The French Electronic Police Docket, a Little-Known Public Security Tool

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Introduction

Since the February 24, 1995 inaugural decree, the electronic police docket (main courante informatisée, or MCI, henceforth EPD), descendant of the time-honored paper version of the police docket (MC), has become an important tool in human resources management and action in urban communities for all French police stations. However, few studies have been made of this steering instrument for administrative and judicial policing, which now entirely structures the organization and resources of public security to the point where earlier management practices are no longer recognizable. The fact is that this tool is often wrongly viewed as merely counting complaints and grievances at police station desks. Now, as shown below, the present study reveals something different, and above all that the EPD has set in motion a mechanism modifying the structure and reshuffling power relations within local police bureaucracies. Indeed, the EPD has become a multipurpose tool, much coveted outside of police stations and not only by the upper echelons of public security for their sole interests. Above all, it tends to shift and recompose the power relations opposing the various public security services.

The official purpose of the EPD was reformulated in the June 22, 2011 decree that assigned it a fourfold mission: the purpose of the new EPD is to facilitate the processing of reports by the public and of events dealt with by police services so as to improve the efficiency of action; to facilitate the operational management of police services and their officers as well as to monitor evaluation of their work; to improve the quality of reception of the public ; to produce statistics on the activities of police services.

As to private parties who turn to police stations because they are victims or claimants, the "police docket" offers two possible responses to their needs: they may either lodge a formal complaint supposedly leading, theoretically, to subsequent legal action, or simply informally report on a problem without lodging a complaint, which report will be stored forever. For the Public Prosecutor's Office, police dockets generally remain a marginally useful source of information in reconstituting crimes and misdemeanors in view of subsequent action. They represent an "infra-penal police memory" on which it does little a posteriori checking, in spite of official recommendations. For the "police bureaucracy", on the other hand, on which our investigation chose to focus, it constitutes a managerial tool for standardizing the work of public security officers much more than a device for anticipating the local disturbances and adjusting police action to them.

The **input procedure** for quantifiable data breaks down reporting of events to the police into twelve categories: "dialing 17 (the emergency police number)"; other phone calls; requisitioning by private parties ; police officers' initiatives ; calls to the fire department ; calls from the gendarmerie ; calls from the medical emergency service (SAMU) ; calls from the city police ; calls from taxis ; remote alarms ; instructions from the upper echelons ; and statistical reports. The **reported events** listed for statistical processing are divided into 224 types of incidents broken down into 22 serviceable categories: accidents, alarms, discovery of corpses, conflicts, explosions, insanity, suicide and attempted suicide, lost and found objects, fires, crimes and misdemeanors, illness, nuisances and disturbances of the public order, material damage, morals offenses, wanted persons, alarms in public establishments, workplace accidents, alarms in private facilities, stolen vehicles, odd phone calls, operational activities, prevention-partnership-communication operations. Last, **reactions to the events** detected and recorded are listed in 7 broad categories of activities intended to improve management of the available human resources. Aside from non-availability of officers for various reasons, the roster of staff employability is broken down into traffic policing activities, general policing activities, assistance activities, administrative and investigation activities, operational support activities within the police facilities, and logistic support activities within policing facilities.

By transcending the old-fashioned view of the police docket as a mere register recording those everyday incidents of city life that are devoid of any criminal justice utility, this research threw new light on some unsuspected aspects of what is now an inescapable tool for implementing public security.

I – Everyday Functioning of Three Levels of Public Security

We will now attempt to elucidate the different ways in which officers adjust to the tool, depending on their hierarchical position within public security districts.

