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Article in *Probation Journal* · December 2011

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The Journal of Community and Criminal Justice

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DOI: 10.1177/0264550511420750

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## The Japanese Probation Service: A third sector template?

**Tom Ellis**, University of Portsmouth

**Chris Lewis**, University of Portsmouth

**Mai Sato**, University of Oxford

**Abstract** The use of probation in Japan is similar in some respects to probation in England and Wales (E&W) and unrecognizable in others. This article provides an outline of the structure and operation of probation in Japan and draws comparisons and contrasts with probation in England and Wales. It is intended to provide an overview for those who know little about Japanese criminal justice in general and about Japanese probation in particular. The focus is on accessible English language sources that will enable readers to follow up their interest and deepen their knowledge.

**Keywords** community justice, corrections, imprisonment, Japan, offender management, probation volunteers

## Introduction

This article will first contextualize Japanese probation within the wider Japanese criminal justice system, before outlining the key probation service roles and functions. It will go on to discuss the key elements of Japanese probation intervention and whether there is any evidence of its effectiveness and how this is measured. The current dilemmas faced by Japanese probation will then be discussed, before a final analysis of any transferable issues for England and Wales (E&W) practice, both in terms of good practice and in terms of salutary lessons.

## Background: Probation within the wider Japanese criminal justice system

The origins of Japanese probation are almost as old as those of England and Wales; precursors such as non-governmental aftercare hostels (called *Kosei Hogo Shisetsu*) have existed since 1888, providing what would now be called resettlement for released prisoners (see JMoJ, no date 1). The modern versions of these hostels are still an important element of Japanese post-release supervision, and are still run by various non-governmental institutions referred to as the *Kosei Hogo* ('rehabilitation and protection', including organizations such as *Kosei Hogo Hojin* (The National Association of Offenders Rehabilitation Services), and *Kosei Hogo Josei Kai* (Japan Women's Association for Rehabilitation Aid)) which some see as a way of the state reducing its costs and responsibilities and relying on voluntarism (Miyazawa, 1991: 242). The non-governmental nature of the Japanese probation system based on volunteers from the public was introduced in the late 19th century as an obvious attempt at load shedding by prefectural governments that were overwhelmed with the costs of providing for released prisoners (Miyazawa, 1991: 243). This led to non-governmental organizations being commissioned to deal with the problem and these in turn commissioned local community leaders who set up what was to become the basis for voluntary probation in Japan. It should be noted that they were formally recognized as a state body under the 1939 *Shiho Hogo Jigyo Hou*, but are in practice still run by non-state organisations (JMoJ, no date 1).

The current Japanese Probation Service was essentially born after the Second World War (JMoJ, no date 1) when the 'General Headquarters of the Allied Powers Superintendence' overhauled the entire pre-war Japanese criminal justice system and imposed the idea of 'corrections and rehabilitation' to promote a modern rehabilitation system. The aims of the resulting 1949 Offenders Rehabilitation Law sounds strikingly modern in E&W terms: to protect society and promote the welfare of the public and individuals; and aid the reformation and rehabilitation of offenders.

The 1949 Law established the four part structure of modern probation intervention in Japan, only one of which would strictly match the E&W conception of probation as a disposal of the court, with the other three consisting of what would be regarded in E&W as various forms of parole supervision by probation officers.

Two of the four components are for juveniles, equivalent to youth justice in E&W. The first of these, 'juvenile probation', is analogous with probation disposals awarded by youth courts in E&W. Juvenile offenders are placed on probation by the family court. The second juvenile probation component is the self-explanatory 'parole from juvenile training school'. This is a form of supervised conditional parole for young offenders who have committed more serious offences and have originally been sentenced to a custodial setting similar to secure training centres for young offenders in E&W (see Lewis, Brooks, Ellis and Hamai, 2009, for the key comparative elements in Japanese and English youth justice).

The focus of this article is on the remaining two components, which are provisions for adult offenders. The first is supervision by probation officers of offenders released



As with E&W, the probation service is run from the Japanese Ministry of Justice by full-time civil servants. Where Japan differs is that these senior civil servants are almost entirely made up of appointments from the powerful Japanese Prosecutors Office, which has a strong role in directing how court sentences are implemented (Hamai and Ellis, 2008a), while the E&W Crown Prosecution Service is completely separated from the Ministry of Justice and does not concern itself with the way sentences are implemented.

