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Between Perception and Reality.
Socio-spatial Factors Affecting Youth Wellbeing in Public Space in Cuenca and Ambato

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Abstract
Youth wellbeing and development are strongly influenced by the physical environment and its conditions; thus, it is essential to examine the relationship between young people and public space. This case study analyses youth wellbeing in Cuenca and Ambato through perception surveys and a comparison with official dashboard data on urban wellbeing. The findings reveal discrepancies between young people's perceptions of public space and official data. These differences weaken their connection to the city and reduce public space usage, ultimately affecting their wellbeing. The study also presents the experience of these cities using placemaking as a tool to bridge this gap and improve youth engagement with urban spaces.

Keywords: youth wellbeing, public space, safety, placemaking, mental health

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Young people's wellbeing in public space

The relationship between young people and public space is a complex field of study involving multiple social, psychological, and urban dimensions. Recent research has pointed out that the wellbeing of the youth population is closely linked to the characteristics and conditions of the spaces they inhabit (Aramburu, 2008; Blum et al., 2022; Cardona Rodríguez et al., 2013; Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023; Daly et al., 2024; Forero et al., 2022).

According to the relational wellbeing (RWB) theory, wellbeing is shaped by the social contexts and relationships individuals are embedded in (White & Jha, 2023). This approach consists of material (having enough), relational (being connected) and subjective (feeling good) dimensions that are interdependent and change according to personal, societal, and environmental drivers, contrasting with Global North frameworks that focus primarily on individual achievement and material conditions (White, 2017).

We frame this study by considering young people's own definitions of wellbeing, drawing on Woolcock and Steele's (2008) research, which identified three key components based on youth perspectives: (1) belonging, referring to a positive sense of self and social recognition; (2) agency, or the ability to engage in activities independently; and (3) safety and security.

Accordingly, socio-spatial factors influencing youth wellbeing include access to basic services, opportunities for active and independent mobility, safety and security, social connectedness, and urban and environmental qualities - such as green spaces, diverse activities, and spaces for peer interaction. A key concept in this regard is affordances, which refer to the physical, spatial, or social features that enable specific behaviours and interactions within an environment, such as play, rest, gathering, or creative expression (Broberg et al., 2013; Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023). These elements are crucial for youth development, as they support exploration, autonomy, and self-expression (McEvoy-Levy, 2012).

For young people, urban spaces are not neutral; they are socially constructed and imbued with meaning, affecting how individuals form identities and relationships (Skelton & Gough, 2013; Low, 2023). As Abramo (2005) points out, Latin American youth create and redefine urban spaces through cultural practices such as skateboarding, graffiti, and music, thereby exercising their right to the city and claiming their own forms of participation and belonging. This appropriation of space is not homogeneous: social class, gender, ethnicity, and territory deeply influence young people's ability to access, move through, and express themselves in public space, while also shaping their understandings of wellbeing.

Moreover, factors like sprawl, traffic, unsafety, and parental overprotection lead to restricting mobility licenses for youth conditioning their agency (Cordero-Vinueza et al., 2023).

Although some cities provide extensive coverage of basic services and affordances, limited mobility can confine young people to what Broberg et al. (2013) describe as a glasshouse condition, where external opportunities exist but remain inaccessible to them, restricting their ability to engage in activities independently.

Finally, safety is not solely determined by the objective conditions of the physical environment. The perception of safety is shaped by subjective factors such as personal history, traumatic experiences, or childhood neglect (Daly et al., 2024)—as well as broader collective narratives that significantly influence how young people evaluate and engage with public space. Additionally, perceptions of safety, affect the level of freedom parents grant their children to navigate urban spaces (Gillespie, 2013; Kyttä et al., 2014).

Understanding the interplay between these factors is essential for creating urban environments that support young people's wellbeing. Beyond objective conditions, the ways in which youth perceive and experience public space critically shape their interactions with the city.

By addressing both the physical and social dimensions, this paper sheds light on the relationship between youth wellbeing and public space in intermediate cities, contributing to bridging urban studies with youth development and wellbeing, emphasizing their profound and reciprocal relationship.

Cuenca and Ambato: Methodology and current situation in the public space

In this paper, we analyse both objective and subjective data on the socio-spatial factors influencing young people's wellbeing in the cities of Cuenca (ages 15–24) and Ambato (ages 15–29), both intermediate cities in Ecuador part of the Safe & Sound Cities program.

