibility and interactivity generated by the process through engaging with the community (Fang et al., 2022). Digital methods were not considered relevant due to the potential challenges that computing technologies may bring to the researcher and participants (Yu & Chattopadhyay, 2020). Personal interest in the study topic, altruism, need for information and services, and the hope for social contact can motivate the elderly to participate in qualitative research (Kammerer et al., 2019).

4.2 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

The interviews helped gather personal experiences and touch upon the fears the elderly encounter, and more specifically, their individual relationship with physical and social disorders. Ahmadi (2017) states that qualitative research is needed to enable critical reflection on broad concepts such as *diversity* or *cohesion* without depoliticizing them, thus deepening their understanding. Oftentimes, traditional quantitative methods (e.g. surveys and questionnaires) may fall flat or short in unfolding complex experiences, especially in urban space. Once again, most research on the fear of crime has represented this fear as a concrete and static property of certain individuals (mainly through large-scale surveys)

(Lupton, 1999). This is not to say that the questions and methods used in quantitative research, such as Likert scales (De Donder et al., 2005; Glas et al., 2021; Köber et al., 2022; Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020; Oh, 2003), do not have validity, but these concepts are subjective and unpredictable, and should also be qualitatively researched.

The interview phase took place from November 2024 until early March 2025. For both neighborhoods the approach was similar, mainly reaching out to participants via on-site organizations. For the case of Cureghem, the researcher recruited participants from Cultureghem, Cosmos and a church. Firstly, Cultureghem is a non-profit organization in the Abattoirs of Anderlecht covered market. Amongst their many activities, the researcher recruited participants through the Dreamkitchen, where she has volunteered weekly since February 2024. This allowed her to build trust with the volunteers through cooking and, therefore, approach elderly volunteers residing in the neighborhood who would be willing to participate. Here, interviews were held in a small private meeting room (*hutje*) at Cultureghem with previous approval from the staff or at the elderly's private home. Secondly, more participants were recruited via Cosmos. Cosmos is an NGO where seniors and residents can come together for affordable meals and leisure activities. A representative from Cosmos helped approach participants, and interviews were held in the context of having lunch on-site or before it. Finally, a member was recruited at the Notre-Dame Immaculée Church, whose interview was held at their home.

For Trois Tilleuls, the researcher participated in a workshop from Espace Mosaïque before the data collection phase began. This allowed her to get a sense beforehand of the public and shared interests. Espace Mosaïque is a social cohesion project (PCS or *Projet de Cohésion Sociale* in French) and a service prevention center that aims at reinforcing social ties through activities (Espace Mosaïque - Projet de Cohésion Sociale Trois Tilleuls, n.d.). One of these activities is a weekly Café Papote where every Wednesday residents of all ages come together to discuss monthly activities and neighborhood updates. Half of the interviewees were recruited through this organization, with the interviews taking place in a small meeting room on-site or at their homes. The other half was recruited through the Visitor's Center of the Logis-Floréal. The Visitor's Center is a place for both residents and visitors. They propose guided visits (the researcher participated in one in April 2024), written materials (booklets, periodicals, etc.), temporary exhibitions, and other activities (*Visitez Les Cités-Jardins*, n.d.). The data collection took place in the center's meeting room.

Overall, 14 individuals were interviewed across both neighborhoods (Table 1). The shortest interview took 40 minutes, and the longest 1 hour and 40 minutes. All interviews were in French, except for one interviewee who preferred English. All interviews relied on an interview guide (Annex 1), but flexibility was employed according to the direction of the interviewee's responses. The interview guide was based on the main sections of the literature review. For example, general questions about disorder and fear were asked, but were built upon by follow-up questions such as *Who is responsible for these events?*, *What do you think could be done in response?*, *If this place closes, what would you do and why?*, among others. Other questions that were no longer significant to the discussion were omitted entirely. Some questions were new, such as in the case of Cureghem and the New Year's Eve curfew (The Brussels Times Newsroom, 2024). Half of the interviewees signed a consent form (Annex 2) whilst the others gave their consent verbally to the data being used, to being recorded, and that their identity would be anonymized.³ Verbal consent was given when the participant felt comfortable enough not to read and sign a form or due to the interview context (e.g., discussing over a meal). Most interviews were one-on-one, except for two conducted in pairs and another in a group of three. In both cases, the thesis and methodological logistics were briefly explained to confirm their consent.

³ The consent forms were adapted from the sample form of the Institut d'Études Européennes of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Additional demographic questions were included by the researcher.

Table 1. Interview Participants Overview

Number of Interviewees	14 total, Cureghem (8), Trois Tilleuls (6)
Gender Distribution	Female: 10; Male: 4
Age Distribution	Youngest interviewee: 67 years; eldest interviewee: 87 years
Highest Level of Education Obtained	a. High school: 0 b. Technical certification/Higher education (no degree): 5 (e.g., secretary, nurse) c. Bachelor's degree (4 years): 2 d. Master's degree: 2 e. PhD: 0 f. Not specified: 5
Marital Status Distribution	Single: 4; married: 1; divorced: 1; widowed: 3; not specified: 5.
Nationality/Ethnic Background	Cureghem a. Belgium: 3 b. France: 1 c. Algeria: 1 d. Italy: 2 e. Ghana: 1 Trois Tilleuls a. Belgium-Switzerland: 1 b. Belgium: 4 c. Morocco: 1
Length of Residency	Most recent: 1.5 years; Less recent: 58 years

4.3 Focus Groups

Furthermore, using a focus group with a mapping exercise can help understand how the elderly reach consensus on broader narratives of their neighborhoods and collective fears. Crime mapping does capture spatial dynamics and patterns of crime, but it excludes social dynamics necessary to understand these dynamics and patterns. Thus, traditional crime maps project an authoritative reality onto community spaces that reduces the space to violence and crime, revealing an imaginary original of socio-spatiality onto urban spaces (Schwarze, 2023). Not to mention that specific subjects can be “left off” the map, depending on the context (Kindynis, 2014). Therefore, by mapping with the community within the context of a focus group, the researcher takes distance from the visualizations to be produced, as they are not composed of the researcher’s own idea of the neighborhoods. Maps should be created through collaboration, by focusing on situated knowledge, from specific and located positions and lived reflections (de Vet, 2023).

One focus group per neighborhood was carried out, and recruiting participants was fairly similar to the interviews. Three participants were successfully recruited for each focus group, with one focus group per neighborhood. For Cureghem, the focus group occurred in the hutje at Cultureghem. The participants were also volunteers from Cultureghem. For the Trois Tilleuls, the focus group took place with the organisation’s users at the Espace Mosaïque premises. A representative from Espace Mosaïque helped me contact participants and set a date. Before starting, all participants signed a consent form (Annex 2)

similar to the interviews. The set-up was the same: placing an A1-sized base map of the neighborhood, and going through each of the dimensions of fear (three in total) and social embeddedness (one in total) by annotating on A1-sized tracing paper sheets. This setup was inspired by Fang et al.'s (2022) participatory research with elderly communities in Canada, where they annotated aging-in-place needs over large-scale, aerial maps. Overall, both focus groups lasted one hour each with around 15 minutes of discussion per sheet/dimension. Questions were asked based on the focus group guide (Annex 1), and follow-up questions were asked whenever necessary. The sequence of the focus group was adapted from Breen's (2006) guide to focus-group research. After asking an initial question and for any clarifications, the researcher did not interfere much and would let participants discuss things among themselves. In the case of Cureghem, almost all annotations on the map were done by the researcher, and for Trois Tilleuls, it was a mix with the participants annotating themselves. Snacks were provided to enjoy during or after the exercise. Both focus groups were recorded with prior consent.

Table 2. Focus Groups Participants Overview

Number of Participants	6 total, Cureghem (3), Trois Tilleuls (3)
Gender Distribution	Female: 5; male: 1
Age Distribution	Youngest interviewee: 65 years; eldest interviewee: 84 years
Highest Level of Education Obtained	a. High school: 2 b. Technical certification/Higher education (no degree): 1 (e.g., secretary, nurse) c. Bachelor's degree (4 years): 0 d. Master's degree: 3 e. PhD: 0 f. Not specified: 0
Marital Status Distribution	Single: 2; married: 1; divorced: 3; widowed: 0; not specified: 0.
Nationality/Ethnic Background	Cureghem a. Belgium: 1 b. Cameroon: 1 c. Democratic Republic of Congo: 1 Trois Tilleuls a. Belgium-Switzerland: 1 b. Belgium: 2
Length of Residency	Most recent: 1 year ; Less recent: 45 years

4.4 Positionality

The researcher constantly reflected on two things that informed each other: her role as a researcher and student, and her identity as an international young woman. First, presenting oneself as a master's student to both participants and organizations helped gain consent and access to a space more efficiently. It takes away certain anxieties on behalf of others, due to being affiliated with a higher education institution. Additionally, approaching potential participants in French helped soften language barriers and ease participants into a conversation flow. Again, volunteering weekly at Cultureghem further encouraged participants to be part of the data collection process. By the time data collection started, the researcher had already built a good sense of trust with other volunteers. This is not to say that actors at Trois Tilleuls weren't receptive, but interactions were intermittent. Still, this did not affect

the content of the collected data.

Moreover, being a young Honduran woman informed certain decisions and dispositions in the data collection process. On the one hand, physical characteristics. Sometimes, participants and non-participants would say hello and ask for the researcher's origin, which was not thought of as strange in a superdiverse city like Brussels. At times people would start a conversation in Arabic, ask if the researcher was doing Ramadan, or ask questions such as "Cameroon, right?" These assumptions would leave an impression and blur the line between researcher and foreigner. Even though they gave their consent to an interview, some of the participants' generalizations over foreigners (to be explained in the Results chapter) would startle. On the other hand, gender. Few male subjects were actively not approached for a one-on-one interview due to feelings of discomfort. This decision was made because it would not have been beneficial for the data, even if it had been conducted on one of the actors' premises. For others, the researcher felt safe enough to conduct those few interviews at their homes, but took precautionary measures beforehand (e.g., sharing active location with a friend). Still, no reason can be found to believe that the researcher's gender or ethnic background influenced what people shared.

