

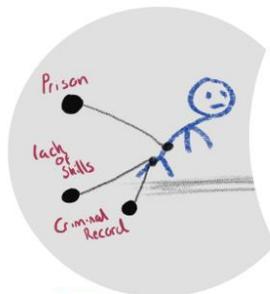
BEYOND  
JAPAN

Beyond Japan Transcript

[Series 2, Episode 29: Crime & Desistance with Adam Hunt](#)

Edited by [Oliver Moxham](#), Host and Producer (18/5/2022)

CRIME & DESISTANCE  
WITH ADAM HUNT



**OM:** Oliver Moxham

**AH:** Adam Hunt

**OM:** Hello and welcome to *Beyond Japan*, an interdisciplinary podcast that looks at the broad reach of Japanese Studies from within and beyond Japan. This podcast is brought to you by the [Centre for Japanese Studies](#) at the [Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures](#) in collaboration with the [University of East Anglia](#). I'm your host, Oliver Moxham, Research Project Coordinator at the Sainsbury Institute and [researcher of language and Japanese war heritage](#).

Today I'm joined by [Adam Hunt](#), PhD candidate at the University of Sheffield, to compare crime between Japan and the UK and how factors such as attitudes towards former convicts affects "desistance"; that is, attempts to reduce the rate of reoffending.

We hope you enjoy the show.

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**OM:** Good morning, Adam, thank you for joining me on the podcast today.

**AH:** Hello, thank you for having me.

**OM:** So, first off, we'd like to know a bit more about you. Can you tell us about your area of expertise and how your interests brought you there?

**AH:** Right, so my area of expertise is desistance from crime, which is how people transition out of crime. What brought me there is general undergraduate research. I had

a teacher at Manchester Metropolitan who did research with a group of his friends, about 20 friends that were drug offenders, and he researched how they all transitioned out of crime. My interest started there and then my own personal research and experience with Japanese media gave me an interest in Japan.

So, I started learning the language and I sort of just combined the two interests from my work in desistance generally in Western spheres, and then realised that very few people have actually done research on Japanese desistance in English. There is a small piece on the topic, but other than that I'm not aware of anyone writing in English on desistance, though people are writing on desistance in Japanese.

**OM:** I see. So, let's begin by looking at crime and punishment in the UK and Japan in general. In recent episodes with Dr Viviana Andreescu on capital punishment in Japan, we discussed that while Japan has a relatively low crime rate and a powerful prosecution system, the general public has a high fear of crime. How does this compare with the UK?

**AH:** It's very similar if you think about Japan and England in terms of how they operate in terms of information on crime. They both have a media that is using the same systems to gain viewership, and in contemporary society, the talking points tend to be globalised, so it's a homogenised view of crime across the world

So, I suppose – it's a very long explanation – Japan, oddly, has a high fear of crime. I mean, one of the best indicators of just how concerned with crime Japan is, is the

number of volunteers that contribute towards crime prevention activities. In Japan, they number in about 3 million of a population of 125 million. These stats might be slightly out of date, but that is an extraordinarily large amount of public that are actively contributing towards crime prevention measures, even though Japan has a very low level of crime in terms of recorded crime statistics relative to the wider world, but we'll get on to that topic in a second, I believe.

**OM:** So, the general media then, is the main driver behind public concerns around crime in both Japan and the UK. Is that correct?

**AH:** Yes. So, the news, online publications, YouTube – based on my reading, there's a level of political mirroring where politicians will address media concerns and sort of validate their existence by addressing them as real concerns, but my reading on this topic is not extensive. My understanding is that, yes, there is a high fear of crime, even though Japan is arguably the safest country in the world.

**OM:** Okay. I'm somewhat sceptical of the claims that Japan is a low-crime country, particularly around sexual harassment. I remember sitting through an induction before my year abroad where the women in my class were told how to deal with *chikan*, or 'molesters' on public transport, as though it were a common nuisance. I later learned that while 65% of women in Japan reported experiencing groping, over 95% of such incidents weren't reported to the police. In your opinion, do you think there is a gap between crimes committed and crimes reported in general?

