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

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Japan
Crime prevention
Volunteering
Police
Neighborhood association

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.
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, prefectoral 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. 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 prevention...
prevention campaign (2006). Taking a quite different approach, Amemiya et al. (2009) have conducted a survey among, among others, 291 criminals who were convicted for property crimes. They learned that crime targets tend to be chosen more or less by chance and without much preparation, and that crime is more likely to be prevented when there are more neighborhood eyes (perceived to be) watching. On the basis of these findings they highlight the usefulness of crime prevention volunteering as a part of machizukuri ideas, in view of the to be expected crime prevention effect of neighbors watching out for and over each other.

While crime prevention volunteering has thus enjoyed considerable scholarly attention, there are still aspects of crime prevention volunteering that have not been fully addressed. One (1) concerns the social organization of crime prevention volunteering and the consequences thereof in terms of the content of volunteering activities. Why do crime prevention volunteering activities look the way they do? What line of thought or theory lies behind the activities as they are being organized? Possibly as a result of the fact that the answers to these questions are more or less self-evident to Japanese researchers, they have not been sufficiently explicitly addressed. The same goes for (2) volunteers’ self-representation. In addition to the many government websites that introduce different volunteering groups and their activities (see supra, note 1), groups typically also present themselves and their activities in bulletins, pamphlets and on websites. Examining the ways in which volunteers do so - examining, in other words, their crime prevention talk and symbols, will help improve our understanding of (a) what volunteers aim to do beyond the options typically provided by multiple choice survey questions, as well as (b) volunteers’ understanding of the extent to which they achieve their volunteering goals, both of which are key to understanding the enduring popularity of this form of volunteering. This picture will be supplemented by and contrasted with information on crime prevention volunteering practices gathered through participant observation, talks and interviews with volunteers.

By addressing aspects (1) and (2) above, this article will provide an original contribution to the literature on crime prevention volunteering in Japan, and how this enduring social phenomenon can be understood. The article in addition has implications for more general, not necessarily Japan related discussions on the effects and effectiveness of neighborhood watch programs. Studies from different contexts show that such programs are generally effective – though to different degrees – in helping to prevent crime (e.g. Bennett et al., 2009, 2006; Duijnhoven and Nijkamp, 2015; Van Graan, 2016). With regard to the social impact of neighborhood watch programs, it has been argued that these play on suspicion and fear, resulting in residents feeling isolated from each other and turning the management of neighborhood activity over to outsiders – the police (Pepinsky, 1989; Zhao et al., 2002). Some of the implications of findings from Japanese contexts for debates on these issues will be preliminarily addressed in this article’s concluding discussion.

This article is based on field work conducted in different parts of Tokyo and Nagareyama city between August and December 2015. I spoke to volunteers in two groups based in Tokyo, and one in Nagareyama, a town with a population of around 180,000 people at some 40 km from Tokyo. Like most groups, these three groups were organized in close connection with the local neighborhood association (National Police Agency, 2015). The Tokyo based groups were active in the residential areas of Kameido and Takaibo. Besides managing the safety of the neighborhood’s housing complexes, the Kameido group focused on preventing crime by keeping the neighborhood clean, watching over children going to and coming back from school and conducting patrols. The Takaibo group focused especially on patrolling, conducted on foot as well as by “patrol car”, a car that looks much like a smaller version of a regular police car (such cars are provided by the crime prevention association to especially active groups). The group based in the residential area of Nagareyama similarly focused on patrolling the neighborhood. The size and frequency of patrols in these two groups varied from three times per week to several times per day. The number of participants typically ranged from around 4 to 20 members. Members could simply turn up at the agreed upon patrolling time, announced in neighborhood bulletins. Group sizes ranged from 84 (Nagareyama) to 43 (Takaibo) and 10 members (Kameido). The different groups’ activities tended to be driven, organized and carried out, however, by a core of 10–20 people, most of them retired and older than 60, who were typically also active as members of the local Neighborhood Association. Groups had slightly more male than female members; all group leaders were (elderly) men.