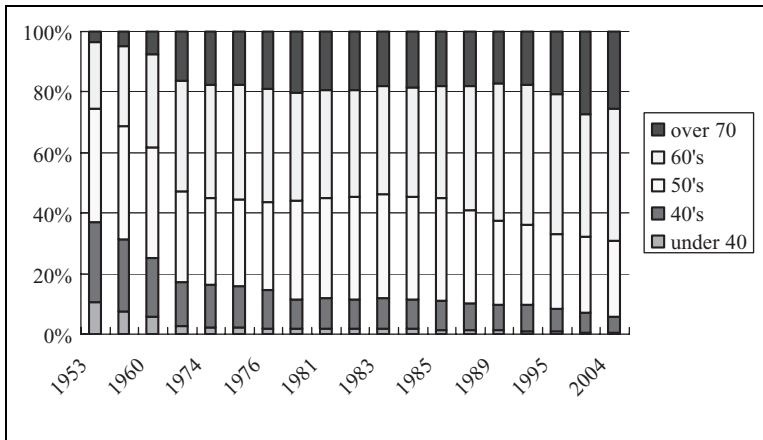
Below the JMoJ civil servants are salaried professional probation officers (PPOs) or *hogo kansatsu kan*, who are organized and administered by the JMoJ's Rehabilitation Bureau. Professional probation officers work from regional offices and are responsible for the implementation of all forms of community-based supervision for both juveniles and adults. Such PPOs engage mainly in organizing and administering the supervision of offenders, while a minority are responsible for conducting pre-parole investigations (Parker, 1986). Their role is akin to the case manager role of probation officers in E&W, but with much less likelihood of direct offender supervision in more serious cases.

Where Japanese probation is most radically different from that of E&W is in its reliance on *hogoshi* or Volunteer Probation Officers (VPOs) for the overwhelming bulk of the supervision of offenders. Miyazawa (1991) argues that Japan has a long history of treating crime as a community phenomenon and public involvement in the control of criminal behaviour. Ellis (2010), therefore, notes that the Volunteer Probation Officer Law of 1950 simply formalized Japan's already pre-existing and unique use of volunteers to assist professional probation officers in supervising offenders of all ages. While there are only around 800 professional probation and parole staff, there are nearly 50,000 VPOs (48,919 as of 1 January 2008: the Volunteer Probation Officer Act, 1950, limits the number of VPOs to 52,500) supervising around 60,000 offenders in 877 probation districts with an average case load of five offenders (JMoJ, 2008a). The predominant offences committed by adults under supervision relate to theft and drugs (see JMoJ, 2008b).

While the offence profiles, even accounting for gender are similar for the two types of probation supervision, VPOs can expect to supervise nearly all of those released from prison for one year or less, while those on suspended sentences will nearly all require between two and five years of supervision (see JMoJ, 2008c).

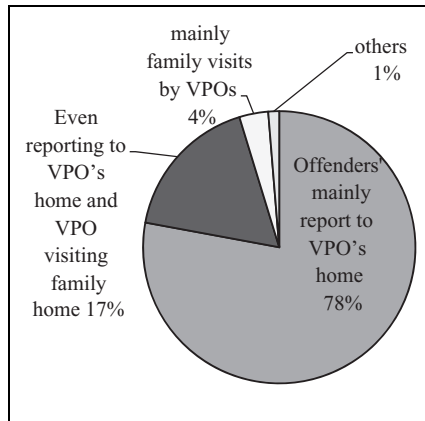
VPOs are appointed by the Justice Minister on the recommendation of heads of the probation offices (Miyazawa, 1991). Initial appointment is for two years, but half of VPOs have served for more than 10 years, but with their average age of 62. This is causing concern in relation to their ability to engage with offenders (Ellis, 2010). They are also getting older as Figure 2 shows.

The other radical difference to E&W is in the style of supervision. While home visits by probation officers were not unknown in pre-NOMS probation practice in E&W, in Japan, not only are they the norm, but this is roughly divided between supervision in the home of the VPO and the offender's home. Because of the way that probation has developed in Japan, there are no 'probation offices' in the E&W sense, other than for administrative purposes. Cynics like Miyazawa might point out that this represents a huge saving for the state coffers. Figure 3 shows that



**Figure 2.** VPO age bands by selected years, 1953-2004.

Source: K. Hamai (2006) Anglo- Japanese Symposium on Prisons and Probation, University of Portsmouth.



**Figure 3.** Site of supervision of Japanese offenders.

Source: K. Hamai (2006) Anglo- Japanese Symposium on Prisons and Probation, University of Portsmouth.

78 per cent of all supervision is carried out mainly in the VPO's home. This is a very different concept to the relatively rare E&W home visit.

