

Closing Plenary Session

Title:

The paradox of criminology in a 'safe' country: The case of Japan – How has Japan maintained a low crime rate?

Koichi Hamai

Professor of Criminology
Ryukoku University, Japan

Abstract:

Japan enjoyed its post-war reputation as one of the most crime-free countries. The number of homicides reported in Japan has constantly decreased since 1955, to an all-time low of 895 in 2016 (950 in 2019). According to the 2019 UN Global Study on Homicide, the Japanese homicide rate in 2017 was around 0.2 per 100,000 population – which was lower than in nearly any other advanced democracy. Japan has effectively controlled illegal drug markets. The lifetime experience rate of illegal drugs is also very low in Japan, with 1.2% reporting cannabis use.

Several explanations have been postulated for why Japan has maintained a very low crime rate. These include, for example, that Japan is a relatively homogeneous society that has few immigrants, or that it has a good criminal justice system. At the 14th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, one of the Japanese delegates claimed that the Japanese people “have developed trust and confidence that their laws are formulated through a legitimate process and are applied in a fair manner, thereby fostering a culture of lawfulness rooted in society”. Is this claim valid and the reason for the low crime rate? A social psychologist, Toshio Yamagishi, claims that social order in Japan is maintained by mutual monitoring and threat of exclusion, rather than enforcement of universal rules of conduct (laws).

John Braithwaite once claimed that Japan's success in maintaining a low crime rate could be explained by the commitment of the Japanese criminal justice system, and Japanese society in general, to notions of reintegration and reparation. But, has Japanese society really been re-integrative, and has the criminal justice been lenient toward offenders? While the number of crimes has been decreasing, the prison population contains many elderly and handicapped people who have been detained for minor offenses. In 2019, more than 13% of new inmates were above 65 years of age and have no pension to fall back on. According to a recent study by the Ministry of Justice, it was found that 14% of inmates over 60 are suffering from forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease. Moreover, some elderly inmates have tried to return to prison by committing another crime just because they knew that there was no place for them outside the wall. Then, in the last two decades, more than a thousand of them have died in prisons. In Japanese society, people are very intolerant of the behaviors which disturb social and moral order or cause trouble. Therefore, people are afraid of disturbing conformity. Considering these aspects, I will explore the social mechanisms of the low crime rate in Japan and the future of criminology in the shrinking Japanese criminal justice market.