Towards Sustainable Crime-Prevention Activities in Japan: The Possibilities and Limits of Volunteer Groups

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1. Introduction

The crime rate in Japan has fallen for the thirteenth consecutive year as of 2016 and remains lower than in most developed countries. The clearance rate has also kept steady at approximately 30% for the past 10 years[1]. While one might thus regard Japan as a comparatively safe and peaceful country － as observers have also done[2] -35.4% of the Japanese public feel uneasy about public safety[3] and are concerned about outstanding issues such as kidnapping, identity theft and billing fraud, cybercrimes, crimes committed by the elderly and recidivism[4]. This public concern and fear of crime began to surface in the latter half of the 1990s following a series of high profile crimes covered in the media. In response, the police began to

(1) According to the National Police Agency (2014), the number of murders and attempted murders recorded by police in 2013 declined 8.8% from the previous year to a post-war low of 939, and overall penal code violations dropped by 4.4% to 1.32 million cases as the number of thefts decreased by 5.2% to 986,309 and slipped below 1 million for the first time in 40 years.

(2) See e.g. Vazsonyi et al. 2004; Roberts, A. and LaFree, 2004. Some of the more optimistic studies may be prone to the so-called 'greener grass syndrome' in which crime prevention appears to be more successful in Japan than at home.

(3) National Police Agency, 2016, app. 27. At the same time, however, 31.9% of people surveyed responded that they did not feel uneasy about public safety. The fear of crime perhaps represents a subjective or emotional response as opposed to concern about actual probability thereof. Although the subject is beyond the scope of this paper, *'taikan chian'* or perceived public safety has become an independent area of study in criminology. See e.g. Matsubara,2009.

(4) These issues are commonly raised by the media and police despite what might be viewed as generally positive statistical findings. For details, see Yoshinaka, *2016*.

promote the forming of volunteer groups in the community to conduct preventative crime prevention activities such as day and night neighbourhood patrols[5]. Groups also disseminate useful tips and information through lectures and bulletins, which, according to one study[6], approximately 36% of community members cite as a source of knowledge about crime related statistics. Children learn how to be cautious of strangers[7] and they are taught to draw community safety maps showing potentially dangerous spots or areas in the community[8].

The various activities of these volunteer groups are thought to have played a great role in reducing the occurrence of street crimes and trespassing offences that account for the majority of Penal Code offences. In fact, statistics reveal that the crime rate in Japan has decreased since 2003 in inverse proportion to the number of crime-prevention volunteer groups[9], which have increased fifteenfold from just 3,056 in 2003[10] to 48,060 as of 2015[11]. Many academics argue that volunteer activities have been instrumental in keeping crime rates comparatively low in Japan, and there has been no evidence to disprove their effectiveness so far.

While the number of volunteer groups remains fairly stable for the time being[12], we have to re-examine the sustainability of volunteer crime-prevention activities in the face of a shortage of funds, an aging population, and general societal

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（5） In regard to community patrol activities in Hiroshima, see e.g. Yoshinaka, 2006.

（6） Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, 2014, app. 27.

（7） One widely known lesson is *'Ika no Osushi (squid sushi),'* a mnemonic acronym for *'ikanai* (don't go with strangers)', *'noranai* (don't ride with strangers)', *'oogoeodasu* (scream)', *'sugunigeru* (run away immediately)', and *'shiraseru* (inform an adult)'.

（8） This widely used learning technique was introduced by Nobuo Komiya, professor of criminology at Rissho University.

（9） NPA, supra note 3, app. 35., Ministry of Justice, 2016, 1.

（10） Ibid.

（11） Ibid.

（12） Ibid. Groups numbered 47,084 in 2013, 47,532 in 2014 and 48,060 in 2015.

changes in Japan[13]. Almost all volunteer groups struggle with chronic insufficiency of funds. Although most volunteer groups are subsidised by local governments, the amount of funding is not enough to fully cover expenses such as surveillance cameras or community patrol cars that must be purchased or rented and of course, maintained[14]. While local governments may need to provide more funding, volunteer groups also need to take a more sophisticated approach by collaborating with financial experts and private companies that are willing to contribute funds as part of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) projects. Advertising is another potential resource as company ads could be placed on patrol cars or embroidered on the uniform jackets that are usually worn by volunteers.

An even more pressing issue, however, is one of human resources. Despite the 1.1% increase in the number of volunteer groups in 2015, the number of members per group dropped by 0.6%[15]. Most volunteer groups cite the rapid aging of their membership as a problem[16]. Age *per se* is actually an advantage considering that retirees have enough spare time to carry out daily volunteer activities. Senior citizens also tend to be willing to participate in day and night patrols in the community out of concern for the safety of their grandchildren. Older volunteers are also able to share wisdom gained through life experience and reach out to people who are at risk of committing crimes. The problem is that as these veteran members retire from volunteer service, it is difficult to find successors. Without turnover, the burden of work converges on the same core members and activities tend to become stagnant,

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(13)　Id., 6-27.