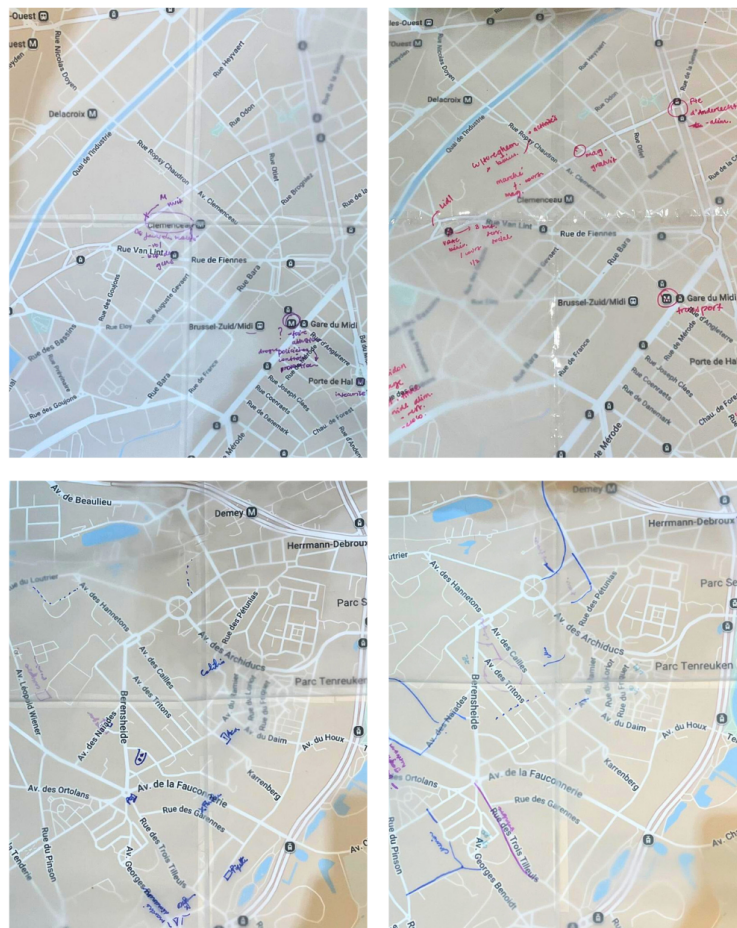


Figure 8. Examples from the Focus Group Exercise (top: Cureghem, bottom: Trois Tilleuls). Photos taken by the author.

4.5 Data Processing and Analysis

With the exception of one interview, all data was recorded on the researcher's phone. For that single non-recorded interview and another that was done in the context of lunchtime, additional notes were taken by hand immediately after. Transcripts were generated manually following a mix of selective

transcription and intelligent verbatim transcription (McMullin, 2023). More specifically, every interview was broken down into 10-minute sections where detailed notes were taken from the participants' answers, in English. Filler words were omitted, and tangents were described minimally, as they were not relevant to the research. Relevant quotes directly connected to the research questions were transcribed in French, some of which are included in this thesis and were translated into English.

Coding was done manually using Microsoft Excel, and followed an deductive-inductive strategy (Fletcher, 2017). Themes or codes such as *Diversity informing dis/order*, *Evidence of othering*, *Fear (of crime)* were created prior to data collection because these are a combination of multiple notions in one. Some codes were more static or closed, such as *Physical disorder* or *Social disorder*. These were largely based on the literature. New codes emerged, such as *Solutions to issues* which gathered participants' opinions on solutions that are currently implemented and consequently their views on local authorities. These new, flexible codes were included to prevent a rigid approach to the coding process, and not distort or dismiss what is "really" happening on site (Fletcher, 2017). Relevant quotes from the transcripts were then classified according to the codes. The coding of the focus groups followed the same logic, with the exception that responses were additionally classified according to the different dimensions of fear and social embeddedness. The data from the handwritten maps was subsequently cleaned and translated into QGIS to produce the final visualization. From these coding results, direct analyses could be applied to inform the findings of the focus groups, interviews, and thus the research questions.

5. Results

The following chapter discusses the results of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. It follows Boswell et al.'s (2019) approach for writing comparative research, where the text will be organized around the common dilemmas that recur across field sites. Interview responses are organized around themes that emerged from the data. More specifically, notions of physical and social disorder stemming from neighborhood diversity and how this leads to othering. Next, social embeddedness and changes in behavioral patterns in relation to fear (of crime). Also, the role local authorities play in handling physical and social disorders. Then, the focus groups will explore fear and social embeddedness more closely, including a visualization of the mapping exercise. Even though Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls look very different, common lessons can be drawn from both. Naturally, competing narratives are also present and will be highlighted accordingly.

5.1 Interviews

Theme 1: Neighborhood diversity, physical and social disorders and othering

Even though the neighborhoods look very different, respondents from both acknowledge the increasing social diversity affecting the landscape. In Cureghem, this is more noticeable. The neighborhood has been characterized by various immigration waves that have left their trace in the built environment. Respondents mention car dealerships, cafés, international food establishments, diverse languages, associations, and African and multicultural shops as examples of the neighborhood becoming more “lively.” They also cite that strong influxes of population make them interact with multiple cultures daily. For example, some interviewees mention having international (or non-Belgian) neighbors or landlords, and some say that the causes for this include proximity to the South Station and an increased interest in renting. Terms such as *diverse*, *fluid*, and *sponge neighborhood* were used loosely to make sense of the neighborhood’s character. These are some illustrations of the neighborhood according to interviewees:

“This place is nearly inhabited by the African people, and you know African people are noisy people... The Moroccans, they dominate this area, they have bought houses... my landlord is Moroccan.” (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

“It was only when Sub-Saharan Africans started arriving that, little by little, at least this part of Cureghem, changed its image.” (interview with Cureghem resident, February 2025)

Lack of diversity, however, is more nuanced in the Trois Tilleuls. Because the physical environment of the garden cities is preserved under heritage, there is little that can be done to alter buildings, most of which are houses. Respondents from the neighborhood say there was more social mixity and diversity of professions amongst neighbors in the past, and acknowledging that having more shops and small-scale jobs (e.g., hairdresser) would be beneficial. For example, one respondent mentioned that the neighborhood should be adapted to current times and diverse lifestyles. Unlike Cureghem, having daily contact with people from multicultural backgrounds is not frequent:

“Go and see how many Moroccans and foreigners there are at La [Ferme du] Chant de Cailles. There are none.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

“It’s isolated, it’s a postcard image. Everyone looks after the outside image, but there’s an intellectual poverty among the people. A poverty... all these people, all these foreigners, they have something to offer us.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

Still, both neighborhoods have an underlying sense that their communities and municipalities are

diversifying exponentially. Some reflect on older times where things were maybe done differently. For example, in Cureghem, a respondent said that there was a time when it was customary for people to clean their sidewalks every Friday, but that does not happen anymore. In Trois Tilleuls, three respondents agreed that it was cleaner before. Older Belgian generations have left across time, not because of a lack of cleanliness but because of strong impositions on order, as stated by four respondents from Trois Tilleuls. This will be addressed in more depth. In general, there is an agreement from respondents in both neighborhoods that older Belgian populations have decreased over time:

“I have the impression that there’s a Belgian population that’s old now and has been here for years. And then you have, as we were saying, I don’t know how many nationalities, families arriving now... when there’s a new family arriving they might also be advised by others who speak the same language... and then it creates a whole movement. It’s like there’s still this old pillar that’s stable and old and dying.” (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

“We’ve got nothing against these people, but the municipality is getting more mixed. It’s only Arabs, it’s only Africans, and almost no Belgians, because that’s what’s going to happen.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, March 2025)

Consequently, this affects how physical and social disorders are identified and perceived. Starting with physical disorder, almost all interviewees (12/14) mention trash and/or littering as a recurring issue. In Cureghem, littering issues are scattered all over the neighborhood. A respondent mentioned littering during the market days, another two mentioned Rue Eloy and Blvd. de la Révision, and another two mentioned Albert 1^{er} Square and how one of them could previously smell roses instead of trash. The South Station, Rue de la Clinique, and Chaussée de Mons also figured, as well as Clemenceau Square, where a respondent mentions debris and empty boxes used to hide drugs, people attracting pigeons with food, and trash left the following day after the square had been once embellished. According to three interviewees, in Trois Tilleuls, and most specifically the Logis-Floréal, neighborhood cleaning by residents began due to increasing littering issues. They also mention littering of trash that does not belong where it belongs. When referring to trash, participants from Cureghem discuss the colored bags (piled or torn) from Bruxelles Propreté, while the Trois Tilleuls respondents discuss people not using the orange and black garbage cans. Both neighborhoods also mention miscellaneous debris and waste left out on the street.

The problem of trash and littering becomes an apparent issue amongst different cultures. Five out of eight respondents from Cureghem mentioned that disorder is due to foreigners having different traditions and not following local rules. A respondent noted that youth are responsible for the trash at Cureghem, but did not elaborate on a specific nationality. Half of the respondents from Trois Tilleuls agreed that littering is a gradual problem caused by foreigners. For this neighborhood, Moroccans, Algerians, and a Ukrainian woman were pointed out as responsible for littering the streets.

“And it’s the foreigners, when one brings a chair, the other brings a sofa... I’m exaggerating, okay? And the other one brings a closet, and the other one brings half his motorcycle that’s broken. So that’s what happened.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls residents, March 2025)

[When asked about the consequences of this] *“Here it will become Schaerbeek.”* (interview with Trois Tilleuls residents, March 2025)

Vandalism also figured in certain answers. In Cureghem, two respondents mentioned Clemenceau Square regarding damaged infrastructure. One mentioned broken benches in the square, whilst the other referred to the metro gates. In Trois Tilleuls, a respondent mentioned a regularly vandalized bus stop with broken glass and graffiti. Two respondents mentioned how benches are not used because they are ruined or covered in moss, even though residents must pay a monthly contribution for gardening. In Trois Tilleuls, unlike Cureghem, all respondents mentioned that vacant houses are detrimental to keeping order. Three mentioned vacant houses are too expensive to be bought, another mentioned that there are empty houses because there are too many regulations to keep up with, and the other two agreed that seeing vacant and run-down houses encourages more disorder. Squatters have begun occupying some of these houses, and respondents acknowledge this change and have varying opinions. A respondent said squatters are right and have the right to do so, whilst another commented she was surprised to see a vacant house suddenly occupied. Another respondent mentioned large amounts of litter he and other volunteers collected whilst cleaning a house to be refurbished after occupation.

When asked to elaborate further on the consequences, residents from both neighborhoods shared insights on the gradual nature of disorder. For the case of Trois Tilleuls, youth were mentioned twice as the cause of vandalism.

“They’ve made efforts, the more you renovate, the more public spaces are preserved, more activities. The more degraded, the worse it gets... including social relations.” (interview with Cureghem resident, February 2025)

“Well yes, graffiti, tags, squats, violence... Filth attracts filth and violence attracts violence. [...] Everything degrades, filth attracts filth and the poor attracts the poor.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

“At the bus stop, the windows are regularly broken. I think it’s young people trying to provoke. It’s tagging, graffiti... It happens everywhere.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

Two types of social disorders figure from both neighborhoods: nighttime disturbances and drug use and selling. Once again, those othered for these behaviors are mostly foreigners and/or youth. First, a respondent from Cureghem mentioned loud noises at night and knocking on doors. Another respondent noted that youth were responsible specifically for nighttime disturbances. A respondent interviewed after the NYE curfew took place recounted on a celebration going on at Notre-Dame Immaculée church that night and it was impossible to walk through Rue de la Clinique because *“there was a group on young people on both sides throwing firecrackers at each other”* (interview with Cureghem resident, February 2025).

