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The role of volunteer probation officers in Japan - Recent challenges and responses



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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) emphasize the importance of community acceptance of, and participation in, successful reintegration of offenders into society. One of the practices that fosters community involvement in offender treatment is the Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) system. VPOs are community volunteers who are appointed as part-time government officials to support the work of professional probation officers. VPOs support the work of professional probation officers by supervising and assisting offenders in the communities in which they live. VPOs are key individuals who facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders as well as the acceptance of the offender by the community. However, in line with social and cultural changes, the Japanese VPO system is facing several challenges such as weaker bonds of the community and decreasing number of VPOs. In response, the Rehabilitation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice has implemented a number of measures, including the establishment of Offender Rehabilitation Support Centers and the creation of a new compensation scheme for property damage or injury suffered by VPOs or their family members. In many countries, VPOs and other volunteers play an important role in helping offenders reintegrate into the community. Comparing and learning from the approaches of other countries are important steps to enhance the effectiveness of probation through volunteers' activities.

1. Introduction

Adoption in 1990 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures, commonly known as the Tokyo Rules, established an international norm for community involvement in the management of criminal justice, specifically in regard to treatment of offenders.¹ Many countries have developed and implemented a variety of practices in active pursuit of community involvement and are engaging in information exchange with other countries as encouraged by the Tokyo Rules.

One of the practices that originated in Japan and that dates back to the 1880s is the Volunteer Probation Officer (VPO) system under which community volunteers are appointed as part-time government officials to support the work of professional probation officers (PPOs). The main duty of VPOs is to supervise and assist offenders in the communities in which they live. VPOs are key individuals who facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders and convey a sense of acceptance by the community.

A number of countries in South East Asia and elsewhere have introduced VPO systems. Adjusting for differences in culture, society

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¹ "Treatment of offenders" includes supervision, assistance, education, vocational guidance and training, casework, group therapy, residential programmes, specialized treatment and various other measures to reduce recidivism and to assist with reintegration into society in accordance with the social and criminal history, physical and mental capacities and aptitudes, personal temperament, intelligence, values and circumstances of each individual. (The Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (The Mandela Rules) Rules 91, 92; The Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (The Tokyo Rules) 13).

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and criminal justice practices, VPO-style programs have been developed in Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Kenya. VPO systems are not common in jurisdictions in North America and Europe, but volunteers play an important role in facilitating offender rehabilitation as well as in fostering community participation in criminal justice. Despite different approaches, almost all governments share the notion that community involvement is indispensable to the reintegration of offenders into society.

This article provides an in-depth review of Japan's VPO system and the issues it currently faces, thereby aiming to provide food for thought for best practices development. I will first discuss the origin, mission, and effectiveness of the VPO system as well the motivations of VPOs who continue to serve despite often difficult conditions. Secondly, I will consider how the VPO system has been challenged by weaker community bonds and a decreasing number of VPOs and discuss the countermeasures that have been implemented. Finally, I will briefly introduce VPO-style systems in several ASEAN countries to offer a cross-border perspective on best practices for the development and implementation of volunteer activities.

2. Overview of VPOs

As of the end of 2015, there were 36,100 probationers and parolees in Japan: 16,108 juvenile probationers, 4077 juvenile parolees, 5184 adult parolees, and 10,731 adult probationers. In Japan, the supervision and assistance of these probationers and parolees is performed by approximately 1000 PPOs who are full-time officers employed by the Ministry of Justice. PPOs are supported by approximately 48,000 (47,939 as of January 2016) volunteer probation officers (VPOs) who are recruited from among the general public. The Offenders Rehabilitation Act (2007) stipulates that probation supervision and assistance shall be conducted by both PPO and VPOs. PPOs are primarily case managers who conduct intake interviews, formulate and implement treatment plans, take adverse action against violation of probation or parole conditions, and liaise with relevant agencies. The duty of VPOs under the Act is to “supplement the work not covered by probation officers” (Article 32). In practice, however, VPOs play a very integral role in probation supervision and assistance as they usually live in the same community as the offender and meet regularly with offenders at their own homes or at the homes of offenders.

2.1. Origin

As in some European and American countries, the origin of probation service in Japan dates back to the nineteenth century and the charitable activities of altruistically or religiously motivated volunteers. Kinpara Meizen, a charitable volunteer, established a private organization in 1888 to provide accommodation and support to ex-prisoners through a network of approximately 1700 volunteers throughout the prefectural area. Kinpara's organization and volunteer structure is said to be the precursor to current day halfway houses (offender rehabilitation facilities) and the VPO system. Similar systems spread throughout the country, and by the time the Juridical Rehabilitation Service Act was enacted in 1939, approximately 14,000 volunteers were recognized formally as “rehabilitation workers”. In addition, “juvenile volunteer probation officers” were formally placed in charge of probation services for juvenile offenders beginning in 1923 under the old Juvenile Law of 1922. VPOs today essentially combine the roles of these initial rehabilitation workers and juvenile volunteer probation officers.²

2.2. Mission, legal status and qualification

The Offenders Rehabilitation Act states that both PPOs and VPOs are executors of probation and parole supervision and assistance.³ Article 1 of the Volunteer Probation Officers Act (VPOs Act) conveys a more altruistic tone for the mission of VPOs: “In the spirit of volunteer social service, to assist persons who have committed crimes and juvenile delinquents to improve and rehabilitate themselves, and to enlighten the public on crime prevention, thereby enhancing the local community and contributing to the welfare of both individuals and the public.”

Article 3 of the VPOs Act requires VPOs to be:

- 1) Highly evaluated with respect to their character and conduct in the community,
- 2) Enthusiastic and sufficiently available to work,
- 3) Financially stable, and;
- 4) Healthy and active.

To recruit VPOs, the directors of the 50 probation offices in Japan prepare a list of candidates based on information gathered from various sources in the community. The list of candidates reflects to a great extent the opinions of representatives of local VPO Associations. Further screening is carried out by the VPO Screening Commissions for each of the probation office jurisdictions. The Screening Commissions act as advisory committees to the Ministry of Justice and consist of representatives from courts, prosecutor's

² The National Federation of Volunteer Probation Officers et al. (2000), Offender Rehabilitation fifty years' history.

