U.S. Cops Here to Scan Japanese Police Tactics

By Denise Pellegrini

Police officials from 12 U.S. cities got a firsthand look at a neighborhood police box in Tokyo recently as a part of a two-week tour to pick up tips from their counterparts in Japan, a country that is virtually free of violent crime.

The 16 high-ranking police officials will also visit Osaka, Japan's second largest city. The trip is sponsored by the Eisenhower Foundation, which works with community groups to battle urban violence.

"The most impressive thing so far is the good relationship Japanese police have with the community," said Philadelphia Police Commissioner Willie Williams. The more than 1,200 neighborhood police boxes, called "koban," that dot Tokyo provide the base from which Japanese police maintain that relationship.

The koban serves as the link between the police and the city's many neighborhoods. Several officers are assigned to each box, from which they make regular rounds of the neighborhood, often on bicycle. Each year a police officer calls on every household in the neighborhood to gather information about the residents and to pass on crime-prevention tips.

"The way they make the annual rounds to every household really helps them know the people and encourages citizens to trust them," said Police Director Claude Coleman of Newark, N.J. "Of course, social problems in the United States contribute to the high crime rate but, even so, we stand to learn from the neighborhood box system that Japan has operated for about 100 years."

The American crime fighters visited the koban in front of the Shibuya train station, one of the busiest stations in Japan. The Shibuya koban is visited by an average of 3,000 people a day, most of whom are seeking directions or looking for lost or stolen items.

"We already have 13 small police boxes in Philly and we hope to have even more after we go home and make our reports and recommendations," Williams said.

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