

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on:

- the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament — The prevention of crime in the European Union — Reflection on common guidelines and proposals for Community financial support’, and
- the ‘Proposal for a Council Decision establishing a programme of incentives and exchanges, training and cooperation for the prevention of crime (Hippocrates)’

(2001/C 357/16)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament — The prevention of crime in the European Union — Reflection on common guidelines and proposals for Community financial support and the Proposal for a Council Decision establishing a programme of incentives and exchanges, training and cooperation for the prevention of crime (Hippocrates) [COM(2000) 786 final) — 2000/0304 (CNS)];

having regard to the decision taken by the Commission on 29 November 2000, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the Regions on the matter;

having regard to its Bureau's decision of 3 April 2001 to instruct Commission 4 — Spatial Planning, Urban Issues, Energy, Environment — to draw up the relevant opinion;

having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Crime and safety in cities (CdR 294/1999 fin) (1);

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 100/2001 rev.) adopted by Commission 4 on 3 May 2001 (rapporteur: Ms Tarras-Wahlberg (S, PSE),

adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 39th plenary session on 13 and 14 June 2001 (meeting of 13 June).

1. Committee of the Regions' comments on the Communication

local level. People have a right to feel safe in their daily lives, and this is an important part of the quality of life.

1.1. Europe is increasingly committed to public security and safety. For a long time now, many EU regions and municipalities have been confronted with crime targeting their citizens or property, the business world or the public sector.

1.4. The Committee of the Regions shares the Commission's belief that intervention from the European Union is likely to add real value to Member State policies.

1.2. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the section of the Communication which deals with possible ways of framing a crime prevention strategy, and the establishment of the Hippocrates programme for the prevention of crime.

1.5. The Committee of the Regions would stress that EU crime prevention action must not prejudice basic general freedoms and rights. Heightened vigilance in an attempt to prevent offences which have not yet been committed must not, for instance, entail security measures which impose excessive constraints on the citizen at either national, regional or local level. The Committee of the Regions agrees that such consequences should be highlighted and prevented.

1.3. The Committee of the Regions believes that much of the EU's crime prevention work must and does take place at

1.6. Given the urgency of the matter, the Committee of the Regions will confine its opinion to everyday crime, as opposed to organised or cross-border crime.

(1) OJ C 57, 29.2.2000, p. 90.

2. Committee of the Regions' recommendations to prevent crime in the European Union

Definitions — the concept of crime

2.1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's definition of crime and crime-related problems as including punishable conduct and other deviant behaviour by individuals and by spontaneous associations of persons. However, in order to make the subdivision clearer, the Committee of the Regions would suggest the following changes:

- serious crime often against the person, i.e. offences defined as such in national criminal laws (e.g. homicide, rape, certain illegal trafficking);
- more frequent offences which can be considered less serious, but which are also defined as such in national criminal laws (e.g. theft, handling stolen goods, acts of violence, fraud, embezzlement);
- 'everyday violence' which is tending to arise in new and varied contexts (schools, sports stadiums, public highways, residential areas etc.);
- anti-social conduct which displays a lack of civic spirit but is not necessarily a criminal offence, and which can by its cumulative effect generate a climate of tension and insecurity.

2.2. The Committee of the Regions believes that the above-mentioned crime in the local environment has a significant impact on perceived safety levels. This type of crime is also a hotbed of recruitment for organised and cross-border crime. It is extremely important that the EU Member States should enact measures to prevent it.

2.3. The Committee of the Regions also endorses — subject to a minor addition — the Commission's proposed definition of crime prevention:

'Crime prevention includes all activities which contribute to halting or reducing crime as a social phenomenon, both quantitatively and qualitatively, either through permanent and structured cooperation measures or through ad hoc initiatives. Here it is important to identify the conditions and activities capable of impacting on both the direct and indirect causes of crime. Accordingly, many actors can play a preventive role: local representatives, enforcement services and the various legal authorities, social services,

the education system, associations in the broad sense, industry, banks and the private sector, research workers and scientists, and the general public, supported by the media.'

This definition is in line with previous Committee of the Regions' statements.

Priorities and strategy for crime prevention measures

2.4. The Committee of the Regions agrees that the crime prevention strategy must aim to protect both the citizen and society, and endorses the proposed objectives for the European Union.

2.5. The Committee of the Regions endorses the proposed list of priorities for general crime, where measures are initially to focus on urban, juvenile and drug-related crime. Continued discussions of the priorities should take on board CoR views since any future decisions involve local and regional authority responsibility in the area of crime prevention.

2.6. The Committee of the Regions agrees that it is important that the crime prevention strategy should focus on knowledge, partnership, and a multidisciplinary approach.

2.7. A more robust, focused approach to knowledge would enable the Member States to improve their understanding of the symptoms and causes of crime, and to identify new crime trends. A more systematic impact assessment of crime prevention action would enable the EU to achieve a reliable and worthwhile exchange of experience and practice.

2.8. Effective crime prevention means identifying and mobilising the players who can impact on both the direct and indirect causes of crime. Measures to combat crime thus usually involve anti-crime cooperation. Models for such preventive partnerships and network-building can be developed at all levels: European, national, regional and local. The Committee of the Regions has already expressed the need to focus particularly on awareness of 'crime prevention', and on exchanges of information, and the launch and follow-up of initiatives, including dissemination of results.

2.9. A comprehensive crime prevention strategy requires a multidisciplinary approach to promote use of complementary ways of developing crime reduction techniques and social preventive measures.

