

# The CREOGN Research Notes

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Strategic priority of  
foresight



Gendarmerie and  
territories

## HOW CAN WE BETTER ENSURE PUBLIC SAFETY, FOR AND WITH THE PUBLIC?

This note summarizes a personal reflection conducted as part of the training program for senior homeland security officials offered by the Center for Advanced Studies of the Ministry of the Interior (CHEMI)<sup>1</sup>. It addresses the vital issue of the close relationship between the public and the gendarmerie, which determines, on the one hand, the trust placed in it by the public and, on the other hand, the effectiveness and legitimacy of its actions.

This closeness, in both its physical and relational dimensions, has in fact become a key quality priority for any organization—an expectation of the user/customer reinforced by the prevailing consumerism that demands accessibility, personalized responses, and simplified procedures. This expectation was particularly evident with regard to public services during the “Yellow Vests” movement.

The goal of strengthening the bond between law enforcement and the public is at the heart of the everyday security policy championed by the head of state. In 2017, he stated: “*Everyday insecurity cannot be effectively combated unless law enforcement agencies are fully integrated into their communities, accessible to residents, and attuned to their concerns.*”<sup>2</sup>

To achieve this goal, the National Gendarmerie and the National Police must identify, based on their own characteristics and those of their respective areas of operation, the most effective ways to improve the quality of their interactions with the public. This requires a two-pronged, complementary approach: “reaching out” to the public (better taking into account and responding to their needs) and “building a sense of community” (involving them more in defining and implementing security policies). In these efforts, the Anglo-Saxon concept of “community policing” offers food for thought.

Following a brief overview of the factors shaping this proximity in the “gendarmerie zone” (ZGN), we will review the efforts already undertaken as part of the GEND 20-24 transformation strategy<sup>3</sup>, before identifying potential areas for improvement.

1 SCHOENHER, Dominique. *La gendarmerie redessine sa proximité au cœur des territoires. Comment mieux produire la sécurité pour et avec la population ?* 2022, 169 p. The full report is available from CREOGN (restricted distribution).

2 Speech by the President of the Republic to law enforcement officials on October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

3 To effectively address new security challenges, the GEND 20-24 institutional roadmap, with its motto “For the people, by the gendarme,” places the public’s expectations at the heart of the service’s priorities and the gendarme at the heart of the institution’s response.

## I) A need for local services that must be met

The public is increasingly demanding greater accessibility to public services, particularly in rural areas where cost-cutting measures have reduced their presence. The gendarmerie's territorial network has not been spared; its downsizing (by 15% over 20 years) has inevitably created a sense of distance.

Other cumulative factors have contributed to the deterioration of community ties and outreach efforts, despite these being described as the “DNA of the gendarmerie.”

Thus, while reducing police officers' working hours may seem legitimate in terms of their commitment to duty, it has limited the resources available for community outreach and crime prevention. The decline in these two areas has been exacerbated by a “numbers-driven policy” that places greater emphasis on response and investigative functions—areas already prioritized by the professional culture.

Computerization has fostered a form of bureaucratization and, until recently, a tendency for personnel to remain confined to their offices, reducing their presence and opportunities for interaction in public spaces. The recent rise in radicalism among adversaries hiding within the population, sometimes referred to as “internal enemies”, has led to the adoption of a vigilant stance and protective measures that have further reinforced this distancing.

Positive results from surveys measuring overall confidence in law enforcement should not obscure the recurring complaints about the quality of service provided or the public's perception of interactions with the police. French law enforcement agencies receive satisfaction scores that are barely in line with the European average, and 18- to 24-year-olds exhibit a particularly high level of distrust, especially among residents of the Île-de-France region. Analysts attribute this in part to the service's repressive approach, which they say fosters a confrontational mindset that reinforces this distrust and resistance to authority.

Within its area of operations, whose vastness is matched only by its diversity, the gendarmerie can generally rely only on its own forces to cover the entire security spectrum. Unlike urban areas, where robust municipal police forces<sup>4</sup> are supported by substantial private security services, applying the principles of complementarity promoted by the security continuum is unrealistic here, unless citizen participation is developed. Similarly, structures for coordinating prevention policies are underdeveloped in these areas. To build a range of community-based services tailored to the priority needs expressed by both resident and transient populations<sup>5</sup>, local gendarmerie officials must navigate a “patchwork” of expectations voiced by more than 33,000 elected officials with varying security priorities.