I participated in crime prevention activities such as patrolling, the making of so called safety maps and workshops on crime prevention organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG). In addition, I interviewed officials of TMG, members of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police involved in the support and promotion of crime prevention volunteering activities, crime prevention experts who provide information and training to the volunteers, as well as school teachers, members of Parent Teachers’ Associations and other concerned persons. My analysis presented here additionally draws on flyers, leaflets and 100 issues of a crime prevention information bulletin (usually comprised of one two-sided leaflet) produced and disseminated by the Nagareyama group between 2005 and 2015.

The article is structured as follows: part one addresses the societal background and developments against which the crime prevention volunteering boom has come about, the roles of those who helped engineer this volunteering boom, and by extension why volunteering activities look the way they do; part two discusses the self-representation of crime prevention volunteering activities and goals. Article findings and implications are addressed in a concluding discussion.

2. Moral panics and the social organization of crime prevention

Towards the end of 2003, the numbers of groups and citizens involved in crime prevention volunteering started rising steeply. This rise is often explained in terms of a growing societal concern about and fear of crime. In the late 1990s, a number of violent, nation-shocking crimes received enormous amounts of media attention. Increased media attention for crime in turn contributed to a public perception that crime was generally on the rise, and that in this day and age everybody could become a crime victim. The latter perception was furthermore reinforced by increased (media) attention for victims of crime and scandals surrounding cases in which
people had become victims of crime as a result of perceived police failure (see Kawai (2004), Hamai and Ellis (2006), Miyazawa (2008). This “crime wave”, then, is thought to have greatly contributed to a crime prevention volunteering boom that started towards the end of 2003.

While this crime prevention volunteering boom might not have come about if people had not been increasingly concerned about and fearful of crime, it is also important to note that this boom was to an important extent generated by police efforts. In 2003, the Japanese government organized a series of meetings that culminated in an Action Plan aimed at bringing about a “crime-resistant society”, and “making Japan the safest country in the world again” (Cabinet Office, 2003). Besides the goals of preventing a further increase in crime and overcoming the “security crisis,” this plan was also – and in fact first of all – aimed at reducing people's anxieties and fears about crime.

Especially relevant here are two elements of the strategy employed towards this aim. One (1) concerns the support of activities that allow citizens to secure their own safety by themselves. Noting that citizens' crime awareness should be raised, the Action Plan states that citizens' willingness to help should be channeled towards concrete actions, where the ideal is for the people to work hand in hand with government institutions. Another element of the Action Plan's strategy (2) is about creating a social environment in which it is harder for crimes to occur. Here the Plan explicitly refers to Wilson and Kelling's broken windows theory (1982), noting the success of broken windows theory-based policies in New York City. These two elements of the Action Plan greatly shaped the face of crime prevention volunteering in Japan. Concretely, in accordance with this plan, local police commissioners contacted the heads of local neighborhood associations and existing crime prevention associations and encouraged them to form crime prevention volunteering groups, which they did in great numbers.

Once a group is formed, the police provide members with information on crime “hotspots” (if applicable), up to date information on the time and place of recently occurred crimes, as well as information on how to prevent crime. Groups are in addition provided with crime prevention goods such as jackets, flashlights and wooden sticks to clap together (see also below), while members are covered by a volunteering insurance paid for by the police. Finally, police officers carry out patrols together with the volunteers (Tsuji, 2016).

The support and instruction that volunteers are given go much further than this, however. In cooperation with the police, local governments such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government regularly organize workshops and lectures for leaders of volunteering groups as well as for school teachers charged with safety issues at their school. These include lectures given by experts on crime prevention theory and practice. Participants are informed about, among other things, broken windows theory and defensible space theory (Newman, 1972) and how some of these concepts could be put into practice within the local neighborhood. For example, during a “safety map workshop” I attended in Tokyo, participants were first informed about ways to identify spaces that criminals would prefer. This information was based especially on criminologist Nobuo Komiya's research in this regard (2013). Participants were subsequently divided into small groups and sent into town, charged with distinguishing low risk from high risk places and how to address such risks. In addition to such events, the police, government and crime prevention associations and other relevant NPOs at local, prefectural and national levels make available an abundance of information on the best ways to go about preventing crime, again with regular reference to relevant criminological perspectives.