**AH:** I do. There's significant evidence that there is such a gap, even outside of Japan. I have some statistics that are worth considering just to set up the discussion. So in Japan, the number of police recorded crimes – this is based on a [white paper](#) that was published in 2021 on crime in 2020 by the Japanese government, translated into English, so the listener can actually go and look at this themselves – the number is 750,000 police-recorded instances. In England, the number of police-recorded crime is 6 million, so obviously that's a lot higher.

So, that's police-recorded crime, that's not self-report data. One thing to point out is that Japan's population is 125,000,000, and the data here is from England and Wales, and the combined population of England and Wales is roughly 60 million, so the relative difference in terms of crimes per population is very close to 15-fold, approaching 20-fold in terms of recorded incidents, but if you look at the crime survey for England and Wales, which is self-report data, you will see that in England and Wales there's an estimated 12 million instances of a penal code violation, which is a fairly sizable gap between recorded crime and the actual number. In recent times, because of the crime survey for England and Wales has put in significant effort into attempting to drive up police numbers to represent true levels of crime, because obviously you have that crime survey data that's telling you that there's all these crimes that happen that aren't being recorded. So, initiatives to get people talking to the police, especially with sexual offences which are significantly underreported because of the possibility that re-victimisation occurs whenever someone reports crimes like that, which are troubling.

In terms of Japan's underreported crime, there's a few factors to get into in terms of sexual offending, understanding that requires getting into power dynamics in Japan and its overall structure and how that may contribute towards people not wanting to come forwards.

**OM:** I see. So, let's consider criminal demographics. What are the social backgrounds of convicts in the UK and Japan? Are there any striking differences that jump out to you between these two countries?

**AH:** So, between these two countries, the demographics of offending, generally speaking, relate to the type of crime you consider. The majority of crime is made up of crime related to ability to survive. So, if you look at Japan, of the 750,000 crimes, roughly 500,000 (well over 50%) is theft, and theft is usually driven by socio-economic deprivation. In England it's very similar. The majority of crimes come from socio-economically deprived areas. Something worth noting is the motivations to commit crime are relatively varied based on the actual specific offence that occurs.

Something that is worth explaining is the age-crime curve. Of the large portion of offences committed, there are two types of offenders: these short-term offenders that only commit a small amount of crime; and long-term offenders that have life circumstances that make it very difficult for them to effectively engage in normal society, and these people will usually have longer careers of offending. We'll get onto this subject later.

So, there aren't specific types of offenders, if you look at literature on this, so there isn't too much specialisation in offending, so you don't have specifically a thief or specifically a violent assault person or specifically even sexual offending in some cases. So, if you think about why someone will get arrested if they are in a life circumstances that is conducive to criminal activity and the people they are associating with, they will have various activities within their life and so they will generally be caught only for a few – maybe even [only] one – of those activities, which means that in terms of data, when you see a person that's committed a violent assault and a person that's committed theft, there's an entire possibility that both of these people have very similar lives in terms of criminal offending if they are long term offenders. That's worth bearing in mind in terms of demographic characteristics.

Something in terms of difference between England and Japan in terms of the demographic characteristics is the obvious point, which is England is a lot more ethnically diverse, and there is a significant amount more of socio-economic deprivation. Something worth pointing out is that Japan has a different age of criminal responsibility, so the actual landscape of its criminal justice system and the people that it's dealing with is slightly different. Plus, Japan's age of criminal responsibility, up until about April 2022, was 20, so you were considered an adult at the age of 20 in Japan. There has been a slight change where if you are sentenced for something over a year, you will be treated as an adult from the age of 18 now, and that's only just changed, so that was

April [when] that rule change went into play. I'm not entirely sure what the implication of this is and how it's going to play out in relative terms.

The other point to raise in terms of demographics is that Japan is, again, isolated relative to England in terms of demographic factors that would compose a country. So, England has got a lot of different nationalities in its DNA, but Japan is very homogenised. Consequently, a lot of Japanese culture is built around the understanding that everyone knows all of these social rules.

