

Research Note

What Are the Barriers to Improving the Safeguarding of Children and Young People in Japan's Entertainment Industries?

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Abstract

This Research Note is based on interviews with stakeholders and advocates for child safeguarding in Japan's entertainment industries conducted by the researchers in Tokyo in July 2024. We argue that, if, as suggested by new legislation, there is an intention to apply UK-style "safeguarding" understandings to prevent reoccurrence of child sexual abuse such as that perpetrated by Johnny Kitagawa in Japan, there are four key barriers to overcome that necessitate increased information-sharing and cooperation between stakeholders in government and industry: precarious work, a reluctance to regulate, a lack of industry accountability, and a lack of societal awareness of child sexual abuse and its impacts.

Keywords: Japan; Entertainment Industries; Cultural Industries; Safeguarding; Children and Young People

In June 2024, Japan's House of Councillors, the upper house of its legislature, approved a bill, likely to come into effect in late 2026, that introduces a mandatory duty for licensed childcare and educational organizations¹ working with children and young people to check the criminal records of those they employ, with a view to protecting children from abuse (Jiji Press News 2024). Modeled after the UK's Disclosure and Barring System (DBS), it is popularly referred to as "Japanese DBS" (*nihonban DBS*) (The Japan News 2024). However, concerns have been raised about the fact that participation in the new scheme from noneducational or non-childcare organizations is voluntary, and does not compulsorily cover, for example, organizations within the Japanese entertainment industries. This distinguishes it from the UK DBS and is a particular concern in light of the scale of child sexual abuse perpetrated by the late Johnny Kitagawa as head of his self-founded entertainment company, Johnny and Associates, and his talent agency, Johnny's Entertainment. This then raises the question; Why is it not possible for this legislation to compulsorily cover the entertainment industries in Japan? And more broadly, what are the barriers to improving the safeguarding of children and young people in Japan's entertainment industries?

¹ Licensed under Japan's School Education Act (1947) or Child Welfare Act (1947), including schools, nurseries, kindergartens, and residential homes (Suzuki 2024).

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In July 2024, the authors of this article interviewed a number of key Japan-based stakeholders with interests in this question, as part of a preliminary comparative scoping study into government and industry-level oversight of child safeguarding in the entertainment industries in the UK and Japan. The rationale for this study is to examine the policy landscape in both Japan and the UK, considering that the UK has been grappling with similar issues of child sexual abuse in the entertainment industries. After the scale of abuse perpetrated by the late TV presenter Jimmy Savile became apparent in 2013, the UK government undertook a public inquiry, examining institutional failures in protecting children from sexual abuse (Jay et al. 2022a). Meanwhile, the current system in the England and Wales for checking the criminal records of those who work with children has existed in some form since 2002 and was most recently revised and given the name "Disclosure and Barring Service" in 2012 (NSPCC 2025). The concept of safeguarding as a policy of protecting children and young people from abuse through preventative "early intervention" (Nikiforidou 2020: 100), upon which the current DBS system in the UK has been built, has arisen out of reviews of documented cases of abuse and resulting child protection practice in the UK since the early 2000s (Parton 2008; Devine 2017). Therefore, it would be reasonable to question how this duty might be applicable to the Japanese context.

While there has been academic discussion in Japan of harassment in the entertainment industries more broadly (Morisaki and Ashino 2022), there is currently a lack of research into specific safeguarding measures related to

children and young people. Prusa (2023: 141) has suggested that *sontaku* or “governance-by-guesswork” has caused media organizations to insufficiently scrutinize the entertainment agencies on whose favor they rely². Similarly, Saisho (2024: 61), a Japanese journalist based in the UK, has provided a critical assessment of the UK’s national public service broadcaster, the BBC, and its culture that discourages the reporting of allegations against star personalities. Both of these points are important to consider. However, we go further by looking at what the barriers might be to implementing the UK-inspired safeguarding-based understanding of child abuse prevention in the context of the Japanese entertainment industries, despite senior figures in Japan’s government calling for the DBS bill to compulsorily apply to those industries (Sakata 2024).