However, in the face of this difficult challenge, it has two assets that strengthen its regional presence: its network of more than 3,000 service locations and its operational reserve<sup>6</sup>. As the Director General of the National Gendarmerie (DGGN) writes, “*We live and serve among the people, in direct contact with those we are tasked with protecting.*”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, our 30,000 operational reservists—the “*vanguard of civic spirit*”—who are primarily deployed in their home regions, serve as key players and liaisons in our community-based initiatives.

To build closer ties with the community, the gendarmerie can draw inspiration from Anglo-Saxon *community policing* by adopting a two-pronged approach: reaching out to citizens to better understand and address their security needs, while also involving them more closely in ensuring that security.

## II) “Reaching out” by promoting accessibility, responsiveness, and accountability

Since the early 19th century, drawing on the “Peelian” principle<sup>8</sup> that “*the police and the public are one,*” the relationship with the public has been central to the British policing model. This model emphasizes the police

4 90% of municipalities in the ZGN lack such units; those that do have them have an average of fewer than three personnel. See MALOCHET, Virginie. *La gendarmerie, les polices des collectivités territoriales et la police de sécurité du quotidien (PSQ)*. Comparative perspectives. Report by the Institut Paris Région for the CREOGN, January 2021, p. 13-15. The report is available from the CREOGN.

5 They balance digital accessibility, rapid response, and a focus on personal relationships.

6 These two strengths will be reinforced by the establishment of 200 new bases and the funding of 20,000 additional reservists.

7 Post titled « Soldats de la Loi : notre statut militaire au service des Français », DGGN blog, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

8 In 1829, Sir Robert Peel, the British Home Secretary, established nine principles defining the role and guiding principles of the London police. The seventh principle states that “*the police must maintain a constant connection with the public, in a manner that embodies the historical tradition that the police and the public are one; the police are merely a part of the public who are paid to perform, on a full-time basis, the duties incumbent upon every citizen in the public interest, for the good and the continued existence of the community.*”

officer's duty of transparency and accountability to society. This shapes their professional conduct, as reflected in the oath to serve with fairness, integrity, diligence, and impartiality, while respecting fundamental human rights. It is worth noting here that the oath taken by French gendarmes has, for over two centuries, focused on hierarchical obedience and the enforcement of order and the law.

All British police officers, regardless of rank, are trained and evaluated on their "empathic" capacity, their communication skills, and their ability to build community. The same applies to the evaluation of the service's collective performance, which is based primarily on meeting the needs of the public<sup>9</sup>. Partnership-based work, which is based on the principle of shared responsibility between the police and community members, has been institutionalized.

On the French side, initial efforts to improve community outreach initially focused on the quality of customer service and then on service accessibility. With the aim of complementing rather than replacing existing services, this is significantly facilitated by the use of new technologies, such as the round-the-clock accessibility provided by the "masecurite.fr" app, which was developed by the digital brigade. Meeting certain expectations, teleservices are developing rapidly with the rise of reporting platforms, appointment scheduling, pre-complaints, and soon online complaints. User feedback and their perceptions of the service provided are now solicited through multiple channels ("User Voice," surveys, polls), and their requests are being better heard. However, there is still room for improvement in leveraging the potential of community networks to address local security needs.

At the same time, recent telecommunications technologies (NEO 2, Ubiquity) enable officers to work remotely, closer to where people live and spend their time, in third places, or even directly in people's homes. A new paradigm is taking hold: instead of forcing the public to come to them, officers are now going out to meet them.

The GEND 20-24 guidelines aim to increase and safeguard the amount of duty time devoted to community engagement and prevention, while leaving it to local units to experiment with and adjust organizational arrangements. The Event Management System (DGE), designed to optimize resources dedicated to interventions, is part of these innovations aimed at increasing the available workforce to expand territorial coverage and enhance contact with the public.