The Safe and Sound Cities program (S^2Cities) is a global initiative that seeks to transform cities into safer and more youth-friendly spaces. In Ecuador, S^2Cities focuses on empowering youth leadership and participation in building safer and more sustainable urban environments through placemaking. The program is led globally by the Global Infrastructure Basel Foundation and organized by Swiss Philanthropy. These cities were chosen for this study, as they had available objective and subjective data on youth wellbeing.

According to data from the 2022 Population and Housing Census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), Ambato has a population of 370,664 inhabitants, 52% of whom live in urban areas. Of these, 93,391 are young people between 15 and 29 years of age, representing 25.2% of the canton's population, with 50.2% female and 49.8% male (INEC, 2025a). Cuenca has a total population of 596,101 people, with 60.64% residing in urban areas. Among them, 105.180 are young people aged 15 and 24, accounting for17,64% of the population with 49,47% female and 50,56% male (INEC, 2025a). The difference in age ranges used to define youth is due to varying criteria: Ambato follows the definition established by Ecuadorian legislation, while Cuenca uses the definition adopted by the Safe & Sound Cities (S^2Cities) program.

Our research methodology follows a triangulation approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data. We collected youth safety perception surveys conducted in 2023 as part of the Safe and Sound Cities (S^2C) program in Cuenca (1,545 surveys) and Ambato (1,558 surveys), alongside official data from open dashboards of national institutions, including the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), the Ministry of Public

Health (MSP), the Ministry of the Interior, and the Attorney General's Office. Additionally, micro-narratives from local youth provided deeper insight into their subjective perceptions.

The surveys are statistically representative, with a 95% confidence level. Sampling considered gender, age groups (under and over 18), and included diverse neighbourhoods to ensure geographic and demographic balance and capture the socio-spatial diversity. It was designed to offer a holistic understanding of the factors affecting young people's safety and wellbeing. It included questions on the material, subjective, and relational wellbeing, as well as perceptions of public space—covering aspects such as mobility systems, green areas, affordances, and overall use of urban spaces. The responses were then compared with official governmental data.

Finally, through field research, we collected data in the public space, on placemaking initiatives to identify potential indicators suggesting that these interventions can enhance safety perceptions and strengthen the relationship between young people and urban spaces. Each intervention was assessed using a mixed-methods approach, including pre- and post-intervention surveys, semi-structured interviews with youth participants, direct observation of activities in the public space and a collection of micro-narratives of users. This allowed for a comprehensive understanding of changes in safety perception, subjective wellbeing, and patterns of space use.

Findings

Safety: Between perception and reality

While the surveys covered a broad range of questions to capture insights into young people's safety and wellbeing.

We compare three key areas that are essential for understanding the main challenges they face in the city: (1) Perceptions of safety issues, (2) Personal experiences of harm or danger, and (3) Leading causes of death.

When asked: What do you think are the main problems experienced by young people in the city? - respondents in Ambato and Cuenca highlighted similar concerns. The three most frequently mentioned issues were robberies in public spaces (69% in Ambato, 41.5% in Cuenca), armed crime (30% in Ambato, 12.5% in Cuenca), and sexual harassment in public spaces (21% in Ambato, 11% in Cuenca) (S^2Cities, 2023a; S^2Cities, 2023b).

However, when asked about personal experiences—particularly whether they had faced an event in the past 12 months that affected their wellbeing—many participants shared significant challenges. The most common incidents in Ambato were sexual harassment in public spaces (37%), traffic accidents (27%), and theft in public spaces (25%) (S^2Cities, 2023a). In Cuenca, 47% of respondents reported being affected by mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or stress, while 18% mentioned sexual harassment in public spaces, and 16% reported robberies in public spaces. Additionally, 14% of young people in Cuenca reported being involved in a traffic accident in the past year (S^2Cities, 2023b).

Notably, while robberies (violent attacks) and theft (non-violent incidents) were initially considered separate experiences, combining both categories reveals that 60% of young

people in Ambato and 32% in Cuenca have been affected by robbery or theft. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents also reported being impacted by natural disasters—20% in Ambato and 15% in Cuenca. However, when asked which lived experience had most affected their wellbeing, stress and depression were ranked first by a significant margin (S^{2}Cities, 2023a; S^{2}Cities, 2023b).

