

Why some Japanese pensioners want to go to jail



Japan is in the grip of an elderly crime wave - the proportion of crimes committed by people over the age of 65 has been steadily increasing for 20 years. The BBC's Ed Butler asks why.

At a halfway house in Hiroshima - for criminals who are being released from jail back into the community - 69-year-old Toshio Takata tells me he broke the law because he was poor. He wanted somewhere to live free of charge, even if it was behind bars.

"I reached pension age and then I ran out of money. So it occurred to me - perhaps I could live for free if I lived in jail," he says.

"So I took a bicycle and rode it to the police station and told the guy there: 'Look, I took this.'"

The plan worked. This was Toshio's first offence, committed when he was 62, but Japanese courts treat petty theft seriously, so it was enough to get him a one-year sentence.

Small, slender, and with a tendency to giggle, Toshio looks nothing like a habitual criminal, much less someone who'd threaten women with knives. But after he was released from his first sentence, that's exactly what he did.

"I went to a park and just threatened them. I wasn't intending to do any harm. I just showed the knife to them hoping one of them would call the police. One did."

Altogether, Toshio has spent half of the last eight years in jail.

I ask him if he likes being in prison, and he points out an additional financial upside - his pension continues to be paid even while he's inside.

"It's not that I like it but I can stay there for free," he says. "And when I get out I have saved some money. So it is not that painful."

Toshio represents a striking trend in Japanese crime. In a remarkably law-abiding society, a rapidly growing proportion of crimes is carried about by over-65s. In 1997 this age group accounted for about one in 20 convictions but 20 years later the figure had grown to more than one in five - a rate that far outstrips the growth of the over-65s as a proportion of the population (though they now make up more than a quarter of the total).

Theft, **principally shoplifting**, is overwhelmingly the biggest crime committed by elderly offenders. They mostly steal food worth less than 3,000 yen (£20) from a shop they visit regularly.

Michael Newman, an Australian-born demographer with the Tokyo-based research house, Custom Products Research Group points out that the "measly" basic state pension in Japan is very hard to live on.

In a paper published in 2016 he calculates that **the costs of rent, food and healthcare alone will leave recipients in debt** if they have no other income - and that's before they've paid for heating or clothes. In the past it was traditional for children to look after their parents, but in the provinces a lack of economic opportunities has led many younger people to move away, leaving their parents to fend for themselves.

"The pensioners don't want to be a burden to their children, and feel that if they can't survive on the state pension then pretty much the only way not to be a burden is to shuffle themselves away into prison," he says.

The repeat offending is a way "to get back into prison" where there are three square meals a day and no bills, he says.