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FRANCE IS GRIPPED BY A CRIME WAVE. AND POLITICS IS IN THE DOCK

The French crisis over law and order has already cost the prime minister his political career. Now the far right threatens the president himself. Why has policing in France become such a farce?

THE RACE AGAINST CRIME

Christine Toomey reports. Photographs by Rip Hopkins

Jean-Marie Le Pen (left) and Jacques Chirac (right), contenders for the presidency of a country riven by crime (below). Le Pen's surprise success in the first round of the elections has been attributed to his strong stance on law and order

"THE POLICE SAID THEY WERE SORRY, THEY COULDN'T HELP"

THE VICTIM

Pensioners in Cannes are given self-defence classes to help them feel safe. Municipal police are also a strong presence (top right). Bottom right: Tim Williams, a Briton, likens the situation to a Pink Panther farce

PREVIOUS PAGES: LEFT, JACK DABAGHIAN/POPPERFOTO/REUTERS; CENTRE, PATRICK KOVARIK/AP, AFP. RIGHT, FROM TOP: DANIEL GIRY/EDITING; J-P BAJARD/EDITING; MAXPPP; DANIEL GIRY/EDITING; J-M HURON/EDITING

Weaving through the busy evening traffic of the Champs Elysées, watchful Parisians would once regularly see two police motorbikes moving in opposite directions at high speed. Though they varied the route, their destination was fixed; each was bound for the building from which the other had set out. One would draw up in front of the headquarters of the national police on Place Beauvau in the eighth arrondissement, its rider disappearing quickly inside clutching a small package. The other would be making its way west, in the direction of the Bois de Boulogne, to the central division of the paramilitary gendarmerie, where its rider would also deliver a small package before remounting and retracing his route.

This nightly ritual was central to the way the two main branches of law enforcement in France shared information. The packages contained, at first, files, and then computer discs storing details of crimes and suspects each force was willing to share with the other. Strict separation of authority and data protection laws have traditionally prevented the national police and gendarmerie from holding information on a shared database; the national police fall under the jurisdiction of the interior ministry, the gendarmerie come under the command of the minister of defence. The intense rivalry each force feels towards the other, their distinctive mentality and methodology and the differing perception the public has of each, underlines a deep divide between the two. While the sharing of information has become increasingly automated – it can now be achieved via instant computer transfer – the principle of keeping both forces separate is central to the French approach to law and order.

But as France battles to control soaring crime levels, the problems caused by this fragmented approach to law enforcement lie at the core of a heated national debate on crime prevention. The shocking success of the extreme-right-wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen in the race for the French presidency has been attributed largely to his tough stance on law and order, while the Gaullist incumbent, Jacques Chirac, battling for re-election next Sunday, has fastened on crime prevention as a key issue at the centre of his campaign, by adopting the now familiar slogan of "zero tolerance" for criminals. One of Chirac's most damning criticisms of his defeated rival, Lionel Jospin, was that the Socialist prime minister fostered permissiveness and allowed crime to go unpunished. Chirac has made great play of proposing closer co-operation between the national police, the gendarmerie and a third force, the municipal police, who are being recruited in ever-increasing numbers by city mayors and village councils despairing of a central government solution to the problem.

The idea that it is a matter of putting more cops on the beat carries less weight in France, which has one of Europe's highest ratios of police per head of population – one officer per 252 inhabitants, compared with one for every 303 in Germany and one for every 380 in the UK. There are 146,000 national police responsible for towns of 20,000 or more residents, 101,000 gendarmes responsible for the countryside and small towns, and a growing number of municipal forces around the country. France's crime rate is still significantly below that of other European countries; Britain, Germany and Scandinavia, for instance, have a rate of around 100 crimes per 1,000 people, compared with 68 crimes per 1,000 in France. But recent robberies by gangs armed with machineguns and rocket-launchers, together with a sharp increase in violent muggings and carjackings, have created a climate of unease and alarm.