³ The Offender Rehabilitation Act (2007) Art. 61 stipulates: “The instruction and supervision and the guidance and assistance during the probation shall be conducted by probation officers or volunteer probation officers considering the characteristics of the probationers and parolees, contents of the measures to be taken and other circumstances into consideration”.

offices, bar associations, correctional institutions and other public associations in the community as well as learned citizens. VPO candidates who pass the screening process are appointed by the Minister of Justice as official VPOs and are conferred the status of part-time government officials.

VPOs serve for a period of two years, but they can be reappointed repeatedly until they reach retirement age at 76 years old. In practice, more than half (52.3%) of VPOs have been serving for more than 8 years (as of January 1, 2016). Although VPOs are not paid salaries, all or part of the expenses for their activities are reimbursed (approximately 40–75 US dollars per month for each case supervised).

2.3. Training

VPOs must undergo various training programs to facilitate their ability to provide probation and parole supervision and assistance.⁴ Probation offices offer periodic training as well as special programs intended for particular levels of experience: a) initial training course for newly appointed VPOs; b) basic treatment skills training course for VPOs who have less than 2 years of experience as VPOs; c) treatment skills reinforcement training course for VPOs who have 2–4 years of experience as VPOs; d) special training course for acquiring specific treatment skills; and e) local probation area periodic training for all VPOs assigned to a local area. Training sessions and lectures are usually conducted by PPOs.

In addition, each local VPOs' Association holds conferences on a case-by-case basis and independently hosts seminars and workshops. Study trips to related agencies such as correctional facilities are also options.

While working collaboratively with VPOs, PPOs continuously communicate with and actively give advice to VPOs regarding the treatment of individual offenders and the management of VPOs' associations. Active communication between PPOs and VPOs is very meaningful to improve VPOs' treatment skills and to enrich their knowledge.⁵

2.4. Main roles and activities

The main roles and activities of VPOs are (i) assisting and supervising probationers and parolees, (ii) inquiring into and coordinating inmates' social circumstances, and (iii) promoting crime prevention activities in the community.

2.4.1. Assisting and supervising probationers and parolees

Supervision and assistance are provided to probationers or parolees by collaborative teams normally composed of one PPO and one VPO.⁶ Depending on the risks and needs of the offenders, PPOs draw up treatment plans and determine the minimum number of meetings that VPOs should have with offenders each month. VPOs typically hold interviews with probationers and parolees about two to three times a month. In their position as fellow local residents, VPOs listen attentively to probationers and parolees, give them advice, help them find jobs, meet with their families, and liaise with local social resources. VPOs must submit progress reports to the director of the probation office each month. The standard form contains the dates and times of interviews, the number of interviews and calls, whether the probationer has complied with his or her conditions of probation, the VPO's opinion on any necessary measures to be taken by PPOs or VPOs in the future and descriptions of behaviours related to friends and associates, money management, alcohol problems, employment/school, health conditions, housing and family status. If a probationer's behaviour is unstable, or in the case of emergency, VPOs call the probation office immediately. Based on these monthly progress reports and phone calls, PPOs follow up with probationers and parolees and recommend revocation of parole or other measures as necessary.

One of the remarkable aspects of service by VPOs is that interviews are usually held in the home. Research shows that more than three quarters of VPOs host probationers or parolees mainly at their own homes.⁷ When surveyed, VPOs noted several merits: "Probationers learn to make and follow through on a promise by coming to the VPO's home" (88.7%); "It allows us to meet in a relaxed and calm environment" (80.0%); and "It enhances the awareness of probationers that they are willingly supervised" (78.0%).⁸

2.4.2. Inquiring into and coordinating inmates' social circumstances

Residence, family, employment, school, community acceptance and other social factors have a great impact on offenders' lives. In order to help offenders transition smoothly from institutional life to life in the local community, probation offices assess living conditions such as accommodation, employment and family relationships from the time of incarceration through release. They then coordinate various life arrangements based on a classification summary prepared by the offender's correctional institution regarding

⁴ The VPOs Act stipulates that "VPOs shall be conscious of their mission, make efforts to develop a noteworthy character and broad vision and acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for performance of their duties" (Article 9).

⁵ Muraki Y., 2015, 'Recruitment, Capacity-Building and Public Recognition of Volunteer Probation Officers in the Tokyo Probation Office', UNAFEI Resource Material Series No. 96.

⁶ Since probation offices handle all types of probationers and parolees regardless of age, gender, crime or length of imprisonment sentence, VPOs may work with all kinds of probationers and parolees, including parolees who serve life sentences. However, probation offices do not assign VPOs if a case is considered inappropriate (e.g., the probationer displays violent tendencies, a defiant attitude, or if there is high public interest in the offender).

⁷ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2005, 'The report 26 - Research on volunteer probation officers' activities and mind' p. 15 (hereinafter, "Report 26").

⁸ Report 26, p. 16.

the offender's life and criminal history, physical and psychological traits and family background (in Japan this is referred to as the "coordination of social circumstances"). While an offender is still incarcerated, a PPO will usually entrust the duty of inquiry and coordination of social circumstances to a VPO who lives close to where the offender would like to live after release. The VPO visits the inmate's family members or guardian on a regular basis, confirms whether family members will provide support to the inmate, and coordinates family relationships, residence and job placement. The VPO often writes letters to offenders who are serving time in correctional institutions to try to understand their future plans and coordinate family relationships. These continuous contacts foster mutual trust between the VPO, the inmate and family members and eases the transition to parole supervision.

2.4.3. Promoting crime prevention activities in the community

While probation and parole supervision are carried out by the probation office, crime prevention activities are carried out under the initiative of VPOs. In order to promote public awareness of the importance of offender rehabilitation, improve social environments and engage communities in the prevention of crime, various activities are carried out in local communities by VPOs. These activities include street parades, small symposia for local citizens, video forums in schools, essay competitions and poster displays that are carried out in cooperation with municipal governments, community members, police and other volunteer groups. The objective is to promote local community bonds and as a result, build safer and stronger communities.

