

The New York Times
Monday, July 31, 1995

In Japan-Style Booths, Police Are Stationed at Center of Action

By Michael Janofsky

Baltimore, July 28 - the little booth sits just off a downtown intersection that once stood at the retail heart of the city, with large department stores, movie theaters and fashionable restaurants. In recent years, with one street a pedestrian mall and the other reserved for buses and commuter trains, the neighborhood has become a collection of specialty shops and stores for the budget-conscious.

But as the neighborhood struggles to stay vibrant without the tourist appeal of other downtown attractions like Oriole Park at Camden Yards and Harbor Place mall, few buildings seem to be as vital to the area's well-being as the small booth. It is known as a koban, a police sub-station modeled and named after similar buildings used in Japan as part of that country's law-enforcement policy of stationing officers among the people they protect.

Baltimore's Howard Street koban (pronounced: koh-bahn), an air-conditioned booth with bullet-proof glass large enough to accommodate two people, was opened in May at a cost of \$150,000. Since then, officers assigned to the 10-by-10-foot koban say crimes that were common to the area, like purse snatchings, shoplifting, assaults and robberies, have sharply declined.

And that is in keeping with trends in other cities where the police are using kobans and other Japanese crime-control measures. A report to be published this fall by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a private organization that seeks solutions to urban problems, concludes that crime rates in those city neighborhoods dropped by as much as 35 percent.

"They're a novel way of bringing police officers closer to the community," said Alfred Dean, an executive with the Police Foundation, a group that studies policing techniques.

"With police departments under the gun to control crime and being forced to do more with less, they're using more nontraditional methods. They're recognizing that the old methods are ineffective."

But as more cities turn to innovative ideas for community policing, kobans are gaining in popularity not only as a crime deterrent. They are also proving valuable as a partner to groups leading drives for economic redevelopment and neighborhood revitalization.

"We're looking for the police to play a role in the total neighborhood redevelopment," said Lynn A. Curtis, president of the Eisenhower Foundation, which first introduced city police chiefs to kobans on a trip to Japan in 1988. "We then try to mesh the kobans with the work of community development corporations."

[Photo]

Officer Dwight Thomas, center, is not confined to the downtown Baltimore koban where he is stationed. He stepped outside to talk with Chrys Cornish, who was giving his son Keyyon a ride on his shoulders, when a bicycle patrol officer and a youngster selling newspapers happened by.

Among the first cities to use a koban were Philadelphia and San Juan, P.R., after officials made the 1988 trip. In Japan, most city neighborhoods are served by kobans of various sizes rather than regional precinct stations, and the police work closely with residents, visiting each house at least once a year. Some Japanese officers assigned to larger kobans live in them with their families.

The Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington-based group named for the brother of the former President, found that Japan's community policing techniques work in the United States. Its report scheduled for the fall concludes that the rate of reported crime in a residential neighborhood of San Juan, where officers worked with residents from a koban, fell by 35 percent from 1989 to 1993. Similar efforts in a retail section of Philadelphia north of downtown helped drive down the rate of reported crime by 24 percent from 1991 to 1993.

A more recent foundation-sponsored trip to Japan included officials from Baltimore, Little Rock, Ark., Los Angeles, Newark and Columbia, S.C.

Here in Baltimore, city officials have not yet linked koban officers and local community groups. But the mere presence of the structure seems to be deterring crime and easing tensions on the streets.

"It's so visible, and visibility is the key," said Gary Austin, manager of the Pick 'n" Pay shoe store just beyond the koban. "It has helped deter

shoplifting and has cut down on some of the loitering around the rail stop."

In several months, the department plans to install surveillance cameras around the neighborhood to allow the koban officer to monitor a wider area through television screens in the koban. The city is also studying the possibility of placing several other kobans in highly populated neighborhoods.

"People down here love it," Officer Thomas said. "They say it's good to see you out here, and teenagers don't congregate the way they used to, standing on street corners."

Many local merchants said that they believed the koban concept had made the area safer. But few people sounded more appreciative of the police presence than John Mathew Smith, a 36-year-old photographer.

Waiting for a bus across the street from the koban recently, a panhandler approached and asked for 50 cents. When Mr. Smith refused, the man punched him in the nose.

"I saw the whole thing," said Mr. Thomas, who was sitting in the koban at time. He dashed out and arrested the man on assault charges.