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Crime prevention in Japan orchestration, representation and impact of a volunteering boom

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ABSTRACT

In the past 13 years, Japan has been experiencing a boom in volunteering activities aimed at crime prevention; as close to 3,000,000 Japanese citizens have involved themselves in volunteering activities with this aim. This article firstly examines how such a boom has come about. It secondly addresses the ways in which volunteers represent their own activities and their reasons for engaging in and continuing with these activities. The article finally addresses the impact of volunteering activities on the neighborhoods in which they are undertaken, as well as implications of article findings for discussions on neighborhood watch programs in non-Japanese contexts. This article is based on participant observation, interviews with and material produced by members of three volunteering groups as well as members of local governments and the police.

The crime prevention volunteering boom has been largely conceptualized and orchestrated by the Japanese police in close cooperation with the local government and neighborhood associations. Volunteers' activities are as a result informed and influenced by criminological theories, concepts and research, while also embedded in more general (local) government "town building" efforts aimed at creating a living environment in which people can lead healthy lives while feeling safe and secure. Volunteers phrased their motivation in terms of both such town building idea(l)s and the threat of crime. They represented crime as existing outside of the neighborhood, and as both effectively impacted by volunteering activities and immutably threatening. While the impact of volunteering activities on crime rates is difficult to assess, these activities in any case provide opportunities for increased social interaction and physical activity, while also resulting in spaces in which the neighborhood's eyes are always watching.

1. Introduction

Crime prevention has for a long time been part of the volunteering activities that Japanese citizens engage in within their neighborhoods. Many people, especially middle aged and elderly, are involved in some sort of volunteering activity either within or outside of the framework of the neighborhood association that most households are a member of [Pekkanen \(2006\)](#). Neighborhood associations (NHAs) are "voluntary groups whose membership is drawn from [a] small, geographically delimited, and exclusive residential area (a neighborhood) and whose activities are multiple and are centered on that same area" ([Pekkanen, 2006](#)). As part of their membership many citizens may be regularly helping to keep the neighborhood clean, or are involved in the organization of local events; they may be active in a Parent Teacher Association (PTA), or take turns as the person responsible for neighborhood fire prevention ([Nakano, 2005](#)). Or they may be trying to prevent crime.

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While crime prevention volunteering has a history that long predates the year 2000, the number of people taking part in such volunteering has in the past decades risen explosively. In 2003, 177,831 people were registered as crime prevention volunteers; by 2016 that number had risen to 2,758,659 people. 45.7% of these on average engage in volunteering activities more than 10 days per month, 38.7% do so 2–9 days per month, and another 14.1% one day per month. Many groups (75.1%) accompany children going to school. 41.3% regularly “inspect dangerous places.” The most popular activity that most groups (79.2%) organize most frequently, however, is that of patrolling the neighborhood (National Police Agency, 2016). In many neighborhoods in both big and small cities in Japan one can regularly see small groups of people walking around the neighborhood wearing the same kinds of fluorescent jackets and caps, waving light saber-like batons, clapping little wooden sticks and using megaphones to alert people to the lurking threat of crime.

The phenomenon of crime prevention volunteering has provoked a growing body of publications, especially in Japanese. By comparison, studies on crime prevention volunteering in English are still few and far between. I will here briefly go over the main directions and developments in crime prevention volunteering research so as to clarify what has and what has not been addressed, and identify what aspects of crime prevention volunteering this article will accordingly focus on.

Much information in Japanese has been made public through reports compiled by researchers often working in collaboration with local, prefectural and national governments and the police. Focus in these publications has typically been on determining the profile of volunteering groups and their activities (National Police Agency, 2015; Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2011; Iwamoto, 2005). The police and local governments in addition make a wealth of similar information on crime prevention volunteering groups available through different websites.¹ On the basis of these sources we know not only how often groups engage in what type of activities, we also know that the majority of crime prevention volunteers nationwide are older than 60 and that in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, a little over half of them are men.