**OM:** One big difference that stands out to me is that, talking about socio-economic difference, in the UK, we have the mentality of a class system - working class, middle class, upper class - and these distinctions of blue collar, white collar crime, whereas Japan has a very large middle class, so there isn't so much stereotypical views based on your socio-economic backgrounds, maybe, in Japan when it comes to crime.

**AH:** Yes, that's true. One of the difficult things about talking about crime in Japan is that criminals occupy a different spacing category relative to the wider population. So, if you think about theories on Japan and Japanese culture, you have to very carefully consider whether those theories are applicable to the specific group of people that are offending in Japan, which may be composed of the people that aren't necessarily Japanese. So, it's something that would require extensive statistical work to just double-check all of the statistics on what percentage of people that are committing theft and so on and so forth.

Something that I didn't note earlier was one statistic that I have in terms of comparing England and Wales, [which is] useful for the discussion going forward. I'm not 100% certain how comparable exactly these two statistics are, but I have the statistic for charge or summoned in England and Wales, which totalled about 315,000, and then in Japan, they had offences with a finalised judgement, which is 250,000, so the relative difference there is about two-fold compared to 20-fold in the official statistics. I just thought I'd mention that now, while I remember.

**OM:** Interesting. So, your research is centred around "desistance", defined by UK justice inspectorates as "the process of abstaining from crime by those with a previous pattern of offending". Before getting into desistance, what are the most common reasons behind reoffending?

**AH:** So, answering this question requires explaining, generally, "desistance". The most common reason behind offending [is that] a person's life is not conducive to a life without offending. It's a very vague answer, but on an individual level, the motivations will be different. On a general level, the motivations are blurred. There's no real patterns that are easy to identify outside of financial need. Everything is quite personal to them in terms of how they orientate their lives.

So, to further explain the system, I believe you've got another question for me that will lead into this.

**OM:** Yes, so could you unpack the process of desistance for us, placing it in the context of how justice systems have attempted to deal with reoffending in the past?

**AH:** So, the first thing to know about assistance, as I noted earlier, is the age-crime curve. You've got a large portion of people that will be called "adolescent limited offenders". If you look at the graph, there's a big spike around the age of 18 where people start being sanctioned for offences and not being deflected into youth-related rehabilitation, and then, over time, this curve sharply and then gently decreases through to about the age of 30. So, you have a large cohort of offending that occurs at the age of about 20, and then over time, this will gradually decline in the population, so people are slowly phasing out of committing crimes. This specific age that this spikes up varies between countries based on their practices in response to youth offending.

So, that's the main background of the system's research is trying to understand why people transition out of crime. So, there's this inherent assumption, which isn't understood widely, that people will actually eventually exit crime and people aren't offenders for life.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Japan is one of the notable exceptions. Japan has an offending population that is growing older. There's old offenders in Japan, so there's definitely social conditions that can change this pattern of offending decline. Japan is a unique country in terms of desistance because it's ageing and there is a declining birth rate, so there's a lot less young people and a lot more old people, which means the actual structure of society is a little different, and a lot of inherent

assumptions that exist on desistance don't apply specifically to the older population of Japanese offenders that are specifically offending because there's an inability to live there, which is surprising. When you start reading about this, there's a double take that you'll do, then you also realise that there's no one writing about this in English papers at least. I'm aware that there's definitely people doing research in Japanese on this.

As you would expect, the explanation of desistance is very multifaceted. There's four different things that are worth noting in terms of why people are transitioning out of crime. Why people transition out of crime is based on their relative agency. So, agency as a concept is a little difficult to summarise, but contemporary thinking places agency as a relative power to the environment a person exists within. So, each person on an individual level will have a different level of agency to affect change in their life, and this will be based on a number of factors.

There's obviously structural factors, so things like if a country has a criminal record, you will want to look at how that is affecting their ability to gain employment and things like that. One of the important factors that's noted in desistance research is the concept of "prosocial bonds", so connections and events and people and bonds in life that are positive in terms of influence. So, these are things like marriage, things like employment, things like friendship, family support, and any number of small things, and obviously it takes different shapes. So, it's understood that as a person goes through life they will accumulate prosocial connections and these will motivate and change their life

in a way that makes offending seem less needed in the case specifically where someone gains employment.