A series of high-profile muggings and shootings in Paris have pushed crime to the forefront of the nation's concerns. One was the attack in February on the actress Sophie Marceau, who was four months pregnant when five men dragged her from her car near her apartment in the suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine and drove off in it. The following month a lone gunman killed eight and wounded more than 30 people during a town-hall meeting in the western suburb of Nanterre. While many shrug, complaining that the Latin attitude to authority makes law enforcement harder, the police, local authorities and victims of crime argue that this mentality has to change if France is to turn the tide. Decades of failed social policy and disastrous urban planning, leading to high-density satellite towns and abandoned immigrant ghettos, are also coming under scrutiny. The urban development policies adopted by France in the 1960s and 70s – favouring heavy-density satellite towns and suburbs, with bleak tower blocks, instead of city-centre renewal – account for many of the country's social problems. Young criminals are often referred to simply as *les jeunes*

"IT'S NO JOKE. THE COTE D'AZUR IS A HOTBED OF CRIME"

THE EXPAT

des banlieues (the youths of the suburbs).

A closer look at the situation in the south of France reveals a growing despair at the government's inability to tackle the problem. It shows a widening gulf not only between the public and police, but between those who feel abandoned in urban ghettos – dubbed *banlieues sensibles*, or "sensitive suburbs", by the politically correct – and the rest of the community. Add to this the rivalry between the different police forces and a picture of law enforcement emerges more reminiscent of Inspector Clouseau than Maigret.

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In the coming weeks, the Croisette promenade in Cannes will swell with celebrities and onlookers drawn to the annual international film festival. The city's streets will fill with luxury cars. Yachts worth tens of millions of pounds will jostle for a place in the Vieux Port to soak up the glamour. Increasingly, international businesses and foreign nationals have moved into the area, including an estimated 250,000 Britons, who either spend part of the year here in second homes or live here. Walled-off villas with swimming pools dot the landscape in the hills behind the coast in the Alpes Maritimes, the Var region and Provence. Set against such opulence, however, the south of France is experiencing the second-fastest increase in crime outside Paris. Last year the number of crimes reported in France broke the 4m barrier, with violent crime increasing faster than other categories and the rate of delinquency rising more rapidly in the countryside and villages and towns than in cities. While urban centres recorded a 6% increase in crime, in rural areas the rate of increase was nearly double. And whereas crime rose by an average of nearly 8% throughout France, theft with violence had increased by 18% and burglaries by 22% in the Alpes Maritimes area encompassing Cannes, Nice and the area dubbed by expats "the golden triangle", stretching from Cannes inland to Grasse and back to the coast at Antibes.

Sitting in an airy conference room overlooking the Mediterranean, Bernard Brochand points out proudly that the rate of increase in crime in Cannes is below that of other towns and cities along the coast. Since taking over as mayor just over a year ago, he has implemented a number of initiatives to tackle the problem. They include a night-time curfew for youths under 13 during the summer months, self-defence classes for pensioners, regular meetings between the local heads of the national police, municipal police and gendarmerie, and the installation of CCTV cameras throughout the city. "My aim is to turn Cannes into a haven of security, prosperity and quality of life," says the former advertising executive with a flourish.

Brochand has distributed leaflets giving tips on security to residents and tourists. These include an eye-catching list of secret signs apparently chalked on walls and pavements by thieves to identify the houses of easy targets. This secret code includes the shape of a triangle for a woman living alone, a diamond for an unoccupied house, and two overlapping squares to indicate the home of a person of a nervous disposition. When questioned about the list, however, a number of police officers chuckle. The signs were once used in the countryside, they say, but are rarely seen now. "The mayor just liked the look of the secret code," said one. "So it was included to please him."

