The Japanese kōban community policing system [1]

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Abstract

Aim: The author aims to provide information on the Japanese kōban model for those interested in community policing. At the same time, he highlights the social and political conditions in Japan that have been necessary for the success of the kōban policing model.

Methodology: The author conducted an empirical data collection based on interviews and participant observation in Japan in 2022. The data collection was supported by a professor, formerly a police officer, who was active in police education and research during the fieldwork period. This support was crucial in enabling the author to contact police leaders, community police officers, criminologists and other professionals. In addition, relevant literature and legal background on the subject were analysed.

Conclusions: In addition to the commitment of the government, collectivism and norm-following, which are characteristic of Japanese society, contributed to the success of community policing. In addition, it was necessary to build a crime prevention network based on the involvement and activation of the public, and on cooperation between the police and local voluntary organisations.

Value: The results make it clear that the introduction or adoption of elements of a community policing model must take into account the specificities of the society concerned. The article also draws attention to the role and potential of comparative criminology.

Keywords: community policing, Japan, kōban, bōhan

Introduction

In this publication, I summarise the experiences of fieldwork that took place in Japan in autumn 2022. The original aim of the empirical data collection was to understand the extent to which restorative justice approaches are applied in the work of the so-called kōban community police. The research allowed me to learn about the Japanese model of policing, the history of its development, the indicators of public safety in the country, and the legislation and strategic documents that govern the work of the police. I have also been able to observe directly the work of community police officers and the crime prevention organisations that support them. During my fieldwork, I conducted interviews and participant observation in the cities of Tokyo and Kyoto. My research was sponsored by the Japan Fellowship Program.[2]

In this paper, I first compare the public security situation in Hungary and Japan. I will then introduce the Japanese model of community policing and the work of the community police and the crime prevention organisations that support them. As I emphasise, government action since the turn of the millennium has been essential to the effectiveness of the community policing model, as it has led to a significant increase in the number of voluntary organisations and their members involved in crime prevention activities across the country. As a result, Japanese community police officers now work in close cooperation with local residents who take it upon themselves to ensure public safety. The article also aims to emphasise the role of the social context; a complex system of crime prevention could not be successful without the specificities of Japanese society.

Public safety in Hungary and Japan

When comparing Japan and Hungary, we should take into account that the cultural characteristics, social and economic indicators of the two countries differ in many ways. Just to mention a few: Japan has nearly ten times the population of Hungary (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022; Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2023). Its natural geographic borders are the Sea of Japan and the Pacific Ocean, while

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This paper is based on the lectures I have presented at the invitation of Chuo University in Tokyo in September and October 2022. An extraction of these lectures has been published in the Comparative Law Review, which also describes efforts to introduce community policing in the country. However, I will not discuss this topic in this article, as I have sought to present only the Japanese specificities.

the country faces geopolitical challenges that are quite different from Hungary's. GDP per capita is much higher than in Hungary (OECD, 2022). The Christian population in the country is very low, with a majority of Sinhalese and Buddhists (Kavanaugh & Jong, 2020). For the purposes of our topic, it is also important to mention a very important cultural characteristic: Japan is often described as the opposite of an individualistic society, where collectivism, conformity, norm- and rule-following are of particular importance (Braithwaite, 1989; Fukushima, Sharp & Kobayashi, 2009; Hidasi, 2007; Kobayashi & Farrington 2020; Liu 2016, Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Purebl, 2020). According to the same narrative as the authors above, in Japan, attachment to others (persons, families, groups, institutions) is more important. These relationships are strengthened by mutual trust, mutual commitments and loyalty. For Japanese people, it is of greater importance how others perceive them. It can be described as avoiding conflict and striving for the members of a community to live in harmony with each other without conflict. This concept of society is widely accepted, even though a number of researchers and research findings have drawn attention to social changes. Thus, mainly the rise of individualism (Matsumoto, 2002; Norasakkunkit & Uchida 2019; Takano & Osaka, 2018; Takano & Sogon 2008), the weakening of traditional gender roles (Rodigúez-Planas és Tanaka 2021; Shambaugh, Nunn & Portman, 2017), and interpersonal relationships (URL1). Some warn explicitly that the description of Japan as a collectivist society is misleading and opens the door to unfounded generalisationst (Croydon 2016; Dollinger, Osawa & Schirmer 2022; Takano & Osaka 1997).

