

# Perception of Security by Tourism Service Providers: The Case of Acapulco, Mexico



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**Abstract** Tourism is one of the main economic sectors worldwide that, in times of crisis due to security incidents, configures a fight for businessmen's social and economic survival. The research determined the perception of tourist security in Acapulco based on the opinion of tourist service providers, to implement strategies that allow them to recover their competitiveness. The methodological process consisted of two phases: in the first, a documentary analysis of social and economic factors was carried out; in the second: the direct, flexible, and dynamic interview was structured. The investigation lasted two years, beginning in 2019 and ending in January 2021. About 60 interviews were conducted with men and women, in the tourist areas of Acapulco: diamond, traditional, and golden, aimed at tourism service providers, such as businessmen, presidents of associations, and managers of the small, medium, and large companies. The number of interviews was defined based on the theoretical saturation criterion, where the information became repetitive in the data collection and no new information emerged. The approximate duration of these interviews ranged between 25 and 50 min. Some findings are: the port was affected by security incidents such as organized crime, delinquency, extortion, kidnapping, payment of land, homicides, and drug trafficking; some causes of low security: corruption and non-enforcement of laws. Tourist service providers dedicate a good part of their income to maintaining your security with the hiring of private security personnel, alarms, security cameras, and resistant locks. Some proposals for improvement are: to fight corruption at all levels of government, promote local and citizen organizations, generate better-paid jobs, and renew the educational system. Finally, a proposed alternative is the creation of a comprehensive tourism security plan.

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## 1 Introduction

The importance of tourism activity is manifested in the world economy due to the social and economic relevance it represents for the development of regions and communities with tourism potential.

However, tourism is sensitive to negative events worldwide such as terrorist acts, local wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and pandemics, causing the perception of security to decrease.

Tourism security is an essential condition for the development of destinations since it represents the protection of life, health, physical, psychological and economic integrity of visitors, service providers, and members of receiving communities.

The insecurity that is observed mainly derived from violent acts in any destination has become a highly important factor in the construction of a negative image of the place.

Tourist destinations that aspire to be in the imagination of any issuing market must guarantee security since it is essential to satisfy the greatest number of expectations of potential tourists, future investors, businessmen, employees, and inhabitants about their ideal place to live.

However, some prestigious tourist sites have faced a crisis to guarantee tourist safety, as such is the case of the Acapulco destination, which has been susceptible to losses that constantly affect and deteriorate its prestige. These events usually manifest fear and panic in tourists, businessmen, and inhabitants and consequently cause a decrease in the potential of the destination, generating negative impacts on the sectors of the economy of the site due to the low influx of tourists. It should be noted that there are numerous investigations to know the perception of security focused on tourists, but incipiently on the opinion of tourism service providers. The case of security of tourism deserves a special treatment of analysis, taking into account the repercussions that its study may derive. In this sense, the objective of this research was to know the perception that tourism service providers have about security and to propose strategies that allow the repositioning of the Acapulco destination.

## 2 Literature Review

Tourism is recognized as a global phenomenon, one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. The volume of tourism equals or even exceeds that of oil, food products, or automobile exports, in addition to the fact that it has become one of the

main players in international trade, and represents one of the main sources of income (World Tourism Organization, 2018).

Every day different countries are committed to promoting their tourist destinations, promoting a high degree of competitiveness against others, and integrating different factors such as: guaranteeing efficient services, visitor satisfaction, accessibility to the destination, transport and accommodation infrastructure, willingness to implement development, maintain a good international image, and guarantee security (Salinas et al., 2022). Tourist safety in a destination is one of the most important aspects when it comes to offering tourists a quality experience (Otto & Ritchie, 1996).

Tourism security is understood as the protection of life, health, physical, psychological, and economic integrity of visitors, service providers, and members of receiving communities (Grünewald, 1989), or as Jorge Amonzabel puts it in his manual on tourist security as a series of protection conditions granted by a tourist destination or place of attraction, for the satisfaction and movement of the visitor; from another perspective it is the set of measures at the social, political, and economic levels that allow the tourist activity which is governed in an environment of tranquility and trust and involves a series of aspects that we can encompass in seven points (INISEG, 2019):

- **Public security:** a system that allows the free movement of tourists around the destination, reducing the percentage of conflict situations, mainly criminal acts (robbery and theft) and accidents.
- **Social security:** a system that allows the free movement of tourists around the destination in the face of social problems such as mobilizations, strikes, etc.
- **Medical security:** prevention, emergency, and protection system that allows medical assistance to the visitor before traveling or during their displacement in the tourist destination.
- **Information security:** a communication system that allows knowledge of the destination's offer.
- **Economic security:** traveler reinsurance system to prevent risks from an economic perspective.
- **Security of tourist services:** a system that allows the protection of the tourist while traveling through the different tourist and recreational service establishments (hotel, restaurant, travel agency, etc.) of the tourist destination.
- **Security in events:** a system that allows protection during the realization or participation of a sporting, musical, recreational event, etc. of the destination visitor.