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Methods and Data

Fieldwork was conducted in 2013 and early 2014 outside of the Paris police district and focused on four locations with various perimeters. In the provinces, 7 officers were interviewed in MOTA [a public security district with a population of 25,000], 9 in VIGO [pop. 859,000], while in the outer Paris suburbs we interviewed 6 officers in RUMU [pop. 58,400] and 13 in CATI [pop. 53,000]. In each of these four public security districts investigated, I attempted to collect a sufficient number of accounts by officers drawn from representative strata of those found in the various police stations (on the département or district levels) who feed and use the docket on a daily basis. The 33 interviews, including questions on representations, uses and constraints involved in the EPD with respect to organization and actual work, provide a satisfactory approach to and control of an optimal diversity of police officers' practices

The EPD and "local pilots" in the département-level police

Local public security pilots (directors on the département level and district superintendents, commissioners or senior officers) all adhere to the Directorate's credo, out of necessity. The need for statistical quantification of all aspects of public security work offers a good opportunity to demonstrate their managerial capacity, which distinguishes them from the concerns of their subordinates. They are hardly interested in quantifying the difficulties experienced by the local population, nor is that a concern for local supervisors as opposed to département-level directors, for whom mastery of police communication on community problems is essential. Actually, the more the pilot heading the département-level organization chart plays a political role the further he is from everyday management, and the more he limits his horizon to the scoreboard and to various barometers, hardly paying any attention to the day-to-day management of operational resources on which he has little control. Conversely, the closer pilots are to the everyday supervision of their troops, the more sensitive they are to human resource factors and the more importance they attach to managing staff availability. In the course of this study, neither of these two types of 'pilots' ever claimed any decisive impact of their managerial "action" on the drop in local insecurity and offending. It is on the basis of their good management of teams by means of the EPD as well as on their talks and educational practices aimed at having each officer report on his action that they feel allowed to profess their excellent political mastery of the tool. With the exception of pilots in small districts, they are usually skeptical as to the efficiency of the tool, supposed to demonstrate an appreciable drop in local offending and insecurity. There is definitely a real desire to obtain corroboration of the short-term dissuasive impact of police action as a whole on some widespread offenses, but pilots generally doubt the value of feedback on satisfaction or trust regarding the action of the administrative and criminal police in general, even if the information is duly coded under the EPD headings.

The EPD and officers in charge of entering reportings and figures

The larger the police districts, the more extreme the division of labor, the more complicated and unrewarding are the tasks involved in the everyday management of human and material resources in both the information and command rooms (salles d'information et de commandement – SIC) and the orders and enforcement bureaus (bureaux d'ordre et d'exécution – BOE), and the more urgent it is to teach all officers to adjust to the requirements of the EPD. Those who manage that tool "teach" proper use of the instrument through which they supervise and organize medium and large-sized squads. They are generally torn between contradictory demands coming from the top and the bottom of

the hierarchy, and which constantly threaten to get out of their control. Some of these interface officers find the tension all the more untenable in that they are confronted with designers of a tool composed of increasingly refined, concise categories and headings, whereas the overall aim is to improve the functioning of the organization so as to modernize it and adjust it to the outside world. In fact, these people mostly feel that what they call their managerial work (daily planning of assignments, monitoring of time-sheets…) is criticized and depreciated. Patrolmen, required to fill out in detail the headings on how much time they spent on their various interventions and what they did, accuse them of incompetence in piloting the tool. They also resist the pressure and arbitrary orders from the central administration, intent on reaching uniform achievements from all police districts to enable comparisons, and which imposes civilian computer specialists who often design the EPD with no regard for local constraints. Last, the requirement that everyone adjust to the tool itself ends up being challenged by middle-level officers and the rank and file, who no longer always understand its goals. This accentuates the sense of a loss of collective work within those police districts where officers still value their autonomy in reacting to unexpected situations. The older officers, at least, express fear of an insidious attrition of solidarity within the institution, for which they are intensely nostalgic. It is only in small districts where professional and social interrelations are still solid and the staff tends to appreciate being less stressed by the demand for quantitative results that the potential offered by mastery of the tool is well, even enthusiastically accepted. The usual resistance to the perpetual adjustment it requires does not seem to be really paralyzing or insurmountable then.

The EPD and the rank and file and sergeants

Many interviews and observed attitudes show that the rank and file and sergeants (both young and older) develop real resistance to the need for training in and familiarity with the EPD, so as to feed it information on their daily work when returning from patrol. However, significant differences are seen between the different squads and when officers are transferred from one to another. Within the Urban Security Squads (Brigades de Sûreté Urbaine, or BSU) for instance, where there is less constraint to adjust to the EPD, some officers can afford the luxury of suggesting refinements for the tool, when they judge its categories, indexed on administrative and judiciary activities, overly standardized and stereotyped, so as to improve its accuracy and make it reflect the variety of their tasks.