In addition to the cultural differences, it is also worth pointing out the differences in public safety. Japan is generally considered one of the safest countries in the world. Victimisation rates are one of the lowest in the world – even in the year when Japan recorded the highest number of crimes since World War II (OECD, 2009; Ellis, Lewis, Hamai & Williamson, 2008). In 2020, the number of homicides per 100 000 inhabitants was only 0.25. It is worth noting that, in the same year, this rate was 6.52 in the United States of America (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). In the table below, I present some data that make a comparison possible with Hungary.

Table 1

Public safety in Japan and Hungary in the statistics perspective

	Japan	Hungary
Total number of crimes in 2021	914 920	154 012
Number of crimes per 100 000 inhabitants in 2021	729	1583
Number of homicides per 100 000 inhabitants in 2020	0,25	0,83
Number of robberies per 100 000 inhabitants	1,1	5,6
Number of thefts per 100 000 inhabitants	332	420
Number of prisoners per 100 000 inhabitants	36	192
Number of police officers per 100 000 inhabitants	374	384

Note. The author's personal editing (National Police Agency, 2021; Legfőbb Ügyészség, 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022; Fair & Walmsley, 2021; Büntetés-végrehajtás Országos Parancsnoksága, 2021; Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022; Eurostat, 2022).

As can be seen from the data in Table 1, Japan's public safety record is particularly good. The number of crimes per 100 000 inhabitants is almost twice as high in our country, while the number of homicides is almost three times higher. For robberies, the difference is even more striking: the figure is five times higher in Hungary. In respect of theft, the difference between the two countries is not as large, but still significant, with 332 recorded thefts per 100 000 inhabitants in Japan and 420 in Hungary. The difference in the prison population is again striking: the number of prison population (per 100 000 inhabitants) is approximately six times higher in Hungary than in Japan. These differences are despite the fact that the number of police officers per 100 000 inhabitants is almost the same; 373 in Japan and 384 in Hungary. However, the structure and mission of the police forces in the two countries are very different. For this reason, it is appropriate to describe the specific community policing model that is characteristic of Japan.

The Japanese community policing model

In this chapter I describe the work of community police officers based on several research reports and police documents (Aldous & Leishman, 2000; Finch, 1999; Kawamura & Shirakawa, 2008; Moriyama, 1993; National Police Agency, 2021; Young, 2022, 2019), as well as personal observation. The key element of the Japanese community policing model is the kōban, which is found mostly in urban environments, and the chuzaisho, which is available

mainly in rural areas. These buildings are usually located in busy areas, at intersections and traffic junctions. In the case of the kōban under the territorial police headquarters, there are typically 3 to 5 community policemen available to residents 24 hours a day, and in the case of the chuzaisho, there is usually 1 community policeman available. A sense of accessibility is also helped by the design of the buildings, with large windows and glazed (and usually open) doors allowing passers-by to see the building from the outside, and police officers often stand outside the building on duty. The chuzaisho also provides a home for the community policemen and their families, so that the wife of the unavailable policeman sometimes records the subject of the enquiries and the problems of the residents (who may be appointed part-time because of her extra duties).

The community policemen of the nearly 6300 kōban and 6200 chuzaisho have a variety of tasks: patrolling, directing traffic, guiding lost pedestrians, recording reports or receiving lost property. When a call for help comes in to the central emergency number, the dispatcher always notifies the policemen of the nearest kōban or chuzaisho to the scene of the call, ensuring a faster response. The tasks also include counselling, where residents share not only crime prevention and crime-related issues with community police officers, but also personal and family problems. Crime prevention is a priority, in close cooperation with local actors (more on this in the next chapter). To summarise, the kōban system is not only a physical structure, but also embodies a policing philosophy, as it explicitly aims to physically extend policing, thereby strengthening the relationship between local communities and the police.

The need for the introduction of community policing and a higher degree of decentralisation has been repeatedly discussed in our country (Berei, 2018; Bezerédi 2020; Christián 2019; Christián, 2016; Korinek, 2015), but no such changes have been made. In Japan, meanwhile, the community orientation of the police is enshrined in several government and strategy documents. They trace how the approach to community policing has become increasingly dominant over the years. The 2003-as *Action Plan to Create a Crime-Resistant Society* (URL9) has not yet used the terms community policing or community policing. However, the *Broken Window* theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), which formulated the defining thesis of the community policing model, was already seen as a reference point for reducing crime. The document *Japanese Community Police and Police Box System* (URL10) already refers to community orientation in its title. It defines the role of community police as

• to participate as part of the local community in activities that are closely related to the daily life and safety of the residents;

- inform the local community about the police presence and support self-defence and crime prevention activities organised by residents;
- respond first to emergency calls.

