

Reforming the French Police

An Interview with Fabien Jobard, sociologist

Ivan JABLONKA and Pauline PERETZ

In their discussion of crime and the best ways to curb it, French politicians have relied on a crude opposition between “the culture of results” and neighborhood policing, a doctrine whose American origins they seem to ignore: for sociologist Fabien Jobard, more than creating a new force, reforming the police implies better coordinating between central and local authorities.

How Should We Evaluate Our Police?

The worst way to study the police is to confine oneself to delinquency statistics. Clearly, the police play a role in fighting and solving crimes; but they also prevent crime and reassure the public. These three responsibilities are relatively distinct from one another.

Why is it misleading to assess the police primarily on the basis of delinquency statistics? Because nowadays, these numbers mean little. The current French government tells us “delinquency is down.” We are effectively at somewhere between four and three and a half million incidents of delinquency. When one examines these numbers closely (this does not require expertise, but simply looking at the numbers themselves), it becomes apparent that the reason delinquency is down is because car theft and damage are down. Cars are better protected than previously. Since crimes involving cars make up the vast majority of delinquent acts, this

decline has an immediate structural effect, resulting in an overall decline in criminal incidents. The left says: “You lie, it’s not true, delinquency isn’t down. And here’s the proof: the numbers that you can’t fiddle with—violence against individuals—are up.” In reality, though, we can’t be so sure. What has changed is the legal definition of violence. More and more acts of violence are automatically classified as criminal, including violence directed at partners, domestic partners, common-law spouses, etc. As a result, violence rises mechanically, but there is no way of telling if the actual incidence of violence in society is increasing.

Our assessment of the police has been based a “culture of results,” a term that has been part of official discourse since 2004, but which politicians introduced even earlier—in 2002—in their instructions to the police. The fallout has been disastrous: neither the right nor the left, neither the government nor its critics know what to do with it. With the police, as with other matters, our first goal must be to renounce our obsession with numbers, to free our minds of their fealty to statistics. This could lead us back to a more qualitative assessment of police work, based on services rendered to the public, on crime and delinquency prevention, on averting crimes, and on reassuring the public and offering it honorable service. This is the first stake.

Coordinating Public Services

At present, the question of police reform is often presented in binary terms: should we continue what we have been doing (though no one dares to characterize what exactly this is) or should we return to neighborhood policing? I think this is a bad alternative, as the experiment with neighborhood policing did not yield triumphal results. One should consider that the doctrine of neighborhood policing was imported from the United States. The United States, however, differs from France in a major respect: its police forces are municipal. Police is one municipal institution contributing to public wellbeing alongside others, such as road services. When a mayor pursues a policy aimed at improving a neighborhood’s wellbeing, he uses these other services and the police force simultaneously. In France, municipalities can also call upon the police force, but usually when police and other services act together, it is the result of a fortunate coincidence.

In reality, what needs reform is less the police than coordination between central and local authorities. This coordination can be conceived at the level of a city or an urban agglomeration, but not, I believe, at the departmental or regional level. It is clear that public institutions must be made to work together. As long as a duality exists between prefects and mayors, which local delinquency prevention councils only barely conceals, we will not succeed. The key is not reforming the police but redrawing the organizational charts of municipal, territorial, and urban power at the moment when the question of the territorialization of politics is about to be reopened, thanks to various reforms relating to departments, regions, and cities. I believe that our thinking about the police must be placed in this perspective. The police must act simultaneously and in coordination with other institutions; they must be assessed with these other institutions in terms of the services they render to the public; and they must be held democratically accountable, which at present is not the case.

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