(14)　Approximately 70% of group expenses are related to crime-prevention patrol, and 55% of this amount is related to use of patrol cars. Surveillance cameras take up approximately 10% of funds. See Id., app. 21.

(15)　Id., app. 35.

(16)　Id., app. 22.

and in some cases, volunteer groups are in danger of dissolving entirely.

Moreover, this downward trend in membership is likely to continue as society continues to become less cohesive in the traditional sense. Rapid lifestyle changes in post-war Japan have made younger generations unwilling or perhaps unprepared to participate in volunteer activities in their present form. This is a fundamental issue that must be addressed when contemplating how crime prevention activities can be sustained in the future. In this article, we examine some of the foundations of social cohesion that have formed the basis for volunteer crime-prevention activities in Japan, analyse how post-war changes in Japanese society present challenges to sustainability, and suggest ways in which communities, local government, and police may need to adapt.

2. Foundations of Social Cohesion

Mutual assistance groups called *moyai, yui or temagae*[17] were formed in Japan during the medieval period. *Moyai* means 'owing something jointly' or 'holding something in common' while both *yui* and *temagae* refer to 'mutual assistance rendered in villages during busy periods.' As an agrarian society, people naturally needed to help each other to supply a mass labour force especially for planting, harvesting, and thatching the roofs of large farmhouses. The tradition created and maintained cohesion and harmony and underpinned a safe community, but as Japan moved towards centralized government during the Edo period (1603-1867), these local groups were utilized to prevent crimes against the state. The Tokugawa shogunate[18] introduced the infamous system of *gonin gumi* or *jyunin gumi*, in which

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(17) N. Yoshinaka, supra note 4, 229. Even now these words are used and understood especially in rural areas.

(18) The Tokugawa shogunate was the ruling samurai clan that governed from the capital city of Edo, which is present day Tokyo.

teams of five or ten community members were formed for the purpose of mutual surveillance. These groups followed a system of internal checks and balances designed to ensure that members would act vigilantly and stop each other from indulging in potentially politically disturbing activities. All members were punished if a group failed to fulfill its duty. This was a central pillar of the *renza* or "guilt-by-association" system based on the principle of collective responsibility. In general, it is said that this mutual surveillance system had a deterrent effect on crime but also impaired trust between group members.

During the Meiji period (1868-1912)[19] the government continued to depend on small community groups to implement national policies and plans at the local level. As Japan's ambitions for military expansion began to escalate in the years leading up to World War I and II, neighbourhood associations were relied on heavily. *Cho-nai-kai* were introduced at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War (1937), and smaller neighbourhood units called *tonari-gumi* were institutionalized uniformly across Japan under the so-called Tonarigumi Reinforcement Law of 1940. *Cho-nai-kai* were composed of people living in the same town while *tonari-gumi* were formed between neighbouring households that engaged in a variety of social and civic activities. The head of the *tonari-gumi* usually collected a sum of money to celebrate births or weddings and likewise organised assistance for the families of deceased persons. Neighbourhood circulars called *kairanban* were passed around by members to keep each other informed of news and events as well as to promote government propaganda. Social cohesion and interaction laid the foundation for neighbourhood associations to function as informal police networks that prevented crime in general and monitored anti-government thought.

Although *tonari-gumi* were broken up outside of rural areas under the

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(19)　Political power was restored from the Tokugawa shogunate to Emperor Meiji in 1867.

American occupation after World War II, *cho-nai-kai* and similar *jichi-kai* (resident associations) remain to this day. They of course no longer operate as government informants, and while they serve as the core units from which volunteers are drawn to participate in crime prevention activities in local neighbourhoods, the role of general crime prevention has shifted to *bohan-kyo-kai*, or quasi-public Local Crime Prevention Associations and the Japan National Crime Prevention Association. As resident associations, they have retained the *kairanban* and other social practices that promote a sense of shared community. It is regarded as a serious issue, however, that people are increasingly unwilling to join as members. A study sponsored by NHK television[20] found that among approximately 300,00 *cho-nai-kai* and *jichi-kai* in Japan, many have struggled with membership rates that have fallen especially in urban areas from nearly 70% to 20% over the past two decades[21].