2.5. Other characteristics

The average age of VPOs has been increasing. As of January 2016, the average age was 64.9 years old. About one quarter (26.1%) of all VPOs are women and almost half of them are homemakers. Occupational backgrounds vary continually depending on social and economic changes: as of 2016 the largest group consists of homemakers and people outside of the labour force (27.0%), followed by employees or officials of companies or other organizations (22.8%), religious professionals (11.2%) and miscellaneous others such as service or commercial sector employees, farming, fishing and other first-industry workers, company owners, manufacturers, construction company employees and employers, social workers, schoolteachers, medical doctors and lawyers.

2.6. Reasons for becoming a VPO

According to a survey of 2260 VPOs in 2004, the main reason that people cited for their decision to become a VPO was encouragement or recommendation by other VPOs (70.8%), municipalities (16.6%), other related organizations" (8.1%), or "offender rehabilitation related organizations" (1.7%). Persons who became VPOs on their own initiative accounted for only 0.9% of those surveyed.⁹

90% of VPOs have experience with other volunteer activities such as neighbourhood associations, parent teacher associations and social welfare councils, and they tend to be well-known and respected in the community. When initially approached about becoming a VPO, some individuals were hesitant or may have even declined because they were anxious about whether they could do enough as a VPO (68.1%), they were fearful of working with offenders (23.4%) or they were anxious about whether they could gain the support of their family members (19.1%). At the same time, however, VPOs had an interest in contributing to the community (82.7%), to offender rehabilitation (80.1%), or to their own personal growth (46.8%)¹⁰. For instance, sometimes VPOs explained that they wanted to give back to the community where they were raised or have lived for many years and that they felt that they were contributing directly to crime prevention by helping offenders reintegrate into the community. Thus, although many VPOs may initially feel a sense of anxiety, they are extremely motivated to improve their own communities and they tend to have high expectations of themselves.

2.7. Advantages of VPOs

The VPO system in Japan has three key advantages: (i) local character, (ii) private character, and (iii) continuity of activities.

2.7.1. Local character

2.7.1.1. Geographic proximity. VPOs, probationers and parolees usually live in the same community. Geographic proximity can reduce time, cost and the psychological burden of making contact. Shared culture, dialect and other local traits also enables productive communication.

2.7.1.2. Local knowledge. Since VPOs have lived for a long time in the community, they are familiar with local people and resources. In 2004, the average length of residence in the community was about 46 years.¹¹ More than half of VPOs had already known the offender before being assigned to the offender's case.¹² VPOs often provide offenders with social resources and useful information such as employment opportunities and local group activities¹³ to help them reintegrate into the community.

⁹ Report 26, p. 59.

¹⁰ Report 26, p. 60.

¹¹ Report 26, p. 33.

¹² Report 26, p. 39.

¹³ Report 26, p. 40.

2.7.1.3. *Influence in the community.* As mentioned above, more than 90% of VPOs have experience with other volunteer activities. VPOs are influential and respected persons in the community because of the social contributions they make. Thus, VPOs are ideal persons to change public attitudes and to act as a “bridge” connecting offenders and the community.

2.7.2. *Private character*

2.7.2.1. *Intimacy as neighbours.* As citizens living in the same community, probationers and parolees look upon VPOs as neighbours rather than as representatives of the government. In some cases, VPOs knew offenders as neighbours or former school students prior to when they committed crimes.

2.7.2.2. *Personal interaction.* As fellow citizens, VPOs demonstrate genuine concern about the welfare of offenders. VPOs regard offenders not as probationers or parolees but as individuals, and they encourage rehabilitation with patience and trust. Although it may take a long time for offenders to open up and speak their minds, VPOs listen attentively with compassion. At the beginning of the supervision period, offenders tend to be reluctant to visit VPOs' homes as one of the conditions of probation or parole. Their attitudes change gradually, however. In one survey, VPOs explained: “I feel a sense of fulfilment when I realize that probationers have gradually opened up their minds” and “I feel a sense of purpose as a VPO when probationers develop relationships with their family members through exchange visits.” Thus, VPOs feel rewarded when they establish trust between probationers and when they see positive change in a probationer.¹⁴

At the same time, since most offenders have never experienced the kind of warm concern offered by VPOs, they grow to regain their self-respect and identify themselves with law-abiding culture.

2.7.2.3. *Flexibility in scheduling.* In contrast to probation offices that are only open on weekdays and are closed at night, VPOs can arrange interview times more flexibly. In practice, more than half of VPOs said they usually meet probationers or parolees in the evening between 18:00 to 22:00.¹⁵ One of the reasons is that probationers have to work during the daytime, and VPOs take that into consideration.

2.7.2.4. *Flexibility and diversity of offender treatment.* Apart from PPOs, VPOs have maximum flexibility to supervise and assist offenders. Based on their own personality, ability and willingness, VPOs can try anything that they think is worthwhile.

2.7.3. *Continuity of activities*

As mentioned above, from the beginning of an inmate's custodial sentence, VPOs assess the living conditions that an inmate is likely to return to after release as part of coordination of social circumstances. Typically, the same VPO will be assigned to supervise the offender after release on parole. Thus, the VPO has already met the parolee's family members or other relatives before parole supervision begins. In addition, if the parolee reoffends and is recommitted to a correctional institution, the same VPO will again start the assessment of living conditions from the start of the new prison term. Again, the same VPO will be assigned to supervise the offender after release. The same VPO could thus potentially work with the same offender and family for several years.

Even after the expiration of the supervision period, in many cases a private relationship may continue between the VPO and the ex-offender as citizens in the same community. VPOs thus maintain long relationships with offenders and their family members compared to PPOs, who are routinely transferred to other offices every two to three years.

2.8. *Impact of VPOs on offenders*

VPOs often have a profound impact on the lives of offenders. Below is a letter written by a former juvenile parolee to his former VPO after learning that the VPO had passed away.

To my late VPO:

It has been 12 years since we last met. I met you for the first time when I was 15 years old, and I got married when I was 19. Now I am looking back at my time during those 4 years.

During my parole period, I was bad and lied many times to you. And I betrayed you in the worst way. Despite being on parole, I was arrested and committed to a juvenile training school again. In your eyes as a VPO, I must have been a troublesome boy.