“That’s the problem with the neighborhood, with nighttime disturbances. They don’t respect, they still think they’re in Brazil, they still think they’re in Africa. When I say Africa, I don’t just mean Africans, even Moroccans, there’s a bit of everything. They bring back their traditions, they make a fuss at night, they don’t respect others.” (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

“And sometimes you see strange people... There’s also the kiosk, now it’s fine but during the pandemic there was music until I don’t know what time... Because there are young people with music outside. There was one day, and it was past midnight I think and it was loud with music and I was tired [...] and I said ‘I’ve had enough’ and called the police.”

(interview with Cureghem resident, November 2024)

Drug use and dealing are issues mentioned in both neighborhoods, to varying degrees. For instance, public drinking was never mentioned at Trois Tilleuls, whereas in Cureghem, it was mentioned in two interviews. One of these interviewees mentioned that it was due to many cafés in the area. However, drug dealing in public spaces is more perceivable amongst interviewees. Two places are frequently mentioned for Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls: Clemenceau and Wiener, respectively. In Cureghem, Clemenceau was mentioned by two respondents concerning drug dealing, with one of them labelling it a hotspot. The other interviewee mentioned that it was mostly young people and unauthorized migrants who were selling drugs on the square. He told the story of how a young man trespassed on Cosmos's premises to hide drugs there or another time to steal a bench to "set up shop" at Clemenceau. It is essential to mention that both of these interviews were conducted before the February shootings. Moreover, Wiener Square is off the Trois Tilleuls' limits but is mostly mentioned for its Sunday market. Here, four respondents agreed on how the tram stop, also called Wiener, is used as a drug distribution point. Three of these respondents also agreed on how they have seen blinded, expensive cars driving around the neighborhood dealing drugs as if they were "distributing milk."

"On the square [Clemenceau], and they were young people who lived in the neighborhood because we knew them... they were always here. Here on the terrace, they tried to come in and open the gate to hide their drugs on the grounds here. And when we saw that, we said 'no, you can't do that.'" (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

[About who is drug dealing at Wiener] *"Yes, young people. And young people who aren't...I don't think they're from here. Boitsfort is much more accessible, so with the [tram] 8, you can see [them], they get off the tram, they gather there."* (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

According to a few interviewees from both neighborhoods, the introduction of drug dealing is due to increasing diversity. A respondent from Cureghem said that these are the first generation of Moroccans and Sub-Saharan Africans who live with certain frustrations and have to integrate (interview with Cureghem resident, February 2025). In Trois Tilleuls, a respondent acknowledges that there is more crime than before but says there is a lack of social control due to a lack of people in the neighborhood (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, December 2024). However, three respondents agreed that drug dealing in their area is due to all these changes in diversity and multiculturalism from elsewhere that started to make way in their neighborhood. And if there are dealers, there must be consumers as well. In their words:

"When people who live in Molenbeek, Schaerbeek or Anderlecht were given a house here, they came here, but their friends followed, who still live in Molenbeek and so on. And their friends always came because...one day there was a fight in the metro at [Herrmann-] Debroux, and they ran away and the police caught them. When the police asked them where they came from, they said Molenbeek." (interview with Trois Tilleuls residents, March 2025)

Theme 2: Social embeddedness and changes in behavioral patterns in relation to fear (of crime)

In Cureghem, the interviewees mentioned a wide array of social activities. Outside of volunteering, respondents mentioned places and associations they consider beneficial, even if they do not necessarily visit them: *Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance*, Lidl, MediCureghem, *Magasin Gratuit*, once again,

and the Saint Guidon food bank (located outside of the perimeters of Cureghem). Four mentioned they volunteer weekly, three mentioned Cultureghem, and the other mentioned the *Magasin Gratuit* in Chaussé de Mons. Six respondents mentioned Cosmos as well. Three said they enjoy going to Cosmos because they can be in contact with people and share a sense of conviviality. Two respondents mentioned they found Cosmos through a friend, with one elaborating that he goes to Cosmos because he wants to, not because he has to. Another respondent said she knows her neighbors because they also go to Cosmos. Three respondents said they would find another thing if Cosmos and/or Cultureghem closes one day. To some, it offers a sense of interest for both personal and interpersonal growth and a familial sense:

"I volunteer here at the Magasin Gratuit... we're like family. They serve... they care."
(interview with Cureghem resident, November 2024)

"This is a place [Cultureghem] of interest to me too, because when you come here you meet a lot of people and what I love is just like African family. You know Africa, we cook and then we eat... so it is the same as Africa." (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

"So, to have these relationships often it's through work, we had that in our youth. But now, at our age, we always try to do voluntary work. And it's through volunteering that we get involved in the neighborhood." (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

For the Trois Tilleuls, social activities are more limited. A respondent mentioned she sometimes goes to the Soignes Forest or parks outside the neighborhood. Two respondents mentioned a pharmacy of interest. Two mentioned they volunteer, one within the neighborhood and the other outside. Three mentioned the Espace Mosaïque and the weekly Café Papote. Two respondents said Calypso 2000, the pool of the *Parc Sportif des Trois Tilleuls*, with one of them specifically referring to a time before when there was a bar and restaurant where they could meet friends. Two respondents mentioned the town hall, the Tram de Boitsfort fry shop, and the playground next to it, all located in Wiener, which they say are seemingly often empty.

Loneliness and age are motivators for going out (or not) in both neighborhoods. In Cureghem, two respondents mentioned loneliness as a motivator for keeping busy outside, with one saying that *"loneliness kills people"* (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024). Another mentioned they go out due to little contact with neighbors. One noted that she has become busier and active after becoming a widow. Still, she and another interviewee mentioned they are more indoorsy. Two other respondents mentioned they do not go out at night, with one elaborating that age contributes to going out less and doing things more slowly. However, age makes it easier to take public transport, and appearance (e.g. white hair) makes people offer them a seat, as shared by two interviewees, respectively.

In Trois Tilleuls, however, age was not mentioned once as a factor for movement. Some of the participants mentioned loneliness in one way or another. One interviewee discussed barely meeting people when going out and feeling that many people are *"lonely and depressive"* (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024). Another said they barely move past small talk with neighbors. Three residents think that more playgrounds would help increase those feelings of togetherness and help with other issues, such as drug usage and selling. Four residents agreed that dynamism and sociability ultimately come from the people themselves, not necessarily from what is currently proposed.

[If the PCS Espace Mosaïque closes one day] *“That would be nice, I’d be happy. As far as I’m concerned, I’ll be able to see the people on the benches...I’ll be the one who chooses who I see, who I stay with. At the PCS, I don’t choose who’s there.”* (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

“Social cohesion, we’re the ones who make it happen.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls residents, March 2025)

The majority of respondents (10) say they do not have fear (of crime) *per se*. However, all fourteen interviewees mentioned they take precautionary measures, to varying degrees. By this, they mostly mean paying attention to their surroundings when leaving their house, but continue living normally. Crime-related events are shared among themselves, whose stories come from friends and/or the people they meet, as well as from the media. In Cureghem, only three people mentioned being a victim of an attempted robbery. One of these and two other respondents have had a friend who was a victim of robbery. Some of their precautionary measures include offering a smile to a drunk person to calm them, speaking the offender’s language, placing different belongings in different pockets when walking around/in the South Station, taking shortcuts around South Station, leaving the house only when necessary, or surveilling a seemingly suspicious person. Additionally, when asked to elaborate on who the robbers were, three mentioned they were young people of Moroccan origin or Muslim.

“One day I went to church and when I was coming back [close to the traffic lights by Clemenceau], I had two guys and they said ‘We are going to snatch your bag’ and I spoke Arabic and I said ‘You know I’m an old lady, if you snatch this bag maybe I will fall down. But let me tell you, there’s nothing in my bag, so there is no need, take it. [She makes a surprised face imitating the two young boys that were surprised by her speaking Arabic.] [She continues to them]...And you are so young, and I have been with the Muslims, you are treated as if the Muslims are not good, but to me they are very good! That is because of you [the two boys], why should you think of snatching somebody’s bag?... From now on, you do not do it again.’ [She continues saying how since then, they have become friends.] If not because of the little Arabic, they would have harmed me, they would have pushed me.” (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024)

Moreover, some respondents mentioned the night as uncomfortable. One respondent said she avoided roundabouts at night, another said she would feel uneasy if alone, but feel alright if she was with someone. This same woman mentioned how once people tried to enter her house at night, but the offenders were deterred when the people in front started to record. She expressed her dislike in *“people from the night”* (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024) saying how these people have strange behaviors, such as fixating stares at others. Another respondent said people should respect the times to go out, stating that *“you do not know who you will meet”* (interview with Cureghem resident, January 2025). An interviewee commented on how they placed a gate guarding the front stairs due to, first, people hanging out at the entry for various reasons, and, later, doing drugs at night. Some areas mentioned include Clemenceau (square and metro), Chaussée de Mons, Rue de la Clinique, Bara Square and around the abattoirs.

“I’ve never had a feeling of insecurity. But if there’s a visitor here who comes home at a certain time, say after 9 pm, we accompany them to the metro station.” (interview with Cureghem resident, February 2025)

Stories regarding robberies and drug dealing are mostly told in Trois Tilleuls. Two respondents mentioned

stolen pets, one mentioned leaving unattended objects on her sidewalk that got stolen, and another mentioned wallets and books stolen from the Visitor's Center. The latter responded that it is due to not knowing who comes to the bigger events in the neighborhood. Additionally, a respondent said that robbers are people from outside the neighborhood. Wiener Square and Keym Square were mentioned as hotspots for dealing and burglaries, respectively. Precautionary measures included being cautious to lock front doors, knowing self-defense from before, relying on their car to move around, leaving the lights on at night before leaving, or filming.

"I phoned again. A few months ago. It was in the middle of the night. I could hear people shouting and yelling at each other, and I thought it was a drug deal. [...] I grabbed my cell phone and started filming. Then a big car came and I said 'that's not normal at all,' shielded... And then I phoned the police, I said, 'That's it... They [the police] know who I am... But when they're there, I don't show myself anymore. I filmed it and I'm going to keep it on something external.'" (interview with Trois Tilleuls resident, November 2024)

Thus, fear of the night was mentioned by three of the respondents. Mobility was also brought up. One of them commented that elderly women don't go out. She cited that it is not the style of the neighborhood, they have a learned fear, and are afraid at night and to leave the house at night. Finally, two respondents mentioned that the sidewalks are not always in a good state, mostly due to holes in them. One said she fears falling on the sidewalk and that no one would be around to help her. The other respondent relies on public transport to get around.