In the same vein, there appears to be a general lack of public interest in crime prevention activities undertaken by neighbourhood volunteer groups. Although many groups are very active, residents are often unaware of or indifferent to activities being implemented locally. According to one survey[22], approximately 90% of residents did not recognise the volunteer groups engaging in their own community. In contrast, 90% of volunteers believed that their activities were well known by the community. Thus while some foreign observers might tend to think that volunteer crime prevention activities are widely appreciated in Japan, the reality appears to be the complete opposite. The overwhelming majority of people living in the community are indifferent to the crime prevention efforts of volunteer groups.

Those individuals who do opt to engage in the various obligations and rituals

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(20)　NHK television programme aired on 4 November 2015.

(21)　Reflecting the times, the Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that *cho-nai-kai* and *jichi-kai* are voluntary organisations and that members have the right to join or leave freely (04. April. 2005).

(22)　Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, supra note 6, app.22, 27

of neighbourhood groups tend to enjoy a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem through these forms of social intercourse. They may also be motivated by *giri* (duty), one of the basic principles of social interaction in Japan, as well as the notion of *yaku* (role, assignment or responsibility)[23]. Specifically in the case of crime prevention activities, 50.6% volunteers were motivated mostly by a desire to 'contribute to the community,' 41.6% were motivated mostly by 'concern about rising fear of crime in the community,' and 40.2% participated primarily because they were asked to do so by local government, police or schools[24]. To sustain volunteer crime prevention activities in the future, we may need to consider how the next generation of volunteers may be motivated to become active in their communities. Perhaps the first step is to better understand how some of Japan's social cohesion has come undone.

3. Changing Japanese Society after World War II

What explains the apparent decline of social cohesion in Japan? In this section, we discuss five major changes in Japan since World War II that have altered traditional notions of community, family, and the individual and that may present challenges to the sustainability of volunteer involvement in crime prevention.

3.1 Lifestyle and Working Conditions

The lifestyles and working conditions of people in Japan have changed in concert with the transition of industrial structure. In 1920, 54.9% of workers were engaged in primary industries as opposed to 32.7% in 1960. By 2010, the proportion declined dramatically to just 4.2%, according to statistics published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications[25]. Unlike farmers who work and live in the same community and are therefore able to keep track of neighbours and visitors

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(23)　See N. Yoshinaka, supra note 4, 246-247

(24)　Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, supra note 6, 14-17.

(25)　Statistics Japan, 2010, 161.

during the daytime, salaried company employees have to take the train daily to and from workplaces that are mostly far away from home. They come home in the evening to have a late dinner and a quick bath, and then they go to bed to wake up early in the morning and rush to catch the train again. The daytime population is reduced by half in many cities, and people employed in tertiary industries are often estranged from their own fragile communities.

3.2 Nuclear Families and Urbanization

Related to the change in working conditions and lifestyle is the nuclearization and urbanization of the family. Statistics reveal that three-generation families have decreased from 15.3% in 1986 to 9.7% in 2004, and to 6.5% in 2015.[26] The population has increased in urban areas (e.g. Tokyo) but decreased in rural areas (e.g. Akita)[27]. In a traditional agrarian society, families necessarily consist of multiple generations that help each other in home and work life. But in a modern industrial society, breadwinners tend to leave their parents for jobs in urban areas. Aging parents left behind in rural areas are prone to identity theft and billing fraud without help from their children. In this way, nuclear families and the shift to urban areas seem to have gradually eroded the foundation of traditional community structures.

3.3 Information Technology

We now live in a society of highly advanced information technologies. Since the 1960s, our means of communication have developed at rapid speed from the conventional telephone to beepers, personal handy phone systems (PHS), mobile phones and now smart phones. Almost all households had a landline by the end of the

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(26) Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015, 3.

http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/k-tyosa/k-tyosa15/index.html/ (accessed 05.10.18)

(27) Statistics Japan, 2015, 11.

1970s, and most young people had their own PHS or mobile phone by the end of 1990s. In 2015, 92.9% of youth in their twenties (and 86.2% of people in their thirties) carry a smartphone according to statistics published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications[28]. From a young age, people grow accustomed to having a personal gadget by which they can do things on their own, free of interference from family. This change may be liberating and isolating at the same time.

3.4 Consumer Culture

A highly advanced consumer culture has developed since the latter half of 1950s. Besides the original 'Three Sacred Treasures' of television (black-and-white), washing machine, and refrigerator, modern essentials include vacuum cleaners and private cars. Our lifestyle and consumption patterns have dramatically changed due to advances in consumer electrical appliances. Many families now drive a private car to purchase a week's worth of groceries at a big shopping centre, whereas previously we went out to local shops every day to buy food for the evening meal. We did not need a refrigerator at that time. The change in lifestyle has led to the loss of work for quite a few family retailers as local shopping areas are deserted[29]. So-called 'shuttered streets' have emerged in central areas in many cities. Brick and mortar shops have also been abandoned as people have come to be able to purchase everything they need on the Internet. It is no longer necessary for us to go outside and interact with someone face-to-face in our daily lives. Thus, it might be difficult to feel any real connection or ties with our communities even though we live in them. Many of us live in urban anonymity with little sense of community.

