Crime Prevention: The Universal Challenge*

Gilbert Bonnemaison
Member, French National Assembly
Mayor, Epinay-Sur-Seine
Vice-Chairman, National Council of Cities
Chairman, European Forum of Local Authorities For Urban Safety

Over the last few decades, 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 major suburban housing and construction programs. However, housing capacity has often been the sole consideration and, as a result, public estates have been created which fail to take into account both social issues and appropriate infrastructure and facilities. These urban developments have ignored the social needs of those living in them and overlooked other resources essential for harmonious social development.

In 1991, this oversight has created real and major problems and has exacerbated the rise in crime and violence. The urban ghettos, which these housing estates in big cities have become, can be seen as ‘dumping grounds’ where a whole gamut of social problems -particularly high levels of youth unemployment -are concentrated.

Exclusion from school, exclusion from the community, and exclusion from the political arena can lead to a lack of respect and dignity which is deeply resented. Inhabitants of these zones often feel very strongly that there is a general lack of control over their lives and an arbitrariness in the events to which they are subjected. This feeling pervades both relationships between individuals and the relationship between society and the individual. Even more importantly, sections of society come to be treated differently and -depending on the social category to which they belong -for individuals caught up in this situation, the concept of a full and equal citizenship seems very remote.
So how can the inhabitant, the citizen or the resident, respect the laws which express the underlying values of the community in which they live? There is a major problem if these individuals do not consider themselves to be full and equal members of their community: that is, if they feel rejected and excluded or that society is not doing its utmost to find ways of preventing their alienation from the mainstream community. These feelings, whether they are groundless or not, lead to strong 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 discrimination.

Social cohesion becomes increasingly difficult to achieve in communities and, as a result, safety and security is increasingly a major problem. In confronting this problem, what should be our attitude? How should we respond?

Ensuring safety and security, both for the individual and for property, is one of the major challenges facing the developed world and an imperative for all governments. Individuals are particularly sensitive to safety and security issues, although the way these issues are perceived varies greatly according to environment, culture, education and social standing. In this context it is worth noting that the fear of crime experienced by many people does not always correspond to the local reality of crime problems. This factor is well-known. What we tend to be less sensitive about are psychological issues that are probably just as decisive but are less quantifiable and more difficult to understand.

Particularly important among these psychological issues are the nature and quality of an individual’s social relationships, the moral values 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 individual -the potential victim -as it is true for the delinquent or the criminal. All these factors strongly influence the way people see themselves within society.

Drop-outs and criminals are also consumers of the media. They do not always reflect on, or distance themselves from, the fiction or news which is presented. The creation of youth gangs in our suburbs is a clear manifestation of this. Programs of action against crime must, therefore, not be restricted simply to defining norms or formulating policies which attempt to control or prevent. The fight against crime is also, and above all, a fight for citizenship and for civic rights. This issue concerns the state as much as the individual, and government as much as the citizen.

Common, if not universal, values that can transcend the specific character of the fragmented groups (particularly socioeconomic groups) that increasingly make up our communities today, need to be identified and developed. Police forces, judicial systems and prisons must also be developed and supported in ways that ensure strict respect for the rights of the individual and for fundamental liberties. Only a conscious awareness of this dimension -which affects the very core of our communities -will enable us to confront the most important issues in the fight against delinquency and crime.

The rise in urban crime affects all nations. The richest, as well as the poorest, have to confront it. For many years now, the most developed
countries have made very substantial and costly investments in the fight against crime, particularly in what might be termed repression through the criminal justice system. But resources that have gone into this area have not always been matched with results. Policies which are solely dependent on the criminal justice system lead to a stalemate. Therefore, France has initiated a different approach and some positive results have already been achieved. In 1986, a definite decline in crime rates was evident. However, more recently there have been increases as a result of the social developments noted earlier. This must convince us that it is absolutely essential to strengthen the preventative approach.

Firstly, the underlying causes of crime must be identified by means of appropriate social policies: policies which offer everyone at least a chance to become integrated within the community and policies which will allow social interaction and cohesion to flourish. Next, prevention and repression through the criminal justice system must be linked very closely in a balanced way.

More generally, the multiplicity of factors which have been identified as leading to crime and its many manifestations demand answers that are also necessarily very diverse. Prevention programs which are implemented and take effect locally must be at the centre of crime prevention strategies. National policies, however suitable they may be, cannot solve the crime problem if they are developed in isolation from local efforts.

Governmental institutions such as the police and the judicial system cannot provide solutions on their own - particularly if they operate in isolation, without adequate coordination and cooperation, and with their only focus being repression, law enforcement and punishment. These agencies must also have ideas about, and must put into effect, strategies for the prevention of criminal behaviour and its recurrence.

Before elaborating on the methods adopted in France, the role of imprisonment as a preventive measure will be discussed. In this better balance between ‘prevention and repression’, the purpose of the penal sanction must be redefined so that it can be of real value to society. To that end, and as soon as a sentence is given, the offender’s re-integration and action to indemnify the victim also should be addressed. Due to a lack of imagination, imprisonment has tended to remain the main response.