Theme 3: Perceptions of local authorities' responses in navigating physical and social disorders

Regarding what solutions could be implemented for physical disorder, five residents from Cureghem mention (re-)educating the population. While some were not sure how to elaborate further on this, others mentioned re-educating through activities or being more strict. For example, sharing things, neighborhood festivals, or small-scale fairs like kermesses that were once done. Another mentioned more activities and renovations that keep the public space cared for. Others mentioned more shelters and centers, activities for both genders and adults, and aid for foreigners. *Stricter* measures include ensuring fines are applied for street littering, or that there must be a limit to skyrocketing diversity. A respondent reiterated that the problem of trash is a *"question of education and other generations"* (interview with Cureghem resident, January 2025).

Still, perceptions of the authorities' input in these matters are similar. A respondent said that Bruxelles Propreté cannot keep up with the population influx in Cureghem, and another commented that they do not believe the municipality has done anything about trash issues. Likewise, an interviewee commented that the STIB/MIVB transport access gates for the metro at Clemenceau are permanently open because they were getting damaged repeatedly, or that there are not enough means to support the high number of newcomers. He also said how Bruxelles Propreté faces challenges in following through with new measures:

"There's also the phenomenon that Bruxelles Propreté must consider the neighborhood here as a bit declassified and we've noticed that sometimes they don't come to pick it [the trash] up. For example, at one point we were obliged to put food waste out for composting in red bags. We had been doing this for some time now, and Bruxelles Propreté just did not pick it up. We notified them by phone, we sent them emails and they said 'yes yes yes, we'll do that.' So sometimes they came two or three days later and picked it up, but sometimes they don't come at all. It's true that maybe from Bara to the abattoirs, there are

two or three people who put the compost outside, and they [Bruxelles Propreté] get tired of coming just for two bags and [so] they don't come. Now we mix it in the white bags. So there's also the fact that when a neighborhood is declassified like that, services also tend to lose quality.” (interview with Cureghem resident, February 2025)

In Trois Tilleuls, the landscape is somewhat different. Enforcing too much order is cited one way or the other by four respondents as damaging to the neighborhood. Two commented that when there are damages to the houses and the tenant is not pleased with the proposed solution, the administration's counter-solution is that they can leave the neighborhood. This is because, according to these same two interviewees, owners and tenants must pay for household repairs and not the administration. Moreover, three of them mentioned that there is no maintenance of youth spaces and/or playgrounds, and another interviewee talked about rejected petitions for sandboxes and places for children to gather. For the most part, the garden city administration agrees with proposals for social activities from the residents. However, according to three respondents, residents must manage it themselves, and the local authority invests little resources.

Four interviewees commented that preserving the image of a space that is listed as heritage has brought these tensions forward. They also mentioned no foreseeable long-term changes. Even though the Brussels Capital Region decided to turn into social housing and make way for temporary occupation to prevent and/or manage squatting, activities do not feel inclusive, according to them. For example, opening a new restaurant that is too expensive or language barriers that keep people from diverse origins separated. There is an uncertainty about where their rent is managed and a worry that houses are solely proposed to lower-income minorities.

The topic of police was briefly discussed with interviewees. In Cureghem, police have a higher visibility in public spaces. Two interviewees believe the police are active and provide security in the neighborhood, especially around the South Station. Another area where police have been seen surveilling is Place du Conseil or in different streets. One of the respondents interviewed after the NYE curfew on whether it should remain or not said that the measure has good intentions, but can also hurt police enforcing it. The other interviewee said the curfew should be normalized, reiterating that you never know who you will meet in the streets. On whether it should continue or not, this interviewee only responded with “*to each their own*” (interview with Cureghem resident, December 2024).

Police response was discussed in Trois Tilleuls, to varying perceptions. One respondent mentioned how after calling for a nighttime disturbance police came rapidly to inspect and the offenders left. This respondent reiterated how she steps back once police arrive at the scene. Another interviewee living elsewhere at that time shared the experience where police came long after a nighttime disturbance had happened; therefore, there is a lost registry of it. Two respondents mentioned the need among residents to report and speak to authorities, police or not, when something happens. This was also brought up in Cureghem, where two respondents said that everyone keeps quiet and is afraid to speak out, and people should report to the police even if they feel hopeless, respectively. Nevertheless, neighborhood image plays a central part, as discussed by the following residents from Trois Tilleuls:

Interviewee: *“Because the city of Brussels did a survey on drugs, and they found that there were no drug addicts in Boitsfort. We said, ‘Why, what does that mean?’ As we’re considered, in quotes, ‘a rather wealthy municipality...’”*

Researcher: *“Who did the survey?”*

Interviewee: “The police... They did it all over Brussels and there were two, three municipalities... I think it was Uccle, Ixelles and Boitsfort where they decided there were no drugs. And we felt very vexed because we see [it]... And there was one [among us] who said ‘It’s not difficult, on the market day, on Sunday, we have the [tram] 8 which arrives at Wiener... There’s one who gets off, there’s one who waits, drug exchange happens and they take the tram. It’s typical, it’s everywhere.” (interview with Trois Tilleuls residents, March 2025)

5.2 Focus Groups

Affective Dimension

This dimension revolves around the question *where do you feel unsafe?* Participants mainly focused on the South Station. They mentioned certain cues that make them pay more attention to their surroundings during the day and night: drug consumption in general and by homeless people, or seeing the same number of police officers as there are civilians. Nevertheless, they all agree that the new police station that opened at the railway station is beneficial. One of them, a Belgian citizen, mentioned that she has never had an issue with fear of crime, in this case. The other two, who are unauthorized people, cautioned her that she should watch around the South Station. They mentioned feeling uneasy around Clemenceau at night. They had different opinions regarding the media’s role in advising the general public. One says they should follow them, whilst the other says the news inflates feelings of fear.

“For us sans-papiers, these are not frequented places. Because if there’s an incident, they check everyone who’s there. And for us who have no residence permit, it’s not easy... Especially at night...” (Focus group with Cureghem residents, December 2024)

In Trois Tilleuls, participants mostly mentioned small-scale fears related to mobility. For example, stories of someone throwing things out of their balcony. Also, damaged sidewalks with holes, loose cobblestones, and slippery and slightly flooded due to the rain. Some stairs were also considered impractical. A respondent said it is difficult to bike in the neighborhood when it rains.

Cognitive Dimension

This dimension is centered around *where have you heard of instances of crime?* For Cureghem, responses were about robberies. Once again, the South Station was mentioned as a place where these incidents happen. Another participant mentioned robberies in crowded areas such as Blvd. du Midi, Clemenceau and during market days in the abattoirs. They discussed that it could be organized crime at times when multiple thieves are operating at the same time. Young people were discussed as robbers too. One mentioned how she puts her phone in a place different from her bag after a near-robbery experience. Finally, Cultureghem is mentioned as a place where people also share or hear of conflicts.

At Trois Tilleuls, Wiener Square and Keym Square are discussed. First, they mention when the fry shop at Wiener was vandalized by youth on December 31st, 2023. They also mentioned works in the neighborhood, especially Keym (the square was being renovated at the time of the focus group). They discussed robberies throughout the neighborhood, such as Avenue de Cailles and Keym. Additionally, vehicles set on fire were discussed around Avenue Berensheide and by the Academy of Music and Performing Arts. Invisible disorders were also discussed, such as dirty private gardens, noise, or barking dogs. Finally, they have learned of these incidents through exchanging stories with people they know

or via the news in the case of the fry shop. Also, one was victim of a robbery, or they have seen the burning cars themselves.

“Culture is presented as insecurity in the public space, whereas it’s in the home that it’s dangerous.” (Focus group with Trois Tilleuls residents, November 2024)

Behavioral Dimension

This dimension discusses *what are the routes you take most often?* Or, in other words, *what routes are you most comfortable taking?* In Cureghem, they discussed feeling better in large streets with trees or when families are on the streets/squares coming back from school together. They discussed how the South Station is largely equipped security-wise. Their personal appearances are discussed (e.g., elderly, white hair), which makes them look approachable—for example, being offered a seat in public transport or a drunk man saying hello. A respondent mentioned Samusocial as a comfortable place where she feels cared for by her roommate. Finally, they all agree on Cultureghem as a place they go to weekly and feel at ease.

The participants from Trois Tilleuls consider the neighborhood to be safe everywhere, except for sidewalks in poor condition occasionally. For example, one complained about fallen fruit from the trees, which damages the cobblestones. They discuss a reason for this: they barely cross people on the streets and smaller pathways. Consequently, they talk about the conditions of the houses and infrastructure. They briefly discuss graffiti and broken windows in houses, saying that if it isn’t fixed or cleaned, it gives “permission” to enter a home or repeat the action.