There is another side to this, which is the concept of internal change. For the offender, the ability to obtain prosocial bonds is based on a person's ability to get those bonds in some way. [For example], to gain employment you need obviously skills, so for a lot of offenders that have come from socio-economic deprivation or very poor backgrounds, they may not have – in the peak of their offending – those skills, so in order to desist, they require some sort of internal change, skill-set change. So, there are two sides to this: the motivation to change needs to kick in; and also the ability to change needs to kick in, so what desistance research does is identify where in society people are gaining these supportive mechanisms and relationships.

There's also background to all of this change and desire to change is the concept of a feared self or a negative motivation from offending. Say, for example, you look at an offender and they have been to prison and they start talking about some of the people that they met in prison and they'll explain that they were looking at this 20-years-old person – so in their 50s or 60s and they're still in prison – and had some sort of realisation that may be them if they continue offending and that they do not want to do that. So, you will get increased motivation to change over time as people realise that there are more negative events that can happen because of offending.

Overall, desistance is centred on a concept of support and supportive mechanisms in society. This can be state-run support lines, it can be drug counselling, all sorts of things. Does that answer your question?

**OM:** Yes, very comprehensively, thank you. I guess one last thing I would like to ask about that is do you know how far a public sympathetic to past offenders is an important factor in desistance?

**AH:** It is a very interesting question, something that I've been trying to think about. There is historical perception of Japan as being a sympathetic country to offending. Brie Thwaite wrote a piece that explained Japan was restorative in the way that it approached criminals. That isn't entirely true, and there's been a lot of push-back from Japanese scholars and researchers in general that Japan is actually quite disintegrative. The sympathetic nature is only important in the case where criminals are being identified in society as they are trying to desist.

So, if you think about it in those terms, in England, because the criminal record is disclosed before employment, the reaction to offenders will heavily inform their ability to make one of the pivotal changes to their life necessary to end offending, which is the ability to obtain money in a legal way. I have spoken with several colleagues in Japan and I have mixed messaging on whether or not people are required to disclose their criminal record to people, and I've been told that they do and I've been told that they don't, so I'm not going to comment at the moment.

My understanding is Japan does have a criminal record and I think it's variable whether it's public or not for young offenders. I know that it isn't, so that would be people currently under the age of 20, but yeah, being sympathetic towards the offender is important specifically in these structures that can provide support. So, a person called Donna Seger did research on desistance in Israel and she found the family reaction to offending there is very supportive. There's sort of this view that a person offending is the responsibility of that family and it's the responsibility of that family to correct that behaviour across even close family connections.

So, the response to offenders is very important to consider, but it varies by stakeholders that you think about, so family, the state, the probation service, employers - any of these different aspects of society that are interacting with an individual will have a potentially different reaction to that offender based on the ideology and culture that they exist within. So, yes, the answer to your question is it is important that people are sympathetic towards offenders in facilitating desistance, but how that sympathy manifests in reality is obviously very complicated.

**OM:** Sure, and I guess beyond a personal basis of how people respond to meeting and interacting with past offenders, there's also the grander political level, right? When you think about – again, to refer back to right-wing tabloids in the UK and the Conservative Party's stance on law and order – about having more police and removing parole rights for people who commit serious crimes, increasing sentences, there doesn't seem to be much empathy for those who have committed crimes. The voters – on the right, at least

– seem quite keen to lock them up and throw away the key almost. So, without empathy towards offenders, there is no capacity to give people legally the opportunity to start again, I suppose.

**AH:** I agree, it's very tricky, the political landscape in terms of dealing with offenders. For the offenders, what is best is a society that tries to understand them, tries to understand why they're offending. I feel like we are slowly at certain levels, starting to understand that offending isn't necessarily entirely the offenders fault, but there still needs to be that understanding that crime will be punished, people can't abuse the system, and you've got to have all these systems in place.