The JMoJ White Paper (JMoJ, 2008d) outlines, as follows, the way in which probation supervision is expected to take place. Probation/parole supervision is usually carried out jointly by a PPO and a VPO. A PPO is responsible for making an initial individualized treatment plan based on an interview with the probationer/parolee and his/her related records. A VPO then provides guidance and assistance according to this treatment plan through interviews and visits with the probationer/parolee and their families. The VPO reports on progress every month to the director of the

**Table 1.** Commencements of the 4 types of Japanese probation disposal in 2009

Type of supervision	Commencements	%
Juvenile Probation	26,094	54
Juvenile Parole	3,869	8
Adult Parole	1,4854	31
Adult suspended sentence	3,671	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48,488</b>	

Source: JMoJ’s Rehabilitation Bureau (Japanese language version)

probation office and the PPO cooperates with the volunteer probation officer to take appropriate measures when necessary.

The relative workload across the four types of disposals outlined above shows (Table 1) that over half of the probation workload comes from juvenile probation supervision through the family court, where VPOs would supervise offenders. The remaining supervision of juvenile parolees for more serious offending constitutes only 8 per cent of the probation workload that would require a combination of VPO and PPO supervision. Adult probation supervision constitutes just under 40 per cent of the probation caseload overall, and the bulk of this (31%) is for parole supervision, leaving only 8 per cent of the caseload for suspended prison sentences, which are the only element of adult probation work in Japan that is akin to probation as a community penalty in England and Wales. In all, there is a very different distribution of probation supervision in the two countries.

In addition to the basic supervision process, there are, since 2006, specialized treatment programmes for ‘sexual offenders, stimulant offenders and violent offenders’ and a plethora of further provisions that are summarized in the JMoJ White Paper (JMoJ, 2008e). In these cases, it is more likely that PPOs will directly supervise these offenders, a situation that Johnson (1996: 250) had identified as common practice since 1974 in Tokyo and Osaka. His account is a good English language account of the relative roles of PPOs and VPOs.

## Analysis of the meanings and effectiveness of Japanese probation practice

There are inevitably some criticisms of the Japanese reliance on largely voluntary probation supervisors and some challenges come from increasing modernization and urbanization. The current system was developed in an era when the Japanese lived in a much more rural society. As a result, it still relies on those who do not have full-time employment commitments and remain a part of their community for long periods. Miyazawa (1991: 246) refers to earlier work showing that in the late-1980s, around a quarter of VPOs did not work and another fifth appeared to be retired farmers or fishermen living with their families. It is increasingly difficult to recruit VPOs in urban settings who can spare the time. Older people have moved to suburbs and the farming and fishing community is shrinking (Miyazawa,

1991: 246) with a subsequent overreliance on married women who do not work and who themselves are becoming rarer.

Japan has not put the same emphasis as E&W on outcomes and effectiveness in terms of reconvictions, etc., and the evidence is uneven. Indeed, the JMoJ's flagship series of White Papers on Crime, which are otherwise extremely comprehensive, do not include reconvictions analyses (with the exception of JMoJ, 2009). We do know that approximately 30 per cent of repeat offenders were responsible for around 60 per cent of the crime committed in Japan from 1948 to 2006 (Somedá, 2009). However, much of the patchy available evidence on effectiveness is also dated. Johnson and Johnson (2000) have included an analysis of 'adult probation as a condition of a suspended sentence' as compared with those released on 'suspended sentence without probation supervision' and found that those 'with probation supervision' fared worse. As Johnson and Johnson note, however, the comparison is misleading in that those who received a sentence 'probation supervision' had actually been charged with a new crime while on a suspended prison sentence that was originally 'without probation supervision' and were therefore higher risk. A proxy for successful outcomes, the revocation rate, is recorded in the JMoJ White Papers. The latest figures for 2007 (JMoJ, 2008f) show that 5 per cent of prison parolees (820 persons) were subject to revocation of parole, and 29 per cent of offenders given suspension of execution of sentence with probationary supervision (1386 persons) were subject to revocation of suspension of execution of sentence. This supports Johnson and Johnson's analysis, but is clearly a function of the length of supervision.

Another study is also worthy of note in looking at the effectiveness of Japanese probation, although it is focussed on youth justice, which has a very different emphasis to youth justice in E&W and to adult justice in Japan (see Lewis et al., 2009). Yuma, Kanazawa and Kashiwagi (2006) evaluated the effectiveness of long-term, general-short-term and special short-term juvenile training school programmes recidivism rates in comparison to probation supervision, while controlling for differences in socio-demographic background, strength of ties to conventional society, offending history, and current delinquency type.

