



WORLD POLITICS | CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Japan has exceptionally low crime rates. But there's a dark side to its justice system.

By German Lopez | @germanlopez | german.lopez@vox.com | Dec 13, 2015, 10:00am EST

Japan has **exceptionally low levels of crime**. In 2011, its **intentional homicide rate** was 0.3 per 100,000 people, while America's rate was 4.7 per 100,000 people. Japan's gun death statistics are particularly impressive, given the recent **mass shootings** in the US: In 2013, Japan's gun homicide rate was **0.01 per 100,000 people**, while America's rate was **3.5** — 350 times the rate of Japan.

But as the **video** above by the Economist shows, behind Japan's low crime rates are some very troubling criminal justice practices. The Economist **explained**:

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Some suspects will falsely admit guilt just to end a stressful interrogation, and interrogations in Japan can be very stressful. Police and prosecutors may hold ordinary criminal suspects for up to 23 days without charge—longer than most other rich countries allow even terrorist suspects to be detained. Access to defence lawyers during this period is limited. In theory, suspects have the right to remain silent; but in practice prosecutors portray silence as evidence of guilt.

Prosecutors put pressure on the police to extract confessions, and 23 days is plenty of time to extract one. Interrogators sometimes ram tables into a suspect, stamp on his feet or shout in his ears. Interviews can last for eight hours or more. Suspects are deprived of sleep and forced into physically awkward positions. Few people can withstand such treatment. "Not being able to sleep was the hardest for me," says Kazuo Ishikawa, who held out for 30 days before signing a confession he couldn't read (he was illiterate at the time) to a murder he says he didn't commit. He spent 32 years in prison and is still fighting to be exonerated.

In other words, Japan's criminal justice system is built to rely largely on confessions — confessions underpinned 89 percent of criminal prosecutions in 2014, the Economist **found**. And the lack of safeguards for suspects means the system **often relies** on *false* confessions.

The Economist **reported**:

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In a court system without an adversarial approach to establish innocence and guilt, judges too rarely question whether confessions really are voluntary. Yet time and again innocent people have been shown to confess to crimes in the hope of a more lenient sentence—or simply to make the interrogation stop. In October a mother convicted of killing her daughter for the insurance money was released after a crime reconstruction proved her innocence. Last year Iwao Hakamada was freed after 46 years on death row when a judge declared that his conviction was unsafe (among other things, he appears to have been tortured at the time of his arrest). One lawyer estimates that a tenth of all convictions leading to prison are based on false confessions. It is impossible to know the true figure, but when 99.8% of prosecutions end in a guilty verdict, it is clear that the scales of justice are out of balance.

So Japan's criminal justice system may boast some very impressive statistics, but those figures seem to come with a dark side.

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