The principle of accountability<sup>10</sup>, which involves reporting on one's actions and ensuring they align with user expectations, is gradually taking shape. The initial focus has been on mayors, who are demanding the right to be better informed. A designated liaison officer is assigned to each elected official. The "#PrésentsPourLesÉlus" action plan, developed in 2021 with the Association of Mayors of France, offers various information, advisory, and diagnostic tools available on the "Gend'Elus" platform. Through the Service Consultation and Improvement Mechanism (DCAS), each elected official is asked for their opinion on the service provided by the gendarmerie.

More broadly, specialized awareness-raising and protection initiatives are implemented in response to local or current issues, in the spirit of "tailored protection."

The highly innovative "GEND-C.A.R.E." procedural justice project, piloted by the Yvelines Gendarmerie, serves as the culmination of this approach to accountability and the well-being of the public in all forms of interaction.

There remains a significant challenge to be addressed: objectively assessing the impact of these changes on improving outreach and relations with the public. The goal is to ensure that these changes become embedded in the professional culture by demonstrating that they improve working conditions without compromising operational efficiency.

However, these positive developments still largely keep the public in a passive role rather than making them a partner.

### III) "Building a sense of community" by encouraging public participation

The goal of this complementary approach is to move citizens away from the role of passive "consumers" who are critical of public safety services, and instead give them the opportunity and motivation to become active participants by applying the three-step incremental approach of "knowledge-engagement-cooperation."

<sup>9</sup> The PEEL (Police Effectiveness, Efficiency and Legitimacy) Assessment Framework, conducted annually.

<sup>10</sup> See art. 15 of the Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen, which has not been invoked very often to date: "Society has the right to hold any public official accountable for his or her administration."

As evidenced by the operational reserve and, more broadly, the vitality of the nonprofit sector, the potential for civic engagement is there; however, the general public and law enforcement, having few opportunities to interact, know little about one another.

However, increasing the frequency of these interactions, beyond simply fulfilling the principle of accountability, would improve the public's understanding of police work and correct biased perceptions among young people. Young people should be a priority target for addressing these prejudices, particularly through immersive experiences and discussion sessions integrated into the school curriculum.

French society is calling for more participatory democracy, but—particularly in the realm of security policy—governance bodies are struggling to open up to citizens. Early efforts at citizen participation have been largely inconclusive, both in substance and in form. Despite the rhetoric of the 2020–2024 National Crime Prevention Strategy, the public—whose participation in the debate is viewed as lacking legitimacy—remains excluded from the development of security policies. As the Bernasconi report<sup>11</sup> highlights, due to a lack of training, the culture among internal security officials remains instinctively resistant to such involvement. On the other hand, the culture of operational partnership is progressing, with a few trusted partners. According to the social principle that knowledge builds trust and facilitates buy-in, it is reasonable to believe that involving the public in the decision-making process would lead them to support the measures more fully and might even encourage them to cooperate in achieving shared goals.

The national security situation has led French authorities to view citizen participation as crucial to enhancing the country's collective resilience, without, however, reevaluating its role. The British police system, through an empowering and participatory approach known as “Citizens in Policing,” seamlessly integrates professionals and volunteers (special constables, police support volunteers, cadets). It readily draws on the public's civic-mindedness to report unusual situations without falling into the excesses of informant culture. Provided that certain ideological—rather than legal—barriers at the national level can be overcome, the British example could thus inspire models of operational engagement for public service missions carried out by young people participating in the Universal National Service (SNU). This citizenship training, which is set to become widespread, will place a heavy burden on the services; it is therefore an opportunity to familiarize participants with security issues through constructive dialogue. It may even spark an interest in careers in the field at a time when recruitment needs are significant.

To summarize my view of the trends toward greater community engagement, while the “reaching out” approach appears well underway, the “building a sense of community” approach is still struggling to take root within an institutional framework that keeps citizens at a distance. Based on this observation, 17 recommendations have been formulated to strengthen information sharing with the public, increase public engagement, change police culture, and influence perceptions among young people (these 17 recommendations are presented in an appendix available on the webpage for this Note).

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The content of this publication reflects the views of the author alone and does not necessarily reflect the views of CREOGN.

11 BERNASCONI, Patrick. *Rétablir la confiance des Français dans la vie démocratique – 50 propositions pour un tournant délibératif de la démocratie française*. Background Report. february 2022, p. 10. Available via: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/283948-retablir-la-confiance-des-francais-dans-la-vie-democratique-bernasconi>