But I have something I have always wanted to tell you. Now I live a straightforward life. Because you always told me never to quit, I have managed to keep on working, and I run a small business of my own. Although I married early, I was blessed with three children. My life is not perfect, but I have a cheerful family. I have had many happy days with the support of many people.

I regret that you have already passed away, and that I can't see you anymore. I wanted to let you know that I have been working hard. And I wanted to receive your praise. I wanted to see your happy smile.

I would like to repay you for all the help you've given to me. You always listened to me gently, trusted me and praised me from the

¹⁴ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime, p. 297.

¹⁵ Report 26, p. 23.

bottom of your heart for every little thing I did. Now I realize that what you wanted to teach me most was to have the firmness of heart to trust people no matter what happens. I began feeling pained when I betrayed others. I am grateful for what you taught me, and I believe that passing on what I learned from you is my responsibility.

Although I haven't been able to tell you all this time, I want to say "thank you so much" and let you know that you will always be my pride and my greatest and dearest teacher.

This letter illustrates how a VPO can affect the lives of offenders. The VPO approached his charge not as an offender but as an individual. He encouraged and helped the young parolee with patience and trust even after being betrayed. It was this experience of trust that taught the parolee how to trust others. Clearly, the VPO had sowed a seed of change in the offender that had kept growing even after more than ten years.

Research suggests that "The first critical component of desistance is empowering relationships. . . . where consistent positive regard may be interpreted by the individual, sometimes for the first time, that he or she is deserving of love and belonging. Being in this relationship gives people the confidence and courage to explore new roles and their attendant skills."¹⁶ Thus, the positive personal relationships that offenders develop with VPOs may tie in directly to desistance.

3. Recent challenges and responses

3.1. Recent challenges

Probation and parole are affected by society, economics and culture, and the activities of VPOs are inseparably connected to the state of the communities in which they live. VPOs are currently faced with several challenges in relation to changes in the needs of offenders as well as changes in socio-economic conditions in Japan.

3.1.1. Weaker community bonds

With urbanization and the aging of society in Japan, bonds within the community are becoming weaker in both urban areas and the countryside. A 2007 poll revealed that neighbourly ties have gotten weaker (see Fig. 1 below), and more than half of the respondents thought that the sense of community had declined.¹⁷ Reasons for this weaker sense of community included: the pervasion of individualism, resistance to interacting with others when the community is considered not safe, lack of opportunities to interact with others, lack of personal connection to homes, and an increase in the number of working mothers. Weaker bonds in the community may lead to social isolation. The number of offenders that do not receive support or assistance from their families and neighbours is increasing. Another poll taken in 2012 shows that the percentage of people who think Japan has become less safe over the past 10 years amounted to 81.1%, and that the majority of these people (54.9%) attribute this (perceived) development to "weakened community bonds".¹⁸

Reflecting this trend, a majority (51.5%) of VPOs feel that it is difficult to ask other members of the community to participate in offender rehabilitation activities because community bonds are getting weaker (See Fig. 2 below).¹⁹

3.1.2. More complicated and diversified needs of offenders

At the same time that probationers and parolees are hard pressed to find jobs and accommodation in the face of severe economic conditions, their needs are becoming more complicated and diversified with issues related to ageing, mental, physical and developmental disorders, and drug and alcohol addiction. For example, the number of elderly inmates (65 years old or over) is increasing rapidly, and 10.4% of new inmates are elderly (2014). Among elderly inmates, more than 70% are re-imprisoned, and the parole rate is lower compared to the rate for all inmates.²⁰ The number of newly placed elderly probationers and parolees is also increasing.²¹ Inmates with mental disorders also account for 12.2% of all new inmates.²²

In the context of this reality, more than 70% of VPOs feel that it is difficult to treat elderly or mentally or physically disordered offenders because they lack expert knowledge, and more than two thirds of VPOs experience difficulty in responding to the various complicated needs of offenders (see Fig. 2 above).²³ Generally, it is difficult for elderly and disordered offenders to find jobs, and it is challenging for VPOs to coordinate the necessary support (such as medical care, social welfare, accommodation, employment) required to help them reintegrate into society.²⁴ Thus, VPOs have reported difficulty in working with these offenders.

¹⁶ Bonita M. Veysey, 2015, "How Offenders Transform Their Lives" (lecture, United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI), Tokyo, Japan).

¹⁷ Cabinet Office, Japan, 2008, White Paper on Youth 2008, p. 59. A 2007 poll showed that the number of people who visit their neighbours has decreased compared to seven years ago, and the number of people who do not visit their neighbours has increased. In 2007, almost 60% of respondents had negative attitudes about visiting their neighbours.

¹⁸ Cabinet Office, Japan, "Special poll survey on safety" (2012), <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/tokubetu/h24/h24-chian.pdf>.

¹⁹ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 295.

²⁰ While the parole rate for all inmates is 56.5%, that of elderly inmates is 40.1% (2014). Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice (2015), White Paper on Crime 2015, p. 189–190.

²¹ In 2014, among new parolees, the elderly accounted for 8.1% (1129 persons), and among new adult probationers, the elderly accounted for 9.2% (309 persons).

²² Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2015, White Paper on Crime 2015, p.192.

²³ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 295.

²⁴ The Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and other organizations have been cooperating in facilitating smooth transfer to welfare services since 2009 so that the elderly and mentally or physically disordered offenders can get welfare support.