Crime prevention instruments in the European Union

2.10. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the emphasis on cooperation on crime prevention measures in the various policy areas. This particularly applies to policies which impact on residents' safety, e.g. social policy, urban policy, regional policy and research policy. Other important policy areas are the information society, external policy and environment policy. It is very important to involve the applicant countries in crime prevention prior to their accession to the European Union.

2.11. The Committee of the Regions believes that the proposal for a better match between the social exclusion programme and the crime prevention strategy is a necessary measure. The Committee also endorses including the prevention of drug addiction in the new social agenda, which stresses higher standards of living. These measures, along with the social, economic and cultural integration of immigrants in the fight against racism and xenophobia, are a good crime prevention strategy as part of a European, national, regional and local social policy.

2.12. The Committee of the Regions would stress once again the importance of the urban dimension, and of the accent being placed on crime resulting from inadequate urban planning. The Committee of the Regions agrees that insecurity and/or crime should be among the indicators of the urban audits regularly carried out in the large cities of the European Union.

2.13. A strategy for grass roots level crime prevention requires in-depth knowledge and analysis of the feeling of insecurity and how it spreads. Surveys are an important source of information in this context. The Committee of the Regions would stress once again that the media have a significant role to play here. Media reports can influence perceived safety levels to the extent that they do not correspond to any actual safety risk.

2.14. The Committee of the Regions would stress the need for exchanges and dissemination of best practice to be subject to an evaluation based on common criteria, to assess whether they can be followed up or implemented across the board.

2.15. Effective EU crime prevention requires a comprehensive mobilisation of many sections of society, building a partnership between national, local and regional authorities, NGOs, the private sector and citizens, all of which can be considered as society's crime prevention players. The

Committee of the Regions welcomes the French and Swedish initiative to establish a European crime prevention network, focusing particularly on urban, juvenile and drug-related crime ⁽¹⁾.

2.16. The Committee of the Regions agrees that an Internet site for crime prevention could need setting up. This would provide easier access to policy and practice in the European Union and in the Member States, and facilitate exchanges of information within the framework of the deliberations of the European level crime prevention network. In this connection, the Committee of the Regions would also point out that much EU crime prevention work takes place at regional and local level, and the possibility of linking this work ⁽²⁾ to the Internet site should be considered. The Committee of the Regions would, however, assert that the importance of such an Internet site should not be over-estimated.

Hippocrates

2.17. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the proposal and concurs with the Commission that a financial instrument would add value to Member State action in the area of crime prevention.

2.18. The Committee of the Regions endorses the programme measures, viz.: training, exchanges and placements, studies and research, meetings and seminars, and dissemination of the results obtained within the framework of the programme.

2.19. The Committee of the Regions also believes it is important for the applicant countries to be given the option to take part in Hippocrates-funded projects, in preparation for accession.

2.20. The Committee of the Regions feels it is positive that the programme has been designed according to the same principles as other funding programmes in the area of Justice and Home Affairs. With regard to the criteria for obtaining funds under the programme (within the EU), it is worthwhile looking at the experience of the European Crime Prevention Awards (ECPA), in which six Member States currently participate. The award is meant to encourage measures to combat 'everyday' crime.

⁽¹⁾ Council of the European Union 13464/00 DG H III.

⁽²⁾ e.g. efforts to reduce crime and the fear of crime via urban planning, architecture, and the upkeep and maintenance of towns through Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design — CPTED, and the European Designing Out Crime Association (website: www.e-doca.net), and the International CPTED Association (www.CPTED.net).

2.21. The Committee of the Regions believes that the proposed appropriation of EUR 2 million is too low. The programme is intended as a pilot programme, i.e. established for a period of two years running from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2002, in order to comply with other programmes managed by the Commission. The Committee of the Regions wonders whether the introductory phase of the programme will actually lead to an increase in overall support for crime prevention. Establishment of the Hippocrates programme could lead to other avenues for crime prevention support being cut off. Moreover, the sum set aside is low. Consequently, the Committee of the Regions does not believe that the programme will necessarily provide more resources during the first two years.

2.22. The Committee of the Regions would stress that it is extremely important to raise the profile of measures to combat crime other than organised crime. Otherwise 'everyday' crime will end up being overlooked.

2.23. The Committee of the Regions welcomes and supports the Hippocrates programme, and assumes the figure earmarked for the programme will be raised after the start-up phase.

Conclusions

2.24. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the proposed definitions of crime and crime prevention. It is important to apply the same definitions wholesale at national, regional and local level throughout the European Union.

2.25. The Committee of the Regions would stress that the subsidiarity principle must be taken into consideration in the implementation of the crime prevention strategy.

2.26. The Committee of the Regions endorses the declared objectives and proposed approach with a list of priority measures to focus initially on urban, juvenile and drug-related crime.

2.27. The Committee of the Regions would stress that a European crime prevention strategy must be built around an overall approach, and promote recourse to situational and social measures.

2.28. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the focus on cooperation between different policy areas.

2.29. The Committee of the Regions warmly welcomes the establishment of a European crime prevention network.

2.30. The Committee of the Regions endorses the proposal for the possible establishment of a crime prevention Internet site.

2.31. The Committee of the Regions welcomes and supports the establishment of the Hippocrates programme and assumes that measures to combat crime other than organised crime will be given a higher profile.

2.32. The Committee of the Regions assumes the figure earmarked for the programme will be raised after the start-up phase.

2.33. The Committee of the Regions would also stress the need for the funding programme to benefit the applicant countries.

Brussels, 13 June 2001.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Jos CHABERT