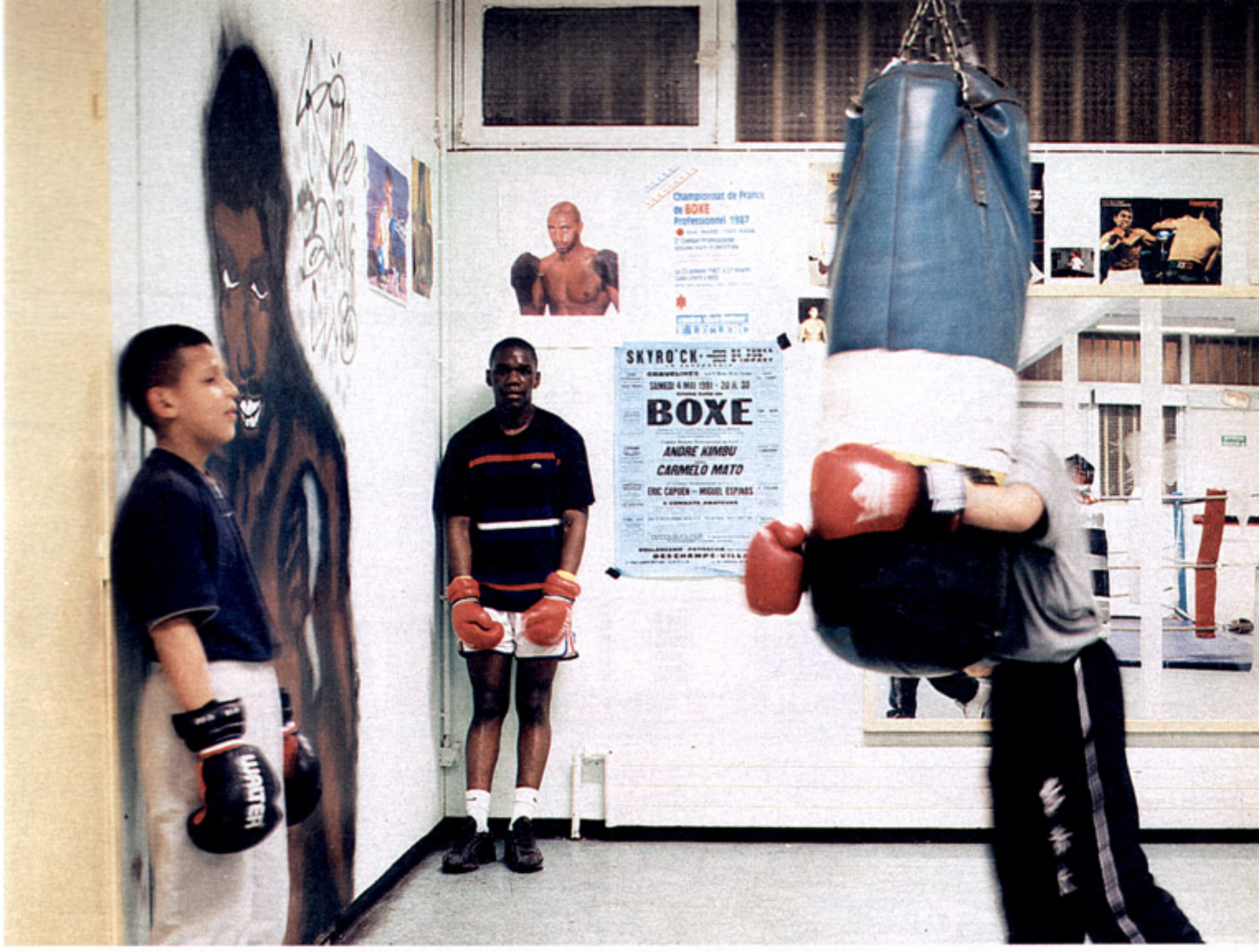
Brochand also arranged for the head of the city's 160-strong municipal police force, Guy Heron, to visit London's Metropolitan Police ⟶

Heron, to visit London's Metropolitan Police at Charing Cross and Newham recently, where he was briefed on the way British police employ CCTV and on an advanced imaging programme to identify suspects. Heron says he was impressed with the organisation and clear briefings. "There also seemed to be a spirit of co-operation between the police and community that does not exist here in France. The police here are seen as the enemy of the people," said Heron. "This is a Latin culture. People believe it is okay for the police to police others but not themselves. Police are seen less as a protecting force in France than one that controls and interferes." The powers of the municipal police are limited, anyway, he admitted. They do little more than enforce local by-laws. Their training is shorter than that for either the national police or the gendarmerie and they are generally paid less. Heron, a former gendarme, says he has good relations with both the national police in Cannes and the gendarmes who patrol its outskirts. "We are slowly opening our eyes to the need for more co-operation. But there is still a lot of suspicion and jealousy between all three forces."

Major Claude Pourcet, commandant of one of Cannes' brigades of gendarmes, explains that much of the resentment stems from the fact that the gendarmes are technically part of the army. This means they are not allowed union representation and have to work longer hours than their counterparts in the national police, for less pay. "Traditionally, gendarmes have enjoyed a better reputation than the police. People respected our military discipline and the fact that we have no set hours," says Pourcet. "But slowly, I think, we are losing some of that respect."

