

Japanese Community Police and Police Box System

1. Overview of Police Box System

(1) Overview of Japanese Community Police

The Japanese community police force in police stations is mainly composed of officers posted at police boxes (Koban) or residential police boxes (Chuzaiho), and those assigned to radio patrol cars. Some community police officers in a police station are assigned to police guard posts, check posts and police station-based patrol units.

In addition, each prefectural police headquarters has a railway police unit, a communications command center, police vessels, and police aircraft (helicopter).

The main characteristics of the community police are: (i) to become part of the local community and engage in activities that are closely related to the daily life and the safety of residents, (ii) to let community residents know about the presence of police officers and carry out neighborhood watch and prevention activities such as patrols, (iii) to be the first to respond to any emergencies.

For most community residents, community police officers are both tough crime fighters and friendly protectors. They call them ‘omawari-san’ (Dear patrol officer) with a degree of respect and affection. The term conveys the image of someone who is gentle but strong, like a big brother or uncle.

(2) Police box as the center of community policing

The police service should aim for the safety and security of community residents and therefore should include patrols and other activities which make the police close to the public. This is the reason why Japanese police adopted the police box system, which includes a wide deployment of police officers in communities all over the country. It enables the police to grasp the security condition of each community and the opinions, needs, and worries of the residents.

From the viewpoint of crime control, this means that the Japanese police system aims for prevention of and deterrence against crime by keeping in touch with community residents, giving guidance, and conducting law enforcement for relatively minor violations and disorderly conduct.

Amid a worsening crime situation in Japan, the strengthening of the traditional crime deterrent functions of the police box system has currently become a hot topic within the police community.

(3) History of the Japanese Police Box System

From the 17th to 19th century, Japan was ruled by a succession of shoguns, a time called the Edo period. The rule of the shoguns came to an end between 1867 and 1968 in what is known as the Meiji Restoration, and Japan began its march towards a modern nation state. As part of this process, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department was established in 1874 to protect the public order in the Tokyo, the capital. In that year, “Kobansho” (designated places where policemen engaged in standing watch duties in shifts) were set up at major intersections and other important locations in Tokyo. Boxes were built at some Kobansho locations later on.

In 1881, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department decided to provide all Kobansho with boxes, and their name was changed to “Hashutsujo” (police box). This effectively marked the beginning of today’s police box system. Subsequently, the police box system spread to other prefectures. At that time, 330 police boxes were established, manned by 2,042 officers.

In 1886, when the Local Civil Service System was decreed through an imperial order, a “one police station for one county or city” system was established. In 1888, the Ministry of the Interior issued an administrative ordinance to all prefectures, except Tokyo, demanding to set up “Chuzaisho” (residential police boxes), in every town and village in principle.

Before the above ordinance was issued, police forces had been concentrated in urban areas. After that, police officers came to be permanently deployed throughout Japan. Since each residential police box was manned by one officer, the nationwide deployment of police forces was possible without dramatically increasing personnel numbers. In 1897, there were 1,255 police boxes and 11,047 residential police boxes. Following the ordinance, a host of residential police boxes were established, and this forms the basis of police boxes in urban areas and residential police boxes in rural areas currently in place.

Instead of a traditional two-shift system, a three-shift system was adopted around 1970 throughout the country. The only exception is the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, which introduced a four-shift system in 1972, with overnight duty in every four days.

While the Japanese formal name for a police box was “Hashutsujo,” the nickname “Koban” was widely used among community residents. In 1994, the formal name also became “Koban”, and the word “Koban” began to be displayed in roman letters in front of the entrance to help those who can’t read Japanese characters recognize a police box when they see it.

2. Operation of police boxes

(1) Differences between police boxes and residential police boxes

According to the Community Police Operation Rules, police boxes are in principle established in urban areas, usually operated in shift services.

Residential police boxes, on the other hand, are in principle established in non-urban areas (rural or semi-rural areas) and manned by a single officer, who lives his family in the residential section attached to the office.

With these differences, the police box and residential police box have their own strengths.

Police boxes are more advantageous in terms of the prevention of crimes and accidents, and the response to such events, because each of them is manned by more than one officer around the clock. In the case of a large-scale police box, someone is always there, so it is convenient for visitors.

In contrast, each residential police box is manned by just one officer, making it possible to cover a wide area with a small number of personnel. The residential police box system is effective in rural and semi-rural areas, where there are relatively few crimes and accidents. Since officers posted at residential police boxes work and live in the same place with their family, they can keep in closer contact with community residents.

