

American and japanese violent crime

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



American and Japanese Violent Crime While it may not be obvious at first, Japan and America hold many things in common. These countries are both known for priding their unique national histories. Both countries kept themselves isolated up until the 20th century. Today, the two are highly populated and urbanized countries. In fact, Japan has become increasingly westernized since World War II, allowing the people of both nations to share interest in the same cultural icons. Yet, these two seemingly similar countries have vastly differing experiences with violent crime. Differing historical experiences, cultures, and criminal justice systems are responsible for the great difference between recent Japanese and American violent crime rates. To begin, it is important to understand just how strongly the Japanese and American experiences with crime differ. While American crime rates have been steadily rising for the past 20 years (" Crime in the United States 2010", Table 1), Japan has seen a progressive decrease in crime (Blair). Interestingly, the rate of recidivism is equal between the two countries; both America and Japan find close to 40 percent of ex-convicts return to prison within 3 years of their sentence (Bluestein; " Preventing Recidivism"). However, though the United States has only twice the population of Japan, it has about 13 times as many homicides and 51 times as many incidences of rape (Hays). In 2010, 14, 748 murders were committed in the United States (" Crime in the United States 2010", Table 1). Japan, on the other hand, experienced 1, 097 murders in the same year (Blair). These statistics are reflected in each country's perception of their own safety. Many Americans avoid stepping outside during the later hours of the night as it is generally thought to be unsafe and is considered a time of higher criminal activity.

Compare this to Japan, where there is no such fear (Hays). Similarly, the Japanese hold little fear of child abductions. American parents would be shocked to learn that Japanese parents often let their young children walk to school or take trains to other cities on their own, without any supervision (Hays). Through statistics and the personal experiences of groups of each nation, one finds that America has been and continues to be more affected by violent crime than Japan. As each country faced a time in history marked by a lack of governmental efficiency, Japan and America found different paths to bring order to the resulting criminal chaos. The country of the United States of America is still relatively young. Just 200 years ago, the nation was in its infancy and was still attempting to find a way to effectively and fairly rule the people. With the Mexican-American War fought and won by the United States, America owned more land than it could govern (Gurr). Thus, the western frontier was the home of rampant violent crime that was only held in check by weak vigilante justice (Gurr). Any courts set up are believed to have been unjust, and many times homicide was the people's solution to crime (Gurr). The majority of people in the American West carried guns and used them to resolve bar fights and power struggles, and it is believed that heavy alcohol consumption contributed to these bloody duels (Gurr). There was a strong sense of individualism during this time, where each man was out for himself (Turner). Indeed, the people who moved out to the West were often hoping to make a large profit by mining gold, or to secure the then-plentiful free land for themselves. It was not until the territories were officially made into states that order was brought to the frontier through government intervention (Turner). 11th century Japan dealt

with its lack of leadership somewhat differently. With the waning power of the Imperial Court resulting in higher and more severe crime, the Japanese communities turned to local warriors to protect them (Leonard 56). Eventually, communities formed alliances and a hierarchy began to form where smaller groups would pledge their loyalty to more powerful warrior bands in exchange for protection (56). At the top of this chain was the shogun, a strong warrior leader who led the Bakufu, a group of appointed executives (60). Organization of this quality allowed for honest courts, public works projects, and effective law enforcement (60). This highly detailed and organized system is in many ways similar to Europe's feudal alliances, even down to the brave and honorable soldiers fighting for their lords. This is where the well-known samurai first came into being as Japan's "gentlemen warriors" (57). These samurai served the shogun to the death and acted as a fearsome police force for the communities. Thus, where America fought chaos with chaos and used criminals to punish criminals, a system that was dominated by never-ending power struggles, the Japanese formed an intricate and effective system that saw little shift in power for over 700 years, and even managed to unify Japan into a single nation in the process (56). In time, America began to idealize the rugged self-sufficiency found in the "wild west" and associated the open frontier with endless possibilities. Japan similarly holds great pride in their honor-driven warriors. With foundations such as these, it is little wonder why America would tend to see more violent crime than Japan. Culture undoubtedly plays a major role in violent crime rates in America and Japan. Perhaps most relevant is the role of the individual within each society. The United States is an individualistic