Their relatively sophisticated analysis produced mixed results. They found that those sent to long-term and general short-term programs were less likely to be re-incarcerated than those sentenced to juvenile probation supervision, but none of the three programmes was found to significantly affect the timing of re-incarceration relative to probation. As noted, the picture on effectiveness and probation is still unclear in Japan and it is an obvious area where more research is needed, including the development of intermediate and alternative measures of success.

## Thoughts on future directions and implications

Braithwaite (1989) 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 and stressed the prominent roles of apology and forgiveness (Hamai and Ellis,



2008a). However, some Japanese and western scholars (e.g. Johnson, 2002) feel that this has been overemphasized and have argued that Japan is now in the throes of its own version of popular punitivism (Hamai and Ellis, 2008a). Indeed, two of the 'three pillars of justice reform' (JMoJ, no date 2) in Japan focus on greater public satisfaction and establishing a popular base.

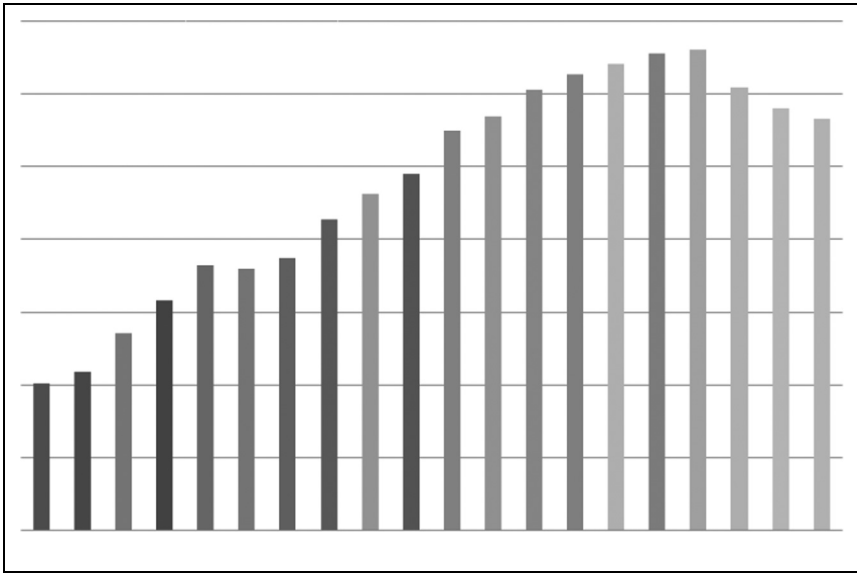
Probation has not been excluded from this process. A series of 'scandals' during the 2000s has been built up by the Japanese press in a pattern familiar in other countries as a moral panic. The most prominent case for its impact on probation was a murder of an 11 month-old boy in February 2005, by a man who had been released on probation and had absconded from a halfway house for the homeless. After the incident, the media and legal experts blamed the probation and parole service for being too lenient on offenders, demanding stricter supervision (see *Japan Times*, 3 September 2006). In response, the JMoJ created the Expert Committee on Probation and Parole in July 2005 and on 27 June 2006, the Committee proposed a reform plan which was prefaced by the statement that 'The Probation and Parole services are an important part of the criminal justice system whose main responsibility is to arrest offenders and punish them'.

Although the plan generally supports rehabilitation of offenders in the communities, it demonstrates a very similar shift of emphasis that has occurred in E&W probation. The new look probation service now puts more emphasis on surveillance, more intensive supervision with more frequent contacts and home visits by VPOs; more restrictions and more ready use of revocation. Community Service (unpaid work) is also included as a potential. The new law on probation and parole adopted the above policy and was enacted on 6 June 2007 as the Offenders Rehabilitation Act. It is important to see this development within the wider context of growing penal populism (*genbatsuka*) in Japan in the current and previous decades. Indeed, the numbers sentenced to custody have risen dramatically as Figure 4 shows. As Hamai and Ellis (2008a) note, perhaps the most convincing evidence of the rise of *genbatsuka*, is the rise in the number of executions in Japan in the 2000s. While only a few executions were carried out each year at the turn of the century, this changed when four people were hanged in 2006, rising to nine in 2007, and finally to 15 executions in 2008 (Amnesty International, 2010). Similarly, the number of death sentences was also constant before the turn of the century, with an average of around five executions per year. This changed in 2004 when death sentences rose, with 15 recorded in 2004 and 23 in 2007. The rise in death sentences naturally resulted in an increased number of death-row inmates, from 68 in 2004 to 107 in 2009, outnumbering the rising rate of executions. (Amnesty International, 2010).