When it comes to information on crime prevention volunteering best practices, special emphasis is typically given to how crime preventive activities and strategies can be integrated in people's daily lives. People are encouraged to be mindful of crime prevention and in fact make their mindfulness apparent in their attire when walking their dog or cycling around the neighborhood. Or they may be encouraged to water their plants when the children in the neighborhood are going to or coming back from school, so that there are many neighborhood eyes watching over them (Hino, 2017, this issue).

Here it is important to keep in mind that most volunteers are older than 60 and retired, and that this demographic profile very much affects the shape that volunteering activities take. For many, the perceived need for crime prevention volunteering forms a welcome opportunity for physical activity and social interaction. In this sense, within a rapidly ageing society “crime prevention” is a goal as well as a means to a *machizukuri* (“town building”) end, where crime prevention volunteering is part of a range of neighborhood activities that people can take part in or attend, such as neighborhood festivals, art performances and collectively cleaning the neighborhood. These activities, then, are aimed at creating a pleasant living environment as well as an increased sense of community. The town that is built that way is presumed to be one where crime is less likely to occur (see also *infra*). It should be noted, however, that besides these very friendly looking activities for which crime prevention at times seems little more than an excuse – a label providing the activities with an air of usefulness and importance – many groups also install neighborhood CCTV cameras as part of their activities (as the Kameido and Takaido groups had also done). Groups do so typically on the basis of police advice, but the cameras are often maintained and managed by the groups themselves. The completion of the installation process then turns out to be a cause for celebrations. Festive parades, with traditional music and dance to celebrate the installation of CCTV cameras, are not uncommon. Volunteers of the Takaido group mentioned that initially the CCTV cameras had caused some protest, but that these had gradually disappeared, something they attributed to television programs showing how CCTV recordings contributed to the arrest of criminals.

*2* Every prefecture in Japan has its own crime prevention association, meaning that there are 47 prefectural associations nation-wide. Most local police stations (of which there are 1166), however, in turn have their own local crime prevention association. Prefectural level crime prevention associations are so-called public service corporations (NPOs) that employ paid staff, while local crime prevention associations are comprised of volunteers. Initially “crime prevention association” was simply another name for NHAs that were dismantled by the US General Headquarters (GHQ) after World War II in view of their regime supporting role during the war. In 1952 the ban on NHAs was lifted, however, and crime prevention associations were from the 1960s on re-organized separately from NHAs (interview with local crime prevention association, 16-12-2015, Hirakawa, 2012).
As also indicated earlier, patrolling, inspecting dangerous places and watching over children going to and coming from school are in any case the most widely practiced crime prevention volunteering activities. Among these, patrolling is by far the most frequently practiced and most common form of crime prevention volunteering. This can first of all be explained by the fact that patrolling is easy and in line with the theoretical perspective and general concepts on which crime prevention volunteering is based. To give some examples: during the patrols in which I participated, members would typically check if garbage had been left outside of designated areas or otherwise violated collection rules. Members of all three groups also looked out for abandoned (presumed to be stolen) bicycles as well as graffiti and flyers put up without permission. They would check if there were any broken lamp posts or holes in the road and relay any information either to the police or to the responsible city official. By patrolling, the volunteers would thus be alert to and take action at the sight of any “broken window”.

During patrols, volunteers would in addition emphatically greet any person they encountered. People would also come up to the volunteers to make small talk and occasionally report anything “suspicious” or odd, ranging from inappropriately placed garbage to a “suspicious card board box” found on a porch (that turned out to be empty). Along the way members would also check for overstuffed mail boxes, which would indicate that something might be wrong especially in the case of elderly residents. People would often walk by saying “thank you for your efforts”, while there were also people who flat out ignored the volunteers and their energetic greetings or advice on crime prevention (often given through a megaphone). Patrolling volunteers would also be talking much among themselves – and nearly all the volunteers I spoke with mentioned that patrols provided a welcome opportunity to talk with other members of the neighborhood. Patrols also provided volunteers with their daily dosage of exercise: “one patrol is good for 4000 steps!” The activity of patrolling the neighborhood is as such very much in line with ideas of “town building”, in the sense that they are aimed at creating a neighborhood in which there are opportunities for people (including elderly people) to actively interact, to get to know each other, watch over each other and stay physically active.

