

L'ÉTÉ CHAUD

ISTD Council member Martin Wright advises us to take a good look at France when it comes to crime prevention.

It is encouraging that ministers have been looking round for new ideas in crime prevention, including the promising developments in France, following outbreaks of trouble there during an *été chaud* – a hot summer – in the early 1980s. Four ministries worked together – social affairs, justice, interior, youth and sports. They set up inquiries which took a cool, analytical approach, on the working hypothesis that young people are not so much wicked and in need of repression (which can be counterproductive), but are bored and hunting for constructive things to do.

What is more, there was all-party support for this line, which has survived changes of government from left to right and back. This initiative is fully described in Michael King's report 'How to make social crime prevention work: the French experience' (available from NACRO, 169, Clapham Rd., London SW9 OPU. 01-582 6500).

The first part of the analysis came up with general conclusions about broad social policies: that crime prevention, as well as general concern for a healthy society, requires positive action to improve living conditions, housing, and communal life, and to reduce racial discrimination.

More specifically, it was recommended, firstly, that there should be support for victims of crime (one area in which perhaps Britain has progressed further than France) and that secondly, it is in society's own interests, quite apart from any moral obligation, to look after its young people and its social outcasts.

To tackle this, in tidy French fashion, they set up a three-tier structure. At the top is the *Conseil National de Prévention de la Délinquance*. There are councils in the *Départements*. Most significantly, *Conseils Communaux* have been set up in about two thirds of all towns with a population of 30,000 or more. These bring together police, statutory social work agencies, voluntary

organisations, trade unions, elected representatives and mayors.

The starting point was to provide summer activities which would be attractive to young people: 'you don't attract flies with vinegar'. This was the more necessary since there are no Young Offenders Institutions in France to which troublesome young people can be shunted (just as, in the 1970s, closure of juvenile institutions in Massachusetts concentrated people's minds on providing constructive alternatives). *Étés jeunes* (summer activities for young people) were instituted. By 1987, some 200,000 young people aged 13 to 18 were enabled to go on holidays and summer camps and other organised activities in 2,000 projects. For a nominal 10 francs (£1) young people can get a 'passport' or season ticket for a range of activities - tennis, motor mechanics, and many more - which offer more fun than hanging around shopping centres. The applications are analysed to see if young people in some areas are not applying; special promotions can then be organised, for example for dropouts or ethnic minorities.

The projects are not all handed to the youngsters on a plate. In the new town of Cergy-Pontoise (in Val d'Oise, northern France) reports *Le Monde* (11 August, 1988), the deal was the chance to earn 500 francs a week by cleaning and maintenance in the neighbourhood, or for five weeks' work, 2,600 francs' worth of driving lessons, with other incentives for younger children. About a hundred accepted. One of them, Mohammed, aged 16, commented 'The town is much cleaner now; I used to mess it up, now I keep it clean.' Petty vandalism went down by 60 per cent in one year and a further 30 % the next; petty delinquency was reduced by about 12 % in eighteen months.

The views of young people are taken into account. In areas where there is suspicion of the police, for example, projects have contact with the police only at the top, so that there is no possibility at street level of projects being accused of being undercover information gathering by the police. (In Britain, this kind of suspicion has led to some objections to a police presence in schools). In

about 100 of the largest towns and cities, *missions locales* have been established, with 50/50 national and local funding, to bring together employers, trade unions, charities and young people, and to receive suggestions for projects.

Two common theories about delinquency are that it is linked with drinking, and that young people need constructive outlets for their energies. Among the projects, accordingly, are a *Café sans alcool* in Lille, and a combat sports programme in Roubaix. Lille also tackled the problem of young drifters who used the congenial surroundings of a new railway station to hand around and take drugs. The answer was not a police crackdown, which would merely have moved them somewhere else, but a project in which they were invited to make a six-week contract, with wages, to write and perform their own play. Many of the 'inner circle' of the group joined in: some went on to get jobs.

The proof of the pudding is that crime has fallen, in Lille by 12 per cent between 1985 and 1986 and in France as a whole by 8 per cent. Petty crime in particular has declined.

The lesson seems to be that it pays to have an integrated effort by all agencies - not a series of individual projects, but a programme. It probably pays financially, as well; youth programmes are cheaper than the repair of vandalism, to say nothing of the cost of youth custody institutions. The programme's central government budget for 1988 was only about £2m. As a by-product, this kind of involvement is said to be good training for elected representatives and mayors. It promotes a realistic recognition that crime prevention needs to be approached by a variety of routes, and that crime prevention cannot be approached only by, for example, laying responsibility on parents; there must be a recognition of society's responsibility for its young people, in the best interests of the rising generation and of all of us.

Martin Wright writes in a personal capacity, and his views do not necessarily reflect those of Victim Support.