

Standing by the Community

For more than a century, local koban police boxes have kept watch over every neighborhood in Tokyo, ensuring safety and security for all.

In 1874, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department (TMPD) was established as the first modern police organization in Japan. Although it incorporated elements of European institutions, there is some debate as to what extent Western concepts shaped the TMPD. What is certain, however, is that the department was guided from the beginning by a strong sense of community spirit. It wasted no time in dispatching officers to stand watch at busy intersections and high-profile locations, and then set up guardhouse-like shelters or “boxes” at these spots. This initiative paved the way for the system of community *koban* police boxes—one of the most distinctive features of the TMPD.

At 23 years of age, Saya Goto is already a pro in community relations. Goto is one of a small but growing number of female “community police officers” in TMPD’s 43,000-strong workforce. Her first deployment, as with all new recruits, was to a *koban*. Being fluent in English, Goto was posted in October 2016 to, of all places, the famously busy *koban* in Kabukicho—a nightlife district teeming with bars, pachinko parlors and seedy clubs, and a major tourist destination.

Brimming with enthusiasm, Goto reports for duty at 8:00 a.m. sharp, when many all-night establishments are still closing up. Standing under the *koban*’s

signature red lamp and gold star emblem of the TMPD, Goto gives a quick rundown of what her four-day shift entails. “Mostly, I give people directions, handle lost-and-found items, answer ‘110’ emergency calls and patrol the area on foot,” she says.

This might not sound like the stuff of high-suspense TV dramas—but at Kabukicho Koban, even an “average” day can turn very hectic, very quickly. “How do I get to the Godzilla statue?” “Can you read this kanji character for me?” “I missed the last train. Where can I stay?” Given Kabukicho’s maze of narrow, nameless streets and its high turnover of retail outlets, it’s hardly surprising that navigation apps often fall short. So, for many people, the friendly corner *koban* is the most reliable and accessible source of local information. Kabukicho Koban handles more than 100 queries a day in Japanese, English and Chinese. Meanwhile, translators for other languages are always on standby at TMPD’s Translation Center, just a phone call away.

For community police officers, daily patrols are paramount to keep in touch with, and keep watch over, their fast-changing communities. This is tough work in a neighborhood that never sleeps, like Kabukicho. A fight might break out. A runaway might seek shelter. An inebriated customer might need medical attention. All TMPD patrol officers are well prepared



Kabukicho Koban, one of over 800 police boxes in Tokyo.

for the unexpected. Goto herself is highly trained in the martial art of aikido for self-defense, while her colleagues are expert in judo or kendo, or both. But it’s equally important to be approachable. As there are few female officers at Kabukicho Koban, Goto is often called to help break up domestic spats, or counsel women in distress over stalking or harassment. “Women open up more readily to a female officer,” she explains.

Inevitably, the erratic demands of the shift cut into officers’ downtime. This has not dampened Goto’s passion for her profession—far from it. “Every day is a challenge,” she concedes. “But in the end, it’s worth it all just to hear someone say ‘Thank you.’”

Today, Tokyo has 826 *koban*—one for every neighborhood. Each is staffed around the clock by officers on rotating shifts, so one is bound to encounter an officer on duty within a short walk in any direction, at any time of the day or night. According to the TMPD, just *being there* is key to maintaining peace and order. “Knowing there’s always a *koban* keeping watch gives people a sense of *anzen*, *anshin* (safety and security),” explains Shinya Nakanishi of the TMPD Regional Planning Department. “This is the *koban*’s most important function.”

Recognizing the value of community-integrated policing, other countries have developed their own

police-box networks, among them, Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, El Salvador and Brazil. Mobile police “pods” have also been set up at various spots in the U.K. Somehow, it seems fitting that the TMPD’s original, home-grown feature, which became a hallmark of the police system Japan “imported” 145 years ago, is now finding its way overseas to help communities everywhere feel safer and more secure—one police box at a time.



Community police officer Saya Goto at her post in front of Kabukicho Koban.