



# NOTE D'INFORMATION

n° 22.26 – July 2022

## Changes in the social mix of French lower secondary schools

- ▶ Lower secondary schools have very different social compositions, which is regularly described as a factor reinforcing educational inequalities. The level and components of segregation vary from one *département* to another, particularly in view of the degree of segregation between municipalities and neighbourhoods, the weight of the private sector and economic inequalities. At the national level, segregation between lower secondary schools varies little over time. Segregation among public schools is on a downward trend and the differences in social composition between the public and private sectors are increasing, with the private sector enrolling more and more students from privileged backgrounds. Since 2014, segregation has decreased significantly in around twenty *départements*, most of which are located in the North and West. Segregation between public schools has fallen there, and the gaps between the public and private sectors have not increased. Conversely, in about twenty *départements* located more in the southern half of the country, segregation has increased, with a marked rise in the gaps between the public and private sectors.

Ministry of National Education and Youth  
Director of publication: Fabienne Rosenwald  
Authors: Marine Guillerm, DEPP-B3 and Olivier Monso, DEPP-A  
Editor: Bernard Javet  
Layout: Frédéric Voiret  
e-ISSN 2431-7632

▶ Social segregation between schools is defined by the fact that schools enrol very different populations according to social background. It is regularly highlighted as a factor that reinforces educational inequalities. Indeed, the concentration of social difficulties in a school is detrimental to the success of the pupils who attend it, even if they generally benefit from additional teaching resources that make it possible to mitigate the effects of segregation. Segregation also raises an issue of national cohesion, insofar as it makes it more difficult for young people from different social backgrounds to meet. For these reasons, reducing segregation between schools, or improving social diversity, is part of the mission of the public education service. In 2015, a policy to promote social diversity in lower secondary schools (French *collèges*) was launched by the Ministry of Education. At the local level, decision-makers were encouraged to implement measures to promote social diversity in schools. These local authorities include the departmental councils (the French territory is divided into 101 *départements* which are territorial authorities and administrative districts), which are notably responsible for defining the school catchment areas - i.e. defining a public school (or sometimes several ones) for each address where a pupil lives. They

also include the departmental services of the Ministry of Education, which manage, in particular, requests from families for a waiver to enrol their children in a public school other than the assigned school. Experiments have been launched to identify the most effective policies for reducing social segregation. These policies correspond, depending on the case, to the relocation of schools, a change in the school zoning, or the enrichment of the educational offer of the most socially disadvantaged schools to make them more attractive to families. More recently, these policies have been given a new impetus, in particular to rebalance the distribution of grant holders between schools. The purpose of this *Note d'Information* is not to evaluate these actions, but to propose an overview of social segregation in lower secondary schools at the start of the 2021 school year, by updating the overview that the DEPP carried out at the start of the 2015 school year (see 'Further information') and describing the heterogeneity between *départements* in terms of the level of and changes in social segregation between schools. Indeed, the evolution of social segregation between schools is not only linked to educational policies, but also includes, for example, housing policies and the consequences of the geographical mobility of families.

### There are strong disparities in social composition of schools within and between the public and private sectors of education

Social background is taken into account here on the basis of the occupation of the pupil's custodial parent. At the start of the 2021 school year, the proportion of pupils who are children of workers or people not in work (disadvantaged backgrounds), which is 37.4% on the whole, is higher than 61.0% in one tenth of the most disadvantaged lower secondary schools and lower than 14.6% in one tenth of the most advantaged schools ↘ **figure 1**. Similarly, in one tenth of the schools, the proportion of children of teachers, managers, business owners with 10 or more employees or whose custodial parent has a liberal profession (very advantaged backgrounds), which is 23.9% of all students, is less than 6.6%, whereas it is more than 44.6% in one tenth of the most privileged schools. This segregation is partly linked to the existence of two educational sectors, the public and the private sector. Since the early 1980s, the private sector has been educating about one fifth of secondary school students (22% in 2021). These private lower secondary schools are largely Government-dependent (*collèges privés sous contrat*, 98% of pupils), which means that the curricula

## ➤ 1 Distribution of lower secondary schools by proportion of pupils from very advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, in 2021