It is important to note that while natural disasters were frequently reported as personal experiences, they were not initially mentioned as perceived safety concerns. Similarly, car accidents were rarely cited as a perceived risk, despite their significant impact.

An analysis of the leading causes of death among young people (ages 15–29) in 2022 shows that in Ambato, traffic accidents were the primary cause, accounting for 54% of deaths, while in Cuenca, they were the second leading cause at 40%. Suicide was the second leading cause in Ambato (24%) and the first in Cuenca (52%). The third leading cause varied by city: gun violence in Ambato (12%) and violent attacks in Cuenca (4%) (INEC, 2025b) (S^{2}Cities, 2023a; S^{2}Cities, 2023b). Young people in both cities report that a lack of safety negatively impacts their quality of life, with 61% in Ambato and 46% in Cuenca expressing this concern. However, their second most pressing issue differs: in Ambato, it is the lack of employment (S^{2}Cities, 2023a), while in Cuenca, it is the perceived low quality of public spaces (S^{2}Cities, 2023b). This contrast highlights a significant difference in the factors that young people consider essential for their wellbeing according to their context.

Official indicators of reported crime show rates of 3 and 2.28 crimes per 1,000 inhabitants in Azuay (Cuenca) and Tungurahua (Ambato) respectively, considered low compared to the average in Ecuador 4.6 crimes per 1000 inhabitants (FGE, 2025). However, the perception surveys reveal that the perception of safety in both cities is low and that personal experiences also show a significant number of young people affected.

Young people are not only affected by their own perceptions of safety in public space but also by how others perceive them. Frequently viewed as threatening due to their age, they are often stereotyped as engaging in delinquent or unhealthy behaviours (Owens, 2002; Owens, 2020; McEvoy-Levy, 2012). As a result, urban environments are frequently designed to minimise or exclude youth presence and activities (Owens, 2002). This may help explain why over 25% of surveyed youth in Cuenca and 41% in Ambato reported feeling discriminated against because of their age.

Moreover, gender plays an important role in safety and safety perception. For instance, young women are significantly more affected by harassment than men, while man are more often victims of traffic accidents and gun violence. This gender difference also affects the way and frequency in which men and women use the public space. Less young women report to visit public spaces alone compared to young men and men are more often un public spaces with friends, while women are accompanied by relatives (S^{2}Cities, 2023a; S^{2}Cities, 2023b).

As Caldeira (2013) argues, fear in urban settings is not only the result of crime statistics but also of broader narratives and social experiences that shape how space is perceived and used. This aligns with our findings in Cuenca and Ambato, where youth report high levels of perceived insecurity despite relatively low official crime rates. Moreover, similar to the new urban practices observed in São Paulo, placemaking initiatives in

Ecuador show how young people can actively reconfigure public spaces, challenging traditional forms of exclusion and fostering emotional wellbeing.

Mobility

In Ambato, 46% of people use public transportation, but 90% of young people report feeling unsafe while using it. This feeling of insecurity is more pronounced among women (92%) compared to men (88%). Additionally, 73% of young people feel unsafe walking, while only 10% feel unsafe using a private car. This suggests that young people tend to associate safety primarily with crimes like robbery or harassment, rather than considering traffic accidents, which are the leading cause of death and one of the most common incidents affecting young people according to the survey (S^2Cities, 2023a).

In Cuenca, a high percentage of young people also report feeling unsafe on public roads: 43% feel unsafe walking, and 38% feel unsafe using public transport (S^2Cities, 2023b). However, the perception of safety differs between modes of transportation, with 53% feeling safe on the tram compared to 39% on the bus. Despite these concerns, 38% of young people use public transport for their daily routes, 21% walk, and 35% use private cars. While women use public transport more frequently (44% vs 33%), they report a higher exposure to harassment, highlighting the importance of considering gender when analysing young people's experiences in public spaces.

Mental Health

It is known that in Cuenca and Ambato, 71% and 72% of young people, respectively, reported having experienced stress, anxiety or depression in 2023, with a higher prevalence in females (81%) than in males (60%) (S^2Cities, 2023a; S^2Cities, 2023b). These figures are worrying, considering that the WHO has recognised mental health as one of the priority challenges for youth (WHO, 2023) and official statistics on mental health reflect alarming rates of suicide (INEC, 2025b).