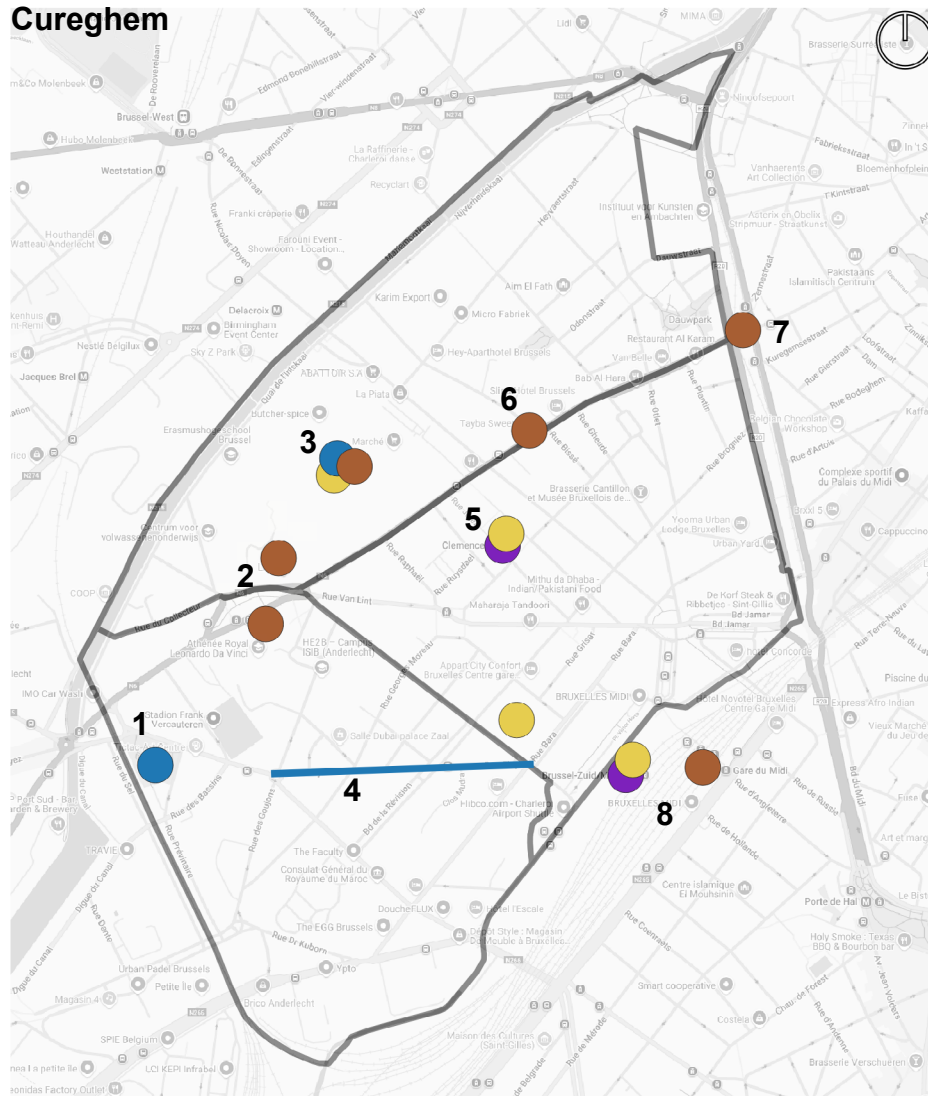
Social Embeddedness

This final “dimension” examines *what places do you like or visit often?* For Cureghem, participants mentioned diverse organizations. All three mentioned Cultureghem as a valuable place. Two mentioned food aid organizations, such as those in the Porte d’Anderlecht. Other mentioned areas were: going to church, Magasin Gratuit, abattoirs’ market, Lidl, and the Albert 1er Square where there are social service establishments. The South Station was also mentioned for having plenty of public transport options. Finally, they mentioned seeing friends who live outside of the neighborhood.

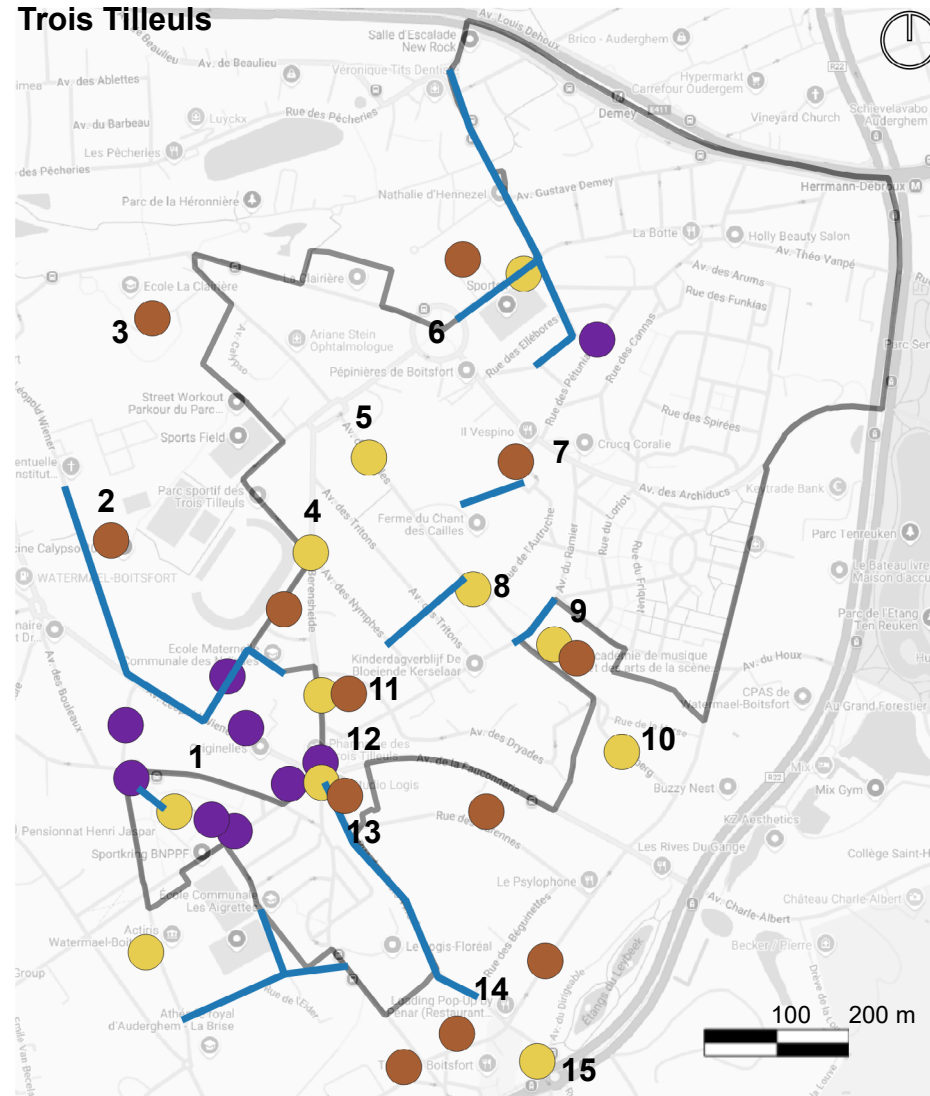
“I’d look for another volunteer job because I need connections and for me that’s important and then also find people who live in the neighborhood. [...] You get to know people, you make friends and things like that, and I think it helps to keep that neighborhood spirit alive.” (Focus group with Cureghem residents, December 2024)

Participants from Trois Tilleuls discussed places where they mostly meet people. For example, the PCS Espace Mosaïque, the Academy, the town hall, Calypso 2000, and the Sunday market at Wiener. Others include Oxfam, a bakery, a vegetable garden, their own house, or taking small green pathways. They mention an unused/abandoned urban garden and no follow-ups regarding petitions for sandboxes or small playing areas for children. Finally, they reiterated that fear is gendered and therefore, many elderly women (excluding them) are fearful to go out.

Cureghem



Trois Tilleuls



Legend

- Affective Dimension
- Cognitive Dimension
- Behavioral Dimension
- Social Embeddedness
- Neighborhood Perimeters

Index Cureghem

- 1 Parc Crickx
- 2 Sq. Albert I (Food/social aid)
- 3 Cultureghem / Abattoirs
- 4 Rue Eloy
- 5 Clemenceau (Drug activity)
- 6 Magasin Gratuit
- 7 Porte d'Anderlecht (Food aid)
- 8 South Station (Mobility, crime)

Index Trois Tilleuls

- 1 Damaged sidewalks
- 2 Parc Sportif / Pool
- 3 CPAS Seniors' Residence
- 4 Av. Berensheide (Car on fire)
- 5 Avenue des Cailles (Robbery)
- 6 Sq. des Archiducs
- 7 École Le Colibri
- 8 Avenue des Cailles (Squatting)
- 9 Academy of Music & Performing Arts (Car on fire)
- 10 Car on fire
- 11 Nighttime disturbances
- 12 Pharmacy
- 13 PCS Espace Mosaïque
- 14 Various commerces
- 15 Wiener (Drug activity and vandalism)

Figure 9. Focus Groups Results. Elaborated by the author.

6. Discussion

This thesis investigated how neighborhood diversity shapes fear and order perceptions among the elderly in different neighborhoods. More explicitly, it examined the perception of social and physical disorders' impact on the elderly's experience of their respective neighborhood. Additionally, this study explored how social embeddedness influences perceptions of fear (of crime). While earlier studies have quantitatively tested the relationship of fear (of crime) and disorder, amongst the elderly or not, they have not explicitly addressed perceived diversity and perceived disorder's impact on elderly experiences through a comparison. This study also focuses on social ties and socio-structural embeddedness, both social mechanisms that influence fear. This chapter will interpret notable findings from the interviews and focus groups. To do so, the results will be discussed through the main theories addressing the relationships between diversity, fear, and order presented in the literature review. Similarly to the results section, the following discussion will be formulated across the same common dilemmas found (Boswell et al., 2019).

Theme 1: Neighborhood diversity, physical and social disorders and othering

This study found a perceived increase in cultural diversity generating tension in both neighborhoods. Whilst diversity has always been characteristic of Cureghem, residents from Trois Tilleuls acknowledge changes in diversity seeping through their neighborhood. Jackson et al. (2007) suggested that increased diversity creates a greater demand for living space. This aligns with what Cureghem residents commented regarding new residents from diverse nationalities arriving due to sharing cultural similarities. In the Trois Tilleuls, temporary housing is offered to manage squatting, and resident families must follow the mutation scheme when their family size decreases. In a way, residents see a potential strain in resources (housing, for example) related to a perceived increase in diversity. If this leads specifically to crime, it is more nuanced.

Elderly populations generally agree with standard definitions of physical and social disorders. Interviewees from both neighborhoods mention littering and drug use as predominant issues, whilst also discussing loitering, noise and nighttime disturbances, panhandling, vandalism, graffiti, and decay in small-scale infrastructure, which aligns with earlier studies (Ceccato & Bamzar, 2016; Gibson, 2014; Oh, 2003). Although Köber et al. (2022) found that street accessibility, connectivity, and sidewalk condition affect neighborhood walking patterns and overall perceptions of insecurity, Cureghem residents are mobile and active and do not show significant indications of behavioral changes when walking. Specific mobility issues, however, such as damaged sidewalks, are mostly mentioned in Trois Tilleuls. Additionally, the study found that elderly populations reflect on the past when their neighborhoods were cleaner and there were more Belgian residents. They share a sense of uncertainty about the future, too. Even though respondents do not have a resulting fear of crime, they agree with Ceccato & Bamzar's (2016) account of fear of the unknown and changes in their neighborhood. Unlike Jackson et al. (2007), longer length of residency doesn't appear to strictly exacerbate this sense of uncertainty, as short-time and long-time residents from both neighborhoods have varying opinions.