(2) Police box facilities

Police boxes vary widely in size. Apart from an office area, a police box has a simple kitchen and break room for officers. A “community room”, a reception room for residents, has recently been incorporated. Residential police boxes have been built as a combination of office and residence, and recently they also contain a community room in the office section. Small-size police cars are deployed at many police boxes and residential police boxes for use in patrols and trips to and from the police station.

All police boxes and residential police boxes feature a red lamp above their entrances. Many community residents feel reassured when they see this lamp, and it has become an instantly recognizable symbol for a police box or residential police box.

(3) Officers of police boxes

As of April 2004, there are about 6500 police boxes and 7600 residential police boxes in Japan. Of the nationwide 245,000 police officers, some 88,000 or 36%

engage in community police activities, including about 45,000 posted at police boxes, and 8,000 posted at residential police boxes

Officers posted at police boxes are ranked Assistant Police Inspector or below, i.e. Policeman, Police Sergeant or Assistant Police Inspector. They vary in age. All newly recruited officers are first deployed at police boxes after receiving training at a prefectural police school. However, there are quite a few community police officers who are in their 50s amid a rapid aging of Japanese police organizations. In Japan, the retirement age of public employees, including police officers, is 60, and most police officers serve until their retirement age.

Police box chiefs, who in principle work eight hours a day and five days a week, are assigned to many police boxes. Most police box chiefs are ranked Assistant Police Inspector (occasionally Police Inspector). In addition to commanding his subordinates, a police box chief shares the same duties as his staff if necessary, and liaises with municipalities within the jurisdiction of his police boxes.

(4) People who contribute to the police boxes

As of April 2004, approx. 3000 so-called police box counselors are assigned nationwide to police boxes as part-time staff. Most of them are retired police officers. Although police box counselors are unable to engage in the arrest of suspects and other law-enforcement activities, they can make a contribution by performing non-enforcement duties, such as consulting citizens, giving directions and handling lost or found property, in collaboration with police box officers.

Hiring police box counselors is done with the intention of accommodating two contradictory community demands - strengthening police patrols and keeping staff at police boxes at all times. The presence of police box counselors makes it easier for officers to go on the beat.

In the case of a residential police box, the police officer usually lives with his family. Here, the wife of the officer receives residents who visit the residential police box while the officer is out where he is needed. Although the wife is not a public employee, she receives a monthly residential police box allowance, a payment designed to reward her contribution to police activities.

3. Duties and Activities of Community Police Officers

(1) Mode of service

Officers posted at police boxes, in principle, work in shifts - four shifts in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and three in other prefectures. Under the three-shift system in which most police box officers work, on-duty officers work from one morning to the next, but their net working hours are 16, because they receive a total of an eight-hour break over the shift. At busy police boxes such as those located in city areas, however, officers cannot take such long breaks.

The basic duties of officers posted at a police box include standing watch in front of the police box, sitting watch from inside, and field duties consisting of patrols and door to door visits to homes and businesses. Officers posted at police boxes work according to a schedule set for each service day, e.g. standing watch from hour A to hour B, patrol from hour C to hour D, and so on. Needless to say, if a crime, accident or any other emergency event occurs, response to that event takes precedence.

In contrast, a residential police box officer works eight hours a day and five days a week. However, he needs to receive residents even outside working hours if requested. Because the area of a residential police box is fairly large, door to door visits are usually undertaken simultaneously with patrols. The wife often helps her husband by, for example, receiving visitors while the husband is out .

The duties of officers assigned to patrol cars are more specific, and cover mobile patrols, the arrest of offenders, and rushing to the scene of crimes and accidents, followed by initial action. They perform their duties in pairs, with one officer driving the vehicle, while the other keeps an eye out for suspicious persons, and engages in radio communication.

(2) Basic duties (Watch duty and patrol)

A diverse range of people visit police boxes. Many ask for directions. In the case of a police box in front of a train station, most visitors are of this kind. Other common visitors include those reporting lost or found property, a crime, or a traffic accident.

Standing watch is a duty performed in front of the police box, but it is sometimes performed from inside the police box (sitting watch). When a citizen visits the police box, the officer is allowed to receive him/her even when the officer is on the watch duty.

Patrols are the most important duty for community police officers in that the visible presence of police officers in their uniforms prevents crimes and gives community residents sense of security. Patrols are in principle to be performed either

on foot or by bicycle, because that way officers can effectively grasp the situation and assess suspicious persons. Where the area of the police box is large, a small patrol car or motorcycle may be used.

While on patrol, officers question suspicious persons and make arrests or give guidance or warnings if there is a crime or an unlawful activity. They also give guidance to traffic law violators and juvenile delinquents, take care of drunken persons and missing children, and give advice to community residents. Officers on patrol sometimes drop “patrol cards” in mailboxes. Patrol cards inform residents of any security problem, while reminding them that police officers are on patrol in the area.