	Sector	Average proportion (%)	1 <sup>st</sup> decile	1 <sup>st</sup> quartile	Median	3 <sup>rd</sup> quartile	9 <sup>th</sup> decile
Pupils from disadvantaged social backgrounds	Public	42.6	23.8	32.6	42.6	53.4	63.8
	Private	18.3	5.7	10.6	19.9	29.9	39.2
	All	37.4	14.6	25.7	37.8	49.8	61.0
Pupils from very advantaged social backgrounds	Public	19.5	5.8	9.7	15.2	23.6	34.5
	Private	40.1	12.8	18.8	29.4	46.0	63.9
	All	23.9	6.6	10.9	17.4	28.6	44.6

**Interpretation:** in 2021, 10% of public lower secondary schools have less than 23.8% of pupils from disadvantaged social backgrounds, and 10% have more than 63.8%. The proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in public schools, taken as a whole, is 42.6%.

**Scope:** Metropolitan France + the French overseas departments, public and Government-dependent private sectors.

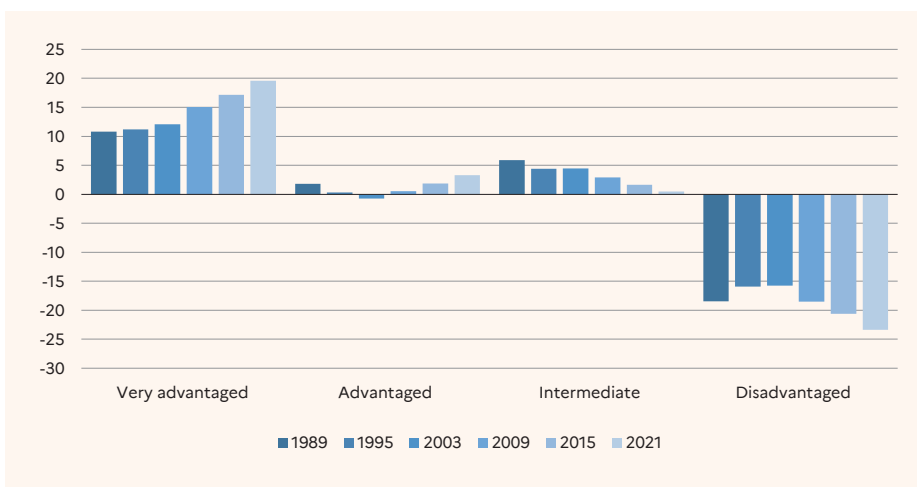
**Source:** DEPP, *Scolarité* Information System.

Réf. : *Note d'Information*, n° 22.26. DEPP

and timetables are the same as in the public sector, and their funding is mainly provided by the State (which pays the teachers) and the local authorities. They are not subject to the school zoning and have some leeway in defining their educational offer. They are mainly chosen by socially advantaged families. At the start of the 2021 school year, 40.1% of pupils in the Government-dependent private sector are from a very advantaged social background, compared with 19.5% in the public sector. Conversely, 18.3% of pupils in the Government-dependent private sector are from a disadvantaged background compared with 42.6% of pupils in the public sector. If we restrict ourselves to pupils entering sixth grade, for which long-term data are available, the proportion of pupils from very advantaged social backgrounds was already 11 points higher in private schools than in public schools in 1989. This gap remained fairly stable during the 1990s, then increased sharply from the early 2000s, reaching 20 points in 2021. The gap in the proportion of pupils from a disadvantaged

social background also widened: it was 16 points for students entering sixth grade in 2003, then rose to 23 points in 2021 ➤ **figure 2**. Segregation also arises from differences in the social composition of schools within each of the public and private sectors. These differences are partly linked to urban segregation. Particularly in large urban areas, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in certain residential areas. Part of the segregation is therefore due to the location of lower secondary schools in areas with a more or less advantaged social composition. For public schools, the link is made through the school zoning. The social composition of private schools, even if they do not belong to the school zoning system, is also influenced by their location. These schools can also specialise and direct their intake towards a certain student profile. Some private schools will, for example, train a social and academic elite, while others will specialise in providing support for pupils with learning difficulties.

## ➤ 2 Change in the differences in social composition between pupils enrolled in private and public schools among those entering the sixth grade, in percent points



**Interpretation:** among secondary school pupils who entered the sixth grade in 1989, the proportion of pupils from very advantaged backgrounds was 10.8 points higher in private lower secondary schools than in public lower secondary schools.