Conversely, in the Public Security Units (Unités de sécurité publique, or USP), where work outside the police station must be reported in much greater detail, we found attitudes to diverge along rather unexpected lines. On the one hand, patrolmen and sergeants admit that the tool makes it easier to detect shirkers, which is a good thing since it equalizes the work load within squads, whereas on the other hand many USP officers feel a symbolic downgrading with respect to changes in the priorities assigned to the tool by the central offices. Now that people's differing ability to adjust to the constraints of computerization is a discriminating factor within their own units, "going for hoodlums" out of a taste for the hunt no longer seems to improve their standing as much. According to them, it is as if listing the possible responses to various events in the proper category is more important than measuring the impact of their action in response to those events. Few people respond as "good pupils", accepting the two political necessities, that of "reconquering the territory" and "adjustment to a protective, equalizing tool".

The job of receiving complaints at the police station desk is most often viewed as "punishment" by patrolmen (and even auxiliary officers) in the large and medium-sized districts. In the smaller units on the other hand, contact with the local community is still valued, since it shows the latter's trust in its police, an important symbolic function, important to cultivate.

Last, the EPD is an infinitely valuable qualitative and quantitative tool for the Public Prosecutor, since it relieves its Office of the need to deal with the infra- and pre-penal fallout of the mass of complaints judged by lower criminal courts (tribunaux de police), such as traffic cases. This too often unsuspected dimension remains absent from politicized debates on "numbers-based policing policies".

II – Effects on Police Services of Twenty-Five Years of Computerization of the Police Docket

We wondered how the institution itself judges the contribution of the "new" EPD, in comparison with the initial evaluations produced by a pioneering study conducted by the École des Mines in 1995, at the very start of police docket computerization. Is there progress? Regression? Actually, on the one hand this tool reflects a form of inter-subjective cohesion among officers constantly threatened by loss of meaning, so to speak, due to scattered missions. On the other hand, conventional criticism of the changes it induces in established public security practices is not so much aimed at the upper echelons. Rather, it has gradually become more horizontal, directed against the technicians who computerize action at all levels.

On the positive side, since the onset of computerization in 1995 and the extension of the EPD to all police services, entering data and using this tool for management and knowledge has become routine practice, to the point where it would be impossible for any police officer to imagine not encountering it at some point in his professional career.

Computerization has welded local public security officers together and produced a new way of life, more in step with the internal and external environment of the structure they inhabit. The EPD has redistributed some power relations within public security services by unofficially re-coordinating the action of officers who were usually unaware of each other. That is to say, it hybridized their various skills by creating more dependency and solidarity with respect to its modus operandi. The EPD has helped to reduce the symbolic frontier separating uniformed from plainclothes officers, which in the earlier mentality overlapped substantially with the split between "active" or "operational" field workers and "inactive" bureaucrats.

Even if it has demotivated many people, it has also shown how and why it is capable of remotivating them. In particular, it has enabled middle-level officers within SICs and BOEs to establish a type of legitimacy that lieutenants and captains had lost, by giving them an opportunity to specialize in a new role: monitoring and teaching of information input from squads to achieve better, more balanced management of human resources, more in phase with the various warning channels. All in all, the EPD has renewed the bonds between the interests of the rank and file and sergeants, against central management, and perhaps further slackened their internal hierarchical ties with the designer and managerial corps of commissioners and commandants. Above all, it has renewed those bonds, rightly or wrongly leagued against the power of computer programmers keen on rapid-fire technical innovations allegedly providing greater online comfort for the whole staff.

As for its relative failures, the EPD has shown the extent to which innovations whose goals have not all been assimilated by most local-level officers elicit resistance, not to say some forms of sabotage, as long as they have not been totally integrated by the entire personnel.