However, in Ambato, the most common ways in which young people have dealt with these situations are through artistic and sporting activities (48%), support from friends (35%) and family (31%) (S^2C-Ambato, 2025). In Cuenca, it is similar through artistic, sporting and cultural activities (36%), followed by help with friends (21%), family (19%). (S^2C-Cuenca, 2024), many of these activities happen in the public space. Moreover, young people also report feeling better at parks and green areas, which they report as their favourite space to spend time, followed by home. The main activities that young people do in their free time are playing games or sports, eating or drinking, meeting friends and walking. However, 30% more man play sports than women, which also suggest that not all spaces are welcoming for everyone.

Basic Services

Census data indicates that basic services and public transport coverage exceed 90% in both cities (INEC, 2025a). However, young people perceive parks, streets, and public transport as unsafe environments. In Ambato, 81% of young people feel unsafe in parks and squares, and 90% feel unsafe on public transport (S^2C-Ambato, 2024). In Cuenca, 43% feel unsafe walking, and 38% feel unsafe on public transport (S^2C-Cuenca, 2024).

This disparity highlights that the mere availability of infrastructure does not guarantee that spaces are perceived as safe or adequate for youth socialization. Interestingly, young people still report parks and green areas as their favourite places to spend time, suggesting that safety is not always the main factor in ensuring wellbeing. Instead, young people value the activities that are available in that space for them.

Placemaking as an alternative for youth-centred urban planning

Considering that wellbeing is affected by the physical environment, but also its uses and perception, placemaking is presented as a key tool for improving young people's wellbeing by encouraging their active participation in the creation and transformation of public spaces (Chawla, L. & van Vliet—, 2020).

Research by Ploner and Jones (2019) examines the relationship between placemaking, culture, and local identity, highlighting its role in shaping young people's sense of belonging and self-perception. Their study indicates that placemaking initiatives can contribute to social cohesion and perceptions of safety, particularly in urban areas where young people often have limited involvement in planning and regeneration processes. Additionally, Gal (2017) discusses the role of youth participation in decision-making regarding their environment, emphasizing its association with social and emotional development by fostering a sense of agency and engagement in local processes.

In this context of emotional discomfort and perceptions of insecurity, placemaking is presented as a potential tool to directly and positively impact the emotional wellbeing and mental health of youth by also shaping their agency and independence (Daly et al., 2024; Chawla, L. & van Vliet—, 2020).

Youth-led placemaking initiatives were implemented in Cuenca and Ambato in the Safe and Sound Cities programme. From the data collected in the interventions of Bibliorío, Arteria (initiatives led by young people aged 15-24 in Cuenca), Renovarte and Espacio Sano y Seguro (ESS) (initiatives led by young people aged 15-29 in Ambato), it is possible to observe a clear improvement in the perception of safety in public space and the subjective wellbeing of young people.

Bibliorío – a youth initiative carried out on the banks of the Yanuncay river in Cuenca, involving reading, recreation, and artistic activities (See Graphic 1)- not only generated a significant increase in the perception of safety - from 72% to 90% - but also fostered spaces for positive socialisation, collective learning and community bonding (S^2Cities, 2024c). The young people who participated reported developing social skills, increased knowledge on placemaking, their stay in the space increased despite unfavourable weather conditions, and participants reported a 35% positive impact on their subjective wellbeing (S^2Cities, 2024b). This experience suggests that the combination of nature, culture and active participation can counteract stress and foster emotional wellbeing, aligning with existing literature on green spaces as a resource for mental health (Forero et al., 2022).

Similarly, Arteria - an urban intervention in Cuenca that transformed a grey and unsafe corridor into a green, pedestrian-friendly space connected to the city's mobility system (See Graphic 2)- encouraged active mobility and reduced risks associated with minor traffic accidents. Prior to the intervention, 95% of users reported feeling unsafe in the area. Following implementation, 75% indicated feeling safer, and 99% expressed greater

comfort walking through the corridor (S²Cities, 2024c). The project not only revitalised the physical environment but also fostered conditions for social interaction and community ownership—both critical for strengthening belonging and perceived safety. Whereas young people previously avoided or rushed through the space, they now linger to socialise, rest, play, or eat. Additionally, bicycle use in the area increased by 10% (S²Cities, 2024c). These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of contact with green spaces and quality infrastructure on youth mental health (Jansson, Sundevall & Wales, 2016; WHO, 2023).

