

# CRIME PREVENTION: The Universal Challenge

by Mr. GILBERT BONNEMAISON

A conference on "Crime Prevention: A National Overview" was held in Adelaide from the 4th to 6th June, 1991. The conference was organised by the Australian Institute of Criminology and sponsored by the Attorney-General's Department of South Australia. Monsieur Bonnemaïson was to have been the keynote speaker at the conference. He is a member of the French National Assembly, Mayor of Epinay-Sur Seine, Vice Chairman of the National Council of Cities, and Chairman of the European Forum of Local Authorities for Urban Safety. His work has become well known far beyond the boundaries of his native land. For the last

eight years he has been advocating a co-ordinated approach to crime prevention, with particular emphasis on regional and municipal involvement as well as National councils.

Unfortunately, Monsieur Bonnemaïson was required to undertake an urgent assignment at home and was thus prevented from visiting Australia at the time arranged. His paper was, however, presented to the conference by the Attorney-General and we are grateful to Monsieur Bonnemaïson and to the Australian Institute of Criminology for permission to reproduce it here.

Over the last few decades, our cities have been experiencing very rapid change and development. This urban growth has been commensurate with the economic transformation of our societies.

To meet this demand, many countries have initiated numerous major housing projects. However, housing capacity has often been the sole consideration and as a result we have witnessed the emergence of estates that failed to provide any social equilibrium or infrastructure, and which did not take into consideration the common resources essential for harmonious development.

Today this oversight has created real problems. The incidence of crime and delinquency has increased. Outlying housing estates in our big cities often have come to be seen as "rejection centres" where a whole gamut of social problems prevail.

Exclusion from school, exclusion from the community, exclusion from the political arena coupled with lack of respect and dignity are deeply resented. Interactions between individuals as well as the relationship between society and individuals are also seen to be governed almost by arbitrary laws.

To individuals, caught up in this situation, the concept of citizenship seems very remote, and that is the crux of the problem.

How can the inhabitant, the citizen, the resident, respect the laws which express the values underlying the community that they live in? There is a problem if they do not consider themselves full members of that community, if they feel rejected and excluded or if they feel that society is not doing its utmost to find a solution to their exclusion.

Those feelings, whether groundless or not, lead to serious tensions within society – tensions which are further exacerbated when, through sheer irresponsibility and stupidity, some elements begin to give vent to notions of racism and exclusion.

In summary, cohesion becomes increasingly difficult to achieve in communities and, as a result, security is increasingly a problem.

Faced with this risk, what should be our attitude? How should we react?

Ensuring safety and security both for the individual and property is one of the major challenges facing our developed world and an imperative for all governments.

All members of society are particularly sensitive to this problem although the way they perceive it can vary greatly according to environment, culture, education and social standing. These factors are well known. What we tend to be less sensitive to is factors of individual psychology that are probably just as decisive but are less quantifiable and more difficult to grasp.

Particularly important among these is the nature and quality of an individual's social relationships, the ethics which prevail in these relationships, the reality of a person's ability to participate in democratic life and his or her state of empowerment within society. This is as true for the citizen – the potential victim – as it is true for the delinquent or the criminal. All these factors strongly influence the way each person sees themselves within society.

We must remember that our drop-outs, our delinquents and prisoners are consumers of the media, who often are incapable of reflecting on, or distancing themselves from, fiction or information; the phenomenon of youth gangs in our suburbs is a clear indication of this.

Our programs of action must therefore not be restricted simply to defining norms, or political principles, in order to find out how to sanction or how to anticipate the fight against delinquency and crime; it is also, and above all, a campaign for **citizenship** and for **civic rights**. This issue with which we are involved concerns the State as much as the individual and Government as much as the citizen.

We need to conceive and develop common if not universal values that can transcend the peculiar character of ethnic communities and the ill-assorted groups that increasingly make up our societies today. On these grounds, we must also think about and maintain our police forces, our judicial systems and prison institutions in ways that ensure due respect for the rights of the individual and for fundamental liberties.

