



PRESS RELEASE

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PUBLIC ENTITIES AND POLICIES

MUNICIPAL POLICE FORCES

Expansion of municipal police forces, already observed by the Cour des Comptes over the 2000-2010 period, continued between 2010 and 2018. Municipal forces now have larger staff, are implanted in more diversified locations and are better equipped. Their missions have expanded to the extent of being similar, in some cases, to those of national security forces. This momentum, which will likely to be maintained over the next few years, calls for assertive measures from the Central Government for an improved management of local forces and a strengthened governance at national level. It should also provide better training for officers and improve the complementarity between municipal police forces and Central Government security forces. The Cour des Comptes formulates 11 recommendations for this purpose.

Continuous expansion since the 2000's

In ten years, the role of municipal police forces in public security measures has been reinforced. Although moving at a slower pace than between 2000 and 2010, staff numbers rose by 18 % between 2010 and 2019, but with no necessary correlation with the local delinquency level. Although still concentrated in the Ile-de-France region and the Mediterranean arc, municipal police forces have also been created in regions where they were practically non-existent ten years ago, such as in Normandy, Brittany or Hauts-de-France. Weapons have also become commonplace over the last ten years: in 2019, 81 % of municipal police officers carried weapons and 57 % were issued with a firearm.

In terms of missions, all municipal police forces are responsible for general surveillance, public peace and security. However, an increasing share is now intervening actively to fight and prevent crime, sometimes with equipment and measures similar to those of the national police force. Municipal police forces tend to act as public thoroughfare units, above and beyond the task share initially set out in the coordination conventions that were supposed to organise their relations. Furthermore, a drop in the number of interventions by the national police force has been observed, as well as a substitution effect in towns and cities with more elaborate municipal police forces.

Practices to be more effectively structured

Video protection has become an ordinary instrument in everyday use for municipal police forces and urban supervision centres have multiplied over the last few years. The current debate is about the scope of technological innovations such as drones or face recognition. These techniques have become widespread during the sanitary crisis and due to a persistent legal vacuum, which led to unstructured usage of these technical resources



when acquired by municipal police forces. This situation needs to be addressed by finding a balance between innovation and the protection of privacy rights.

In the mean time, prerogatives and attributions of municipal police officers have been extended. They can now have direct access to certain police files and carry out blood alcohol screening as part of road traffic control operations. These changes, made as the need arises and often without sufficient foresight, lack overall strategic planning about the role of municipal police forces.

These shortcomings are partly caused by the weakness of the national bodies for dialogue and governance, in particular the municipal police force advisory committee. This committee has too few meetings which are, when held, monopolised by statutory questions. The lack of strategy is however above all caused by the reluctance of Central Government to define a clear scope of intervention for the municipal police forces and an assumed complementarity with the national police.

Evaluation and auditing to be reinforced

Investment in security missions is costly for towns and cities, whether in terms of wage bills, equipment or investments in video protection systems. Yet little is known about this cost, as there is no account classification aiming at isolating the “municipal police” component in local budgets. Control of the wage bills of municipal police officers, estimated at 1.26 Md€ for all the towns and cities concerned, is still a central issue.

Actual measures for evaluating the performance of municipal police forces still remain to be created. The external auditing, currently deficient as it is subject to prior approval from the advisory committee, must be reinforced.

Above all, the development of municipal police forces may eventually increase the dependence of Central Government security forces on services over which they have no creative or operational control. This movement underlines by inference the difficulty for the national security forces to accomplish all the tasks under their responsibility.

Central Government should determine how much importance it wishes to grant local authorities within the “*security continuum*” between the forces contributing to public security. Only then can municipal police forces become an essential link in public peace and security.

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