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Crime prevention volunteering in Japan: Japanese citizens' contribution to low crime rates

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1. Introduction

Japanese crime rates are, and have been for decades, among the lowest in the industrialized world (Ministry of Justice, 1964–2016). Be that as it may, in the past 10 years the number of volunteers involved in crime prevention has risen from around 200.000 to almost 3.000.000 (National Police Agency, 2016). Many of these volunteers accompany children going to school; others regularly “inspect dangerous places.” The most popular activity, however, is that of patrolling the neighborhood (National Police Agency, 2016). These volunteers’ activities come on top of growing numbers of volunteers involved in helping ex-convicts and juvenile delinquents reintegrate into society. This is a remarkable development not only in view of its unparalleled scale but also in view of the fact that in Japan, like in many other industrialized countries, “public demand” has in recent years lead to harsher sentences for criminals, and more public attention to the needs of victims rather than criminals (Miyazawa, 2008; Hamai and Ellis, 2006; Herber, 2017).

Why have so many Japanese people come to spend their free time trying to prevent crime in a country already famous for its safe streets and low crime rates (Leonardsen, 2004), and what is triggering so many to volunteer to help former criminals? Moreover, what is the impact of such *crime prevention and reintegration volunteering* on crime rates, local communities and Japanese society at large? These are some of the questions addressed by the participants in two conference sessions held at the 2015 annual meeting of the Asian Criminological Society.

These participants included academics and government officials as well as volunteers involved in the study, organization and practice of crime prevention volunteering in Japan. Three perspectives on crime prevention volunteering were therefore represented: (1) the governance perspective of those involved in its organization; (2) the practitioners’ perspective of those participating, and (3) the academic perspective of those conducting academic research on crime prevention volunteering activities.

On the basis of these contrasting perspectives the sessions addressed the development and social organization of crime prevention volunteering as well as its effects in terms of crime prevention and its impact on the typically urban social environment in which the activities take place. Participants in addition identified some of the issues that crime prevention volunteering is facing within the context of Japan's ageing society.

This special issue contains five articles on crime prevention volunteering that were written on the basis of five selected session presentations. In this introduction I will briefly go over these five articles and how they relate to the questions raised earlier, as well as the significance of these articles for debates on crime prevention volunteering.

2. Crime prevention volunteering

As a starting point for this special issue, my own article presents a contextualization of crime prevention volunteering in Japan that may benefit those unfamiliar with the Japanese setting.] As part of my aim to explain how the recent Japanese crime prevention volunteering boom came about, I highlight first of all that volunteering activities are typically organized within the framework of

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local Neighborhood Associations (NHAs). These NHAs are voluntary groups whose members live in the same residential area, and whose various activities are also focused on that same area (Pekkanen, 2006). NHA members' activities include helping to keep the neighborhood clean and organizing local events such as festivals or fairs as well as activities related to fire prevention. The NHAs have a long history of being involved in the organization of such activities, often in close connection with the local government.

Important to realize here is that the enormous surge in crime prevention volunteering activities witnessed since 2003 has to an important extent been the result of efforts undertaken by the Japanese police in cooperation with local governments. Together they have succeeded in mobilizing NHA leaders to form or revive crime prevention volunteering groups, providing these groups with principles and know-how as well as material equipment for crime prevention. The efforts undertaken by the police as well as local governments should, however, also be seen as part of more general efforts aimed at bringing about an environment in which people can lead healthy lives and also *feel* safe and secure. Police efforts to promote crime prevention volunteering are thus also directed at such feelings, and people's anxieties about crime cause them to be especially receptive to these efforts.

Volunteers' self-representation of their volunteering activities, the second theme I address, also reflects the duality in volunteers' understandings of their activities. Volunteers portray crime as immutably threatening yet effectively impacted by their crime prevention activities, and these activities serve the parallel function of helping volunteers themselves lead more active, social lives in an environment where they can feel secure - thanks also to the increasing numbers of CCTV camera's, that volunteer groups pay to have installed in their neighborhoods, and the neighborhood's ever watchful eyes.

What should be noted here is that the people talking and talked about here are mostly elderly people, and that the Japanese crime prevention volunteering boom is in different ways linked to the ageing of Japanese society. This dimension receives more extensive attention in the second article by Kimihiro Hino, in which he calls attention to the fact that the majority of crime prevention volunteers are men in their late seventies, something which according to Hino is largely a reflection of the fact that 26.7% of the Japanese population is aged 65 or older (Cabinet Office, 2016).¹

Hino further notes that the National Police Agency has tried various recruitment programs to involve younger people in crime prevention activities, but that these have not been successful. Since many of the volunteering men will gradually lose the physical strength necessary for their volunteering activities, crime prevention volunteering could very well be on the edge of a sudden decrease, as the current, already overburdened younger generations are reluctant to take over the activities of their seniors.

Given this situation, Hino explores a new approach to crime prevention volunteering called *Plus Bouhan* ("Plus Crime Prevention"). Under this approach the aim is to add a crime prevention aspect to people's daily activities, allowing for a diversification of crime prevention volunteers' profile. One such activity studied by Hino was that of walking and jogging at times and places convenient to each volunteer, where the added crime prevention aspect was that of "increasing the number of eyes in communities." When the participating volunteers are on "Jog Patrol," they wear bibs with the phrase "mite iru yo," that translates both as a warning: "we are watching you" as well as a reassurance: "we are watching over you." Hino's research shows, among other things, that 97% of those on "Jog Patrol" became more "safety aware," that 43% changed their route or schedule with crime prevention in mind, and that the patrols allowed for increased communication among local residents as well as an increased sense of community.

A common theme in Hino's article as well as my own is thus how crime prevention volunteering allows for increased social interaction between neighborhood residents. Much in line with this theme, in the third article Anna Matsukawa and Shigeo Tatsuki investigate the connections between crime prevention volunteering and social capital, defined as "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000: 308). In an earlier study, Tatsuki examined the connections between social capital and community safety and security in the city of Kobe over a period spanning more than 10 years. Using structural equation model (SEM) analysis, Tatsuki established five factors that affect the amount of social capital and also explained how the amount of social capital affects incivility, which in turn influences the number of arson incidents, crime risk, and fear for crime (2008; cf. also Matsukawa and Tatsuki, 2011).

Following up on this research, Matsukawa and Tatsuki surveyed neighborhood associations in Kyoto to confirm the validity of their Kobe model and explain how specific community resident efforts such as crime prevention volunteering can enrich social capital. Social capital in turn not only reduces the fear of crime, but also increases community livability for both elders and children. They further found a crime reducing effect of social capital that was significant for street crime but not for burglary. This, they argue, suggests that there are more significant variables for burglary, and that their study may be improved with a consideration of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) variables. Matsukawa and Tatsuki's research thus helps us think about the possibility of universal community empowerment methodologies that can contribute to the prevention of crime as well as community members' sense of security.

3. Reintegration volunteering

The three articles discussed in the previous section all address volunteering citizens' efforts to prevent crime from occurring in their neighborhood. In the remaining two articles, Satoshi Minoura and Fumiko Akashi address a different form of volunteering, one that aims to prevent the reoccurring of crime by supporting former convicts' and juvenile delinquents' reintegration. Such support is provided especially by Volunteer Probation Officers (VPOs). As Akashi notes, VPOs are community volunteers, recruited from among the general public, who are appointed as part-time government officials. Their main duty is to supervise and assist offenders in the

¹ This is a percentage markedly higher than that of other industrialized countries such as the United States (14.8%), United Kingdom (17.8%) and France (19.1%) (Cabinet Office, 2016).

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