**Scope:** lower secondary school pupils entering the sixth grade in the public and Government-dependent private sectors, metropolitan France, excluding children whose custodial parent is retired.

**Source:** DEPP, 1989 and 1995 Sixth Grade Cohort Longitudinal Studies; *Scolarité* Information System.

Réf. : *Note d'Information*, n° 22.26. DEPP

For these reasons, there are also large differences between private schools. In particular, while one tenth of these schools enrol only a small proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (less than 5.7%), one tenth enrol at least 39.2 %, which is about the average proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds ➤ **figure 1**.

## How to measure social segregation?

The segregation indices aim to measure the disparities between lower secondary schools in a synthetic way. They allow for the comparison of disparities between lower secondary schools from one territory to another, and over time. Generally speaking, every measure of segregation is relative to a given territory, for example a *département*, an *académie* (main administrative district of the ministries in charge of school and higher education), or the national level. In the case of social segregation between schools in a given territory, the social composition of each school is compared with the social composition of all the pupils in that territory. A high level of segregation indicates that schools tend to deviate significantly from the average social composition in the area, and are therefore very different from one another.

The differences in social composition between schools are measured here by an indicator of segregation, the entropy index. This indicator varies between 0 and 1. When it is high (close to 1), this means that the social gaps between schools are very large and that within each school the diversity of social backgrounds is rather low; when the indicator is low (close to 0), this indicates that the social gaps between schools are smaller and that the social composition of each school is close to the social composition of all lower secondary school students in the area under consideration. We can then say that there is a greater social mix between the schools.

Segregation between secondary schools is driven by these three components: disparity between public secondary schools, disparity between private secondary schools, and finally the gap in social composition between the public and private sectors. For each of these components, it is possible to calculate its contribution to the overall segregation. In 2021, 55% of the value of the entropy index for lower secondary schools can be linked to the differences in social composition between public schools, 22% to the segregation between private schools and 23% to the differences in social composition between public and private sectors.

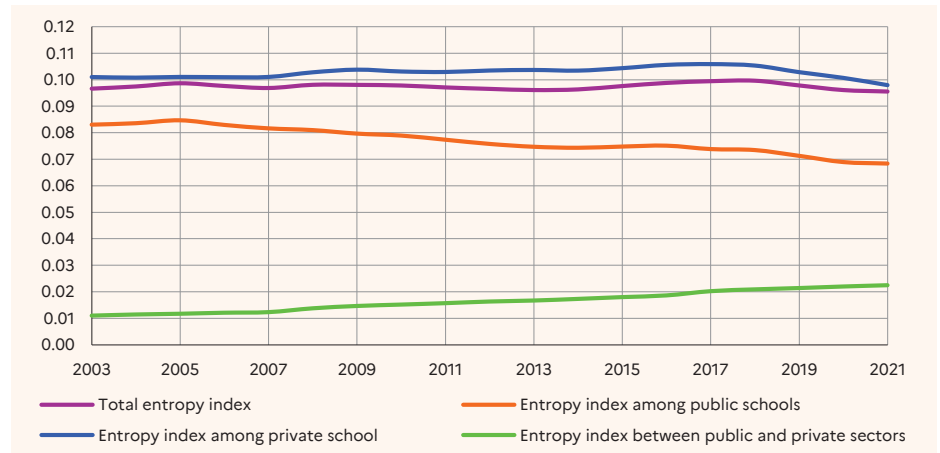
## Segregation is stable at the national level, but the gap between public and private sectors has widened

At the national level, social segregation between lower secondary schools has changed relatively little between 2003 and 2021, although there was a slight increase between 2013 and 2018 and a slight decrease since then [↘ figure 3](#). The change in the overall segregation is mainly due to two components: segregation among public schools, which follows a downward trend, more pronounced from 2018 onwards, after a period of stagnation; and the differences in social composition between the public and private sectors, which are increasing, with the private sector enrolling more and more students from advantaged backgrounds. The heterogeneity of the social composition of private schools varied less markedly, but remained greater than that of public schools over the whole period. In the end, the stability of the level of segregation for all schools masks more marked changes when the index is broken down according to the public and private sectors.