Still, the findings suggest that perceived diversity amongst the elderly affects perceptions of disorder, which leads to othering. More specifically, they indicate that more cultural diversity can lead to more disorder. Both Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls residents mention a Belgian population at the core of their neighborhoods facing new cultures. Rationally, there is an understanding that other cultures may find local customs about waste management different, for example, or that they are not fully aware of them and thereby not complying. For some respondents, however, this is becoming a threat to order, aligning with the basis of intergroup threat theory. Following Swart et al. (2023), respondents' perceived threat and attitudes are fueled by perceived diversity profiles. The supposed threat of increasing diversity appears independent of the built environment; it just manifests differently. For example, superdiversity

is already commonplace and acknowledged in Cureghem and the threat is not knowing the limits of it. In Trois Tilleuls, the study found that people from more diverse neighborhoods in Brussels are entering the neighborhood to deal drugs or due to prior connections. The felt threat in Trois Tilleuls is the potential complete rupture of order they have been accustomed to. Either way, they form stereotypes about specific populations, contributing to this sense of group threat (De Silva et al., 2021; Gibson, 2014).

The findings show that foreign cultures and/or youth are mostly othered. The data aligns with classical notions of othering, such as labelling those associated with danger, threat, or unpredictability, resulting in negative expressions (Ceccato, 2017). The interviews provide further insight into the relationship between we/they. Respondents use “the other” to deposit their anxieties related to disorder, whether they know “the other” or not. Lupton (1999) discusses the unpredictable stranger as an unknown figure in public space for whom behaviors cannot be determined. The present study shows respondents from both neighborhoods who know or have personally seen youth drug dealing, attempted a robbery, or caused disturbances. Likewise, they comment on not knowing who they may encounter on the streets and thus becoming more careful. Others assume youth or foreigners are vandalizing or littering, respectively. This aligns with Søråa et al. (2020), where the elderly use “the other” to make sense of (un)acceptable social order and cultural codes in public space. It also reinforces their own and the other’s identity. Santos (2021) explains that the idea of “the other” itself implies the idea of a world foreign to one’s own. This can be seen in the data, where residents from Cureghem blame specific nationalities (e.g., Brazilians, Moroccans, etc.) for social and physical disorders, whilst in Trois Tilleuls, it is also people from specific municipalities (e.g., Molenbeek, Anderlecht, Schaerbeek).

Geographically, the composition of both Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls aligns with the concept of social disorganization. Cureghem complies with the characteristics brought forward by Tibbetts & Hemmens (n.d.), Bellair (2017), Shaw & McKay (1942), and Köber et al. (2022): higher crime rates and social disadvantage (than Trois Tilleuls in this case), surrounds the central business district, more physical dilapidation and poverty, and a high cultural mix. While previous research and definitions of social disorganization focused on the causal relationship between ethnic heterogeneity and crime (Bellair, 2017; Gau, 2014; Sampson & Groves, 1989), these results demonstrate that disorder is more strongly perceived with cultural diversity, than crime. In relation to Hooghe & de Vroome’s (2016) study, the results do not agree that the community level of ethnic diversity is significantly related to *fear of crime*, but that there is a perceived impact of diversity on potential crime (due to increasing disorder). This is important to consider because disorder is used conceptually as a pathway to crime (Jackson et al., 2007). However, it is both important to recall that respondents still othered youth and certain nationalities and cultural backgrounds about crimes like robbery, nighttime disturbances, and drug dealing.

Additionally, the endogenous and exogenous dimensions tested by Sampson & Groves (1989) regarding social disorganization do not necessarily align with the realities in Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls. The endogenous dimensions (supervise and control teenage peer groups, informal local friendship networks, local organizational participation) do not weigh mostly in favor of either neighborhood. Cureghem has higher crime rates than Trois Tilleuls, but Cureghem has a higher local organization pool for social participation. Youth is seen as an issue for social disorders in both neighborhoods. Also, for both cases, few respondents know their neighbors, and friendship local networks are developed in enclosed “orderly” spaces (e.g., Cultureghem, Cosmos, Espace Mosaïque) and not informally in public space. The exogenous dimensions (socio-economic statistics, residential stability, race/ethnicity, family disruption, and urbanization) are also not fully determinant for either neighborhood. In line with Sampson & Groves (1989), ethnicity, family disruption, and urbanization affect local friendship networks in Cureghem and Trois Tilleuls. Respondents in Trois Tilleuls discuss language barriers to explain the absence or separation of different groups at events or organizations. In both neighborhoods, losing

a partner, living alone, or loneliness become motivators for seeking social activity independent of residential stability or length of residence. Socio-economic attributes were not perceived as affective to friendship networks in both neighborhoods. If the idea is that the better these endogenous and exogenous dimensions are maintained equals to less corrosion in the neighborhoods, this leaves little to no recognition for contextual struggles.

In general, the results indicate that the elderly largely agree with the exponential nature of the broken windows theory (Wilson & Kelling, 2017). For instance, they name multiple physical cues brought forward in the theory, such as decay, empty buildings, vandalism, and open drug use (De Donder et al., 2005). Results also show that they agree that an increase in low-level disorders can lead to more disorders (Jackson et al., 2007). When it comes to drug dealing, for example, they use comparisons to describe its proliferation across their neighborhoods (e.g., milk distribution, it is everywhere, or that if there are dealers, there must be consumers). While some studies discuss the impact of the theory within a neighborhood (Gau et al. 2014; Jackson et al., 2007), the Trois Tilleuls gives new insight on how this perceived corrosion may happen at an inter-neighborhood level too.

Moreover, fear stemming from these physical and social cues is nuanced, too. The results agree with the claims of Gibson (2014), De Donder et al. (2005), and Gau et al. (2014) in that the respondents from both neighborhoods think further decay leads to weak social ties and connections. Also, the results support the notion that there is nothing inherently terrifying about graffiti, litter, or broken windows (Gau et al., 2014). The results also build on the claims by Lupton (1999), Hunter (1978), and Ceccato & Bamzar (2016), where social disorder in the form of incivility and unpredictability go beyond than just fear of crime and physical disorders. This shows that their fears are multidimensional (Ceccato & Bamzar, 2016) and that disorders cause more issues than fear and fear is the result of more issues than just disorder (Gau et al., 2014). More than fear, the results demonstrate a feeling of uncertainty regarding disorders. Their responses reveal neighborhood norms (Galinsky et al., 2012) are broken, and that others may not understand what it means to “live together in a convivial manner,” as mostly expressed in the Trois Tilleuls. Likewise, in both neighborhoods, this analysis largely supports the claim that social control is connected to collective action and securing external resources rather than informal ties (Gau et al., 2014). In Trois Tilleuls, this is the case when respondents discuss the lack of people on the streets and may worry about not having immediate help if something happens or if they were to fall. In Cureghem, for some, multiculturalism and busy public spaces do not cause fear, but navigating diversity for conviviality is challenging. The latter is also true for Trois Tilleuls. In other words, like Sampson (2012), social control on the streets doesn’t do much. Rather, it is an underlying agreement (or expectation) among residents to act for the greater good.

Theme 2: Social embeddedness and changes in behavioral patterns in relation to fear (of crime)

In both neighborhoods, involvement in neighborhood activities and organizations affects the construction of the elderly’s social ties. Respondents from both neighborhoods mention various third places (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024), from volunteering organizations to public services hosting regular gatherings. Even though Cureghem has a larger offer of social organizations, for all respondents, social interactions emerge from the distribution of opportunities in space, as Damurski (2021) states. Cosmos, Cultureghem, and Espace Mosaïque were primarily mentioned, not only because the majority of respondents were recruited from these places, but also because they figure as part of their weekly routines. There is no single motivator for visiting these places. The results show that it is inevitable that the elderly experience a decrease in the size and scope of their social networks (Galinsky et al., 2012; Oh, 2003), either because their children moved and started a family or their marital status has changed. For others, loneliness and being inactive are seen as detrimental but not necessarily fearful,

as Jackson et al. (2007) state.

The data also contributes to a clearer understanding of the importance of diversity in and of the social infrastructure in a neighborhood (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024). The results show that the assumption that the more social ties and networks there are, the better the neighborhood's social fabric is (Gau, 2014), is not determinant. This is because of individual factors such as age, interests, language, routine, etc. that affect social processes. For example, multiculturalism and diversity as standalone concepts do not necessarily threaten social relationships (Eraydin, 2018; Glas et al., 2021; Sampson & Groves, 1989), but language barriers may complicate the process, as the results have shown. The fact that respondents acknowledge that their third places are diverse is also telling, but it is not an underlying factor that defines the quality of their social ties, as the literature also suggests (Ahmadi, 2017; Glas et al., 2021; Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020). For example, Cosmos and Espace Mosaïque are predominantly visited by elderly White residents (Belgian or not), while Cultureghem is highly diverse and intergenerational. There were also some adverse opinions towards having to frequent a place such as Espace Mosaïque to meet people, instead of letting it happen more organically. So it is not that Cultureghem is more welcoming than Cosmos, even though they are in the same neighborhood. Still, these results should be taken into account when considering the importance of social infrastructure for aging-in-place and its potential for social exclusion (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024). Just like Swain & Urban (2024) discuss, social ties can be strong across groups, but it does not mean there is a cohesive whole. This analysis shows the complexity of cohesion at a neighborhood level.

The results indicate that age is not overarching over perceptions of fear (of crime), but rather a combination of factors that De Donder et al. (2005) discuss, such as others' victimization, social contacts, media, and neighborhood participation. These authors also state health and physical vulnerability as factors, and even though the former did not figure in the results, the latter did in the shape of fear of falling due to damaged and slippery sidewalks and being pushed during a potential robbery. Likewise, there were mentions of fear of strangers, robberies, the night, and suspicious behavior. This confirms that fear of crime is an umbrella term and a type of fear amongst many that can be associated with each other (Enhuis, Forthcoming).

Again, the results show that fear (of crime) develops mainly as an emotional response to a perceived threat (De Donder et al., 2005), rather than being fearful of disorders (Jackson et al., 2007). To balance this perceived fear, the data shows that the elderly take precautionary measures. Out of the four behaviors that Ceccato and Bamzar (2016) describe, the data shows respondents adopt mostly avoidance and protective behaviors, rather than committing fully to behavioral lifestyle adjustments and doing collective activities in response to fear specifically. For example, filming drug-related activities and nighttime disturbances, speaking multiple languages, not going out at night, and, if they do, leaving the house lights on, placing personal belongings in different pockets, surveilling someone in a public space, among others. While this study did not compare fear perceptions between youth and the elderly, the results show that other factors influence the elderly's safety perception rather than objective neighborhood conditions (Köber et al., 2022). Even though they may be vocal about who may be causing crime, they are not fearful of who the offender might be. Consequently, personal experiences greatly impact othering processes and those responsible for crime. The results agree that factors such as age, diversity, and who they meet can influence their outlooks on others (Søraa et al., 2020).