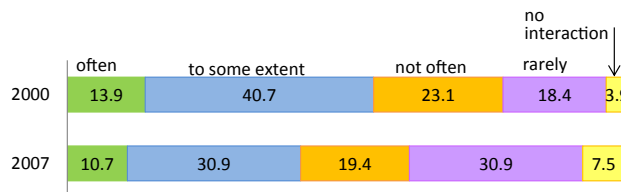


Fig. 1. (Poll) Neighbourly ties. (How often do you visit with your neighbours?). Source: White Paper on Youth, 2008, Cabinet Office, Japan

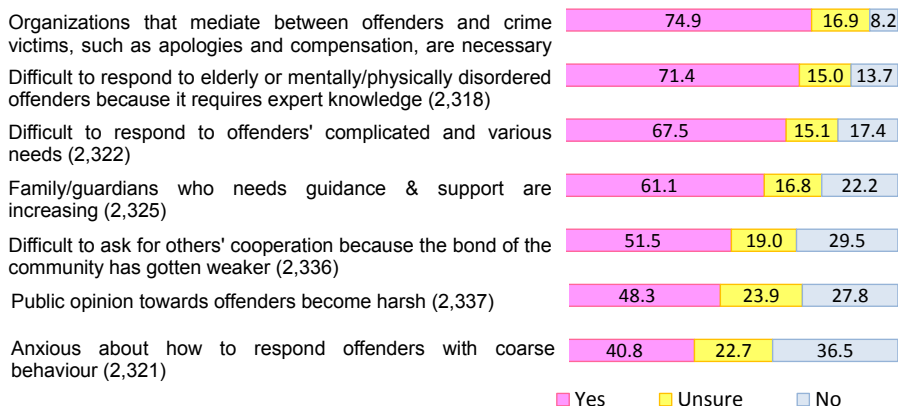


Fig. 2. How do VPOs feel when they work with offenders ? Source: White Paper on Crime 2012, Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan

The same concerns apply to drug offenders who are placed on probation or parole. Under a new law that was enacted in June 2016 to allow “partial suspended execution of sentence”, repeat drug users who receive a partial suspension must be placed on probation supervision for a portion of their sentence. Thus, it is anticipated that the number of drug-dependent offenders who are placed under probation supervision will increase. Since drug dependence affects offenders’ mental and physical health, long-term and sustained medical care and other necessary interventions by multiple agencies is required. As a result, VPOs are likely to experience more difficulty providing supervision and assistance.²⁵

In order to meet the multiple needs of offenders, VPOs have cooperated with other related agencies and individuals in probation supervision, but they are concerned that they should be working more closely with related agencies such as social welfare organizations, public employment security offices, not-for-profit organizations and self-help groups.²⁶

In addition to offenders themselves, the families of offenders also tend to require support and guidance. More than 60% of VPOs feel that the number of “family members who need guidance and support is increasing” (see Fig. 2 above).²⁷ They report a psychological burden when the guardians of juvenile offenders are indifferent about their children or when probationers or parolees have poor relationships with their families.

3.1.3. Decreasing number of VPOs

Although the maximum number of VPOs permitted by the VPOs Act is 52,500, the current number of VPOs is 47,939 (as of January 1, 2016). Since 2009, the number of VPOs has steadily declined except for a slight increase in 2016. The capacity rate in 2016 was 91.3%, which represents a slight (0.1 point) rise compared to the previous year but is still lower than 20 years ago when the capacity rate was around 93% or 94%. In the Tokyo Probation Office, the capacity rate is about 80%. Possible reasons are as follows:

3.1.3.1. *Difficulty of recruitment.* According to a survey of 886 VPOs who were VPOs association presidents in 2012, 84.7% of respondents answered that their attempts to recruit new VPOs were declined, and more than 60% of respondents answered that securing and recruiting appropriate VPOs has gotten tougher over the last 10 years.²⁸ This trend is stronger in urban areas. Another study in 2004 showed that three out of four VPOs had tried to recruit new VPOs but their offers were declined even when the capacity

²⁵ The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare issued joint guidelines for the treatment of drug dependent offenders in 2016 in order to facilitate cooperation among related agencies.

²⁶ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 293.

²⁷ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 295.

²⁸ Rehabilitation Bureau, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, Volunteer probation officers in statistics, p. 4.

rate was 94.1%. The biggest reason cited for declining an invitation in both studies was “Not enough time”. Other reasons included “Cannot gain family members’ understanding”, “Lack of confidence to supervise and assist offenders”, and “Burdensome to have offenders visit VPO’s home”. Regarding offenders’ visits to VPOs’ homes, the study showed that VPOs living in larger population areas tended to feel that their families were burdened, and VPOs who were living in condominiums or apartments tended to feel burdened by having offenders visit their homes.²⁹

3.1.3.2. Early retirement. In 2004, only 9.9% of VPOs retired within five years after their first appointment, but the percentage grew to 13.1% in 2010. Some of the reasons for early retirement are that VPOs do not have support from their family members, they lack the confidence to work with offenders, and there are too many meetings and training requirements.³⁰ A study in 2012 showed that among VPOs who have less than six years’ experience, more than 70% felt anxious when they became VPOs. The biggest reason for anxiety is the psychological burden of contact with offenders (89.2%), followed by anxiety caused by time spent working as a VPO (47.6%) and anxiety of obtaining family understanding (23.4%).³¹ In reality, more than 40% of respondents reported wanting to resign due to these reasons.

3.2. Responses

3.2.1. Reducing burdens on VPOs

According to the above mentioned studies, especially when first appointed, VPOs must deal with a number of psychological burdens related to inviting offenders into their homes, making significant time commitments, and gaining the understanding and support of their own families.

Despite these stressful aspects of working with offenders, more than 70% of VPOs with less than six years’ service reported that they had continued volunteering because they were encouraged by senior VPOs (41.3%), or they felt a sense of fulfillment in taking charge of supervision cases (38.8%).³² VPOs feel rewarded when they realize that offenders have started to open their minds, when they recognize positive changes in offenders’ behaviours or when they see offenders smile or hear appreciative words after completing probation supervision successfully.³³ Research shows that attitudes change positively as VPOs gain experience. For instance, among VPOs who did not have a strong desire to contribute to offender rehabilitation when they became VPOs, more than 40% said that they had experienced fulfillment by contributing to offender rehabilitation through their activities. Also, among VPOs who felt a sense of fear in working with offenders when they first started, more than half reported later on that working with offenders was not a scary experience.³⁴ Research also indicates that the longer the length of service, the greater the sense of fulfillment and the less the sense of burden on the VPO and his or her family. VPOs who had served for shorter periods were less fulfilled and felt more burdened.³⁵

VPOs thus gradually gain a sense of satisfaction and comfort as they observe positive changes in offenders and recognize that their activities contribute to offender rehabilitation. Such a sense of fulfillment is a strong incentive to continue to work as a VPO. According to one survey, VPOs have said, “I couldn’t be happier when I see ex-probationers work hard and live happy lives”, “I am so glad when ex-parolees come to see me to tell me about their marriage or to introduce me to their children,” or “I feel so happy when ex-probationers say ‘Hello’ to me voluntarily when I run into them on the street.”³⁶ This kind of interaction and feedback encourages VPOs to continue their service.

