



SMARTDEST
CITIES AS MOBILITY HUBS: TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION THROUGH 'SMART' CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT



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Losers and winners in European tourist destinations: a pre-COVID analysis.

Can tourism pressure be a driver of social exclusion in cities? This was one of the key questions that informed the first phase of analysis of the SMARTDEST project, funded by the Horizon 2020 programme of the European Union.

Based on data on the number of visitors in European cities, the housing market, and the social conditions of residents in destination regions during the period between 2013 and 2018, the international research team integrating the project has carried out several analyses to answer this question.

The results indicate that the growth of tourism pressure is associated with at least two negative consequences for people living in tourist areas:

- > First, the increase in the number of visitors who stay overnight in European cities is associated to a corresponding increase of housing rental prices, which in turn has pushed long-term residents to move out their places of residence because they cannot afford to pay the rent.
- > Second, in spite of the fact that cities that are more attractive for tourists enjoyed greater benefits in terms of the mean household income during the period analysed, they also experience greater and increasing economic polarization.

These results have general statistical validity for urban areas in the whole European territory. Some of the urban areas where tourism growth was linked to the greater increase in economic polarization include Newcastle and London in the UK, the region of Bilbao in Spain, Bordeaux, Lyon and Lille in France, the Brussels area in Belgium, Innsbruck and Salzburg in Austria, as well as a cluster of cities in Southern Italy, the Eastern European regions of Krakow, Bratislava and Cluj, and the Black Sea.

Our analyses show in particular that for residents in a tourist destination, being tenants or homeowners makes a big difference to that respect. In fact, the possibility of renting out property in short-term vacational platforms like Airbnb may help homeowners to relief the financial burden of the housing costs. This is not the case for tenants and, generally, a greater number of tourists means higher rental costs, which is bad news for people living on rent. Eventually, the most vulnerable among them will have to move out neighbourhoods of higher tourism pressure or of their home towns altogether. Therefore, winners and losers in tourism destinations take on the appearance of owners and non-owners, respectively. Social and economic distancing between them was a reality even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on these preliminary results, we are now addressing these issues at a finer geographic scale to verify how they differ not only across cities but also within them. This new phase of analysis concerns the 8 cities of Amsterdam, Barcelona, Edinburgh, Jerusalem, Lisbon, Ljubljana, Turin, and Venice, and will run until November 2021.

Even though our analysis focused on the pre-COVID reality, its results serve to call into question the “old normal” and reconsider the economic benefits derived from tourism in the light of its unsustainable social costs. It is our strong belief that resilient tourism places in the post-COVID scenario should be able to renegotiate the relationship between (transient) visitors and (stable) resident populations in a way that could prevent the exclusion or displacement of the most vulnerable sectors of the population, who lack sufficient resources to cope with tourism pressure.

More information on the SMARTDEST project results can be obtained from the project website <https://smartdest.eu/>.

Riccardo Valente, University Rovira i Virgili