Similarly, the experiences in Ambato—particularly through the Renovarte and ESS initiatives—demonstrate the potential of placemaking to counteract the stigmatisation and social abandonment of urban spaces. Renovarte transformed a formerly neglected area associated with criminality into a vibrant, co-created environment through urban art and cultural activities (see Graph 3). This process enabled young people and the broader community to express emotions, foster belonging, and actively reshape their surroundings (S²Cities, 2024b). Perceptions of safety in the space rose markedly from 8% before the intervention to 82% afterwards; among women, this increase was even more dramatic, rising from 0% to 86% (S²Cities, 2024a). Additionally, pedestrian activity among women has grown significantly, and the space is now more frequently used by neighbours and youth for social gatherings—indicating a strengthening of the neighbourhood's social fabric. In the case of ESS (Espacio Sano y Seguro / Safe and Healthy Space) -a cultural and sports- based activation aimed at reducing alcohol consumption and promoting positive youth engagement in public space (See Graphic 4) – the intervention significantly reduced alcohol consumption, while perceived safety increased from 75% to 94%, reaching 100% during organised events. Many young participants indicated that this was their first time actively engaging with public space, as previous recreational options were limited to alcohol consumption. The initiative not only introduced alternative forms of leisure through cultural and artistic activities but also fostered a sense of ownership among youth, who have begun proposing their own initiatives to reconnect with and reshape their urban environment (S²Cities, 2024b).

Figure 1. Cuenca S²Cities. Comparative before and after photograph Bibliorio.

Figure 2. Cuenca S²Cities. Comparative before and after photograph Arteria

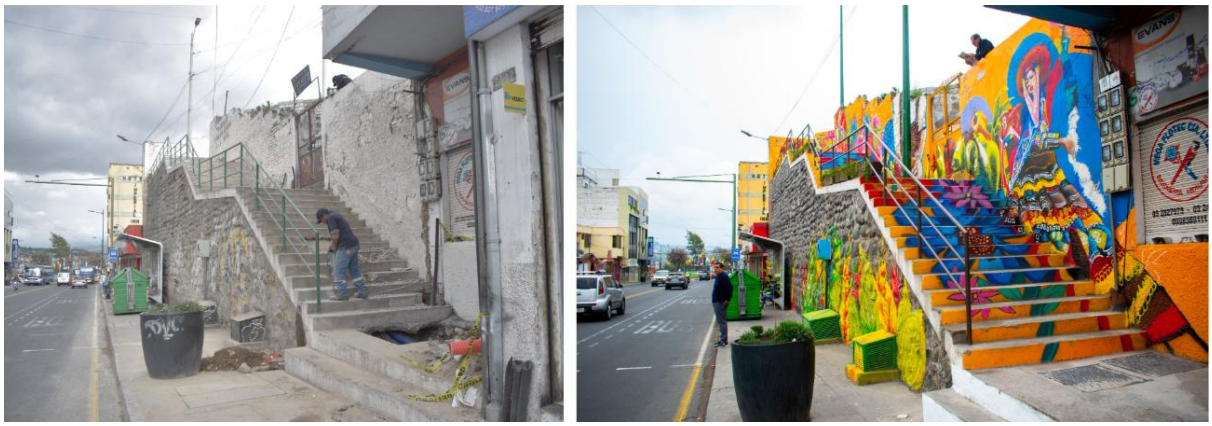

Figure 3. Ambato S²Cities. Comparative before and after photograph Renovarte

Figure 4. Ambato S²Cities. Comparative before and after photograph ESS

Finally, young people reveal important impacts in their wellbeing due to participating in the placemaking process or in the volunteer programs to activate the spaces. Participants and volunteers report 96.2% noting a boost in self-esteem, over 75% reporting enhanced responsibility and independence, and nearly 80% stating it helped them make new friends (Safe & Sound Cities, 2024).

Figure 5. Cuenca & Ambato S²Cities Community. Young people reimagining and reclaiming urban space through cultural and social activation.

Discussion

Considering the relational nature of wellbeing, the findings reveal a significant disparity between young people's subjective perceptions and objective indicators of material wellbeing. This is evident in the high levels of perceived insecurity, despite relatively low official crime rates, and the fact that traffic accidents—although statistically the leading cause of harm among youth—are not widely recognised by participants as a priority for urban intervention or a risk to their safety.