Above all, the EPD has failed to improve relations with the public, as was hoped, through day-to-day problem-solving practices involving the police's partners, for instance. It is a fact that resistance to revealing its quantitative and qualitative contents to a curious local public continues to be firmly anchored throughout the administration. The EPD has not yet given the impression of constituting a lever capable of deviating public security from its natural path, that of the post-war professional model aimed at maintaining law and order rather than preventing disorder. However trite this finding, it is compounded by two other contingent mechanisms tending to reinforce the historic trend toward self-isolation typical of public security agencies. First, the latter are stubbornly struggling to avoid the ascendancy of the Gendarmerie, in spite of a political context tending to encourage synergy between them. Second, they remain resolutely hostile to the curiosity of the justice system, which intends to make use of the EPD by taking over the information it produces on the complaints of victims and plaintiffs. The ministry of Justice intends to derive political benefits from the police's public security tool in its capacity of providing the Public Prosecutor's office with the identity of pre-delinquent 'troublemakers' and 'suspects' requiring surveillance, and not just revealing undecipherable 'weak signals' about "at-risk urban situations".

The Public Prosecutor's offices quite regularly complain about the declining quality of reports written by the new sergeants from the detective units in police stations, whereas some of these offices mean to retrieve control of the fields of family conflicts and urban disturbances in order to "better" 'criminalize' or 'civilianize' protagonists of these rapidly growing types of problems. In this context, the EPD has kindled new coveting in one sort of social service workers (social workers and psychologists) recently sent to police stations to form an opinion on the true nature of the demands of ambivalent victims. Their intrusion has gradually introduced a different division of social/policing labour. A novel source of knowledge and action develops then, based on the most open secrets, reinforcing intersections between recent, unexpected professional legitimacies among people-directed workers, and supported by a better collective evaluation of social suffering. For example, the EPD shows how to coordinate new, specific skills, thus reconciling the interests of workers whose entire history and identity had doomed them to mutual exclusion or ignorance.

III – How Public Security Agencies Deal with the Need for Statistics

The main concern of the Head Office for Public Security is presently to constantly refine the input of infra-penal statistical data so as to possess a solid base of national data, more accurate and more reliable than the one available since 2007, when technicians from the Observatoire National de la Délinquance et des Réponses Pénales - ONDRP issued their first broad statements. A close look at audits on the subject indicates that recommendations for technical improvements may not percolate rapidly into the practices of local actors, inasmuch as these diagnoses fail to analyze the slow collective assimilation of these tools by the personnel using them. It is important to mention these audits, but however accurate their diagnoses of defects may be, they are desperately lacking in realism as to possible remedies. Three recent examples clearly illustrate the real desire to improve the technicalities of the tool with no concern for its actual assimilation by the personnel.

In view of improved efficiency of police strategies for preventing street crime a White Book written by senior police and gendarmerie officials offers reflections on the evaluation of indicators representative of the action of police services and gendarmerie units. Possible objectives for evaluation of public security work are summarized as follows: capacity for initiative, frequency of detection, quality of procedures, presence on the streets, reactivity to calls from citizens, quality of intelligence, behaviour during interventions, reception at police stations or gendarmerie squads, relations with the public. To improve indicators of performance in these areas, this text explains that available statistics alone will never succeed in reflecting the functions involving contact/ protection of the most vulnerable groups, although these are described as particularly receptive when directly contacted. It nonetheless suggests the creation of an additional indicator of performance measuring the efforts of security forces as a valuable lever of communication for the authorities. And since partnerships require concrete implementation, and these forces cannot be everywhere, the need is seen for a collective problem-solving strategy. Thus, the tool receives a further vocation: to share infor-

mation based on a synthesis of trends inferred from the EPD based on the detection of signs heralding deterioration in the appearance of a neighbourhood, and to generalize follow-up as prescribed by the (2007) law on the prevention of crime.