As the following [Figs. 3 and 4](#) show, however, a study in 2012 showed that VPOs who feel a sense of fulfillment contributing to the community or contributing to offender rehabilitation decreased compared to 2004.³⁷

One possible explanation behind the decline in satisfaction is that the number of probationers and parolees has been decreasing since 2002. 68,914 persons were newly placed on probation or parole in 2004, but only 39,995 persons were newly placed on probation or parole in 2014. For this reason, the percentage of VPOs who do not have experience supervising and assisting offenders rose from 3.2% in 2004 to 11.1% in 2012.³⁸ Less opportunities to supervise and assist offenders means less opportunities to experience fulfillment.

The Ministry of Justice also surveyed VPOs on ways to reduce burdens on VPOs. The results are shown below in [Fig. 5](#).

According to this survey, VPOs believe that more guidance and involvement by PPOs would help to reduce their burden. Since VPOs usually do not have expertise in offender treatment, they feel anxious about whether their approach is appropriate and whether they are going in the right direction, especially when an offender’s behaviour does not change or even worsens. The survey results suggest that PPOs need to make a greater effort and actively give advice or instructions. Not only would this reduce VPOs’ burdens, but it would also help to maintain the quality of probation services. In addition, VPOs reported that sharing experience and

²⁹ Report 26, p. 18–19, 28.

³⁰ Review Meeting for the improvement of the VPO System, Japan, 2012, The Report of the Review Meeting for the improvement of the VPO System, p. 6.

³¹ Rehabilitation Bureau, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, Volunteer probation officers in statistics, p.5. For this question, multiple answers were allowed.

³² Rehabilitation Bureau, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, Volunteer probation officers in statistics, p. 7. For this question, multiple answers were allowed.

³³ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 297.

³⁴ Report 26, p. 69–71.

³⁵ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice (2012), White Paper on Crime 2012, Japan, p. 296.

³⁶ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice (2012), White Paper on Crime 2012, Japan, p. 297.

³⁷ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 295, Report 26, p. 65.

³⁸ Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan.

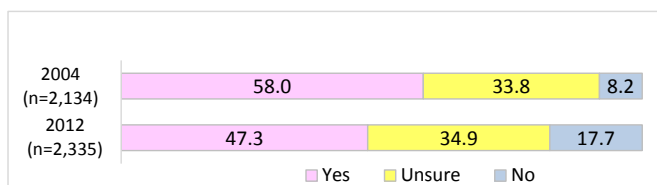


Fig. 3. "I feel fulfilled by contributing to the community".

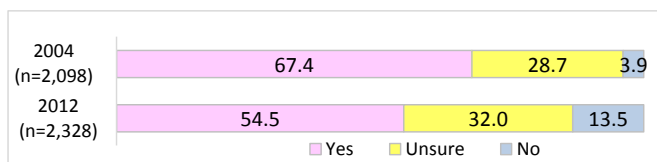


Fig. 4. "I feel fulfilled by contributing to offender rehabilitation".

Source: Report 26 - Research on volunteer PPOs' activities and mind- Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan (2005), White Paper on Crime 2012, Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan

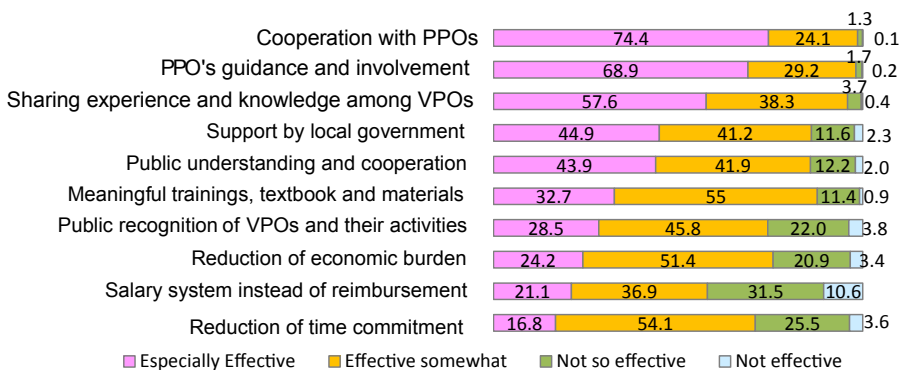


Fig. 5. What measures would reduce the burden of VPOs?.

Source: White Paper on Crime 2012, Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan

knowledge among VPOs is important. Since VPOs sometimes struggle with probation supervision,³⁹ the ability to discuss concerns and consult with experienced VPOs would be helpful to relieve stress and to find effective measures to meet offenders' multiple needs.

Interestingly, research indicates that VPOs who feel a sense of fulfillment and usefulness and who do not feel that their activities are difficult or burdensome tend not to be turned down when they ask other people to become VPOs.⁴⁰ If VPOs feel that their activities are meaningful and fruitful, they will be more persuasive at recruiting persons to become VPOs.

3.2.2. Measures taken by the Rehabilitation Bureau

In order to reduce VPOs' burdens and to support VPOs' activities, the following measures have been taken by the Rehabilitation Bureau⁴¹ of the Ministry of Justice in Japan. It is worth noting that no new legislation was required to implement these measures.

3.2.2.1. Offender Rehabilitation Support Centers. Offender Rehabilitation Support Centers were established beginning in 2008. They aim to promote offender rehabilitation activities by supporting the activities of VPOs and VPOs' associations.⁴² The centers are often built in rent-free public buildings in cooperation with local government. Experienced VPOs are stationed at the centers, and they support VPO activities such as offender supervision and assistance, crime prevention, and establishing local community networks with related agencies. In addition, the centers serve as places for meetings among VPOs and other volunteers and as business offices for VPOs' associations. For instance, VPOs use these centers to interview offenders, conduct case conferences among VPOs, hold

³⁹ VPOs report difficulty when they are faced with dishonesty (e.g., when offender lie or do not visit the VPO's home as required) or when they feel that they cannot help offenders to rehabilitate themselves (e.g., reoffending, failure to find jobs). Research and Training Institute, Ministry of Justice, Japan, 2012, White Paper on Crime 2012, p. 297.