Imprisonment is not an efficient sanction in the fight against large-scale crime. 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 subsequent offences. In effect, prison often represents an additional, albeit temporary, exclusion from the community. Imprisonment should therefore be reserved only for the most serious crimes.

Other sanctions must be applied and enforced: sanctions which ensure a systematic response and sanctions whose aim should be well-understood by the person concerned. Re-integration into the community and prevention of a recurrence of offending behaviour should be the primary emphasis. The prevention policy which France has been implementing for a number of years prior to 1991 hinges on three essential principles:

- emphasis on the local dimension;
- partnership; and
- contracting
Each program of intervention implemented as part of a prevention strategy must be integrated within a defined territory. The selected level in France is the municipality or the neighbourhood and this first principle is based on the particular role that locally-elected representatives must play in the field of prevention. This choice was linked to a large scale program of decentralisation which occurred in the early 1980s. Emphasis on the municipality also is related to the necessary coordination that must take place between prevention policies -narrowly defined -and all the other measures to be combined with them, such as improvement in housing, physical environment and socio-cultural infrastructures. More recently, it has been found useful to add selected groupings of several municipalities to this basic structure because the crime problem is similar across urban areas and knows no geographical boundaries. The state, however, must have a key role of facilitating research and development of these local approaches -it is not a transfer of responsibilities.

The second important principle involves partnership at both the local and the national level. Municipal councils for the prevention of crime bring together all the parties concerned: elected representatives, government agencies and the community. Locally-elected representatives are the driving force in these councils, but these representatives do not take on the task by themselves. It is important to be aware of the role played by representatives of residents’ action groups, managers of urban services -such as housing, public transport, social welfare, doctors, teachers (who play a fundamental and underrated role in the field of prevention amongst young people) -and the private sector. The third component in this partnership are the government agencies whose primary responsibility is the fight against crime -namely the police and the judicial system. France’s crime prevention policy is developed and implemented by all these participants. This coordination engenders a better knowledge of the nature of problems and an improvement of each participant’s role and action.

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 and any preventative measure must originate from a local crime analysis. This analysis, which involves all partners, has as its first objective a precise and well-documented analysis of the conditions and the nature and the evolution of local crime. Its second objective is an assessment of the current situation and malfunctions accompanied by an assessment of incoherences or weaknesses for dealing with crime problems in the current system. This results in the implementation of a ‘crime prevention audit’ or strategy plan. Initially crime prevention audits were carried out annually but France has found it useful to reduce their frequency. Budgetary allocation from government is now every three years. This avoids the lack of continuity which sometimes can be noticeable in local prevention policies.

Crime prevention audits or strategy plans can be grouped into six major contracting categories, each aimed at meeting different specific objectives. The reason for the diversity in the elements of crime prevention contracting areas is the multiplicity of causes and types of urban crime. The six categories are as follows:
National Overview on Crime Prevention

- Practical aspect of prevention: that is, all work concerning the methodology to be used, the method of implementation or the training of participants in prevention.
- Preventative measures of a social nature: that is, anything connected with the education, training, social and professional integration of young people, or assisting with access to culture and leisure for the most disadvantaged in an attempt to overcome feelings of rejection and alienation.
- Prevention by proximity: that is, a closer relationship between police and residents, particularly young people. The idea of foot patrols both as a form of deterrence and as a means of bringing police closer to the community is useful in this regard.
- Articulation of a clear policy to prevent the recurrence of an offence or recidivism by offenders: this approach combines both aid to victims and, when necessary, the implementation of alternative non-custodial sanctions as well as imprisonment.
- Contracts or funding agreements which 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 a demand for drugs at a local level ensures the coherence of this policy. This is translated into providing information to the public, caring for the drug addict and establishing links and necessary cooperation with other health programs. These measures are in no way an alternative to the fight against drugs, minor local trafficking and the receiving and concealing associated with it -they are a necessary extension of it.
- Communication: that is, on the one hand, providing general information to the public and more specific information aimed at community groups, and on the other hand, a transfer of knowledge between councils by means of informal discussions, forums and meetings.

Before concluding, it is necessary to stress the particular importance of international cooperation in the area of prevention. When implementing national strategies, information is often lacking on overseas initiatives and on ways of comparing experiences. It seems advisable, if not essential, that comparative research be undertaken on crime, the effectiveness of prevention policies, training programs and issues of citizenship in today’s society, 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 society in the decades to come. Exchanges between states must be combined with increasingly numerous inter-city cooperative ventures which will leave us better equipped to meet the demands of our communities. If left unchecked, increases in crime rates inevitably will lead to a national loss of confidence in our institutions and our leaders.
No policy will ever achieve a total elimination of crime. Absolute safety and security is incompatible with human nature. While reflection and action in this area must be characterised by modesty and level-headedness, the concerns of citizens must be responded to. It is by looking into the fundamental basis of democracy - freedom and solidarity - that we shall be better equipped to confront violence and crime. This fight against crime is an absolute necessity for democracy and it is with democracy that it shall be won.