In December, gendarmes in several parts of France, including areas around Paris, Marseilles and Bordeaux, staged an unprecedented series of protests demanding higher pay, better resources and more staff. (A tour of Pourcet's barracks on the northern outskirts of Cannes, for instance, revealed only two patrol cars for 52 men.) This led to a pay increase and the creation of nearly 2,000 new jobs. Similar protests by members of the national police, who complained they were tired of "being shot at like rabbits" after a string of violent attacks in Paris left two officers dead and three wounded, led to promises that every police officer would be issued with a bulletproof jacket and a new pay structure to compensate for the increased risks. But victims of crime hold out little hope that such measures will greatly improve the situation. The answer, they argue, is not only more manpower but more effective policing.

The increase in crime has led to a lexicon of terms used to describe particular offences, such as *le drive-by shooting* and *vols à la portière* or *vols à l'italienne,* where handbags are snatched from cars stopped at traffic lights by thieves on motorbikes. Another trend is the increase in *vols au saucisson*, where victims are bound, gagged and beaten before being robbed. One British skipper of a luxury yacht moored in Antibes described how he and his wife were bound and gagged in their villa in Cannes. "We were relaxing after coming home



"PEOPLE THINK THAT WE ARE ALL THIEVES AND ARSONISTS"

THE YOUTH

late one night when this guy with a balaclava came down the stairs and told us to get on the floor. He bound our hands, gagged us and tied us to a toilet, demanding to know the combination of our safe. He was furious to find there was nothing in it. He pointed a shotgun at our heads, took our credit cards, my wife's jewellery, car keys, and drove off in our car," says Simon, who has lived and worked in France for more than 10 years. "When we alerted the police they didn't seem at all interested. A few men came, I think they were gendarmes, shrugged and took a few fingerprints. But every time we tried to call after that, we just got the impression they had already filed it under unsolved mysteries." Foreign residents, those with second homes in the area, or renting villas, have been particularly targeted, as they are perceived as more wealthy than many local residents. But many are reluctant to talk about their experiences for fear of encouraging further attention or because they are sensitive of criticising the local authorities.

"The spirit of the Pink Panther is still alive and well in the south of France," says Tim Williams, the British managing director of one security firm based in Valbonne, an area where many expats live or have second homes. "But while the Pink Panther was a comedy, the situation here is no joke. The reality is that, between the palm trees and the balmy Mediterranean breezes, the Côte d'Azur is a hotbed of crime. There is so much money around here that criminals are inevitably attracted, and anyone with a deluxe car or out-of-town registration has a very high chance of being robbed." Yet Williams says it often seems as if the French police are more interested in investigating the provenance of a crime victim's wealth than the crime itself. "The police all too often think one crime hides another and start asking for fiscal receipts, the implication being that someone who has been robbed might not be paying the tax they should. There is a degree of local resentment towards wealthy foreigners and that is reflected in the way the police deal with them."

Tensions between the local community and foreign residents erupted recently when Williams's firm was asked by parents of pupils at the international section of a secondary school to provide security guards to escort their children from the school gates to a waiting bus. They were alarmed by the failure of the local police to put a stop to pupils being harassed by drug dealers hanging around the school. But the parents were told by the head of the school's French section that they had overstepped their authority. The gendarmerie warned Williams that his guards would be arrested if they continued their work. Among those who requested the special protection were Christine Craik and her husband, Gavin, the British parents of four children, two of whom attended the school. "The children in the international section were seen as rich. It seemed as if the school didn't see why they should get preferential treatment," said Gavin, a financial negotiator with the EU, "and as if our request was an affront to the efficiency of the local ⟿

police." But the Craiks had long since lost faith in the local gendarmes, having battled unsuccessfully for two years to get them to tackle the drug-dealing in the street outside their home in Villeneuve-Loubet, between Nice and Antibes. The family were subjected to regular abuse. At one point the couple's youngest son was threatened by having his head placed under the wheel of a car by drug-dealing youths. It was not until the Craiks complained to the head of the regional council that riot police carried out raids on the houses where the youths lived, to arrest them.