In the following sections, we will examine key themes related to potential barriers to the introduction of improved safeguarding of children and young people in the Japanese entertainment industries derived from four interviews with Japan-based participants with interests in preventing child sexual abuse in those industries. The term “entertainment industries” has been chosen to mirror the Japanese *geinōkai*, which itself reflects the particular structures of the *geinō jimusho* or entertainment agency, a dominant way of managing talent in the Japanese entertainment industries (Marx 2012) that relates to music, film, TV, theatre, and advertising. Interviews were conducted by the researchers in Japanese in locations around Tokyo in July 2024, with ethical review procedures followed at each researchers’ host institution. Participants were free to refuse to answer any question or to retract their consent. An expert on trauma arising from child sexual abuse was consulted (Saito 2024) to ensure interviews were conducted sensitively, and appropriate signposting was provided for counseling and emotional support for issues raised, including what to do if we, or the participants, suspected that someone’s safety was in question. Interviews were semistructured and focused on four key areas each adapted slightly to suit the background of each participant: (1) their own relationship to the issue of safeguarding children and young people in the Japanese entertainment industries, (2) their knowledge of and views on current government measures, (3) their knowledge of and views on potential new measures, and (4) their views on potential improvements to current measures. Interviewees were provided with a Japanese-language summary of laws and policies relating to the safeguarding of children and young people in the entertainment industries in the UK as a prompt. We were careful to acknowledge that the “individualized statutory child protection response” represented by the DBS system cannot be effective without an understanding of “contextual factors” behind abuse (Firmin and Rayment-McHugh 2020), including those specific to the entertainment industries. So, we maintain that without looking into the specific risks of exposure to abuse presented by the entertainment industries in Japan, and the specific barriers

Table 1 Summary of participants

Participant	Role
A	Legislator
B	Experienced performer and expert in human rights in the entertainment industries
C	Victim of child sexual abuse in the entertainment industries and campaigner
D	Victim of child sexual abuse in the entertainment industries and campaigner

to ameliorating those, any discussion of potential policy changes would be redundant.

Our choice of stakeholder research was due to its tendency to support “concurrent analysis to evaluate . . . the feasibility of different policy options and directions” (Brugha and Varvasovsky 2000: 244), with stakeholders approached directly via email on the basis of their known knowledge of, interest in, power in relation to, or clearly stated position on the research topic (Balane et al. 2020), meaning that victims interviewed were already undertaking public advocacy work and had some experience working with policymakers or researchers. Stakeholder research has also notably been used to provide new policy insights in comparative international cultural policy contexts, such as deBoise’s study of the “varying social, geographic and political landscapes” impacting stakeholders involved in gender equality policies in the music industries in Sweden and the UK (de Boise 2019: 486), and Sundet and Syvertsen’s stakeholder analysis demonstrating how public service broadcasters in the UK and Norway use “windows” of opportunity to advance their interests (2021). Characteristics of the four anonymized participants are summarized in Table 1.

The choice of the word “victim” to describe survivors of child sexual abuse derives from the official English translation of the now dissolved Johnny’s Sexual Assault Victims Association, of which C and D were part (NHK News 2024). Of note is that all participants have some role in advocacy work, and were contacted on that basis. This has naturally skewed our sample toward people who believe there are inadequacies in current policies to protect children and young people in the Japanese entertainment industries. However, all participants had good knowledge of the Japanese entertainment industries, which was advantageous.

We are aware that this is a limited range of stakeholders whose views we are presenting. There were other stakeholders we spoke to in government, bureaucracy, and industry who were understandably reluctant to go on record, even anonymously, about their views, and we are thus unable to share them here. However, taking into account the fact that academic analysis has hitherto left policy concerns related to safeguarding in the Japanese entertainment industries relatively unexamined, we still maintain the value of this research note and hope that it might help bring attention to some of the complexities involved in trying to protect children and young people in these industries,

² We would like to point out that we do not agree with Prusa’s (2023: 141) framing of former trainees as having “failed to speak out,” as this we believe this unfairly ascribes them culpability for abuse.

thereby encouraging work toward the removal of these barriers.