A conscious awareness of this dimension – which affects the very core of our societies – will enable us to tackle the major issues in the fight against delinquency and crime.

Mass urban delinquency affects all nations. The richest, as well as the poorest have to confront it. For many years now, the most advanced countries have made very substantial and costly investments in the fight against delinquency, particularly in the area of what might be termed "Criminal Justice Repression".

Their efforts have not always been matched with efficiency. In my opinion, policies which are solely repressive lead to

an impasse. Therefore we, in France, have initiated a different approach.

Firstly, we firmly believe that we must get to the underlying causes of delinquency by means of an appropriate social development policy. A policy which offers everyone at least a chance to become integrated within the community and which will allow social interchange and solidarity to flourish.

In addition, "Prevention and Repression" must be very closely balanced.

More generally, and I believe this to be true for most countries, the multiplicity of factors which have been identified as leading to delinquency and its ramifications demand answers that are necessarily diverse.

Moreover, programs which are implemented and take effect locally must be at the centre of crime prevention strategy. National policies, however sensible they may be, cannot solve the problem if developed in isolation.

Governmental institutions such as the police and the judicial system cannot on their own provide solutions, all the more so if they operate in isolation, without sufficient coordination and cooperation and with their main preoccupation being repression and punishment – even if they also have ideas about implementing strategies for the prevention of delinquent behaviour and its recurrence.

Before I elaborate on the method we adopted, I would like to say a few words about the role, as I see it, of policies of imprisonment as a preventive measure.

In this new balance between "Prevention and Repression", we must redefine the purpose of a sanction so it can be of real value to society. To that end, and as soon as punishment is enforced, the delinquent's re-integration and redress or indemnity for the victim should be addressed.

Due to a lack of imagination, imprisonment has tended to remain the main response.

We are however fully aware that imprisonment is not an efficient sanction in the fight against large-scale delinquency. This is illustrated by the very high incidence of recidivism. In fact, after an offender has been imprisoned there tends to be an increase in the seriousness of his or her offences and crimes committed. Imprisonment should therefore be reserved only for the most serious crimes.

Other sanctions must be enforced: sanctions which ensure a systematic response and sanctions whose aim will be well understood by the person concerned as being their re-integration into society and the prevention of a recurrence of their offending.

The prevention policy which France has been implementing for a number of years hinges around three essential principles.

- Emphasis on an appropriate local dimension
- Partnership
- Contractualisation

Each program of intervention implemented as part of prevention strategies must be integrated within a defined territory. The level we have selected is the municipality or the suburb. This is in response to the particular role that local elected representatives must play in the field of prevention.

I will add that this choice was linked, in France, to a concurrent program of decentralisation, which occurred in the early 1980s. Emphasis on the municipality is also related to the necessary coordination that must take place between prevention policy and all the other measures to be combined with it – improvement in housing, living environment, socio-cultural structures. More recently, we found it useful to add

selected groupings of several municipalities to this basic structure because the manifestations of delinquency are often fairly uniform in large urban areas.

The second important principle involves partnership:

partnership at both the local level and at the National level. Municipal councils for the prevention of delinquency bring together all the people concerned: elected representatives, social "actors" and State services.

Locally-elected representatives, the driving force in these councils, could not take on this task by themselves. It is important to be aware of the role played by representatives of residents' action groups, managers of urban services – housing, public transport, social welfare, doctors, teachers (who play a fundamental and underrated role in the field of prevention amongst young people) and the economic "actors" – mostly business chiefs.

The third component in this partnership are the State services whose primary responsibility is the fight against delinquency and crime, that is the police and the judicial system.

France's crime prevention policy is elaborated by all these "actors". This coordination engenders a better knowledge of the nature of problems and an improvement of each "actor's" performance.