In a more trenchant vein, an IGA (Inspectorate-General of the Administration) and IGPN (Inspectorate-General of the National Police) mission report in 2013 determined that the providential indicator of "actual presence on the ground" calculated using the EPD is stable but its reliability is highly questionable. It noted that from 2005 to 2011 the rate of involvement [on the ground] remained within a stable range of 38 to 41%, whereas interviews showed practices tending to impair the sincerity of the data recorded. The inspection seems to have found that the "stable overall annual trend" was a lie, and that converging evidence elicited the suspicion that rank and file producers of data had other, local goals. The mission believes that differences in input for some codes correspond more to the objectives of the administration than to the reality of activity, such as improper counting of some phases of activities. Another even more closely targeted two-volume report dated June 2013 studying the recording of complaints by national security forces conducted jointly by the INSEE (national statistical agency), the IGPN and the DGGN (Directorate-General of the Gendarmerie Nationale) constitutes another tangible sign of political changes since the arrival in office of the left, with its search for improved transparency of public security statistics. The report claims that complaints received must feed statistics on misdemeanours and crimes in the framework of the implementation of "new computerized environments", henceforth structured around two computer programs for drafting complaint procedures within the national gendarmerie (the LRPGN) and the national police (the LRPPN). Ten new recommended guidelines were sent to the two forces. The work of management controllers will now be confined to reducing the differences between data-collection tools in the two forces, each of which tended in the past to pursue its own recording habits, to the point where it was impossible to ground unified statistics on their work. Moreover, the DGPN and DGGN are requested to share methods for recording and monitoring data, to reinstate convergence between correlation tables used by the LRPPN and the LRPGN, to introduce a phase of validation of complaint-recording by senior officers, as well as to monitor the production line for complaint recording in Paris police stations and do random checks in those of Paris' inner suburbs. This inspection mission also did some statistical work, examining the evolution of ratios of reports by the public recorded in the EPD as compared with formal complaints. This led it to discover a considerable rise between 2005 and 2012 (from 7 to 13%) in the ratio of "agreement" in metropolitan France Viewing this figure still too low, the mission pointed to two possible interpretations of local differences in the many non-criminal reports in the EPD. Either staff became more accustomed to using the police docket because of more systematic recording of statements especially in small départements where there is less day-to-day pressure at the reception desk, or else an unintended consequence of the desire to be exhaustive: the ratio in itself does not necessarily reveal wilful dissimulation, but conversely, perhaps a desire to be exhaustive in the formal interpretation of the duties of receiving the public, according to the mission. In short, be it inertia in highly populated areas or excessive zeal in the less populous zones, the mission's diagnosis of how internal organizational pressure greatly affected the "quality" of data, much more so than the problems of people who had reasons to file complaints, was very much to the point... and proved, in writing, at least that it was receptive to the postulates of organisational sociology.

Last, along similar lines, the National Council of Cities examined the relations between "police and population" in a 2013 note on the need for a shift from a law and order-oriented police to one serving citizens. One of its suggestions for improving the "quality of police services" cites the need for improved consideration of victims and offenders by learning to communicate with them, which suggestion led it to formulate five recommendations on how to receive complaints: shorten the waiting period; if necessary, obtain assistance from associations or individual volunteers to help plaintiffs in translating and writing; provide informative material helping citizens in filing their grievance; encourage internet accessing from homes for reporting to the EPD, notifying losses or thefts, sending computerized letters of complaint (from shopkeepers) and requests for access to the car pound ; set up a system of personalized follow-up for mail sent to police services and affairs in process. In addition, a blueprint protocol was signed on January 31, 2014 between the ministry of Justice, the Directorate-General of the National Police and the Head Office for Public Security on the quantification of cases of "marital violence" by the EPD and reports by the Gendarmerie. This definitely shows the recent interest of ministry of Justice services for this source of quantification, previously viewed as lacking legitimacy.

In conclusion

Having completed our immersion, we hope to have shown how the computerized police docket, an underestimated but potentially polyvalent police tool, exemplifies the recycling of an old tool – the police docket – having survived the ups and downs of history and proved its adaptability to the necessities of the present. The expansion of its computerization and its interconnection with other databases has consistently been accompanied, anticipated or encouraged by fertile imaginings about its virtual aims and the diagnosis of its possible deviations. The old-fashioned paper dockets on which officers recorded complaints and their own field notes may be invaluable for historians of mentalities, but they are no longer appropriate otherwise. For the time being we can only wait for the development, within ad hoc forums, of calmer, less confiscated and better-informed democratic debate on the real policing and social potential of these tools, so that the hopes and fears of citizens as to their empowering potential or their threat to freedom will not be subject to lasting misunderstandings.

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