The data from the focus groups further elaborates on the complexity of fear (of crime). Starting with the affective dimension, in Cureghem, most of the exercise revolved around the South Station. Paying attention to their surroundings and seeing drug consumption, panhandling, and strong police presence can explain both imagined victimization and a diffused atmosphere of risk, in line with De Silva et al.

(2021). Long-time residency is valuable in understanding perceived fear and diversity levels (Köber et al., 2022), but also status, because even though two of the participants have lived in the neighborhood around the same amount of time, the experience of being a Congolese sans-papiers versus a White Belgian is very different in terms of fear. Likewise, if we look into some of the interviewees who have lived in the neighborhood for 30+ years, some know and have made contact with offenders, but others are still fearful, once again indicating that fear is subjective according to personal experiences. Moreover, even though there have been larger scale crimes in Trois Tilleuls, respondents discuss fear more from the perspective of mobility. This is why there are more clustered dots on the map than in Cureghem. However, unlike Jackson et al. (2007), who state that serious consequences are expected to occur against the elderly due to physical conditions and reduced social networks did not figure in the results. This statement indicates a certain generalization and victimization over elderly populations before anything has happened to them, that does not agree with the collected results. Even though some use their age to acknowledge their physical appearance, need for social exchange, and differentiation from other generations as responsible for disorder (North & Fiske, 2012), they do not see themselves as dependent or frail.

Additionally, the results for the cognitive dimension mostly indicate consensus over collective perceptions of crime in both neighborhoods. Even though participants from both neighborhoods agree on large-scale crimes and the locations of these, they do not share a sense of helplessness over the situation, as the literature may indicate (De Silva et al., 2021). They learn of these occurrences because they have witnessed them, discussed them with acquaintances, or seen them through media (De Donder et al., 2005). More than increased perceptions of fear, as suggested by De Silva et al. (2021), the data indicates an increased awareness of the potential crimes happening in the neighborhood resulting from sharing information. This is why sometimes social embeddedness overlaps with the other dimensions. Again, Trois Tilleuls has more dots than in Cureghem, referring to small-scale occurrences rather than in Cureghem, where these overlap in major squares or nodes.

Regarding the behavioral dimension, they mostly discussed the characteristics of places they consider safe. The cues in Cureghem vary, such as large streets with trees, seeing families on the streets, security at the train station, or being acknowledged in public transport because of their appearance. In Trois Tilleuls, too, to a lesser degree, since they mostly discussed decayed infrastructure and considered the neighborhood mostly safe anywhere. It was also expected that residents from the Trois Tilleuls would talk about and point out more greenery in the maps than in Cureghem. Barely anything was discussed regarding protective measures collectively, possibly indicating that these cues affect them individually and change their behaviors according to their lifestyle (De Silva et al., 2021), which matches the responses from the interviews.

In general, the additional dimension of social embeddedness mostly reiterates this second theme's beginning. Third places play a more critical role in older age, especially with motivators such as loneliness and retirement. For some, they have become their weekly, even daily routine and reality. The maps show that social embeddedness is beneficial to build on the dimensions of fear of crime. As De Silva et al. (2021) show in the cognitive dimension, social ties can both enhance social connections but, in doing so, can increase community concern over conflicts. Additionally, as the results show, some respondents prefer to avoid certain times and areas, due to previous news or triggers (Lupton, 1999).

Theme 3: Perceptions of local authorities' responses in navigating physical and social disorders

Naturally, in line with Bellair (2017), all residents would prefer their neighborhoods to be free of crime, but smaller-scale incivilities and disorders are exceptionally critical to understanding othering and

fear (Hunter, 1978). Respondents found the question of what consequences they see stemming from increasing low-level disorders and diversity tricky to respond to. Again, it is not that they feel a full sense of helplessness over the situation (De Silva et al., 2021), but they acknowledge it affects their experiences of the neighborhood. Even though their baseline notion is that their neighborhoods benefit or would benefit from order and maintenance, these are highly contextual in practice.

In Cureghem, respondents focused more on maintaining social relationships and ties than on public space maintenance. By saying it is necessary to work on re-educating the population through neighborhood activities, they recognize that engaging in the social mechanisms that bridge disorders and crime needs attention (Gau et al., 2014). They agree that living in an ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood generates conflict and social disorganization (Bellair, 2017) because they experience it. Again, in line with Sampson (2012), willingness to act together becomes more important for the residents of Cureghem than reinforcing social control. Nevertheless, some respondents questioned the ability of local authorities to keep up with such a diverse neighborhood. This is significant because much of the literature emphasizes that social disorganization falls mostly on the residents' shoulders and little has been mentioned on having secure external resources, as Gau et al. (2014) call them. If Gibson (2014) suggests that policymakers should not address concerns regarding diversity and social disorder, this can further weaken the public's trust in authorities, and deem them as paternalistic and normative. Even if fears are subjective, they have social consequences.

In Trois Tilleuls, the need for attention towards more inclusive activities aligns with what was shared from Cureghem. Even though Cureghem residents acknowledged the potential consequences of not maintaining public space, this topic is more present in Trois Tilleuls. This is important because these experiences and perceptions come from a highly ordered place, even if their responses align with the broken windows theory. The fact that the Trois Tilleuls reported more instances of small-scale physical disorders could mean that disorders are more noticeable in a neighborhood such as a garden city than in a highly diverse and intense neighborhood where one low-level disorders get swamped among many. Additionally, the responses from some residents that cohesion comes from themselves indicate that they rely more on their networks to improve efficacy through coordinated actions (Mouratidis & Poortinga, 2020) than waiting for the local authority to do so.

According to the results, perceptions of how local authorities in both neighborhoods handle disorders vary. Authorities and residents rely on hotspots and the neighborhood's image to understand it. For example, it is interesting that respondents from both interviews and focus groups mentioned Clemenceau as either potentially dangerous or a hotspot for drug dealing before the February shootings. As of the submission of this thesis, the fences are still up guarding the square, and this initial response did not prevent further shootings from happening. In accordance with Weisburd (2018), scaling up and increasing police presence on site does not address the underlying causes for these shootings. Also, these subsequent shootings were displaced to nearby areas, demonstrating that these specific police strategies have little to no effect (Weisburd, 2018). Moreover, some residents from both neighborhoods feel pride over their neighborhoods, either because they chose to live there or have lived long enough to know it well, which is not easily transferable to local authorities and administration. Headlines addressing Cureghem depict it as the "Wild Wild West" (Walker, 2025), whereas the Trois Tilleuls is not particularly newsworthy. Still, territorial stigmatization is employed by some authorities and some residents to reduce these two neighborhoods and other municipalities as either dirty, drug-free, rich, or declassified (Schwarze, 2021). As seen through the examples of the Police and Bruxelles Propreté from interviews and focus groups, this can affect the types of responses employed.



Figure 10. Fence around Clemenceau since February 2025, now with “messages for the neighborhood.” Photo taken by the author (May 2025).

Limitations and Further Research

This study has potential limitations. Mapping with the participants was crucial to understanding perceptions and occurrences surrounding fear (of crime). Participants were receptive to the exercise, and after debriefing with them afterwards, they mentioned that sharing experiences helps them learn more about others and the neighborhood. Due to time constraints, only one focus group could be completed per neighborhood. Conducting these focus groups requires external planning, subject to the actors’ and participants’ availability. Building on these initial maps can further enhance the existing data. Plus, the interviews and focus groups were only conducted in French and English; therefore, there is an inevitable focus on the population who shares these languages, ultimately leaving some populations out and potentially some of those who were “othered.” The majority of respondents were women, which could lead to a gendered outcome, even if it was not the research intention. Participants responded naturally to the prompts, which were constructed irrespective of gender. It could also mean that more female elderly participate in these organizations, but more data is needed to confirm this. Moreover, having never lived in either neighborhood, both methods served as a tool to get to know further the areas of study. Still, the respondents’ views on specific subjects do not necessarily represent the opinions of the entire neighborhood. To resist these limitations, an ample overview of the case studies was necessary to provide context. Equally, getting involved in external activities such as volunteering and participating in certain events helped give a sense of familiarity.

The third theme discussed in the previous sections, perceptions of local authorities’ responses in navigating physical and social disorders, came as a welcomed surprise at later stages. And, due to inexperience in the Belgian Police’s and Brussels authorities’ frameworks, few narratives surrounding them were collected. Still, those collected and mentioned in this thesis were highly relevant to include, in consonance with the pertinent literature. Youth has been an important subject surrounding place-based crime prevention, and it is clear from these results that they are a critical part of the puzzle of social disorganization and fear. Considering the events such as the NYE curfew and the shootings in Cureghem, it is important to hear both sides of the story. Understanding youth fear within the context

of elderly fear can provide a more complete outlook into intergenerational experiences. Finally, another potential limitation is that data collection for Cureghem stopped before the shootings took place. Tactics such as increasing police presence and setting fences around Clemenceau have inevitably changed the landscape, and it would be beneficial to research how feelings of fear have changed after all these events.

7. Conclusion

So, order or disorder? Depends on who you ask and why. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a mapping exercise, this study explored how the elderly navigate neighborhood diversity in shaping their perceptions of fear and order in Brussels. Clashes between cultures are bound to happen in a superdiverse city such as Brussels. Negative perceptions about order are the result of tensions from increasing neighborhood diversity. The findings show that increasing diversity is perceived as a threat to increasing disorder. Youth and other nationalities foreign to one's own are labelled as those at fault. Fear, however, is not necessarily perceived by the elderly as the sole outcome of low-level physical and social disorders. They continue to "live normally." Still, precautionary measures are taken that are influenced by physical and social cues or witnessing suspicious activity. Finally, the image of the neighborhood impacts the way the elderly perceive disorder management. The following paragraphs will conclude with an answer to each research question.

The main research question was *how does neighborhood diversity shape perceptions of fear and order among elderly populations in two contrasting neighborhoods in Brussels?* Overall, the built environment is only part of the equation. What are seemingly two completely different neighborhoods share more similarities than is expected. The environment's design serves mainly as a backdrop because perceptions of disorders in both cases are mostly related to changes in cultural diversity in and outside their neighborhoods. Exponential diversity, according to some elderly, can threaten communal living, not because disorders are inherently fearful or because they wish their neighborhoods to be homogeneous, but because of the challenges that come in the shape of language barriers or adapting to local rules. There is a need for more communal activities at a neighborhood level that can bring people together and lower feelings of tension across cultures. In a last attempt to make sense of increasing disorder, some resort to othering and treating foreign cultures and youth as scapegoats to deposit negative perceptions of the urban environment. Additionally, personal status affects perceptions of disorder and fear, beyond age or gender. Whether a participant is widowed, divorced, single, *sans-papiers*, multilingual, chose to live in their neighborhood or was born into it, etc., this impacts how they perceive their surroundings.