⁴⁰ Report 26, p. 87.

⁴¹ The Rehabilitation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice is responsible for the overall administration of rehabilitation services, the main aspect of which is to provide community-based treatment to offenders. The Bureau handles planning and policy-making which are then implemented by the 50 Probation Offices and eight Regional Parole Boards throughout the country.

⁴² There are 886 Volunteer Probation Officers Association throughout Japan. All VPOs belong to one of these associations.

meetings with other related individuals (e.g., school teachers, social workers, cooperative employers), as well as for consultation or training for newly appointed VPOs. The centers also inform the public about the centers' activities and provide consultation services to the public.

As of 2015, there were 446 centers throughout Japan. Since some VPOs have difficulty interviewing offenders at their homes because of family concerns or lack of space, the centers can be alternative places to conduct interviews. Also, the centers promote sharing of information among VPOs. A survey in 2015 showed approximately 90% of VPOs' associations were satisfied with the center, 80% responded that support for probation supervision was promoted by the centers, more than 70% responded that cooperation with other agencies was promoted and almost 50% responded that public understanding was promoted through the center. At the same time, approximately 40% of respondents said that there was an increased burden on the executives of VPOs' associations and that there was still room for improvement. The centers are expected to become hubs for each VPO association and to promote public understanding of VPOs' activities and community networks.

3.2.2.2. VPO Candidate Information Meetings. Traditionally, when VPOs recruit new VPOs, they make full use of their community networks and generally try to find successors on their own before they reach retirement age (76 years of age).⁴³ Beginning in 2008, "VPO Candidate Information Meetings" were introduced to try to secure appropriate VPOs from a broader cross-section of the population as well as to enhance the transparency of the VPO recruitment procedure. The meetings are conducted by VPOs and representatives from the municipal government, neighbourhood associations, social welfare workers, parent-teacher associations and other members from the local community.

3.2.2.3. Encouraging inexperienced VPOs. Newly appointed VPOs are nervous about taking charge of probationers individually, and the number of VPOs who have no experience supervising probationers is increasing. Thus, PPOs encourage new VPOs to take charge of probationers and often assign more than one VPO to supervise a single probationer. Through this dual assignment, a newly appointed VPO can gain experience supervising probationers and can receive advice from experienced VPO. The sharing of roles is also effective when a probationer has complicated needs. For example, one VPO can supervise the probationer and the other VPO can work with related agencies. Similarly, when the probationer's family members need guidance and support, one VPO can supervise the probationer while the other focuses on the family. This system helps to reduce the burden on VPOs and enables new VPOs to realize that their work is challenging but rewarding.

3.2.2.4. Joint notification asking for cooperation from local governments. In 2014, 2015, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and the Ministry of Justice jointly issued a notification asking for local government understanding and cooperation for VPOs' activities. These activities include sharing information about VPO candidates, securing locations for an Offender Rehabilitation Support Center, support for offender reintegration, creating opportunities to inform local government staff of VPO activities and introducing VPO activities in magazines or websites for local government.

3.2.2.5. Promoting training for PPOs. Each PPO provides periodic training to VPOs on the topic of rehabilitation service, such as probation supervision, treatment for individuals with special needs, and new measures and policies. VPOs obtain knowledge and skills and share their best practices. Training sessions are also a good opportunity for both PPOs and VPOs to communicate, and they often discuss probation cases before or after the training sessions. Thus, the Research and Training Institute of the Ministry of Justice provides training for PPOs in order to deliver effective training for VPOs.

3.2.2.6. Compensation

VPOs initially fear working with offenders. Since VPOs are legally regarded as part-time government officials, they are compensated under the Government Employees' Accident Compensation Act if they are injured in the course of their duties. Previously, however, property damage and injuries to the family members of VPOs were not compensated. In 2010, a tragic event occurred in which a juvenile parolee burned down a VPO's home. Although no one was killed or hurt, the necessity for wider compensation was discussed. In 2012, the Rehabilitation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice and the national VPO Association jointly introduced a compensation system for VPOs and their family members who are victimized or suffer property damage in the performance of their duties.

4. Volunteers in ASEAN countries

UNAFEI has actively conducted seminars, research and exchanges in several ASEAN countries,⁴⁴ among which Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand have developed formal VPO-style systems of their own. As in Japan, volunteers in these countries assist PPOs and play versatile roles by supervising offenders, conducting social investigations, supporting group activities

⁴³ Muraki Y., 2015, 'Recruitment, Capacity-Building and Public Recognition of Volunteer Probation Officers in the Tokyo Probation Office', UNAFEI Resource Material Series No. 96.

⁴⁴ ASEAN stands for 'The Association of South East Asian Nations', and it serves as a regional cooperative organization composed of ten countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Viet Nam.

and crime prevention activities, and enhancing public awareness. At the same time, they face challenges such as lack of budget, lack of public understanding, heavy caseloads, securing adequate numbers of volunteers, and ensuring the safety of volunteers and reducing their psychological and financial burdens. In this section I present a brief overview for the purpose of comparison.

4.1. Overview of volunteer probation officer systems or other similar systems

4.1.1. Malaysia⁴⁵

The Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development handles the rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law and measures for prevention. Child Welfare Committees were established in 1976 under the Child Act, and the committee members assist PPOs in supervising juvenile offenders, making home visits, arranging employment, overseeing training facilities and making juveniles feel accepted in the community. As of 2015, there were approximately 126 district Child Welfare Committees nationwide, and each committee was comprised of 7–15 volunteers appointed by the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development.