While the activity of patrolling fits well with some machizukuri ideals and broken windows theory-based notions about crime prevention, it also fits well with formats of neighborhood patrol that existed in the past. Beginning in the Edo-period (1603–1868) citizens organized volunteer fire fighting groups and walked around their neighborhoods in small groups to alert people to the risk of fire and to be careful when making use of fire. Among other things, they would use wooden sticks to make loud clapping sounds (like many crime prevention volunteers also do) and call out: “Be careful about fire!” (hinayoujin). It appears that groups of volunteer firefighters either still make use of, or have revived this format (Haddad, 2010; Japan Times, 2011). Crime prevention patrols in any case revived that same format, but with a focus on crime prevention. Interestingly, during patrols in Nagareyama members would mix their warnings about crime with warnings about fire.

By calling upon the neighborhood associations and invoking and reviving familiar volunteering formats, the National Police Agency and local government thus succeeded in engineering a crime prevention volunteering boom. This is not something new, however, or specific for crime prevention volunteering; through neighborhood associations, Japanese citizens have long been working closely with government authorities for the sake of bringing about goals set by those authorities (cf. Garon, 1998). While volunteers willingly follow an agenda set by the police, it would be misleading to think that the management of neighborhood activity is turned over to outsiders (cf. Pepinsky, 1989; Zhao et al., 2002). The above account shows that crime prevention volunteering in Japan is very much part of neighborhood self-governance, embedded in a wider range of volunteering activities organized by the neighborhood association.

3. The self-representation of crime prevention volunteering

Much like many other crime prevention volunteering groups, the Nagareyama group produced bulletins that were fixed on bulletin boards around the neighborhood and distributed among the households in the area “governed” by the NHA (586 households; 1520 inhabitants). These bulletins were single page leaflets printed on both sides in black and white and provided information on crime in and outside the neighborhood, information on ways to prevent crime as well as past and future group activities and invitations to join such activities. While different members contributed to these leaflets, one person was formally in charge. This section is primarily based on 100 bulletins produced and disseminated by the Nagareyama group between 2005 and 2015. This allows for an analysis of the crime prevention talk and symbols of a typical crime prevention volunteering group that represents an average in Japan in terms of membership profile, activities undertaken, and close connections with the local NHA and the local police. The picture presented by the 100 bulletins will be supplemented by and contrasted with information on crime prevention volunteering practices gathered through participating in patrols and talking with volunteers during and after those patrols.

3.1. Information, admonitions and invitations

The bulletins, titled “patrol news”, typically contained statistical information provided by the police on crimes that had occurred in Nagareyama city, in other parts of Japan and inside as well as (usually) outside the neighborhood. Specifically and frequently mentioned were numbers of burglaries, cases of theft from cars, purse snatching, car theft and fraud. Besides crime, bulletins also provided statistics and other information on traffic accidents and other accidents that might happen in and around the house. Bulletins accordingly provided a whole of information relevant for safe living that went well beyond crime.

Besides information on crimes and (traffic) accidents, the bulletins each time contained various tips on how to prevent these from happening. The different accidents and forms of crime, invariably described as “frequently occurring” or “on the rise”, were explained in terms of people’s unawareness of crime, a misplaced confidence that they would not become a victim of either crime or an accident, or a careless attitude. This explanation was often explicitly based on information provided by the police on how criminals operate,
providing, for example, a list of reasons why criminals had chosen their target or abandoned their attempts at theft or burglary. That information, then, showed citizens how they could protect themselves and how small things such as greeting people, including strangers, or keeping the light on when leaving the house, could prevent crime.

While the information provided could thus be said to be empowering citizens, it also implied that crimes and accidents are things that come about as a result of citizens failing to take the right precautions. The information accordingly also allowed for the formulating of directions on a “correct attitude” and correct ways of living and acting. Those not following those ways were labeled as sloppy, careless or stingy (too stingy to always leave e.g. the porch lights on), as illustrated by the following quotes from a recurring cartoon thief in the bulletins:

“I’ll be coming by your house shortly! Well, that’s an easy house to pay a visit to! That is, and this is a trade secret, it’s a sloppy house (darashinai ie), a house where people have left their laundry hanging outside, and where they are stingily cutting down on their electricity bill! I won’t be going into a house with people who are watching out, you know!”

