



Yakuza in Japan: Why Are They Still There?

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Abstract

For generations Japan has been trying to control and contain their mafia organizations known as yakuza. The yakuza groups have been an issue since the Tokugawa era in the early 1800s, and to this day they continue to defy the Japanese government which has never been able to fully rid the country of these organizations. In our research we examine why the Japanese government has such a hard time trying to deal with yakuza and why the yakuza have a big impact on Japanese society.

For our research we will be using sources such as historical documents, police reports, articles/newspapers, and first hand accounts on dealing with yakuza. Taking a look at such sources has led us to finding out that the Japanese government is starting to crack down on yakuza more since 2011 with the support of the United States government though the yakuza still continue to hold roots in Japanese businesses and citizens. We hope to bring awareness to this topic and teach people how the yakuza organizations have changed and adapted over the years, how they are currently being handled in Japan, and how they could be dealt with in the future.



(From IroMegane)

History

Yakuza have been around since the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1868). It's believed that when the samurai were disbanded that some were divided between two groups; the Tekiya and the Bakuto. Tekiya were merchants that faced severe discrimination and participated in turf wars and protection rackets. Bakutos were gamblers and started the tradition of the colorful back tattoos as seen in modern yakuza. The yakuza name "good for nothing" which refers to a worthless hand in a Japanese card game similar to black jack, ya-ku-sa (eight-nine-three) which gives the worst possible total overall.

Research Questions:

What are the Yakuza doing now?

Why are the Yakuza still around?

How long are they going to be around?

Current

They are now branching out more internationally and getting involved more in things like drugs or guns. Also doing business with international corporations. Since Japan's economy has slowed down considerably in the last 20 years, it's harder for the Yakuza to shake down people and extort them for cash. They are acting more like real businesses than ever before, dealing with things like loans that have insane interest rates.

Yakuza Prevention

The Japanese government recognizes and regulates 22 yakuza organizations. It is not a crime to belong to the group but doing illegal business like drug trafficking or gambling is. The yakuza exclusion acts were passed in 2011 and this made it harder for yakuza businesses to work due to the fact that anyone who associated with them would be penalized. Recently the Anti-Organized Crime law was recently passed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in order to help prevent terrorist attacks and crack down more on the yakuza for the 2021 Olympics.



Kenichi Shinoda (center), head of Japan's largest organized crime syndicate, the Yamaguchi-gumi, after his release from prison in 2011. (From CNN)



Photo taken at the Sanja Matsuri, in Senso-ji, in the quarter of Asakusa, in Tokyo (From Nothing to Hide on Flickr)

Resistance to Government

The yakuza are currently branching out into things like real estate and the nuclear industry. Japan keeps slowly inching them out and making it harder for them. So they continue to try and keep their rights like they used to have. They are having to find new ways to get around the law which means their old way of brute forcing everything is going away. Most also have influence in political parties where they financially support individuals to run for office.

Big Statistics:

Members in
1960: 184,000
2018: 30,500

(The Telegraph)

63% of Japanese people continue to support Yakuza activity. (Japan Times)



"Yamaguchi-gumi" Japanese mafia gang members bow to their leaders at the headquarters of the organization in Kobe, western Japan. EFE / File (From the San Diego Union Tribune)

Robin Hoods?

Most yakuza, due to their historic roots, believe themselves to be robin hood-like figures in the public eye. They helped out big companies by providing contracted jobs in the nuclear power plants that no one else wanted to take on (The Atlantic). Because of things like this, they are viewed as a necessary evil to some people. This is also displayed in many popular films and video games where the yakuza are idolized as the righteous heroic underdogs of the storylines.

Future Significance:

The amount of Yakuza are dwindling and it appears like they might be on their last legs. The Japanese government's logic behind keeping the Yakuza around is that organized crime is better than petty disorganized crime. If this is the case then it remains to be seen whether disorganized crime is going to see an increase in the years to come. The remaining Yakuza are getting old, with "no pension or retirement payout to look forward to." (Japan Today)