## The level and components of segregation are linked to the social and educational context of the départements

This national situation is, however, an aggregation of different territorial situations. Segregation is stronger in the most urban départements. In metropolitan France, the segregation index reaches its highest values in the Hauts-de-Seine, Paris and the Bouches-du-Rhône. Indeed, the three components of segregation tend to be higher when the degree of urbanisation is greater. Firstly, in these départements, residential segregation is stronger, which is reflected in the social composition of public and private secondary schools. Secondly, the proximity and number of schools exacerbate competition between institutions and may encourage families to avoid the local secondary school, mainly by attending a private school. These choices are mainly made by socially advantaged families and tend to increase segregation. As at the national level, the heterogeneity among private lower secondary schools is higher than among public secondary schools in six départements out of ten. This is particularly the case for the départements in the west of France. For some of them, this observation can be linked to a stronger presence of private education, which is also more differentiated (see 'Further information' - Figure 5). Conversely, in four out of ten départements, the social composition of

### ↘ 3 Evolution of the entropy index among all lower secondary schools, within public and private lower secondary schools, and between public and private sectors, between 2003 and 2021



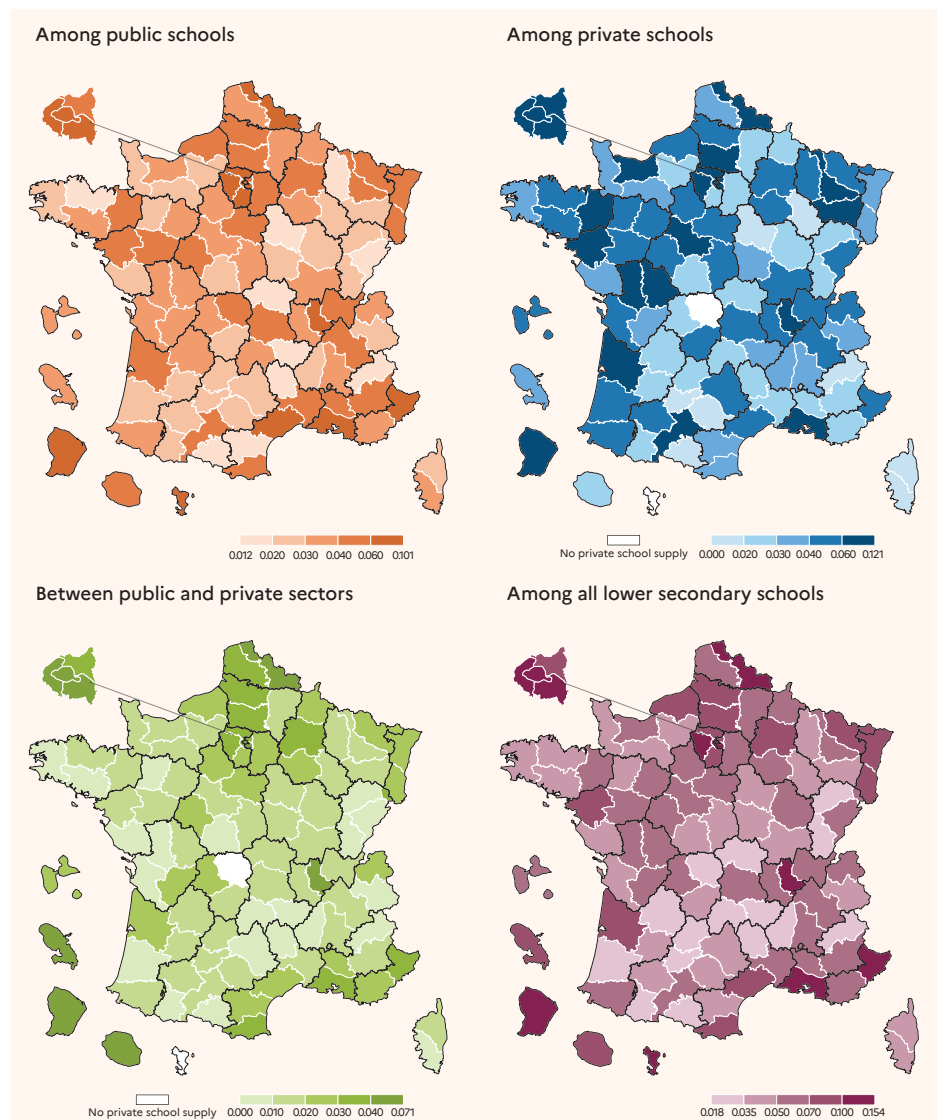
**Interpretation:** in 2003, for all lower secondary schools in metropolitan France and the French overseas departments, the entropy index, which summarises the disparities in social composition between lower secondary schools, was 0.0967. These disparities are the result of three components: disparities between public lower secondary schools, which are summarised by the corresponding index (0.0830); disparities between private lower secondary schools (entropy index of 0.1010); and finally, the differences in social composition between the public and private sectors, summarised by the entropy index between sectors (0.0110). In this graph, the sum of the three components is not equal to the overall entropy index because the components relating to public and private lower secondary schools are assigned a weight, which depends on the proportion of pupils enrolled in public and private lower secondary schools.

