

Community Policing Fighting Crime, Japanese-style

Columbia, South Carolina

In a rough inner-city neighborhood plagued with prostitution, drug-dealing and other messy things, a grey two-story house with new red-brick stairs stands out like a beacon. This "rehabbed" building on Lady Street, always graceful in its lines and now tastefully renovated, makes a sharp contrast with the crumbling motel across the street. It is also notable for its inhabitants: two policemen who use identical one-bedroom flats in mainland America's first live-in *koban*, the Japanese [word] for mini-station.

Opened earlier this summer, and modeled on Japan's little local police stations, Columbia's *koban* is an attempt to prevent crime by tackling some of the things that cause it: broken families, children who stop going to school, the failure of communities to help people at the end of their tether. By coming to the consumer, as it were, these two Columbia policemen -- recent college graduates who volunteered for their rent-free rooms -- have "a vested stake in the community", says Columbia's police chief, Charles Austin. It was Mr. Austin, a veteran of 26 years of policing, who decided that South Carolina needed *kobans*. He had seen them when he was in Tokyo studying Japan's community-policing system in 1995. Puerto Rico, an island that is part of the United States, is also trying them out. The *koban* is not the first creative idea to come from Mr. Austin, who is studying to become a clergyman. In 1991, he arranged for police officers to be offered a loan at a modest 4% interest rate, and with no down-payment, when they move into a home within the city. They also get a bonus of \$500 a year. More than a dozen policemen have accepted the offer, and officials say this move towards the front line has helped to cut crime.

On Lady Street, local people are encouraged to visit the carpeted first floor of the *koban* to report crimes. The building is used for neighbourhood meetings. It is intended to be a safe haven for youngsters and the elderly. It is also a work station for social and educational services, with programmes designed to teach literacy to both children and adults. The *koban*'s officers, Taurus Sanders and Melron Kelly, walk their beat and visit the neighbours, offering tips on crime prevention and trying to calm troubled young people before they do anything foolish.

The experiment is based on the ideas of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation of Washington, DC. During the past few years, non-residential kobans have been opened in a dozen cities, including Washington, Boston, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Memphis, Minneapolis and Philadelphia. Their aim is to reduce crime and violence, and the use of drugs; to improve school and job attendance; and to make it clear to the locals that they have policemen among them. In Columbia, it is also hoped that Lady Street's live-in koban will help the area's economy: the less crime there is, the more businesses may move in. If it works, Mr. Austin thinks Columbia will soon have another one.