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Crime prevention through community empowerment: An empirical study of social capital in Kyoto, Japan

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ABSTRACT

Crime prevention activities led by neighborhood associations are common throughout Japan and exemplify the idea in environmental criminology that communities can be kept safe by residents themselves. In this study, we surveyed neighborhood associations in Kyoto to test a theoretical model for social capital and community based crime prevention that we developed as part of our earlier work in Kobe. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) based on survey data and police records for street crimes and residential burglary suggest that specific efforts by community residents can enrich social capital and lead to community safety and security both subjectively and objectively. Social capital had a significant effect on the reduction of street crime, although not for burglary, and our findings suggest that social capital reduces the fear of crime and increases a sense well-being for families and seniors. Although these well-being measures are subjective, emotional change is important in a context where there is no association between actual crime rates and fear of crime. Our research may offer practical insights for the development of universal methodologies that can contribute to the prevention of crime and sense of security through community empowerment.

1. Introduction

The field of study dubbed by Paul J. and Patricia L. Brantingham as ‘environmental criminology’ assumes that “criminal events must be understood as confluences of offenders, victims or criminal targets, and laws in specific settings at particular times and places (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1991).” Understanding crime as a product of environment naturally suggests that crime may be prevented and controlled. Paul Brantingham and Frederic Faust compare this idea to immunology and public health (Brantingham and Faust, 1976). Primary prevention aims to prevent disease or injury from occurring by maintaining a healthier population and avoiding unhealthy behavior. Secondary prevention aims to reduce the impact of a disease or injury by treating it as soon as possible, and tertiary prevention aims to soften the impact of an ongoing illness or injury through rehabilitation and livelihood support. From a criminology perspective then, primary prevention aims to prevent crime from occurring by creating and maintaining safe environments, secondary prevention aims to address incivilities and deviances before they lead to criminal activities, and tertiary prevention aims to rehabilitate offenders through punishment, correction, probation, parole, and community support.

In this article, we focus on the idea of primary prevention in the form of community empowerment through neighborhood associations. Specifically, we investigate the plausibility of a universal model for community based crime prevention by testing findings from our empirical studies of neighborhood associations in Kobe and Kyoto. After providing some background on

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neighborhood associations in Japan, we present a literature review of social capital and crime prevention theory and describe findings from our ten year research project in Kobe on how social capital and community empowerment relate to prevention of crime and a sense of security. We then compare these findings against similar survey data we gathered in Kyoto in 2015 and conclude with a discussion on applications in practice.

2. Neighborhood associations in Japan

In Japan, neighborhood associations are called *chonaikai* (町内会) or *jichikai* (自治会). In Japanese, *chonaikai* (町内) means ‘inside community,’ *jichi* (自治) means ‘autonomy,’ and *kai* (会) means association. The origins of these associations reach back 1000 years ago to collectives called *yui* (結), in which members helped each other with agricultural work. The role of the *yui* evolved to help members negotiate advantageous agreements with feudal lieges, and such associations came to be called *sou* (惣). As towns developed over the centuries, tradesmen and craftsmen began to organize locally in *cho* (町) protect themselves from meaningless violence from samurai or uprisings by farmers. The *cho* then became a local administrative unit that the government used to its benefit for the collection of taxes and military conscription during the Azuchi-Momoyama (1573–1603) and Edo (1603–1868) periods. Likewise, *chonaikai* (町内会) and *jichikai* (自治会) were formalized and used by the military government leading up to World War II. They also played important roles in everyday life as well and served as the social foundation for marriages,¹ funerals and many other kinds of ceremonies and annual events.² Although *chonaikai* and *jichikai* were dismantled by the GHQ after World War II, residents retained their associations and simply used other names such as the Japan Red Cross Voluntary Group, Education Association, or Cultural Affairs Committee. *Chonaikai* and *jichikai* were allowed again after the Potsdam Declaration, but their connection with local government was weakened (Iwasaki et al., 1989).

Today, *chonaikai* in urban areas are organized from several *kumi* (組) or *han* (班) which contain five to ten households. There are several *chonaikai* inside each elementary school district and they generally organize into *rengo-chonaikai* (連合町内会) or *rengo-jichikai* (連合自治会) (Fig. 1). Usually the *rengo-chonaikai* is equivalent to the area covered by the local elementary school district. The elementary school district is the primary unit for community activities such as intersectional games, and the local elementary school is usually the emergency evacuation site designated by the municipal government for residents in the school district. For these reasons, Japanese people generally identify their community as their elementary school district (Hayashi, 2005).

Rengo-chonaikai manage most community activities such as annual festivals, community care for elders and children, community *bosai* (防災) disaster reduction and mitigation, and community *bohan* (防犯) crime prevention. The vitality and organization of *chonaikai* varies considerably from one region to another, but usually the *rengo-chonaikai* consists of a leader and sub leader, and sub groups for women *fujinkai* (婦人会), safety and security, environmental health, youth, and so on. The *fujinkai* watches over elders and children under the local welfare commissioners, the safety and security group patrols the community for crime and fire prevention and manages emergency evacuation drills, the environmental health group conducts cleanup activities with residents, and youth groups take charge of physical work and play active roles in community events and festivals. Committee members usually serve one or two years.

Participation in the neighborhood association is arbitrary. Participation rates have declined year by year because of the declining birthrate and aging society in Japan. The board members of neighborhood associations are usually elder men in their 60s and 70s. Spurred by high economic growth, most people now work in urban areas and commute from cities and towns that they do not spend much time in. Younger, working generations have little connection to the neighborhoods in which they live. In the past, this problem was covered by young housewives who were expected to join the local *fujinkai* and support community activities. Recently, however, the *fujinkai* has become much smaller and less significant as younger generations are forced to work to maintain household budgets.

Another problem contributing to declining membership is the impression among younger generations that the burdens outweigh the benefits. Members must pay dues (to cover basic operational cost for association) and may sometimes be required to staff community events and festivals. They might also have to serve as a committee member or group leader, which entails a significant commitment of time and energy especially as local government assign more and more social welfare and risk management tasks to neighborhood associations. For example, a city's urban policy division may ask the neighborhood association to conduct more children's safety patrols while the crisis management and disaster prevention division may ask the neighborhood association to conduct programs for disaster prevention and mitigation. The same group of people in the neighborhood associations tends to take on the burden of these responsibilities. Many younger people also do not want to have to socialize with neighbors, especially association members. Some associations are in fact very exclusive and keep new residents out and call them strangers. Some associations even ask for membership fees as high as USD2,000.³ On the other side of the coin, association members see non-members as freeloaders who do not appreciate what the neighborhood association does for the community. In Kobe, for example, association members keep

¹ Marriage and wedding customs are changing and many Japanese couples choose to celebrate in wedding halls, churches or shrines. Not too long ago, however, weddings were held in the home of the bride or groom, and the marriage was not so much a union between man and wife, but a union between *ie* (家), or families. Feudalism (Japanese Feudalism is not same as European Feudalism and discussions are still continuing on the timing and type of establishment) and Confucianism culture dictated that marriages be arranged by parents, relatives and landlords. Landlords were expected to watch over young residents as parents. These ideas have weakened but some customs still remain.

² There are many types of annual events in Japanese community and their derivation, style, and timing are varied by region and those details are beyond the objective of this article. The main point in here is these events run by *Chonaikai* and *Jichikai*.

³ In some associations, especially in rural areas where most old residents are farmers, members pay for construction and maintenance of roads, ditches and other infrastructure over many years. In the interest of fairness, the association wants new residents to bear reasonably equivalent expenses. New residents, however, do not understand why the association considers USD 2000 to be a reasonable fee.

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