This gap between perception and objective data has implications for all three dimensions of youth wellbeing: safety, agency, and belonging. Perceived insecurity can restrict young people's mobility and autonomy, limiting their capacity to participate in everyday urban life and reducing opportunities for social interaction, community integration, and belonging. Ultimately, the underuse of public spaces—driven by prevailing narratives of danger—can contribute to environments that are, in practice, less safe, due to the absence of eyes on the street, diminished trust, and weakened social cohesion.

Although safety concerns may deter youth from frequenting public spaces, they still identify parks, green areas, and communal environments as their preferred places—despite not always feeling secure. This highlights the critical need to design public spaces that enable exploration, social interaction, and autonomy, which are essential for young people's wellbeing, even in contexts where crime persists as a possibility.

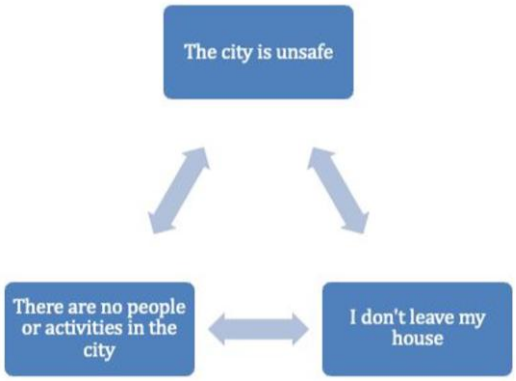

Figure 6. The unsafe city cycle (Authors, 2025).

Notably, mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression emerged as urgent concerns, especially considering the high suicide rates in both cities. Many young participants cited cultural and sports activities as key strategies for coping with these challenges. Therefore, ensuring access to public spaces that offer affordances for recreation, connection, and emotional expression—and enabling youth to reach these spaces independently—stands out as a policy priority in efforts to promote youth wellbeing.

The findings suggest that placemaking presents a valuable approach for wellbeing. The process includes them in activities that allow them to explore the public space helping to reduce feelings of insecurity and gaining confidence to move independently. Moreover, it empowers them as agents of change which improves their agency, but also their sense of belonging, as they feel a part of the community. Finally, the findings showed the increase of safety in the placemaking initiatives led by youth. By involving young people in the co-design and transformation of public spaces, placemaking, showed improved material, relational and subjective factors of youth wellbeing.

Limitations

While the use of program-generated data may introduce certain biases, this was mitigated through a disaggregated analysis of micro-narratives, pre- and post-evaluations, and supplementary materials rather than relying exclusively on consolidated reports. A further critical consideration is the limited depth in capturing participants' own conceptualizations of wellbeing — a crucial avenue for future research, particularly given the cultural, territorial, and socio-economic diversity of youth. Exploring youth wellbeing in urban contexts through Global South perspectives, such as *Sumak Kawsay*, can offer context-sensitive insights that enrich and challenge dominant frameworks.

Conclusion

This study offers a valuable contribution to the underexplored intersection of youth, urban planning, and wellbeing in the Global South. The study reveals socio-spatial

factors that influence youths' wellbeing, but it exposes a notable gap between subjective perceptions and objective indicators—suggesting that narratives and lived experiences play a crucial role in shaping the use and meaning of public space. This underscores the need to address both physical and social dimensions in urban planning. By drawing on empirical evidence from placemaking initiatives, it advances current understanding of how urban environments shape young people's experiences and how co-creation tools such as placemaking can include youth in shaping public spaces that ultimately will have an impact on young people's wellbeing.

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Appendices as Supplementary Files

Appendix 1. Glossary
Appendix 2. Safe & Sound Cities (S²Cities) (2023a) Youth safety and wellbeing perception survey, Ambato 2023.
Appendix 3. Safe & Sound Cities (S²Cities) (2023b) Youth safety and wellbeing perception survey, Cuenca 2023.
Appendix 4. Safe & Sound Cities (S²Cities) (2024a) S²C - Ambato2024 - Impact Grant Report: Initiatives' Use & Safety Perception. Ambato: Safe & Sound Cities Ambato Local Implementation Team.
Appendix 5. Safe & Sound Cities (S²Cities) (2024b) S²C - Ambato Implementations. ESS and Renovarte Indicators Report.
Appendix 6. Safe & Sound Cities (S²Cities) (2024c) Report on placemaking initiatives of Safe & Sound Cities Cuenca 2024.

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