culture where emphasis lies in helping oneself. Personal expression and achievement tend to be the average American's goals. Japan, like many East Asian countries, is a collectivist nation, where society holds more importance than the self. Typically, the Japanese value fitting in and bringing honor to their families over all else (Hays). Many believe that this difference in outlooks plays a large part in the difference in crime. This is illustrated in a poll given to repeat offenders from Japanese prisons. When asked what "psychological breaks" might keep them from committing further crimes, a total of 68.3 percent said a member of the family intervening would end their criminal activity ("Preventing Recidivism"). This suggests that cultural pressure plays a large part in crime prevention in Japan. Supporting this theory, research has shown that altruistic, collectivist societies have lower rates of violent crimes, usually because community members look out for one another's safety (Barber 238). Another factor that may influence violent crime rates is the difference in religious beliefs. The American population is primarily Christian. The Christian religion has a generally negative outlook on humans, believing each person is a sinner and must meet certain qualifications to receive salvation. On the other hand, the largest religion in Japan is Buddhism, which has a positive view of humanity and emphasizes the spiritual power every individual has within his or herself. Thus, one might assume that it is more morally justifiable to commit violent acts if one believes his or her fellow human beings are immoral. On the other hand, the Japanese view of humanity, coupled with the role of the community in deterring crime, explains why the prevalence of shame could be a large reason Japan is low in crime (Hays). Additionally, Japan has been described

as having a very “honest” culture (Hays). As an example of this, in 2002 some 1.6 million items were turned in to the Tokyo Metropolitan Lost and Found, and 72 percent of those items made it back to their owners (Hays). These items included laptops, wallets, and even cash registers, items that an American would generally expect to have been taken by those that found them (Hays). Another element that might factor into the difference in violent crime for each nation is the difference in ethnic diversity. The United States is well-known for being a “mixing pot” society that is exceedingly ethnically diverse. Whites make up only 67 percent of the population, with African Americans representing 13 percent, and Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and many other races contributing to the population as well (Hartney and Vuong). This is in sharp contrast to Japan, where 99 percent of citizens are homogenous, and most other non-Japanese residents are Korean (Hays). These statistics are relevant because of ethnic discrimination’s effects on criminal behavior. Statistics show that minorities in America, particularly African Americans and Hispanics, are much more likely to be convicted of crimes than whites, which many believe to be the result of centuries of discrimination and subjugation (Hartney and Vuong). Japan, however, does not have a large portion of minorities, and thus any effects racial discrimination would pose in that country would be of little statistical significance. The criminal justice system may play a large part in the numbers of violent crimes committed in America and Japan. In Japan, punishment by the community has a greater effect than punishment by the criminal justice system. In the poll mentioned previously, only 10 percent of the Japanese participants said they would be motivated to stop committing

crimes from fear of the police (" Preventing Recidivism"). In America, the emphasis lies in criminal punishment and motivating through fear, not social ostracism. Even so, the high recidivism rates of both countries suggest that Japanese prisons are no more effective in rehabilitating criminals than American ones. This suggests that the problem lies in the high number of prisoners coupled with the method of handling them. Some have argued that sending lesser-offense criminals, such as those convicted of burglary or drug-related offenses, teaches them how to be greater-offense criminals (Bluestein). Couple this with a high conviction rate and the American criminal justice system seems to cause more crimes than it prevents. If the somewhat minor crimes are punished by different means that do not include involving lesser-offense criminals with murderers and rapists, perhaps there will be a greater chance of rehabilitating those lesser-crime offenders (Bluestein). Sending fewer criminals to prison may be one step America can take to having violent crime rates lowered to levels closer to Japanese rates. Hence, the difference between American and Japanese violent crime rates can partially be explained as resulting from their histories, culture, and criminal justice system. Statistics show that America has a disproportionately larger number of violent crimes like homicide, rape, and aggravated assault than Japan, a country known for being largely crime-free. Their histories show that America remained lawless when left without strong governmental leadership, and Japan organized itself when facing a similar situation, thus laying the foundation for each nation's future attitudes toward criminal behavior. The many differing aspects of American and Japanese culture play a large role in rate and attitude toward violent crime. Additionally, the

inefficiencies of the criminal justice system are more pronounced in American because of the ballooning size of prison populations. Ultimately, one is left to ponder if America can reduce its number of violent crimes without sacrificing those aspects of its culture that it holds important, like individualism, strong justice, and personal freedoms.

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