

# Worlds Apart? Policing in Japan and Britain

Chris Aldous and Frank Leishman re-evaluate the orthodox academic view of the Japanese policing model.

Until recently, Japan's reputation for crime prevention and community safety has been an enviable one, resting largely on countless celebratory accounts of its nationwide network of police boxes (*koban*). There are around 15,000 of these and it has been estimated that in urban areas you are never more than seven blocks away from one. *Koban* were the primary focus of David Bayley's seminal study (1976, 1991), in which Japan is characterised as 'heaven for a cop', on account of its famously low recorded crime rate and apparently close police-community relations. However, the celebratory reading has been promoted principally by commentators looking for 'answers for America' and has served, in our view, to overplay claims of police uniqueness in Japan. In recent years, we have been seeking to challenge some of the orthodox assumptions about crime and policing in Japan by shifting the emphasis onto policing 'universals'. Many of the ideas in this short article are dealt with at greater length by Aldous and Leishman (2000).

## Thinking outside the box

We have argued that Western criminologists – and journalists for that matter – have often failed to exhibit the same kind of scepticism when analysing crime and policing in Japan that they would reflexively bring to bear when writing about their own countries. As the introduction to this special issue has suggested, this can be one of the primary pitfalls of doing cross-cultural criminal justice research. The dominant celebratory thesis about *koban* in the West seems to rest on three rather uncritically accepted propositions about crime and policing in Japan, namely that: Japanese police have

a uniquely different occupational culture from their Western counterparts; Japanese police through the *koban* are uniquely in touch with the communities they serve; Japanese crime statistics are more reliable indicators of police efficiency than those of other jurisdictions. A careful reading of the literature, coupled with closer attention to contemporary debates in Japan, reveals that each of these propositions rests on increasingly shaky ground. It emerges, for instance, that 'cop culture' in Japan shares the same core characteristics as in the West, with officers holding remarkably similar views about what constitutes 'real police work', and that tends to be more about crime-fighting than community involvement. While Western commentators and some official Japanese sources still draw attention to the twice-yearly household visits (*junkai renraku*) supposedly made by *koban* officers to premises on their patch, this system has long since fallen into desuetude. These days there is more realistic talk among senior Japanese police officers and academic criminologists of the criminogenic consequences of the country's 'thinning social relations' and of what has become known as the 'empty *koban* phenomenon', a situation redolent of contemporary British debates about the dearth of bobbies on the beat. A number of high profile scandals has significantly undermined public confidence in the police, prompting Japan's National Police Agency to instruct local forces to focus more on the needs and complaints of ordinary citizens. The advice was timely, given that in January 2000 the *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that trust in the police, until then pretty high, had fallen to the point that only 52% of those responding expressed confidence in the police (the figure was 74% in December 1998). Finally, with regard to crime statistics, recent years have witnessed more open acknowledgement of a substantial 'dark figure' of crime in Japan, particularly in relation to sexual offences, child abuse and domestic violence. In an excellent critical review article, Finch (1999) confirms suspicions that much of the statistical evidence which contributes to the perpetuation of the celebratory image of the Japanese police, can in fact be viewed as 'misleading or questionable, particularly when it is used to make international comparisons'.

## Early British influence?

Another criticism that we have levelled at what we might call the 'answers for America' brigade, is their rather ahistorical treatment of the early development of the *koban*. If you pick up any text which examines the historical origins of the Japanese police, it will invariably inform you that those searching for a



Police *koban*, Japan



This *koban* bears an English sign: 'police box'.

suitable Western model for Japan's first national police system fixed their gaze on France and Germany in the 1870s and 1880s, and that there were lots of good reasons for doing this. Japan's rulers warmed to the continental European model because it was highly centralised, incorporated wide-ranging administrative functions and was overtly political. While this is a fair summary, it fails to take account of the influence of the British policing model, which has been allowed to recede into the background, as the practices of continental Europe have taken centre-stage. However, one of the areas where a British influence can be detected is in the establishment of that 'uniquely Japanese' urban police box, the *koban*! Interestingly, the idea of the *koban* came indirectly from Britain, as it is effectively a consolidation of the beat system which originated with the London Metropolitan Police. The beat concept was taken up by the Paris police and by the mid-19th century, had become a dominant feature of policing in other European cities when Japanese officials made their fact-finding visits. Alas, Glasgow, on whose streets distinctive cast-iron police boxes were originally placed in 1891, was not on their itinerary! Against a backdrop of continuing international enthusiasm for *koban* transplantation, there is a certain irony that the historical context of its origins has been typically glossed over.

Japan and other East Asian countries have traditionally been difficult choices of comparators for Western criminologists for a number of methodological reasons (Leishman, 1999). However, the opportunities for developing an Anglo-Japanese perspective have probably never been more

promising, thanks in no small measure to the Internet which, in many ways, is an extremely rich resource for any researcher interested in crime and policing in Japan (Aldous, 2000). The best starting points are: [www.japantimes.co.jp](http://www.japantimes.co.jp), the site for a well-known English language daily in Japan, and [www.nttl.co.jp/c/fpc](http://www.nttl.co.jp/c/fpc), the Foreign Press Centre in Tokyo which was set up to help foreign journalists in Japan keep abreast of current developments. A review of recent articles will confirm that many of the contemporary changes and debates surrounding crime and policing in Japan are by no means unique. One will discover, for example, that in both Britain and Japan there is a keenness to engender collaborative approaches towards community safety and to respond to public concerns for a more visible police presence on the streets. At the same time, both governments are under pressure to give more weight to the rights of victims and tackle youth crime issues effectively. In the same way that the Police Reform Bill passed by the Japanese House of Representatives in November 2000 adapted British practice on police-community consultative groups, our own government might find Japan an instructive example in developing its new 'fast-tracking' proposals for the British police service.

In conclusion — yes of course there are many significant differences between Britain and Japan in terms of crime and policing issues. However, we would suggest that they are far from being 'worlds apart'.

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