**Scope:** lower secondary schools in the public and Government-dependent private sectors, metropolitan France + the French overseas departments.

**Source:** DEPP, *Scolarité* Information System.

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.26. DEPP

### ↘ 4 Entropy index of lower secondary schools by département, in 2021



**Scope:** lower secondary schools in the public and Government-dependent private sectors, metropolitan France + the French overseas departments.

**Source:** DEPP, *Scolarité* Information System.

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.26. DEPP

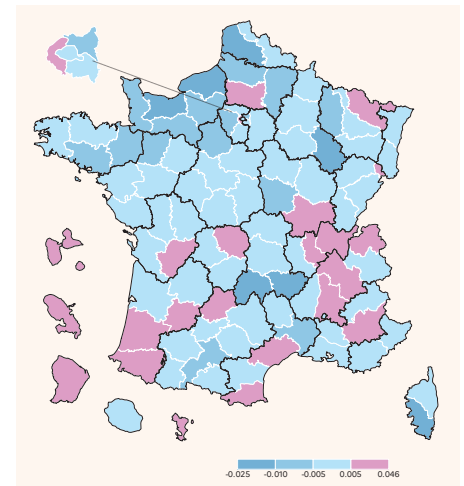
public schools is more heterogeneous, particularly in Alsace and in south-eastern France.

The differences in social composition between the public and private sectors are significant in the *départements* of the Paris Basin, in the southern Mediterranean and in the overseas *départements* (excluding Mayotte, where private secondary schools are not Government-dependent and therefore outside the scope of this study). These large differences concern both *départements* where the private sector enrolls a large proportion of pupils (such as Paris, the Nord and the Rhône) and others where it is less present than the national average (the French overseas departments, Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne). In general, these are *départements* that are characterised either by a high degree of economic inequality or by a high poverty rate. The presence of very disadvantaged areas and schools probably encourages socially advantaged families to choose private schools as an alternative to the local school more often than in other *départements*. Conversely, in other *départements*, the private sector is close to the public sector in terms of the social composition of the pupils it enrolls. This includes some rather rural *départements* where the private sector supply is very limited. However, it also includes the north-western quarter of France and the southern part of the Massif Central where the private sector is strongly established.

### Disparate trends in segregation between *départements*

Between 2014 and 2021, for half of the *départements*, segregation changed little, as it did at the national level ↘ figure 6. In around twenty *départements*, segregation has decreased more significantly (a drop of more than 0.005). These *départements* are mainly located in the north and west of the Metropolitan France. Segregation between public lower secondary schools has fallen, on average, and the gaps in social composition between the public and private sectors have not increased, or have even decreased in some *départements* ↘ figure 7. Conversely, in about twenty *départements*, segregation increased, with a marked rise in the differences in social composition between the public and private sectors. These *départements* tend to be located in the southern half of France. Thus, the changes in segregation does not follow the same trends from one *département* to another. These differences could reflect more or less active policies in terms of increasing social mix, but also differences in the role of the private sector, or in the demographic context. For example, migration of families can reinforce or weaken social segregation between schools through residential segregation. Over this period, 6% to 7% of lower secondary school pupils changed their commune of residence from one year to the next. ■