The unwillingness of police to tackle criminals also amazed Ruth Lamb, an American living in the village of Tourette-sur-Loup, inland from Cannes. She and her daughter were driving in their car in the neighbouring town of Vallauris when a motorbike pulled up beside them and its passenger tried to snatch her handbag. When they struggled, the youth put one arm around her daughter's neck, threatening to kill her, and bent back Ruth's finger until she released the bag. He then jumped back on the bike and sped off. "We chased them and saw them pass in front of two municipal policemen on their motorbikes. When we stopped and told them the youths had robbed us, they said they were sorry, but they couldn't do anything. The neighbourhood into which the bike had gone was too dangerous to enter. They suggested we try the national police. The national police said there was little they could do either."

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Much of the problem lies in recent French history and changing demographics, explains Professor Sebastien Roche, a political analyst with the National Centre for Scientific Research, and the author of a number of books on juvenile crime in France. Although the gendarmerie, acting both as a military force and local constabulary, dates back more than two centuries, the national police were only created after the second world war, when France was still mainly rural. While the gendarmes retained authority in rural areas, the national police were given jurisdiction in larger towns and cities. During the past 50 years, towns and cities have grown while the countryside has become depopulated. Yet the gendarmes and national police have remained in roughly the same areas. This has left some rural areas with perhaps one gendarme per 25 inhabitants, while cities might have one policeman for every 2,000.

"Our penal system is in need of major reform," Roche argues. "Yet it has traditionally been regarded as too much of a hot potato. The turf war between the police forces has its roots in this problem. A culture of rivalry has always existed. While the municipal police suffer from an inferiority complex, both the gendarmes and the national police think they are superior to each other. The gendarmes say the national police have no rapport with people, and the national police say the gendarmes may be good with people but lack the necessary skills to investigate crimes." The problems such resentments cause have resulted in open warfare in some areas. In Paris, for instance, the municipal police, who dress in black combat gear, wield truncheons and tear gas, are called "cowboys" by the national police. They were indignant after the municipal police admitted that they regularly listened in to national police radio traffic to try to get to crimes first. "You can go to jail for doing that," a spokesman for the national police union warned his municipal colleagues.

As the police forces squabble, the crooks adapt. With more towns recruiting municipal police, and increasing surveillance, many now seek targets further afield. This partly accounts for the dramatic increase in rural crime. Thieves see more isolated homes as soft touches, sometimes stealing entire households of goods using removal vans, after gaining access by destroying windows or doors or removing roof tiles – which they also steal because of their value. Provence and the Var region, north of St Tropez and Hyères, have been hard hit. Ian and Vanessa Dabson, who live on the edge of the village of Forcalqueiret, returned from their Christmas holiday to find their home looted. A van had rammed through their fence and driven off with much of their furniture, antiques, even sheets, towels and cleaning materials. "It looked as if someone wanted to fit out their own home with our belongings. It was very upsetting," said Ian Dabson, a retired golf-course superintendent.

Sociologists and criminologists attribute much of the rise in crime in cities and rural areas to youths who have dropped out of the education system and are unemployed. Unlike Britain, where the age profile of the jobless is more even, France has more unemployed young. "The French education system is geared towards the final exam, the Baccalauréat. It is very theoretical. Many young people can't keep up. They drop out and turn to crime," explains Roche. Those on the left argue that part of the answer to tackling youth crime lies in investing more in vocational training schemes, and tackling the causes of delinquency, such as poverty and drug-taking. Those on the right, however, want a return to old-style *maisons de correction*, where young offenders are locked up. They also want the family benefits of young hooligans to be docked and British-style magistrates' courts to administer swift justice. An overburdened court system means that under 10% of crimes lead to legal action in France. Chirac has stated that he will promote a "zero impunity" approach to crime if he is re-elected. His opponents claim he should start by forgoing the legal immunity afforded him by the presidency, which protects him from legal action relating to corruption scandals dating from his time as mayor of Paris for two decades.

Judge Jean-Pierre Deschamps, president of the Youth Tribunal in Marseilles

The direction in which the country moves will be decided by the outcome of the final round of the presidential elections and the parliamentary elections that follow in June. Some indication of the success of each approach can be found in the different experiences of the southern cities of Nice and Marseilles. The latter has traditionally been regarded as a crime-ridden port with a violent image. Yet according to Judge Jean-Pierre Deschamps, the president of the Youth Tribunal in Marseilles, the city has had no overall increase in juvenile crime during the past 10 years. The city's rate of increase in crime is below that of Nice, where it rose by nearly 12% last year and where street crime in particular has soared.