The bulletins were in addition full of slogans and exhortations, typically connected to the information provided. Many of these were and are very similar to those found on police websites promoting crime prevention volunteering and the websites and leaflets of other volunteering groups. Typical slogans of this genre are “let’s gather to protect our own town by ourselves”, “let’s make the most of this (crime prevention volunteering) for the sake of community bonds”; “let’s greet our neighbors when going out” (so that people know there is or should be nobody in the house). These slogans are thus in line with the earlier mentioned idea(s) of town building. The effort of raising crime prevention awareness and bringing about daily crime prevention routines are here part of an effort to create a living environment in which people feel safe and secure and look out for each other, one in which they stay socially and physically active. This “town building” dimension was further illustrated by the repeated mentioning – both in bulletins and during patrols - of how patrolling helped a person stay fit (see supra, section 2), while allowing him or her to meet new people - as is also illustrated by the following quote:

“To those who have stopped working, and who are leaving behind all sorts of memories: won’t you participate in patrols? Human connections, that will again be fun, are awaiting you. Please make use of this opportunity.”

Bulletins were also very much about announcing upcoming activities and events and to encourage people to take part. These included regular patrols as well as patrols for children, performances by local artists, meetings with the police about “the enduring need for volunteers and the police to work together”, prefectural gatherings of volunteering groups as well as national symposia on volunteering best practices. When the group’s main activity, patrolling, was mentioned in the bulletins, it was typically presented as an effective way of preventing crime, in reference also to the ways in which criminals operate. Patrolling was here presented as a way to increase the number of residents’ eyes watching. After all: “what criminals fear most is residents’ gaze”. This phrase could be found not only in bulletins, but also on stickers and posters fixed to gates, doors and fences (etc.) all over the neighborhood. In this way volunteers turned their neighborhood into a place where neighborhood eyes were presented as always watching.

3.2. Mixed successes of patrolling

Besides announcing and promoting activities that were going to take place, the bulletins also provided accounts of these activities afterwards, typically describing them as fun, inspiring, encouraging, educational and heartwarming. The bulletins in addition gave accounts of the things members had encountered during patrols – their main activity - as well as patrol results. Within the 100 bulletins, representing 10 years of patrolling, there were just two accounts, however, of a “crime in progress” directly encountered during patrol: members noticed that a scaffolding had been placed next to a house, apparently in preparation of work to be done on the roof, even though the roof seemed to be in order. When the elderly inhabitant was asked about this, it turned out that he had just been convinced of the need for – as it turned out – unnecessary and expensive “repairs”. Members made sure a “cooling off card” was sent, and that the reparations were called off. Another direct encounter with crime concerned an illegal campfire made in the local park, presumably by two boys who had quickly driven off on their bicycles after spotting the volunteers. Apart from these episodes, the closest encounter with crime in practice were the abandoned, presumed to be stolen bicycles found during patrols.

When asked about crime encountered during patrols, volunteers’ typical response would be “first of all, there is none, you know” (“mazu nai ne”). When discussed, crime appeared to be something (scary) that after all took place outside the neighborhood. Volunteers expressed concern about crime in Japan and crime in their own city (regardless of reports of diminishing crime rates), while remaining relatively unconcerned about crime in their own neighborhood, their own living environment. The message pervading their bulletins, namely that crime was always lurking around the corner thus seemed to concern, after all, the world outside the neighborhood.

Besides the two often recounted “close calls”, recurring bulletin topics were also the children who would every day wave, talk to or play rock-paper-scissors with the patrollers, and people who had said that they felt at ease whenever they would hear the clapping sound of volunteers’ wooden sticks. The bulletins did not only list patrol success stories, however. They also mentioned regular encounters with people who pretended not to listen to patrollers’ advice – “I suppose there’s nothing we can do about that” - or who

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This information was in line with the study by police researchers Amemiya et al. (2009) referred to earlier (section 1), that is based on a survey among 291 convicted criminals.

Crime prevention volunteering thus involves a conscious effort to increase social interaction not only by including as many people as possible in volunteering activities (which would then also mean that participants become part of the network of those active in the local neighborhood association), but also by encouraging neighbors and other members of the neighborhood to greet and talk to each other. From this perspective it is not evident that the Japanese version of neighborhood watch would, as argued by Pepinsky (1989), result in residents feeling (more than before) isolated from each other.
made clear they would not have any of volunteers’ advice. One bulletin described, for example, an encounter with a woman who got angry on being given advice (through a megaphone) on the importance of bicycle lights and the risks of purse snatching: “Don’t say that through a megaphone! I don’t have time to fix my light. I work”. To this the comment was added: “luckily she wasn’t from our neighborhood”.

