

D.C. Police Import Japanese Method

NE Koban Aims To Build Trust Between Officers, Community

By T.R. Reid and Lena H. Sun

Tokyo police are curious to see whether the D.C. cop on the beat can be converted into an Honorable Mr. Walking-Around.

Yesterday, the District held a grand opening for its first koban, a Japanese-style police booth, in the sprawling Paradise at Parkside housing complex in Northeast Washington.

Three officers have been working since Halloween in a second-floor office of the complex's community center. It isn't exactly a booth, but the hope is that the personal approach to policing will help the city achieve some of the social stability and strong sense of community that give Japan remarkably low crime rates.

The District is one of several U.S. cities that have borrowed the idea, with guidance from the Tokyo Police. The koban concept, in turn, is part of a broader American movement toward community policing, a partnership between police and neighborhood residents. The idea stems in part from Japan's experience with police who are not so much law enforcement officers as all-purpose neighborhood helpers.

Every neighborhood in every Japanese city has its own koban, a small booth or office where the local police officer is based. There are about 1,200 in Tokyo alone.

In Washington, Officers William Jackson, Mona Lynch and Richard Saunders spend their days patrolling Paradise at Parkside, visiting apartments and schools to check on troubled children, organizing basketball teams and even providing tutoring.

I'm pretty good at math and science, and Officer Lynch can do just about any subject, said Jackson, 31, who grew up in the neighborhood.

It's a whole different atmosphere, said Lynch, 27. She used to walk a beat in the tough Benning Terrace neighborhood. Each of the officers has an apartment in the complex, and Lynch estimates her commute at two minutes.

Next month, one officer will work days and two will work from 1 to 9 pm.

In Japan, one officer generally is in the booth, while a partner roams the territory - a few blocks to a few square miles, depending on the population - on foot or on the standard white-frame police bicycle. The roaming officer is a benign presence in the neighborhood, as reflected in the respectful term people use for police officers: Oh-mawari-san, or Honorable Mr. Walking-Around.

Mr. Walking-Around knows every home, apartment building and business in the area - which is crucial because Japanese cities generally don't have street names or sequential house numbers. Finding a specific building can be impossible without stopping by the nearest Koban for guidance.

The koban also serves as the local lost-and-found. Police lend umbrellas, lecture teenagers caught smoking and pass the word to neighbors when someone in the vicinity is ill, has a baby or is admitted to a prestigious college.

Now and then, they also fight crime.

In the event of a robbery or some other offense, people run to the nearest koban or dial 110, the Japanese equivalent of 911, which automatically connects the caller to the local police booth in most cities.

Japan's police officers carry pistols, but an informal Washington Post survey of 12 Tokyo officers turned up only one who had ever drawn - not fired, but drawn - a gun in the line of duty.

That sounds tame compared with what an American police officer faces on some city streets - and it is.

Japan's famous postwar miracle usually is defined in economic terms. But there has been a social miracle as well; the Japanese have built a free and prosperous society with crime rates far lower than what Western nations have come to accept.

The District has about twice as many homicides each year as Tokyo - even though Tokyo has 20 times the population. The District, with fewer than 600,000 residents, has had 402 homicides this year; Tokyo has 12 million

residents and an average of 200 homicides a year. Japan also has far fewer police officers, judges and jails.

Just as other countries learned manufacturing and financial lessons from Japan in the 1980s, many Americans are turning to Japan in the 1990s for lessons on creating a safe society. They have found various explanations for Japan's social stability, including an egalitarian economic structure, a national commitment to full employment, the traditional Confucian respect for authority and the widespread sense that every person has a stake in making society work.

But another factor in Japan's success seems to be the community police system, and particularly the citizen's trusting relationship with Oh-mawari-san.

Accordingly, the Washington-based Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation has been taking U.S. police chiefs to Tokyo to observe the koban system. In recent years, about a dozen U.S. cities - now including Washington - have launched koban experiments.

Paradise at Parkside was plagued by violent crime and drugs in the late 1980s, but the crime rate has dropped significantly in recent years. Now the officers hope to turn it into a model.

We hope to redirect the youths, show them that there are positive things they can get into and make outstanding citizens out of them, Lynch said. If we can do this, Lincoln Heights can do this. Benning Terrace can do this. The model can be taken to other places.