4.1.2. The Philippines⁴⁶

The probation system of the Philippines started operations in 1978, and community corrections, including probation, parole and pardons, is administered by the Parole and Probation Administration (PPA) of the Department of Justice. A volunteerism programme was implemented in 1978, and currently there are 10,436⁴⁷ appointed Volunteer Probation Assistants (VPA) nationwide. VPAs monitor and supervise PPA clients as direct supervisors, and lecture on topics relevant to clients' rehabilitation as resource individuals. VPAs also serve as guidance counselors to the client, programme coordinators, mediators, restorative justice implementers and therapeutic community facilitators.⁴⁸

4.1.3. Singapore⁴⁹

Probation in Singapore is administered by the Probation Services Branch of the Rehabilitation Protection Group, Ministry of Social and Family Development. The probation system began in 1947. Since 1971, interested citizens have volunteered their time to mentor probationers⁵⁰ and there are currently approximately 250 Volunteer PPOs (as of 2015). VPOs serve as befrienders and positive role models to probationers (befriending) and as primary contact persons with schools (School Liaison Network). VPOs also conduct curfew checks at night (Operation Night Watch), contribute to group activities such as co-facilitating group programmes for probationers and parents with PPOs (Facilitation/Organization of Programmes) and assist with planning and implementing meaningful community service projects for probationers (Community Service Volunteers).

4.1.4. Thailand⁵¹

Probation service in Thailand started for juveniles in 1952. It is administered by the Department of Probation (DOP) of the Ministry of Justice in Thailand, and the Volunteer Probation Officers Scheme was introduced in 1985. The main roles of VPOs are assisting PPOs by conducting post-sentence investigation, supervising and monitoring adult and juvenile probationers and parolees, making home visits and providing aftercare services to released offenders and ex-probationers, assisting in drug rehabilitation and following up with drug addicts and promoting probation services to the general public. The DOP utilizes approximately 700 VPO Coordinating Centers to accept reports from probationers, provide vocational training to probationers, and otherwise support VPO activities. Under an initiative of the Ministry of Justice to address the shortage of VPOs, the DOP promoted the recruitment of VPOs in every sub-district and increased the number of VPOs to 21,575 (as of August 2015). This effort has enabled offenders who live in rural areas to access the assistance of VPOs.

4.2. Challenges and responses in ASEAN countries

As mentioned above, volunteers play a crucial role in offender rehabilitation and crime prevention in a number of ASEAN countries. Volunteer activities encompass a wide range of supervising and mentoring offenders, conducting social investigations, supporting group activities (e.g., community service, therapeutic community, restorative justice), liaising with other related agencies, securing financial support, preventing crime and enhancing public awareness.

However, at the same time, these countries are facing challenges that limit the effectiveness of volunteer activities: lack of budget, high caseload, declining number of volunteers because of aging and early retirement, capacity building of volunteers, securing safety of volunteers, reducing psychological and financial burdens of volunteers, and raising public recognition. In order to respond to these challenges, Thailand, for instance, defines the term "volunteer probation officer" in the Probation Act 2016, which is the first time

⁴⁵ Thailand Institute of Justice (2016), The Second Seminar on Promoting Community-Based Treatment in the ASEAN Region Seminar Report, p. 70–74.

⁴⁶ "Volunteer Probation Aides" was renamed "Volunteer Probation Assistants" by amendment of the Probation Law in 2015.

⁴⁷ Manuel G. Co, 2016, 'Concept of Community Correction of Offenders in the Philippines' (lecture, United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI), Tokyo, Japan, September 2016).

⁴⁸ Thailand Institute of Justice (2016), The Second Seminar on Promoting Community-Based Treatment in the ASEAN Region Seminar Report, p. 81–84.

⁴⁹ Thailand Institute of Justice (2016), The Second Seminar on Promoting Community-Based Treatment in the ASEAN Region Seminar Report p. 85–89.

⁵⁰ Renamed the Volunteer Probation Officer Scheme in 2012 to strengthen its representation as a volunteering scheme.

⁵¹ Thailand Institute of Justice (2016), The Second Seminar on Promoting Community-Based Treatment in the ASEAN Region Seminar Report p. 99–104.

VPOs have been referenced in the law. In addition, Thailand has promoted the recruitment of younger VPOs and introduced a TEAM model in which one PPO and three VPOs work in collaboration and hold case conferences regularly. In order to reduce financial burden on volunteers, the Philippines, for example, amended the Probation Law in 2015 to provide reasonable transportation expenses and meal allowances. In regard to capacity building, Singapore, for example, has a structured training system for VPOs that makes use of e-learning to enhance the knowledge and skills of volunteers. Although volunteers are not usually paid salaries in these countries, actual expenses such as transportation are paid to a certain extent, and outstanding volunteers are given awards in recognition of their contributions (the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand). In fact, in Thailand, the Cabinet declared March 16th each year to be “Volunteer Probation Officer Day” in recognition of the importance of VPO work.

Although the roles of VPOs and other similar volunteers in different countries may vary somewhat according to cultural, societal and criminal judicial systems, many of the challenges faced are universal. Sharing these challenges and responsive measures among different countries is very useful to enhance volunteer activities in each country.

5. Conclusion

In Japan, in order to prevent recidivism and to help offenders rehabilitate themselves, probation and parole supervision and assistance are maximized by cooperation between PPOs and VPOs. VPOs have several great advantages. They offer supervised detailed knowledge of the local community, personal supervision and support, and continuous contact throughout the process of rehabilitation. Although the Japanese VPO system has a long and successful history, VPOs are facing several challenges in line with social and cultural changes in Japan. In response, the Rehabilitation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice has implemented a number of measures, such as establishing Offender Rehabilitation Support Centers, encouraging VPO Candidate Information Meetings, encouraging assignments for inexperienced VPOs, joint notification asking for cooperation of local governments, promoting training for PPOs, and the creation of a new compensation scheme for property damage or injury to the family members of VPOs. Since the number of VPOs is decreasing, the government and the community must increase efforts to support VPO activities. In order to do so, the role of PPOs is significant.

Sooner or later, most offenders come back to the community. This is why the concept of community acceptance and support is crucial for offender rehabilitation. In many countries, VPOs and other volunteers play an important role in helping offenders reintegrate into the community. When we consider how the effectiveness of probation can be maximized through volunteer activities, it is important to reconsider how PPOs and volunteers can and should share roles. In order to do so, learning from and comparing the approaches of other countries are important steps.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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