The first research sub-question was *how do elderly populations perceive the impact of social and physical disorders on their experience of their neighborhood?* Order is entirely contextual, but there are perceived limits to it. Cureghem has a longstanding relationship with too much disorder, and Trois Tilleuls with too much order, which affects how they are perceived and experienced by the elderly. As residents, they are aware of the image of their neighborhoods and how it translates to them and beyond. Still and independently of how much order or disorder either neighborhood has, residents from both sides agree with baseline ideas of social disorganization and broken windows theories, without actively naming them. Low-level social and physical disorders are strong cues that indicate "something is off," and share a universal language. However, they are not strong enough to completely change lifestyles. Such as in Cureghem, for instance, where the people of Cosmos know the youth who are drug-dealing at Clemenceau. Larger-scale crimes offer a different story, however.

This same neighborhood image impacts the perception of local authorities in efficiently navigating social and physical disorders. Cureghem's history and perceptions of authorities are reminiscent of the ill-fated Pruitt-Igoe apartment complex in Missouri, United States. The project has long been debated as a failure of design, society, or policy. If any of these truly resonate with Cureghem, it is up for interpretation. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the elderly perceive that increasing diversity and disorder are complex for local authorities to address. "Fencing-up" an entire square, not collecting trash, placing a curfew for all minors, increasing police visibility with armored cars, or dismissing a commune in a drug-trafficking survey are short-term solutions that do not address underlying struggles. Additionally, living with too much order, in the name of heritage preservation or not, can be stress-inducing sometimes. Much of the exterior image of the garden city comes from residents' wages, rent,

and proactivity, but they are still restricted to many elements of daily living.

The second research sub-question was *to what extent does their social embeddedness influence perceptions of fear (of crime)?* Social embeddedness is needed to understand fear (of crime) because both coexist in space. Volunteering, basic-need establishments, commerce, religious establishments, etc., are valuable to the elderly. Third places offer a chance to interact with others about topics related to disorder or crime and have healthy discussions. The dimensions of fear can coexist in the same place. At the South Station, for example, a respondent can find it both useful (transportation) and secure (police presence), but dangerous too (pickpocketing, media, or previous victimization). Hotspots where larger-scale crimes have occurred are engraved in their understanding and navigation of the neighborhood. However, fear remains an individualized concept and is mobilized according to one's perception. Additionally, places that are "controlled," but where they can meet people, are mostly appreciated. Rarely were stranger and friendly encounters in public spaces and amongst neighbors discussed. And the quality of contacts was perceived as more important than the quantity. If disorder is at one end and crime is at the other, social embeddedness is bridging them, but in practice, it is much more complex than it seems.

8. References

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Annex 1: Interview and Focus Group Guides

1. Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews Guide

Introductory Questions

- How are you today?
- How did you get here today? How far away do you live?
- What did you notice? Did you notice something out of the ordinary on your way here?
- How long have you lived in this neighborhood?
 - How did you arrive to this neighborhood?

In-Depth Questions

- Disorder and Fear
 - What places do you like/dislike in this neighborhood? Why?
 - What makes X comfortable or uncomfortable? Why? (depends on their previous response)
 - Are there moments where you feel most vulnerable in this neighborhood? When and why?
 - What do you think is responsible for those feelings of fear?
 - Do you see any consequences stemming from graffiti/decay for the neighborhood? (e.g; abandoned buildings, broken urban furniture, windows, graffiti, public drinking, and litter)
 - Have you personally been a victim of crime? Do you know someone who has?
 - Can I ask what happened and how it was solved?
 - Has this affected in any way your day-to-day?

Social Ties and Social Infrastructure

- Are there any places you avoid? For what reasons?
- What does your typical day look like?
 - Where do you go and who do you meet (the most)? What languages do you speak at home and outside your home?
 - How/where did you meet them?
- According to you, what places are the most significant to you in this neighborhood? What makes them so valuable?
- Are there any resources or support systems within this neighborhood that help you manage feelings of fear/conflict?
 - What would you do if X closed/moved? How often do you meet your neighbors? Where?

2. Focus Groups Guide

Introduction

Key Questions: Collective Mapping Exercise

- 1. Dimensions of Fear (of Crime)
 - Affective: Can anyone share a specific experience in this neighborhood that made you feel afraid? Did it affect your sense of safety in your community?
 - What places in the neighborhood make you feel afraid?/Where do you feel unsafe?
 - Why and how would you describe them? What makes them scary?
 - Cognitive: When you think about this neighborhood, what specific concerns come to mind that contribute to feelings of fear? Are there particular events or places that heighten your anxiety?
 - Where have you heard (or seen) of instances of crime? Can you describe what happens in these places?
 - Behavioral: How do you typically react when you feel fearful in your neighborhood? (i.e. what are the 'safest' routes?)
 - What are the routes you take most often? What places do you avoid? Why are they perceived as safer than others?

- 2. Social Ties and Socio-Structural Embeddedness
 - What places do you like or visit often? What are the places and spaces in the community that are valuable to you? (What is missing and how does that affect their fears?)
 - What places do you frequent besides home and/or work?
 - Identify important services and resources (start with each organization as a central place as example?). Difficulties? Gaps? Accessibility? How do they feel there?
- (public services and institutions, organized social activity, green & public spaces, commercial enterprises)
- (connections between places, going from one to the other, routes they take do they visit them daily or not?)

Ending Question: General discussion, improvements for the FG?

Annex 2: Interview and Focus Group Consent Forms



FORMULAIRE DE CONSENTEMENT : ENTRETIEN

Je, _____, consens à participer à un entretien dans le cadre du projet de recherche intitulé L'influence de la diversité des quartiers et de la désorganisation sociale sur la perception de la peur parmi les personnes âgées : Une étude comparative à Bruxelles (provisoire), réalisé par Ana Gabriela Perez sous la supervision de Lucas Melgaço (lucas.melgaco@vub.be) et Floris Liekens (floris.lieken@vub.be), dont l'email est ana.gabriela.perez.sierra@vub.be.

En signant ce formulaire, je reconnais que:

1. Je participe volontairement à cet entretien.
2. La chercheuse m'a informé des objectifs du projet de recherche et l'entretien, de son déroulement et de ses éventuels résultats.
3. Je ne recevrai aucune rémunération pour ma participation au projet de recherche.
4. Je peux refuser de répondre à certaines questions.
5. L'entretien sera enregistré numériquement. Je peux demander l'arrêt de l'enregistrement à tout moment, que ce soit temporairement ou définitivement.
6. Cet enregistrement et la transcription correspondante seront conservés de manière privée. L'accès sera limité à la chercheuse et ses superviseurs.
7. Des citations de l'entretien peuvent être utilisées dans des publications écrites et des présentations orales ultérieures résultant de ce projet. Toutefois, mon identité, ma fonction ou toute autre information permettant de m'identifier seront gardées secrètes à tout moment. Je serai simplement présenté comme un.e participant.e.
8. Je peux, à tout moment, revenir sur mon consentement sans motif et sans être pénalisé.
9. Je ne renonce à aucun de mes droits légaux.

Nom et prénom du/de la participant.e	Signature du/de la participant.e
Nom et prénom de la chercheuse	Signature de la chercheuse



Demographie:

1. Âge: _____
2. Quelle est votre identité de genre ?
 - a. Femme
 - b. Masculin
 - c. Transgenre
 - d. Non binaire
 - e. Autre (veuillez préciser)
 - f. Préfère ne pas dire
3. Quelle est votre origine ethnique ?
 - a. _____
4. Quel est votre niveau d'études ?
 - a. Moins que l'école secondaire
 - b. École secondaire
 - c. Études supérieures (sans diplôme)
 - d. Certification technique
 - e. Licence (4 ans)
 - f. Maîtrise
 - g. Doctorat
 - h. Préfère ne pas dire
5. État civil
 - a. Marié
 - b. Veuf.ve
 - c. Divorcé.e
 - d. Séparé.e
 - e. Célibataire
 - f. Préfère ne pas dire
6. Depuis combien de temps est-ce que j'habite dans/visite le quartier ?
 - a. _____



FORMULAIRE DE CONSENTEMENT : GROUPE DE DISCUSSION

Je, _____, consens à participer dans un groupe de discussion dans le cadre du projet de recherche intitulé L'influence de la diversité des quartiers et de la désorganisation sociale sur la perception de la peur parmi les personnes âgées : Une étude comparative à Bruxelles (provisoire), réalisé par Ana Gabriela Perez sous la supervision de Lucas Melgaço (lucas.melgaco@vub.be) et Floris Liekens (floris.liekens@vub.be), dont l'email est ana.gabriela.perez.sierra@vub.be.

En signant ce formulaire, je reconnais que:

1. Je participe volontairement à ce groupe de discussion.
2. La chercheuse m'a informé des objectifs du projet de recherche et du groupe de discussion, de son déroulement et de ses éventuels résultats.
3. Je ne recevrai aucune rémunération pour ma participation au projet de recherche.
4. Je peux refuser de répondre à certaines questions.
5. Le groupe de discussion sera enregistré au moyen de notes. Je peux demander l'arrêt de l'enregistrement à tout moment, que ce soit temporairement ou définitivement.
6. Cet enregistrement sera conservé de manière privée. L'accès sera limité à la chercheuse et ses superviseurs.
7. Des citations peuvent être utilisées dans des publications écrites et des présentations orales ultérieures résultant de ce projet. Toutefois, mon identité, ma fonction ou toute autre information permettant de m'identifier seront gardées secrètes à tout moment. Je serai simplement présenté comme un.e participant.e.
8. Je peux, à tout moment, revenir sur mon consentement sans motif et sans être pénalisé.
9. Je ne renonce pas à aucun de mes droits légaux.

Nom et prénom du/de la participant.e	Signature du/de la participant.e
Nom et prénom de la chercheuse	Signature de la chercheuse



Demographie:

1. Âge: _____
2. Quelle est votre identité de genre ?
 - a. Femme
 - b. Masculin
 - c. Transgenre
 - d. Non binaire
 - e. Autre (veuillez préciser)
 - f. Préfère ne pas dire
3. Quelle est votre origine ethnique ?
 - a. _____
4. Quel est votre niveau d'études ?
 - a. Moins que l'école secondaire
 - b. École secondaire
 - c. Études supérieures (sans diplôme)
 - d. Certification technique
 - e. Licence (4 ans)
 - f. Maîtrise
 - g. Doctorat
 - h. Préfère ne pas dire
5. État civil
 - a. Marié
 - b. Veuf.ve
 - c. Divorcé.e
 - d. Séparé.e
 - e. Célibataire
 - f. Préfère ne pas dire
6. Depuis combien de temps est-ce que j'habite dans/visite le quartier ?
 - a. _____