In response to the worsening crime situation, the Japanese police services introduced a new policy in the summer of 2001 to give top priority to patrol activities and to greatly increase patrol hours by extending patrol car operating hours and setting up special units for foot patrols. As a result, the number of Penal Code offenders arrested by community police officers rose by 1.3 times in 2004 compared with 2001, the year the policy of strengthening patrols was introduced.

(3) First response to crimes and accidents

In Japan, the police emergency call number is 110. In each prefecture, all 110 calls are directed to the communications command center of the prefectural police headquarters, where commands are issued to the relevant police stations. Upon receiving a command, the police station dispatches officers from the nearest police box or sends patrol cars to the scene. Officers who have arrived at the scene report on the situation to the police station and the communications command center. If a certain type of crime, such as a felonious crime, is committed and the suspects are still at large, community police officers within a certain distance from the scene are immediately deployed. They are sent to find and arrest suspects by setting up checkpoints and other measures.

In the handling of a criminal case, the role of community police officers involves gathering evidence, preserving the site, arresting suspects, and protecting citizens. With a serious crime, accident, or other incident, the case is handed over to specialized police officers dispatched from the police station or headquarters.

In recent years, the number of 110 calls has dramatically increased. In 2004, there were approximately 9.5 million calls, which is a 1.8 times increase from 10 years earlier. The rise in the number of 110 calls has resulted in an increase in the workload of community police officers.

(4) Clearance of crimes by community police officers

In 2004, about 324,000 Penal Code offense suspects were arrested by community police officers. This accounts for about 83% of all Penal Code offenders, which totaled about 389,000.

At the same time, community police officers arrested 51,000 special law offense suspects, sharing about 66% of all 76,000 offenders, excluding violations of road traffic laws. They also cleared about 6.3 million traffic law violations, or 53% of the total (11.9 million).

Community police officers play the central role in clearing criminal cases on the street. Approximately 47% of Penal Code offense cleared by community police officers started with the questioning of suspicious persons. This illustrates the importance of police questioning. In contrast, detectives and other officers assigned to the criminal investigation branch work on mainly serious crimes, such as felonious offenses through investigations conducted in civilian clothes. Community police officers and detectives have different roles in overall crime clearance activities.

(5) Communication with residents (Door to Door visits, Newsletters, Liaison council)

Door to door visits help police maintain a good relationship with the community and grasp the situation in an area. They are designed to give advice regarding crime prevention to homes and businesses as well as to listen to the opinions and requests of residents. When an officer visits a home or business, he hands out a “door to door visit card” and asks that it be filled out with the names of the family members or employees and emergency contact information in case of a crime or accident. During door to door visits, officers distribute information about crimes and accidents in the area, safety measures, and the like.

Police boxes publish one-page long newsletters once a month, or every few months. They used to be handwritten before the prevalent use of personal computers. Each newsletter is designed to be passed around or distributed to households within the jurisdiction of the police box. Topics center on crimes, accidents and preventive methods, with pictures and graphs to be more interesting to the reader.

Apart from interviewing residents during door to door visits and conversing with visitors, each police box has set up a police box liaison council. The council members, representatives of community residents, meets several times a year with police box officers in attendance. At these meetings, officers listen to the opinions and requests of the council members, and discuss various problems in the community.

(6) Injuries in line of duty

Community police officers tend to sustain injuries in the line of duty, alongside traffic police officers. Many community police officers suffer from injury, as they are attacked while questioning suspects.

To prevent injuries, various measures have been put in place. These include an amendment in November 2001 to the rules for the handling of guns. This amendment aimed to reverse the excessively restrictive attitude towards the use of guns, which has been traditionally held in the Japanese police community. Officers are now advised to use their guns if necessary.

To protect officers from knife attacks, knife-proof clothing is being introduced. Such clothing is worn underneath the uniform. Suppression devices are used such as police batons, nightsticks and “sasumata”. A “sasumata” is a U-shaped prong attached to the end of a long pole which has been used since the Edo period (17th to 19th centuries).

(7) Personnel guidance, supervision and evaluation

Since community police officers are working outside the police station, guidance and supervision has greater importance, as compared to other branches.

Guidance and supervision for officers posted at police boxes is primarily made by senior officers from the police station, as well as the police box chief, if appointed. Residential police boxes are also subject to supervision by a senior officer from the police station. In addition to going the rounds of police boxes, the senior officer examines activity records to provide guidance.