The 2021 report, published by the Japanese police, already dedicates a separate chapter to community policing (National Police Agency, 2021). Community police officers are described as maintaining close contact with citizens in the community through their constant and visible presence, patrols and regular visits to households.

Early research on criminology and policing, focusing on the Japanese model of policing, also explained the excellent public safety indicators by the kōban system and its community orientation (Ames, 1981; Bayley, 1976; Braithwaite, 1989; Clifford, 1978; Haley, 1992; Parker, 2001). Although the perception of the kōban remained very positive, the causal link above has subsequently been challenged by others, who have pointed out that there is no empirical support for this hypothesis (Brogden 1999; Miyazawa, 1990; Leishman, 2007), and that the relationship between the population and the police is not harmonious (Miyazawa, 1992). Others have stated that researchers of the kōban system have given an unjustified positive characterization of the Japanese community policing model, whose low-morality, elitist and masculine members do not prioritize community relations (Aldous & Leishman, 2000; Yoshida, 2006, 2008, 2010; Yoshida & Leishman 2006). Still others have criticised Japanese police officers for low levels of trust in community policing and the practice of coerced testimony (Ellis et al, 2008). Baradel (2019) has pointed out that the kōban system is an excellent way to monitor and control citizens. I will not go into the details of this debate in this article. In the following, I will only attempt to draw attention to some of the social characteristics that contribute to the effectiveness of the work of kōban community policing.

Allies of community policing

In the years leading up to the millennium, the number of recorded crimes in Japan started to increase. Although the number of recorded cases in the decades following World War II ranged between one and one and a half million, by 2002 the figure had reached 2.85 million (Ministerial Meeting Concerning Measures Against Crime, 2003). Several researchers have pointed out that this increase can be partly explained by a change in statistical data collection, and that there has not been a substantial change in the number of serious crimes. Nevertheless,

the subjective sense of security of citizens has deteriorated: in 2002, 41% of citizens felt fear or anxiety about crime, compared to 26% in 1997 (Hamai & Ellis, 2015, 2008a, 2008b, 2006; Hamai, 2013). The public discourse on crime has intensified (Fenwick, 2004; Miyazawa, 2008), and the moral panic in society has been further exacerbated by police corruption scandals and misconduct that sometimes claim lives (Johnson 2002; Kanamaya, 2011; Oyamada 2019; Tsushima & Hamai 2015). Trust in the police has weakened in these years, even by international standards (Cao, Stack & Sun, 1998; Fenwick 2004; Hamai & Ellis 2008; Hamai & Ellis 2006; Kobayashi, 2020). The government has decided to respond to the challenges of public safety by strengthening the relationship between the police and local communities, as well as community solidarity. Thus, several guidelines and strategic plans (Ministerial Meeting Concerning Measures Against Crime, 2003; 2005; 2008), have been developed to (among other things) (1) raise awareness of crime prevention, (2) enable citizens to actively participate in activities aimed at improving public safety, and (3) create a social environment that is not conducive to crime. In line with these strategic objectives, the crime prevent organizations, the so-called bōhan, which have been existing in the country since the beginning of the 20th century, have been strengthened. The range of these organisations has expanded with new members joining crime prevention, road safety, teacher-parent and neighbourhood associations, youth support committees, and organisations supporting police-parent cooperation. As an indication of the extent of the change, the number of volunteers involved in bōhan activities increased by 1227% between 2003 and 2008, reaching 2.5 million by the latter year (National Police Agency, 2018). The increase has not stopped thereafter, with nearly 2.8 million volunteers participating in crime prevention activities in 2016 (Herber, 2018). The expansion is also reflected in the increasing number of bōhan renrakushō (translated as 'crime prevention checkpoints' in English) (Finch, 1999): hese homes act as a kind of interface between the police and the public, facilitating communication. It is interesting to note that the members of the bōhan initiatives were often former police officers, so that the increased crime prevention activities also kept retired police officers occupied (Moriyama, 1993). The bōhan's activities, in line with the strategic plans presented earlier, are usually supported by business organisations in the form of financial contributions or other crime prevention programmes.