"Marseilles' reputation as a city of crime is outdated," argues Deschamps. The difference can partly be explained by the fact that Nice is much wealthier, so its allure for criminals is greater. But he believes it is also due to a different approach to the problem between the two cities. "Although Marseilles is not a rich city, there are a lot of organisations set up to look after young people here; youth activities, education programmes. We also have a heavily subsidised bus service so kids from the poorer suburbs can get down to the sea in the summer," says the judge. Deschamps has also personally set up an organisation called Jeunes Errants, for *les enfants clandestines*, children who have taken the boat across from North Africa without their parents in the hope of finding a better life. Unlike Nice and Paris, Marseilles also has fewer *banlieues sensibles*, urban ghettos.

The police deny that many of the *banlieues* in cities such as Nice and Paris are no-go ⟶

"MY AIM IS TO TURN CANNES INTO A HAVEN OF SECURITY"

THE MAYOR

"THEY ARE CRAZY WITH RAGE, AND SEE NO FUTURE"

THE PROFESSOR

areas, although locally they are often regarded as out of bounds – even to ambulance crews and firemen, who are often attacked. Yet when police do enter some of these areas, their presence sparks riots and retaliation such as police stations being torched or cars overturned and burnt.

Surrounded by advisers and aides, Jacques Peyrat, the mayor of Nice, thumped his fist on his desk and blamed the situation on Jospin's Socialist government "not being repressive enough". Peyrat, a senator and member of Chirac's RPR party, wants city mayors to be granted more power to deal with crime. "We suffer from too much centralisation. We should be allowed more control. We have to give the municipal police more powers and then get all the forces working closer together," he argues, describing the traditional lack of co-operation between the gendarmerie and national police as "very damaging" for law and order.

But Peyrat, a former member of the far-right National Front party, also blames increasing numbers of immigrants from North Africa and eastern Europe for the soaring crime levels in his city. France's 5m-strong Muslim community, principally from the former French territories of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, is Europe's largest. Government figures don't separate crimes committed by *français de souche* – those of western European descent – and *les immigrés*, essentially North Africans.

But immigrants invariably get blamed for most of the delinquency. Nice is regarded as having some of the most deprived, volatile immigrant ghettos after those that ring Paris, though Peyrat denies this. "We have a little difficulty sometimes," he says. "But we can't call it a real problem."

Those who live and work in one of these *banlieues*, a northwestern suburb of Nice called Ariane, see things differently. "Segregating many foreigners in ghettos like this is racist. The young here have no work and are abandoned by the education system," says Sam Joubij, who runs a boxing club for 40 youths – some of them orphaned refugees from the war in Rwanda.

Frederic Kuhn, who runs a fitness club nearby, agrees. "There is a lot of racial prejudice against the people who live here. Very little is done to help them assimilate. It is not surprising when they get into trouble," says Kuhn, an officer with the national police. "After eight o'clock at night it is like the meanest streets of Chicago. People here feel forgotten, tossed to one side."

Requests to build a new sports stadium in the area have been consistently ignored. But city officials have recently agreed to build a barracks for a squad of riot police in the neighbourhood. "People think that we are all thieves and arsonists. We have to fight hard to change this image," says 17-year-old Yahya, who is working out in the gym. "As soon as you say you're from Ariane, people lose any interest. It is very hard to get a job because of your home address."

One recent report by a Sorbonne university professor painted a bleak picture of the degree of alienation felt by much of the youth in such ghettos. "Many of these kids are first- or second-generation children of immigrants. They have never been welcomed into French society. They are crazy with rage. They have been marginalised to the furthest edge. They see no future," wrote Sophie Body-Gendrot. The police, she said, often worsen things by humiliating and insulting them, and ordering them to avert their eyes. She warned the government that slum violence in France risked approaching that of large American cities if initiatives were not taken to address the problems.

"The trouble is that election time is not a good time for everyone to start talking about such complex issues as crime and its causes," Judge Jean-Pierre Deschamps concludes. "It leads politicians to talk about simple solutions to the problem. But there are no simple solutions." ■