The third important principle involves a process of contracting with the State.

From the very beginning, all partners in crime prevention are brought together under the auspices of the municipal council.

The procedure is as follows: any preventative measure must originate from the "Local Security Network". Its work, which involves all partners, has, as a first objective, a precise and well documented analysis of the conditions, the nature and the evolution of local delinquency and, as a second objective, an assessment of the current situation and malfunctions, incoherences or weaknesses in the current system.

All this work results in the implementation of a "Crime Prevention Audit". Initially these were carried out annually but we have found it useful to reduce their regularity. Budgetary commitment of the State now is every **three** years. This avoids the lack of continuity which sometimes can be noticeable in local prevention policies.

Crime prevention audits can be grouped into six major categories, each aimed at meeting different specific objectives.

Firstly, there are those related to the **practical aspect** of prevention, i.e. all the work concerning the methodology to be used, the method of implementation or training participants in prevention.

Secondly, there are preventative measures of a **social** nature. Anything connected with the education, training, social and professional integration of young people or with access to culture and leisure by the most under-privileged in an attempt to overcome the feelings of rejection and alienation which I discussed earlier.

Thirdly, there is anything related to **prevention by proximity**, i.e. a closer relationship between the police and the inhabitants, particularly young people.

Fourthly, we thought it necessary, as I mentioned earlier, to articulate a clear policy to prevent recurrence of an offence or recidivism by offenders. This combines aid to the victims, and when it is necessary, the implementation of alternative sanctions as well as imprisonment.

Fifth, these contracts contribute to the fight against drug abuse. With a reduction in drug peddling, suppression of

trafficking and recycling of the money resulting from trafficking, the fight against demand at a local level ensures the coherence of this policy. This is translated into providing information to the public, taking charge of and caring for the drug addict, establishing links and the necessary cooperation with other health programs. May I add that these measures are in no way an alternative to the fight against the demand for drugs, minor local trafficking and the receiving and concealing associated with it. They are a necessary extension of it.

Finally, the objective of the last type of contract is communication, i.e. on the one hand, general information to the public and information more specifically aimed at specific "actors" and on the other hand a transfer of knowledge between councils by means of informal discussions, colloquia and meetings.

The reason for this diversity in the elements of crime prevention contracts is the multiplicity of causes and types of urban delinquency that I mentioned earlier.

Before concluding, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to stress the particular importance I place on international cooperation in the area of prevention.

When implementing national strategies, we often lack information on overseas initiatives and on ways of comparing our experience. It seems advisable, if not essential, that we undertake comparative research on delinquency, efficiency of policies, training programs and issues of modern citizenship which, in view of the internationalisation of the media, no longer can be seen within the narrow scope of a "Nation-State". This perspective will be of importance to the future of our societies in the decades to come.

Exchanges between States must be combined with increasingly numerous inter-city cooperative ventures. In 1989, Montreal witnessed the gathering of the Mayors of many European and North American cities who, at the conclusion of their common declaration "for safer cities", decided on the need to intensify the exchange of information.

This will become a reality with the European and North American Conference on safety and crime prevention in an urban environment which will take place in Paris next November. I would be delighted if as many as possible of you could take part. It will provide the perfect opportunity to continue and complete current exchanges.

All of this will leave us better equipped to meet the demands of our fellow citizens. Left unchecked, an increase in crime rates inevitably will lead to a national loss of confidence in our institutions and leaders.

We are all fully aware that no policy will ever achieve a total elimination of crime. Absolute safety is incompatible with human nature.

While reflection and action in this area must be characterised by modesty and level-headedness, we must be strongly determined to respond to the concerns of our fellow citizens.

It is by looking into the fundamental basis of democracy – freedom and solidarity – which form the very keys to our individual responsibilities that we shall be better equipped to confront violence and crime, and delinquency in particular.

This fight is an absolute necessity for democracy and it is with democracy that we shall win it.

TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH

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