These strengthened local organisations perform a wide variety of tasks. Most volunteers undertake patrols in their neighbourhoods (National Police Agency, 2016). Members also take children to school, distribute information materials, visit elderly residents or clean up public spaces (National Police Agency, 2018).

Crime prevention presentations and workshops are also organised in partnership with the police, involving a wide variety of target groups.

As I mentioned earlier, I had the opportunity to do fieldwork in Japan in autumn 2022. In total, I conducted ten interviews with police officers, National Police Agency staff, but I also met criminologists, lawyers and prosecutors. Overcoming the language barrier was a difficulty during the fieldwork. I conducted the interviews in English, but my interviewees sometimes found it difficult to express themselves in this foreign language. For this reason, I needed the help of a translator on several occasions during the conversations. However, my professor at the host university was an advantage during the fieldwork. Thanks to the contacts of the professor, who used to work for the police, I was able to easily get to the scenes and interviews that were of particular interest to my topic. I have visited several kōban buildings and participated in crime prevention programmes involving local associations, schools and young people.

During my visit to the police station in Tokyo's Tama district, it became clear how the local bōhan activity helps to create public safety and thus supports the work of community police officers. On Saturday in the early hours of the morning, young people from nearby schools, involved by the local Parent-Teacher Association and Crime Prevention Association, arrived at the district police station. Then the head of crime prevention gave a presentation on local hot-spots, the characteristics of crime in the district, and the dangers of the so-called 'grandparent scam', which is also on the rise in Japan. The Police Commissioner personally congratulated all the young people for their participation, who then set off on a car patrol together with members of the association and local police officers. The terminus was at the local kōban building. This building can be found in a busy location, next to the local metro station and next to a shopping centre. In this area, young people – accompanied by members of the association – were targeting elderly passers-by. They were made aware of the phenomenon and the dangers of grandparent scams, and were given information materials issued by the police. Participants wore high visibility vests at all times, while wearing photo identification issued by the police station. At the end of the activity, the head of the crime prevention department presented the young people with certificates at the police station, and the event ended with a lunch. It is important to emphasise that the participation of young people was not limited to this one activity, and they want to continue to support crime prevention in the district.

As can be seen from the description, the cooperation of several actors was needed, as crime prevention officers from the local police station, community police officers from the kōban, school teachers, parents present at the event and association volunteers also took an active role. The action was an opportunity

to activate the elderly members of the bōhan, as well as to build and strengthen personal relationships between local residents. The feedback from the scene is in line with Herber (2018) citizens' voluntary participation was motivated by several factors, mainly public safety, personal relationships and concerns about crime.

Some researchers on the subject draw attention to the crime-prevention potential of the bōhan, while also emphasising the role of community and networking. However, it is also worth briefly presenting the critical views. According to Yoder (2011) bōhan initiatives are primarily dominated by monitoring, tracking and controlling. Motoyanagi (2011) suggests that these crime prevention organisations can be used to exclude deviant behaviour from the community. Others have expressed concerns that the bōhan's activities are less initiated by people in the local community and that the activities themselves reinforce fears of crime (Schimhowsky, 2021).

It is not clear how the development of the bōhan is causally related to changes in public safety indicators. However, crime statistics show positive changes in Japan in the years following the millennium. The number of crimes solved by community police officers has increased, while the number of recorded crimes has decreased from 2.85 million in 2002 to 914 920 in 2020 (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Thanks to the government's will to involve and activate the public in crime prevention, it has therefore been successful. This, however, required increasing the number of community (and supporting retired) police officers in the kōban, keeping the police community-oriented, involving and activating the local community, and creating cooperation between the relevant actors (Ellis & Kyo, 2017; Herber 2018; Kanamaya, 2011; Schimhowsky, 2021). As a result, kōban community police officers do not work in isolation from the local community. However, even with the support of this extensive network, the community policing model of the present day faces challenges.

Contemporary challenges

In this chapter I summarise the experiences of the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork. Due to the small number of interviews, the short time spent in the field, and language barriers, I am not able to draw far-reaching conclusions. However, based on the information gathered during the data collection, I will present some of the characteristics that were reported to make the work of kōban community police officers difficult today.