Another aspect of crime prevention volunteering addressed especially in (local) government research concerns the reasons why people take part in such volunteering activities. Locally conducted surveys, based on multiple choice questions, show that most people participate in order to make their neighborhood safer; other reasons include getting in touch with and meeting (new) people in the neighborhood as well as concern about crime (National Police Agency, 2015; Sakamoto and Nakai, 2007; Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2011; Yoshinaka, 2006). There is still little research that brings into focus volunteers' motives as formulated by these volunteers themselves. An exception, however, is Nakano's book on community volunteers, which also addresses volunteering activities aimed at juvenile delinquency prevention (2005). Nakano shows how participation in volunteering activities is closely connected to issues of local social hierarchy and gender. Activities may allow some participants to assert the authority they seek, while others may participate because, for different reasons, they feel that participation is expected from them. It should be noted, however, that Nakano's fieldwork dates from 1993 to 1999 and accordingly ended when the crime prevention volunteering boom started. When it comes to present day volunteers' reasons for participating, the picture is in any case incomplete. On top of the findings discussed here, we do know that participation is very much determined by how much a person was already involved in organizational activities in the neighborhood (for men) as well as the number of school-age children and contact with neighbors (for women) (Takahashi, 2010).

With regard to the social dimension of crime prevention volunteering, the connections between volunteering activities and social capital have also been addressed. Different researchers have noted that such activities are conducive to increased neighborhood social capital and that those organizing the activities in fact do so in a conscious effort to increase such social capital (Herber, 2014; Takagi et al., 2012, 2015).

Besides their impact in social capital terms, an important theme in crime prevention volunteering research concerns the effects of volunteering on participants' fear and perceptions of crime. Based on a large scale survey, Shimada et al. have noted in this regard that aspects of crime prevention volunteering lead to a high perceived risk of crime and low residential satisfaction among participants (2010). Looking for factors that more generally affect people's (not just volunteers') fear of crime, Sasaki et al. found that an awareness of crime prevention volunteer activities contributed to lower levels of fear of crime (2014).

Fear of crime has also been looked into in connection with issues of urban planning and environmental design. Although arguably not directly related to crime prevention volunteering per se, crime prevention volunteering activities are typically part of a more general effort to create a living environment where people feel safe and secure (Hino and Schneider, 2013; Yamamoto, 2005). Crime prevention volunteering activities are accordingly part of what is known as *machizukuri*, a term that literally translates as town building, but that, as Sorensen notes, “refers to a range of practices and has multiple and contested meanings” (2009). I will come back to this concept and its connections with crime prevention volunteering below. Crime prevention volunteer groups typically play a part in bringing about such an environment through their various activities, which may include the organizing of neighborhood events such as summer parties and sports tournaments events to collect money to buy volunteering goods or to install CCTV cameras.

When it comes to the relationship between crime prevention volunteering and the occurrence of crime, Tsuji has noted a general (nation-wide) correlation between the rise in popularity of crime prevention volunteering since 2003 and a decreasing trend in registered crime that started around the same time (2016). Focusing on one “crime prone area” in the town of Hiroshima (1,196,274 inhabitants), Yoshinaka attributes the 37.7% decrease in registered crime that occurred between 2002 and 2005 to a large scale crime

¹ See for example the website set up by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, on which 87 crime prevention volunteering groups and their activities are introduced: <http://www.bouhan.metro.tokyo.jp/>- website last accessed 28-10-2016. This website also provides information on, among other things, how to form a group and how the police and local government can be of assistance when doing so. See also the crime prevention volunteering website of the National Police Agency that provides a list of 3898 registered groups nationwide, a great many examples of the activities undertaken by these groups, and other information on crime prevention volunteers and volunteering: <https://www.npa.go.jp/safetylife/seianki55/>- website last accessed 28-10-2016.

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