Under this perspective, guarantee the physical, legal, and patrimonial security of all the actors involved in this activity, mainly tourists are aspirations of tourist destinations (González et al., 2019). The issue of tourist security is becoming more important every day in the tourism industry, even though some publications had already been published on the subject, such as Sonmez (1998) on the terrorist attacks in Egypt, in 2011 the Organization of the United Nations a watershed at the international level in addressing the issue due to the attack on the twin towers in New York.

However, tourism is exposed to constant events: cultural, a product of urban progress and the homogenization of the landscape; economic, due to fluctuations in demand and seasonality; and social, such as the increase in crime. Some authors argue that tourism is industry susceptible and fragile to any incident such as those related to nature: natural disasters, crime-related activities as well as plagues or epidemics, and it often has a quick and direct impact (Neumayer, 2011; Santana, 2003; Valencia & Crouch, 2008).

Consequences that can lead to a tourism crisis are understood as a situation that can endanger all businesses related to tourism and harm the image of a tourist destination in terms of safety and attractiveness of the place. Therefore, tourists are negatively influenced, and local tourism businesses are harmed as tourist arrivals and expenditures decrease (Fortini, 2013; Kurez & Prevorsek, 2015; Sommez et al., 1994).

In addition, destinations perceived as unsafe will tend to gradually disappear, since their image of the destination is tarnished which translates into a significant decrease in demand (Ceron and Silva, 2017; Korstanje, 2016; Mansfield and Pizam, 2006; McElroy, 2006).

The perception of security of the tourist place is frequently used as a mechanism to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the government in different public affairs (Gélvez, 2018). It becomes a determining factor in the choice of a tourist destination (Peña & Contreras, 2019).

The complexity of this lies in being made up of two dimensions: objective and subjective. Objectivity is oriented toward statistical information: criminal situation, existing risks, and emerging entities available, while subjectivity is allied to the qualitative aspect where the perception of security of the destination in question is embedded. However, it is the subjective part that has a greater connotation in the first instance because it is the one that affects the decision to choose a tourist destination to visit and throughout the overnight stay (Grünewald, 2012; Yang & Nair, 2014).

On the other hand, in the construction of tourist security, various factors intervene in its application, such as the set of measures, objective conditions, and existing perceptions in the social, economic, and political spheres of a tourist destination, which allow the tourist experience to develop in an environment of freedom, trust, and tranquility and with the greatest physical, legal, or economic protection for tourists, their goods, and for those who offer services in said destination (Jiménez & Pérez, 2018).

### 3 Methodology

The research was qualitative; as Barrantes (2014) points out, it focuses on the study of the meanings of human actions and social life. In this sense, we sought to know the perception of tourism service providers in the Port of Acapulco about tourism security and its effects according to their experiences.

The study consisted of two phases: in the first phase, a documentary analysis of scientific journals was carried out, as well as journalistic notes and articles on social and economic factors.

In the second phase: the structured, direct, flexible, and dynamic interview was used as a technique. Its application lasted for two years and ended in January 2021. It should be noted that its application had a before and after the SARS-CoV2 coronavirus pandemic, which causes the COVID-19 disease. A total of 60 interviews were applied to men and women aimed at tourism service providers, such as entrepreneurs, managers of small, medium, and large companies, and presidents of associations. The number of interviews was defined based on the theoretical saturation criterion, where the information became repetitive in the data collection and no new information emerged. The approximate duration of these interviews ranged between 25 and 50 min. The geographic area of application was the tourist areas of Acapulco: Diamante, Tradicional, and Dorada.

The analysis process of the interviews consisted of 4 stages, which were integrated from the analysis of the methodologies of Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) and Pieterse (2020):

1. Condensation: it was carried out to carry out an analysis and delimit the text while anticipating the central meaning.
2. Encoding: it is expressed as a label that accurately described the particular condenser unit.
3. Category: the codes are organized in categories when they describe different aspects, similar or differences, of the content of the text that belongs together.
4. Topic: an interpretive analysis of the content to obtain results.

## **4 Results, Capitalize the First Letter of Every Word in the Title**

*Social and economic factors that affect the construction of tourist security in the port of Acapulco.*

The municipality of Acapulco, a tourist destination located in the State of Guerrero, Mexico, 2019 was declared the epicenter of organized crime in Mexico, with more groups fighting for control of the territory than in any other region (International Crisis Group, 2020). About 927 victims of intentional homicide were registered, occupying the national position of the number 6 victim rate, 10 victims of femicide, 144 victims of extortion (collection of flat), 1921 victims of robbery with violence, 31 victims of kidnapping, and 899 robberies of vehicles with violence, Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System [SESNSP] (2020).