These accounts thus show how through patrols, volunteers confronted the outside world in a way that they did not in their other activities, typically attended by fellow volunteers, NHA members and their children. Within the context of police information on the imminent dangers of crime and accidents and the regular slogans and tips on how to stay safe, the importance of volunteers’ activities was clear. Once volunteers went on patrol, however, it turned out that there was “to begin with, no crime” and that besides those thankful for volunteers’ efforts, there were also many people uninterested in or annoyed by patrollers’ activities.

Volunteers’ own characterizations of patrols also mirrored the mix between the “official” crime prevention idiom and mundane patrol accounts found in the bulletins. Thus, during and after patrols some members emphasized the usefulness of and need for patrols while others seemed quite unconcerned with the “official” goals, and indicated they were quite content just to be walking outdoors (as long as the weather was fine), talking to their neighborhood acquaintances. Some volunteers also explained that they simply had a lot of time on their hands, while again others stated that patrolling was part of their activities for the neighborhood association (this was in fact the case for the vast majority of those interviewed). In other words: their participation was not so much related to the specific focus of the activities, but rather part of their more general effort to do something for the area they lived in. These accounts of the mixed success and the (uneventful) reality of daily patrols in any case bring into focus questions about the sense and effectiveness of crime prevention volunteering in general and patrolling in particular.

The effectiveness of crime prevention volunteering was a recurring subject that provoked contradictory messages. On the basis of police statistics the bulletins showed that registered crime was “dramatically” going down. This decrease was something that was, every year again, proudly announced and referred to in the group leader’s New Year greeting, published in the bulletin. At the same time, the bulletins emphasized, again and again, all the different kinds of crime that regularly occurred, how easy it was to become a crime victim, but also that crime was in fact rising: “Danger! With the coming summer crime is going to go up!”; “Danger! Winter is a time of year in which many crimes and fires occur!”; “Scary! When the end of the month approaches, purse snatching increases! Scary!”; “Scary! Dramatic increases of crimes targeting the elderly! Scary!” – etc., etc.

The depictions of the levels and dangers of crime thus did not diminish, always conveying a sense of danger and risk, irrespective of the crime statistics presented and the daily experience of crime prevention patrolling. Such depictions of crime as an enduring threat were arguably made possible by the perceived dichotomy between the safe neighborhood and the world outside that neighborhood, generally conceived as one in which crime in any case was a scary problem. The enduring concern about crime was however also fueled by meetings with the police, reported on in the bulletins, during which the police invariably emphasized the need for continued cooperation, and “forcefully argued the importance of patrols”, and the continuation of volunteering activities.

Another reason that volunteers gave – both during patrols and in the bulletins – for continuing their activities was that of raising a new generation of volunteers. As noted earlier, the majority of volunteers were older than 60, and the Nagareyama group attracted only very few members of younger generations. It did, however, regularly organize crime patrols for children, that in practice often consisted of practice sessions for safe bicycle riding, storytelling, making drawings about things to do with safety, etc. Children would however also receive crime prevention goods as well as patrol membership certificates, formally handed to them by local police officers. Raising a new generation of crime prevention volunteers (“a rainbow bridge to the future”) was here repeatedly presented as another reason for volunteers to continue their activities, so that these would turn out to be “little mustard seeds that would grow and grow”. While this was a very positive way of presenting reasons to continue, members also voiced the concern that if they stopped their volunteering activities (if old age forced them to stop) there would be nobody to continue with crime and safety volunteering activities – a concern also shared by government officials.

4. Concluding discussion: findings and implications

The previous sections have shown that the Japanese crime prevention volunteering boom that started after 2003 was to a great extent engineered by the National Police Association, in close cooperation with neighborhood associations. As a result of their combined efforts new crime prevention volunteering groups were formed and existing ones reinvigorated. In promoting specific volunteering activities, notably crime prevention patrolling, the police and local government used or revived familiar volunteering formats while also providing volunteers with information and training. As a result, volunteers’ activities are very much informed and influenced by criminological theories, concepts and research. Nevertheless, while crime is the official focus of volunteering groups’ activities, these are also part of and fit well with more general (local) government “town building” efforts. These town building efforts, then, are about creating a living environment in which young but especially also older people can lead healthy lives while feeling safe and secure.