### ↘ 6 Change in entropy index between 2014 and 2021

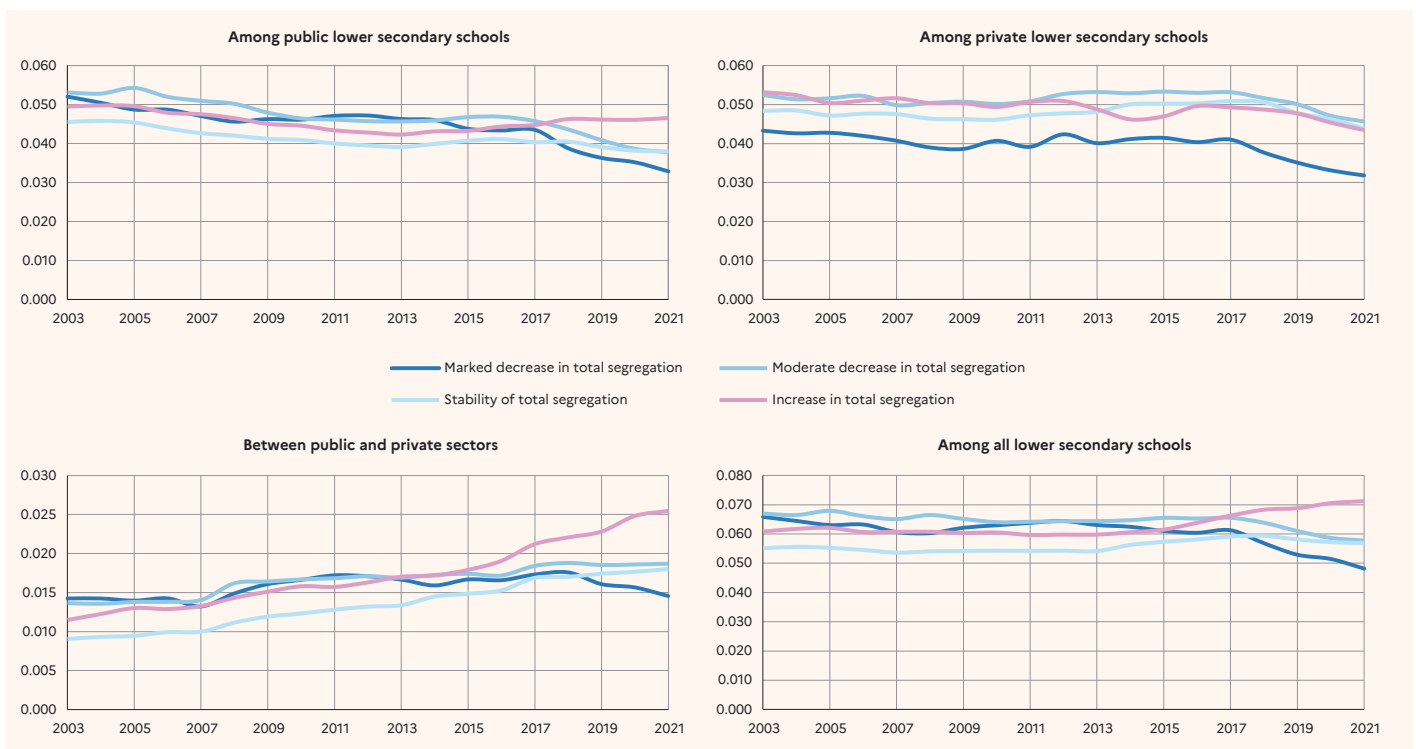


**Scope:** secondary schools in the public and Government-dependent private sectors, metropolitan France + the French overseas departments.  
**Source:** DEPP, Sclarité Information System.  
 Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.26. DEPP

**FIND OUT MORE**

You can access this *Note d'Information* 22.26, the figures and additional data on [education.gouv.fr/statistics](https://education.gouv.fr/statistics)

### ↘ 7 Changes in segregation in four groups of *départements*, 2003-2021



**Note:** the four groups of *départements* correspond to the four classes distinguished in Figure 6, following the change of the segregation index among all lower secondary schools between 2014 and 2021.  
**Scope:** lower secondary schools in the public and Government-dependent private sectors, metropolitan France + the French overseas departments.  
**Source:** DEPP, Sclarité Information System.

Ref. : Note d'Information, n° 22.26. DEPP