Acapulco has been positioned in the ranking of the 50 most dangerous cities in the world for several years (Citizen Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice A.C., 2022).

Alerts of recommendations issued by various tourist-issuing countries have increased, as is the case of the United States Department of State, which has suggested

for more than 10 years to the present that citizens could not travel to the entity due to its high prices and crime levels (Embassy and Consulates of the United States in Mexico, 2022).

Some consequences of the criminal events that affect the tourist destination are: according to the National Chamber of Commerce [CANACO] (2019), about 400 micro-enterprises have closed their doors; the arrival of international tourists has declined; and in 2019 alone 12,602 international tourists arrived, the main issuing poles being the United States with 4982 visitors and Canada with 7186 (Secretaría de Turismo [SECTUR], 2019).

As the main source of jobs and economic benefits for a population of nearly 900,000 thousand inhabitants, National Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI] (2015), who live in the destination and who directly and indirectly depend on tourism for its multiplier effect, which makes the destination more vulnerable to the lack of tourist influx, since in the last fifteen years Acapulco has had an average occupancy of 50% of its 19,483 registered rooms in all its categories (Statistical Yearbook, 2019), which has become poverty, social marginalization, and delinquency due to the lack of employment opportunities stated intimidation of criminal groups, collection of flat.

In 2020, security incidents in the tourist destination Acapulco persisted, since 752 victims of intentional homicide were registered, occupying the national position of the number 8 victim rate, 10 victims of femicide, 129 victims of extortion (charge of the floor), 1325 victims of robbery with violence, 585 vehicle thefts with violence, and 9 victims of kidnapping (SESNSP, 2020). Different clandestine graves with human bodies were found in the port (State File of Guerrero, 2020).

Some factors that reflect the tourist situation in terms of the economic part that was experienced in the year 2020 in the port are:

During the second quarter of 2019, the tourist influx in Acapulco was 1,844,790 visitors, and in the first critical point which was in the second quarter of 2020, a stage where the economy was completely closed, the tourist influx was only 9605: a drop of 99.4%. For the second quarter of 2020, when infections were on the rise and reaching their first maximum peak, hotel occupancy decreased by 41%, going from 9,465 occupied rooms on average before, to 5601 rooms, and for the third quarter of 2020 to 4082 rooms.

The economic spill has unusual behavior; since before the start of the pandemic, it begins to fall rapidly and bottoms out in the second quarter of 2020, the date of the first wave of infections, passing from 9,851,055,652 million generated in the second quarter of 2019 to 423,009,300 a drop of 96%. In the second wave of infections that occurs in the first quarter of 2021, it reports a spill of 3,313,000,000 million, 68% less than that generated in the same period of 2019.

In the holiday season, it received just over 193 thousand tourists, with a hotel occupancy of 37.8%, which, compared to the previous year, when it was 83.4%, is practically equivalent to less than half. The estimated spill for Acapulco was 794 million pesos, against 2 thousand 765 million generated in December 2019, with the visit of 628 thousand tourists (La Jornada, 2021).

In 2020, the employed population decreased from 307,171 jobs in the second quarter of 2019 to 279,578 jobs, a loss of 27,593 jobs, equivalent to 9%, of which 20,858 were located in the tertiary sector and 11,723 in retail establishments, restaurants, and accommodation. In the fourth quarter of 2020, a slight increase in employment was observed, but in the second wave of infections that corresponded to the first quarter of 2021, employment again decreased, reaching 284,195 jobs, 34,031 jobs less than in the first quarter of 2020. In 2019, the shock was felt by the tertiary sector with 29,561 of them, 13,020 of which were located in restaurant and accommodation establishments.

The pandemic had very strong repercussions on the employment of tourism-related companies; in the second quarter of 2020, when the peak of infections reached its first maximum, 11,723 jobs had been lost, a drop of 22% compared to the same quarter of 2019, and by the third quarter, another 6202 jobs were lost again. Of this loss, women accounted for 55% and men 45% (Perez & Añorve, 2021).

However, what was observed was that during the SARS-CoV2 coronavirus pandemic, which causes the COVID-19 disease in 2020, security incidents such as homicides decreased, an action that is related to the quarantine that was kept by mandate of the World Health Organization.

Acapulco was a world-class tourist destination that positioned Mexico in the world; however, it has been affected by various social and economic elements such as insecurity, which is observed mainly as a result of violent acts, murders, armed robberies, rapes, drug trafficking, and the high rates of unemployment and business closures, facts that are reflected in the worn and abandoned infrastructure.