First of all, the changes in the Japanese social structure are worth mentioning. Parker (1984) must have been faced decades ago in his research on policing

with the fact that the weakening of interpersonal relations was making it increasingly difficult for the police to cooperate with local communities. Reports from the Japanese Police Research Centre have reached a similar conclusion (Yasuda, 2011; National Police Agency, 2021). They show that until the 1980s, community solidarity and citizens' sense of social normality played an important role in maintaining public safety. However, thanks to social changes, this crime prevention potential is not as high anymore. The same view was expressed by researchers who examined the relationship between the police and local communities (Aldous & Leishman, 2000; Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; Ellis et al., 2008; Fenwick, 2004). In addition, these difficulties were also emphasised by the interviewees I visited during my fieldwork. In their view, urbanisation and increased spatial mobility, together with the weakening of local communities, have made crime prevention work more difficult. This type of difficulty can be traced back to the preparation and implementation of household visits.

As I mentioned earlier, community police officers are responsible for visiting households in the area at least once a year. The aim of these meetings is to provide advice on crime prevention, suggestions for improvements in the work of the police and to receive complaints from the public. (Brogden, 1999; Kawamura & Shirakawa, 2008; National Police Agency, 2021). Community police also collect information, for example on the family composition or who to contact in case of an emergency. However, feedback from my interviewees is that community policemen are less and less welcome by household members. Many feel that a visit from the police is an invasion of privacy. This reluctance may explain why citizens' dissatisfaction with the police could be traced back to the fact of visits years ago (Leishman, 2007).

A further difficulty is the operational model itself; if community police officers are on patrol or responding to a crime scene following a call for help, there is no one for residents to call for help in the kōban building. This is not a new phenomenon: according to a 2004 survey by the National Police Agency, 56% of respondents had experienced this type of problem (Kawamura & Shirakawa, 2008). This explains why 39% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the work of local police officers because of the empty kōban (Leishman, 2007). In response to the data, the Prime Minister indicated in a speech in 2004 that he considered it necessary to put an end to this phenomenon (Hamai & Ellis, 2006). The number of community police officers has increased over the years, but even today there are still some people who cannot find anyone to turn to for help (URL3).

It is also worth noting that community police officers believe that single kōban buildings can pose a security risk to those on duty there. In recent years, there

have been several incidents of attempts to seize the weapons of community police officers (URL4; URL5), including some fatal attacks (URL6; URL7). My interviewees stressed that the necessary security measures have already been taken by the Japanese police to avoid similar incidents. However, as a result of these incidents, the sense of security among police officers has decreased and the work-related tension has increased.

Summary

To sum up, Japanese community policing faces many challenges today. However, their work is supported by a number of organisations that are networking and sharing information and working together to prevent crime in the local area. It is likely that this kind of collaborative network contributes greatly to Japan's excellent public safety record. Its success can be explained by the fact that the kōban model has already been adopted in several countries and regions, including Brazil, Central America, some cities in Germany, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and some US states (Bayley, 1984; Brogden & Nijhar 2005; Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2022a; Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2022b; Kocak, 2018; 2019; Martin, 2011; Singh, 2000).

The Japanese example is also important because it highlights an interesting contradiction between excellent public safety and the very poor subjective sense of security that goes with it. As I have described above, the number of recorded crimes has started to decline since the turn of the millennium. Nevertheless, during this period, the proportion of people in Japan who felt unsafe on the streets after dark was high, even by global standards (OECD, 2009; Ellis et al., 2008). Low perceptions of safety have also been highlighted by recent comparative studies (National Police Agency, 2020; Hino, Uesugi & Asami, 2018; URL8; Tomita, 2011). All this demonstrates that the introduction of a community policing model is not in itself a guarantee of a greater sense of subjective security. As I indicated in the article, processes unrelated or less related to police activity, such as the growing moral panic in society, have most likely had an impact on this phenomenon. However, further research on policing is needed to understand the contradiction in detail.

Finally, it is worth underlining that the cultural specificities of a society also contribute to its excellent public safety. Alongside government commitment, collectivism and the need to follow norms is what makes nationwide bōhan effective, otherwise the work of community policing would be much more difficult. In my perception, however, there is no universal recipe: the adaptation of the community

policing model must also take into account the specificities of the society in question. The introduction of the kōban model may pose unexpected difficulties in societies that are less collectivist, more tolerant of deviant behaviour or less supportive of police-population cooperation (Ferragi 2010; Goldsmith 2006; URL2). For this reason, it is important that the organisational and operational framework that regulates the work of community policing be adapted to local specificities, while maintaining the basic principles and objectives of community policing.

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