The right-wing ideology has always been to be very punitive and to really embrace that righteous condemnation that we have historically in us based in religious ideology of placing someone as an “other” and “us” as superior, and creating a very black-and-white world, but in terms of offending, the drivers of crime are usually quite nuanced and the real solutions to crime are structural solutions. But yeah, I agree that there's a lot of political ideologies that aren't productive.

One of the issues you have is that the crime problem is so nuanced, the real answers don't appropriately fit into short sound bites that you can build a campaign around. It's an interesting point.

**OM:** I've got one last question: I mentioned earlier about the very strong prosecution system in Japan which has abnormally high prosecution rates of over 90%, and how

they have the right to technically hold someone who's been arrested for two, three weeks if they so choose. This can lead to false confessions, and so people can very rapidly find themselves in a position where they're being cast as an offender when they haven't actually offended, with little recourse to defend themselves. So, surely these people, if they are convicted, they can't really be called "re-offenders" if they haven't offended in the first place, they've been falsely imprisoned. What can be done to address this?

**AH:** Well, I don't believe anyone in England really has the knowledge or capacity to change that. Something worth considering is that in Japanese society, the entire structure is very different and the level of trust people are given on an individual level is a lot higher. There is sort of this inherent belief in people that there won't be abuse of power. England and English people are very sceptical of giving the state specifically overt power, because of its history, this identification of corruption, and things like that. So, the [prosecution] statistics [in Japan] are pretty scary if you were to consider those statistics to exist in a place like England, but something worth remembering is that the Japanese criminal justice system does have some level of deflection before sending people to courts. If you look at the actual numbers in the white paper, a higher percentage of people are turned away from prosecution, so the burden of proof doesn't happen in the courtrooms, it happens elsewhere, and the police are given a significant amount of responsibility in that regard.

The standards of policing expected in Japan are a lot higher just in terms of qualification and practice. Probation, for example, requires undergraduate degrees. There's just extremely high levels of education in Japan. So, it's very important to consider the contextual factors around Japan when you view a specific cultural practice and not to draw comparisons one-to-one and situate all of the various components to that discussion. So, I think the best thing to do is to wait for someone specifically to engage in research on those topics and look at those rather than make guesses at the time when we don't really have full information about how these systems are being used.

My assumption is there's significant abuse of power that's occurring in Japan, but I don't know the scope or scale, and Japan is a very utilitarian country, as most [collectivist countries] are. So, collectivist countries tend to be very group-orientated, so the individual and the individual's rights aren't seen as pivotal. They aren't the central point of the cultural dialogue, as you would find in a place like America, which is extremely individualised. So, concessions are made for the individual to improve the wider functioning of society. I hope that answers your question.

**OM:** Yes, thank you, and for any Japanese Studies students out there looking for a PhD topic, there you have it. Thank you for answering my questions today, Adam. Before we finish the episode, could you share with us what other projects are you currently working on?

**AH:** Other than the PhD, my other projects are learning Japanese, which is very difficult, all-consuming, and still very bad, to be honest. I'm looking forward to trying

learning in Japan, see if that makes a difference. I'm hoping, once the PhD is finished, to complete a more robust desistance study with my colleagues, where I will have a Japanese native researcher help me interview probationers there, rather than me do it, which is what I'm planning to do with the PhD. In terms of research quality, it would be extraordinarily helpful just in terms of understanding the data itself, facilitating better quality interviews, and the scope of the project would be better. So, I'm basically planning to do the PhD again, but with someone, which would be really nice if I can actually manage it.

**OM:** Excellent. Thanks again, Adam, it's been a real pleasure.

**AH:** Thank you for having me.

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**OM:** You can find a link to [Adam's research profile](#) in the description below. Don't forget to subscribe on JapanInNorwich.org or on your preferred podcast provider for updates on new episodes. You can also get in touch to recommend topics for the podcast at [cjs@uea.ac.uk](mailto:cjs@uea.ac.uk). Join us for our next episode with Sophie Richard, art specialist and acclaimed writer on Japanese museums, as we explore art museums in Japan of every variety.

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