In tourism, security at the international level has permeated even in the choice of the international destination of the trip, through recommendations that are issued by government agencies to its citizens. One of the main factors that affect the perception of tourism safety in both citizens and tourists in Acapulco is insecurity. These events usually manifest fear and panic in tourists, thus creating a negative image of the place and consequently causing the potential of the destination to decrease significantly, generating negative impacts on all sectors of the economy reflected in a low influx of tourists to the destination.

*The perception of service providers on tourism security in the year 2019–2020:*

- Of the total number of interviewees, 57 people answered that they do not live in a safe destination and only 3 considered that they did.
- The tourist security of the Acapulco destination is weakened for the following reasons: delinquency, collusion between the government and organized crime, homicides, and drug trafficking; however, an interviewee answered that there is tourist security in the port, since feel safe coming and going to your home and the tourists keep coming.
- Companies in the tourist destination Acapulco have mainly faced incidents: robberies/thefts, disorderly conduct (excessive noise, vandalism), homicides and assaults, violence with weapons, and to a lesser extent sexual assault and prostitution.

- One hundred percent of those interviewed agree that the security protocols in the tourist destination coordinated at the municipal, state, and federal levels are not effective; likewise, the main reason stated is due to corruption between government agencies with organized crime. Likewise, some participants agreed that they currently do not dare to report any criminal act, for fear that the information will leak to criminal groups since the authority that provides security has lost credibility and trust.
- The causes that have generated insecurity in the port, according to your point of view, are the first position: corruption, non-application of laws, unemployment, poverty, poor quality education, and lack of values.
- They added that each month they spend approximately 30% of their income on maintaining the security of their businesses. They have had to choose.

Hire private security, security alarms, and resistant locks, reserve the right of admission to your businesses or jobs, cameras, cancelations, and closed circuits.

The main strategies to improve the tourist safety of the port are: to fight corruption, organization, and local unity, create paid jobs, renew social education systems, and ensure that governments comply with their mandates.

Some outstanding findings regarding the perception of tourism service providers on security in the year 2020–2021.

- It was identified that this year there was a minimally positive variation in the perception of security at the destination since forty people considered the site to be unsafe, and twenty interviewees as safe, highlighting some comments such as: despite all the security incidents, the tourism generally coming on weekends, considering that this is due to the pressure of confinement, the proximity to Mexico City, and the desires of visitors to travel.
- The actions that affect tourist security are corruption and organized crime. Some incidents that tourism service providers have faced are robberies, collection of flats, homicides, and kidnappings.
- The total number of interviewees stated that the tourist security protocols continue to be inefficient and are only projected as a promotion of the government that holds the position.
- The causes of insecurity in the port are corruption in society and collusion of the security authorities at the National, State, and Municipal levels with organized crime and unemployment.
- Added more than a third of participants have had to increase economic spending to maintain the safety of their businesses; on the other hand, the instability of tourism due to insecurity and confinement due to the pandemic declared by the World Health Organization forced many investors and companies in the tourism sector to close.

Finally, based on the analysis of the results and according to various success cases applied to guarantee tourist safety in destinations worldwide, one proposal is the creation of a Comprehensive Plan for Tourist Safety where citizens, providers of tourist services, the press, other officials, and the different security departments at



their different levels of government, Municipal, State and Federal closely coordinate and promote a public policy that guarantees a safe tourist destination. However, the objective is to seek to create a sense of solidarity and shared benefits for the participants.

Peace and security are basic requirements for the success and development of tourism, not only image and price are the basis for selecting a vacation destination, but an essential factor is the perception of security (Carballo et al., 2021; Shin, 2005).

## 5 Conclusion

The perception of tourist safety was not positive on the part of the tourist service providers in Acapulco. It is considered an unsafe place, as a result of the various criminal incidents such as homicides, collection of flats, kidnappings, and robberies, which gradually increase due to crime. Some examples are drug trafficking, assaults, unemployment, and the weakness of public security institutions, highlighting the collusion between organized crime and authorities from different levels of government.

Brings with it some effects such as the deterioration of the image of the port due to the acts of violence broadcast in the media and in the alerts from the embassies, which have made the flows of international tourists from potential markets such as the United States and Canada which have gradually moved away the national tourist influx of high purchasing power.

This has had a strong impact on the economic sector, causing business closures, unemployment, and increased poverty in the port, influencing the lack of investment and abandonment of the infrastructure of companies in the tourism sector.

It is urgent to implement strategies that mitigate security incidents through risk prevention management, to mitigate current and future effects, create reflections, and identify proposals that allow generating a favorable environment for the development of tourism.

Finally, it is important to consider that the union between security and tourism is of vital importance to protect the life, physical and psychological integrity of tourism service providers, which must be assumed as the responsibility of all the main actors that manage tourism, tourism sector.

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