## Links or lessons for England and Wales?

There is no easy link between Japan's low crime rate and its probation supervision, organization and practice (Miyazawa, 1991). There is also a dearth of reconviction or other impact studies to show its effectiveness in this way.

It does perhaps represent one model of cost-effectiveness, especially payment by results as outlined in the recent E&W coalition government's Green Paper *Breaking*



**Figure 4.** Newly admitted inmates 1990–2009.

*the Cycle* (E&W MoJ, 2010) which might appeal to the current coalition government's 'big society' and the desire to increase the role of the third sector in probation and community sentence supervision and the problems that might arise with that (Burke, 2010). While volunteers have worked in probation in E&W in auxiliary roles, and are still encouraged to do so (see <http://www.ccif.org/whatcanido/probation.html>), perhaps the most analogous development to the Japanese VPOs may be the heavily criticized discussion about plans to introduce a dad's army of ex-servicemen to supervise unpaid work (Doward, 2010). Napo have already said that this is motivated by reducing costs, rather than expanding community involvement. Perhaps the lessons Japan provides for E&W here are salutary ones, and relate more to the provision of halfway houses than to VPOs. As Miyazawa has argued, the state has avoided investment in resettlement infrastructure by relying on aid organizations to provide the capital required. Instead, the state limits itself to supplying the money for operating costs and regulation of provision (Miyazawa, 1991: 246–247). It also ensures that expenses payments to VPOs are limited and symbolic rather than realistic. Unfortunately, one can see the appeal of this to a government seeking to reduce costs drastically, but this has to be balanced with the likely quality of service delivery and professionalism. The lack of reconvictions evaluations may speak for itself in this regard and there is certainly no evidence that the Japanese model is likely to increase effectiveness or value for money.

The Japanese model of voluntarism certainly goes beyond the type of third sector involvement envisaged by probation commentators in E&W (see for instance Burke, 2010; Faulkner, 2008). However, there are more immediate hurdles to overcome in trying to transfer any lessons from Japanese probation into the E&W context.

The first and most obvious one will be historical and socio-demographic differences. These are often overstated in comparative work, but the long history of voluntarism in criminal justice in Japan, the low crime rate and greater homogeneity cannot be overlooked. Some of the practices that are part of the Japanese system create their own difficulties even in Japan and perhaps hark back to an earlier era in our own probation history, making them impracticable for consideration in E&W.

Second, whilst the Green Paper *Breaking the Cycle* (E&W MoJ, 2010) calls for greater involvement of volunteers, it also calls for decentralization. Although the Japanese system appears very localized, even involving VPOs' own homes, as Miyazawa notes, there is no real local or regional policy making structure. All decisions on policy and practice are top down and are directly controlled through the JMoJ. There is thus no local innovation possible, or lessons to learn from it for probation practice in E&W. Third, *Breaking the Cycle* also puts enormous emphasis on payment by results, as we have seen. There is little in the way of systematic evaluation of effectiveness in Japanese probation that can relate lower recidivism to the style of intervention.

The Japanese system is only really feasible for old style 'straight probation' with attendance and no conditions or programmes. VPOs are not trained or paid and Japan has fewer intervention programmes. Where these are run, it will require the use of professional probation officers or other professionals such as psychologists, or expensive training of volunteers, who may drop out due to more exacting requirements and time. Indeed, volunteers are able to decide their level of involvement through lack of an employment contract and it is possible that in E&W it may prove to be as difficult to encourage supervisors to turn up as it is to get offenders to attend. Some evidence is already there in Ellis, Hedderman and Mortimer's (1996) Home Office enforcement study where offenders working for charities as part of their community service orders were seen to be more reliable than some of their volunteer counterparts.

In sum, in comparison to E&W, most Japanese probation supervision relates to a wider process of post-release supervision and is not a sentence in itself. It is therefore difficult to view it other than in this light. It is more appropriate to think about any useful lessons in terms of post-parole supervision. It would certainly be a bold move to rediscover home visits in E&W, and bolder still to introduce the notion of an offender visiting the home of a volunteer community sentence supervisor!

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**Tom Ellis** is Principal Lecturer in Criminal Justice at the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth, St George's Building, 141 High Street, Portsmouth PO5 3DP, United Kingdom. Email: [tom.ellis@port.ac.uk](mailto:tom.ellis@port.ac.uk)

**Chris Lewis** is Visiting Professor at the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth, St George's Building, 141 High Street, Portsmouth PO1 2HY, United Kingdom.

**Mai Sato** is Howard League Post-doctoral Fellow at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, Manor Road Building, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom. Email: [mai.sato@crim.ox.ac.uk](mailto:mai.sato@crim.ox.ac.uk)