With officers assigned to patrol cars, a car locator system makes it possible to monitor their activities fairly closely, as it displays the location and status of each patrol car on the monitor screen at the communications command center.

The method of evaluation varies from prefecture to prefecture. Generally speaking, priority is given to the clearance of crimes, but a good relationship with the community is also important. The evaluation also depends on the clearance of traffic law violations, performance of door to door visits, courtesy to citizens, and the appropriateness of clothes worn.

4. Current Problems of Community Police

(1) Vacant police box problem

A vacant police box is a police box with no officer present to receive visitors. The fact that police boxes often become vacant is a political issue. As of April 2004, Approximately 38% of all police boxes (about 2460 nationwide) have less than two

officers per shift, and these small police boxes tend to become vacant fairly often. To meet the needs of community residents, officers should be always present at the police box. This is not easy, given that officers must go on patrols and rush to the scene in the event of a crime or accident.

In order to respond to the dramatically increased crime rate, community police officers are no longer spending enough hours at police boxes. The number of 110 calls has risen 1.8 times in the last 10 years.

To alleviate the vacant police box problem, the National Government of Japan has launched an initiative to increase the number of police officers from FY 2001, and the deployment of retired police officers as police box counselors is underway. In addition, equipment allowing visitors to communicate with the police station using visual images, is being deployed at some police boxes.

In the summer of 2004, all prefectural police headquarters have drawn up their own plans and have been implementing them in order to eliminate vacant police boxes by spring of 2007.

(2) Operation of residential police boxes

The number of residential police boxes has been decreasing, with 800 of them eliminated over the past 10 years. Residential police boxes, where one officer works during the daytime, are increasingly being replaced by urban type of police boxes. This is largely due to a rising nighttime crime rate and other factors associated with urbanization.

At a residential police box, the officer in principle lives with his family. Therefore, the family plays an important role, such as receiving visitors when the officer is out.

However, the lack of clear distinction between public and private lives places a great burden on the family. It is recommended, but not compulsory, for police officers to live with their family. However, less and less officers are doing so.

On the other hand, there have been attempts to set up residential police boxes in urban areas, in order to rebuild community solidarity and crime deterrence. It is hoped that this will bring together the local community and engage them in police activities.

(3) Difficulty in carrying out door to door visits

Door to door visits, one of the important activities in establishing a good rapport with the community, are becoming increasingly difficult, particularly for police box officers in urban areas.

One of the reasons of this difficulty is an increase in the number of crimes and accidents, which reduces time available to officers for door to door visits. Another factor is changes in the urban lifestyle. Namely, the number of double income or single member households, where no one is home during the daytime, has increased. This means many residents are unavailable or unwilling to cooperate with police officers. To resolve this issue, some prefectural police have assigned older and experienced officers for only door to door visit tasks.

In addition, efforts have been made to work in collaboration with residents' organizations for the dissemination of crime prevention information and the promotion of crime prevention campaigns.

5. Essential factors of the police box and residential police box system

Factors essential for a successful police box system are as follows:

First, good security conditions are a fundamental prerequisite for the system. Although police boxes are institutions designed to secure public safety, they can only be successful in areas that are already safe. For example, in an area where terrorist attacks frequently occur, police boxes could become easy targets. It is still necessary for officers to make a lot of effort in order to defend a police box against less serious crimes such as vandalism and other attacks. A small number of officers are deployed to a large number of places under the system. Therefore, the police box system can be successful under highly secure conditions such as what Japan has.

Japan's good security conditions have been underpinned by the police box system, and also by non-police factors such as sea-bound geographical conditions, a highly homogenous society, group conscious culture, economic and industrial development, and strict weapons ownership control. In other words, the police box system has been able to contribute to the safety of Japan because it already had favorable conditions for maintaining public security.

Second, the presence of quality officers with a good relationship with community residents is necessary.

Police officers stationed at a police box come into direct contact with community residents everyday. Their quality has a major influence on how residents perceive the police. In Japan, the high quality of police officers in general, not just community police officers, is believed to have contributed to the success of the police box system. While the Japanese police were embroiled in a series of scandals several years ago, most police officers are honest and diligent. It is reasonable to say that Japan has attained high quality police officers.

The quality of police officers is important from the viewpoint of personnel management. Officers posted at police boxes and residential police boxes come under the direct supervision of senior officers less frequently than those working at the police headquarters or a police station. It is difficult to maintain the efficiency of police boxes. To ensure proper enforcement of duties in such a working environment, it is necessary to recruit quality personnel and train them well.

Although the Japanese police box system now faces various challenges under a deteriorating security situation, it has firmly taken root in the society for over 100 years, and has played an important role in the maintenance of public order, working with community resident contributions.