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(28)   Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, 2015, 8.

   http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000445736.pdf (accessed 05.10.18)

(29)   The fact that aging storekeepers often have no successor is also regarded as a cause of this phenomenon.

3.5 Globalizing Economy

Lastly, Japan's communities are losing their regional or local economic power with the spread of a global economy. Some traditional communities in Japan still have local economic or financial organisations called *kou (jyuu)*, but nowadays almost all of them seem to be on the wane. TPP (Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership) and other international agreements may facilitate the development of a global economy but in turn, they leave a lacuna in regional economies that encroaches on the foundations of power and cohesion in local communities. The question that arises is whether we really 'live' in the local communities in which we dwell.

As we have seen, ways of engaging in the local community have changed in accordance with transitions in industrial structure, family structure, working conditions, information technology, consumption patterns and economic environment since the latter half of 1950s. We are now living in a highly personalised yet comparatively isolated society where we need not necessarily depend on other people for help or cooperate with each other[30]. Old mechanisms for mutual assistance such as *moyai, kou, yui or temagae* have become obsolete where they were previously indispensable resources. Today, we contract with construction companies to build and maintain our houses, and we can farm our crops with machines. If we need money, we look to regional and national banks, and if we need life advice, we search on the Internet instead of drawing on the wisdom of our grandparents. In many households, everyone has his or her own smartphone, PC, and sometimes even personal

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(30)   This tendency seems to correspond to the transition from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society) in the theory of 'Social Darwinism' asserted by Ferdinand Tönnies.

television. Perhaps it is a logical or historical consequence then that more and more people decline to join their neighborhood *cho-nai-kai* or *jichi-kai* and partake in the community.

4. Conclusion : A Contingent Model

In the process of transition to a highly advanced modern society, many of the community connections and relationships that used to exist across Japan are gradually disappearing as they become unnecessary or uncomfortable. This is especially true in urban areas, although conservative styles of community are preserved, for instance, in parts of Kyoto, Tokyo and other large cities where traditional shopping streets or districts remain intact[31]. To sustain crime prevention activities in large cities, non-profit organisations (NPOs) may serve as more workable alternatives to traditional neighbourhood-based volunteer efforts[32]. NPOs tend to be more efficient in terms of organizing volunteers and executing activities on a broader scale, and they have better access to funding through private sector contributions. They also serve as an outlet for individuals who are interested in volunteering but are unable or hesitant to get involved in more intimate neighbourhood groups. In fact, the number of NPOs engaging in crime prevention activities is currently on the rise in large cities as well as in the prefectures[33]. Both NPOs and smaller neighbourhood groups may need to offer more incentives to attract prospective participants[34]. Making use of Facebook and other SNS (Social Network Services) outlets might be of importance especially

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(31)　See, N. Yoshinaka, supra note 5, 32.

(32)　Regarding NPOs, see Nobuo Komiya, 2001. *NPO ni Yoru Semi-Formal na Hanzai Tousei*, Tachibana-Shobou, Tokyo.

(33)　See NPA, supra note 3, app. 36-47.

(34)　Many groups carry out a variety of measures regularly, for example hobby meetings or tea parties, in addition to regular crime prevention activities. See NPA, supra note 3, 12-47.

for younger generations as well.

In less populated, non-urban areas, however, traditional neighbourhood based customs and practices are probably still the best vehicle for volunteer crime prevention activities. Family and community networks tend to be more tightly knit, and in fact, there is growing public interest in rural living partly because people are attracted to the ideals of social cohesion. In what is referred to in Japan as 'U-turns' and 'I-turns'[35], an increasing number of people are moving from big cities to smaller towns or the countryside in pursuit of a slower, more community conscious way of life. Local governments and the police could encourage integration between old and new residents and promote involvement in crime prevention through community activities.

In both urban and non-urban areas alike, it may be most effective for local governments and the police to adopt a double-track policy of cooperation with both traditional neighbourhood associations and NPOs. These groups should also increase cooperation with other organisations such as the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), Parents' Associations, Local Councils of Social Welfare, and Local Crime Prevention Associations to create or restore a sense of social cohesion and consequently contribute to the prevention and reduction of crime at the local level.

Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. Erik D. Herber for his invitation to contribute

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to this project on crime prevention volunteering in Japan. He also would like to express his gratitude to Ms. Jennifer Connelly for providing language help.

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