In their bulletins, volunteers phrased their reasons for engaging in and continuing with crime prevention volunteering in terms of

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5. Besides confirming in this way the necessity and sense of volunteers’ activities, through decorations and awards the police also officially recognized the value of these activities. A group's efforts could in addition be recognized by being invited to and give a presentation about their activities at prefectural and national crime prevention voluntary symposia – an honor that was also bestowed on the Nagareyama group. In the bulletins leading up to and following such events this honor and recognition were repeatedly presented as a reason to continue volunteering activities, although in talks with volunteers the importance or relevance of such recognition for continuing their activities could not be ascertained.
such town building idea(s), as well as in terms of raising of a new generation of volunteers. A more pressing reason was the threat of crime, to which local volunteers' activities were the answer. Depictions of these activities as a useful and effective way to keep the neighborhood safe were explicitly informed by crime statistics and criminological research findings. Representations of the threat of crime nevertheless also had a life of their own. While statistics showed decreasing numbers of registered crime – “proof” of the effect of volunteering activities - crime continued to be represented as being dramatically on the rise, always lurking around the corner and always dangerous and scary. Such representations of an ever present and increasing crime threat contrasted not only with the statistical information presented, but also with the accounts of crime prevention patrols provided in the bulletins. They in addition contrasted with members’ own accounts of their activities offered during (uneventful) patrols. With the exception of abandoned bicycles and two crime-like events in 10 years – these accounts contained no reference to actual encounters with crime, supporting volunteers’ own statements that in the area patrolled there was no crime to speak of. Besides reasons related to volunteers’ perceptions of the usefulness of crime prevention volunteering, the bulletins suggest that the societal recognition of such usefulness also played a part in motivating volunteers to continue with their activities. Nevertheless, volunteers’ own accounts illustrated that crime prevention volunteering was not necessarily about town building, crime prevention or specific recognition of the value of crime prevention volunteering. Most volunteers were already active as members of the neighborhood association (NHA), and being engaged in crime prevention volunteering was accordingly also part of being an active NHA member and generally making a contribution to the neighborhood, regardless of the form or focus of that contribution.

In Japan, crime prevention volunteering is very much part of neighborhood self-governance, embedded in a wider range of volunteering activities organized by the neighborhood association. While the management of neighborhood activity is thus not so much turned over to outsiders (cf. Pepinsky, 1989), part of the volunteering agenda is indeed set by the police, who work closely with volunteers willing to contribute to the public cause.

Doing volunteering work means being included in a bigger network of people being active in the neighborhood. Keeping in mind also that increased social interaction and building social capital are actively pursued as a crime prevention strategy, it is not evident that the Japanese version of neighborhood watch would, as argued by Pepinsky (1989), result in residents feeling isolated from each other (Zhao et al., 2002).

Volunteering activities do however contribute to increased mutual surveillance and social control, as neighbors watch over each other in different ways, but also check which households are sloppy and which neighbor is “too stingy to leave the lights on”. Such mutual surveillance is further increased by the CCTV cameras that volunteers are seemingly happy to install in their neighborhoods. That installing CCTV cameras gives cause for celebration may here be related to perceptions of crime as something coming from outside the neighborhood; a means for members of the neighborhood to defend their neighborhood themselves (although residents’ attitudes towards these CCTV cameras would be a topic for further study).

The close contacts with the police and the instant relaying of information thought to be relevant do furthermore result in volunteers turning themselves into surrogate police officers, illustrated also by the mini-police patrol car used by active groups. All in all, crime prevention volunteering in Japan contributes to increased social contacts, physical activity and possibly also lower crime rates, while producing spaces in which the neighborhood’s watchful eyes are hard to avoid.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Funding

This work was supported by the Vaes-Elias Fund/Leiden Asia Centre.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the members of the Kameido, Nagareyama and Takaido crime prevention volunteering groups for their kind cooperation, as well as Professor Kimihiro Hino for his introduction to these groups.

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