After transcription, overarching themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun et al. 2018; Braun and Clarke 2019), with themes understood not simply as “domains” of content, but as “meaning-based patterns, evident in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways, and as the output of coding” (Braun et al. 2018: 848). The software NVivo was used to help visualize digitized transcriptions of the interviews alongside each other, and to label “codes” (small units of meaning of significance to the research project), for grouping into larger themes. The four main themes identified are discussed below, these being: (1) the negative influence of freelancing and precarity, (2) government reluctance to create legislation bespoke to the entertainment industries, (3) the closed and vertically integrated structure of Japan’s entertainment industries, and (4) lack of societal awareness of and support for victims of child sexual abuse.

The negative influence of freelancing and precarity

All participants spoke to some extent about the negative influence of the dominance of freelancing and precarity in the Japanese entertainment industries. There were concerns that the scarcity of secure opportunities in the industries created power imbalances between those employing children and young people, those working to get them employed (including their parents and carers), and the children and young people themselves. As “B”, who has worked in the entertainment industries in Japan for many years explains “almost all the performers at Johnny’s . . . are employed on a freelance basis,” which they claim is also representative of competitor companies. “A,” a legislator who has been involved in the adoption of Japan’s new Freelance Act, which aims to provide more legal protection “to workers in looser associations with their clients” (Hashimoto 2024), argues that:

“The agencies hold all the power to get you into auditions and get you work. You find yourself sucking up to them and even doing things you wouldn’t normally find yourself doing. These conditions are ripe for the exploitation of young people.”

As Nisbett et al. (2023) have shown in exploratory research into abusive leadership in the arts in the UK, because those working in creative industries are “passionate” about the industry they aspire to break into, they “frequently place their artforms and institutions ahead of their own wellbeing,” making them more “open to abuse.” This is arguably even more concerning when considering the increased vulnerabilities of children and young people. “C,” a victim of the abuse perpetrated by Johnny Kitagawa, claims that many of Johnny’s victims did not even have contracts, that “you just sent off your resume, and then what you went to wasn’t actually an audition, but a series of lessons where you would try and catch Johnny’s eye.”

“B” points out that those who do have freelance contracts might rely on royalties for regular income, but there are “very few” to whom this applies. The entertainment agency

system in Japan is one where the agency has ultimate control over casting in agreement with sponsors and partners, as opposed to an audition-based system, where the person commissioning the performance has the final say over who is hired. “B” argues that this system is a contributing factor to making young people vulnerable, as parents and carers might be vulnerable to pressure from the agency to encourage their charges to participate in projects with “no morals or standards.”

Although Japan’s new Freelance Act, which came into effect in November 2024, will theoretically provide more protections for children and young people, including those in the entertainment industries, participants seemed concerned that there was no appetite from government to create legislation bespoke to the particular risks of those industries. These views are explored in the following section.

Government reluctance to create legislation bespoke to the entertainment industries

“D,” another victim of Johnny Kitagawa argues that “the entertainment industries are very distinctive” and therefore merit particular attention to the risks that children and young people are exposed to in terms of policy. More specifically, “D” suggested a “mutual system of checks and balances, a triangle between the media, the entertainment industries, and the government.” The implication is that, at the moment, the media, particularly the advertising industry (in “D’s” words “sponsors”), the entertainment industry, and the government, do not operate at points separate enough from each other to allow the formation of such a triangle. This lack of initiative to create further regulation, informal or formal, of the entertainment industries, was raised by all participants, with two reasons given: a lack of clarity on which ministry or agency was responsible for pushing for such regulation, and a sense of indebtedness on the part of the Japanese government for the economic contribution made by major entertainment agencies. This reportedly leads to bureaucratic organs such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs being prone to bowing to what “B” describes as “intense pressure from lawyers representing entertainment agencies.”

At the same time, “C” believes that “Within the power structures of the entertainment industry, people tend to defer to what they perceive the law and the government would favour, and vice versa.” In the same breath, “C” also expresses worries that the entertainment industries would feel singled out by bespoke legislation (e.g., guidelines on the need for chaperones and the issuing of licenses to companies employing children for performances conditional on certain safeguarding conditions being met, such as those issued by the UK’s Department for Education (2015)). “A” points to the case of South Korea, where there are workplace safety laws specific to some entertainment industries (such as the adult video industry), but concludes bluntly that the absence of a prime-ministerial human rights envoy suggests that “Japan values economic growth more than human rights [in the workplace].” “B” adds that “the simple reason there is not

more regulation is because entertainment production companies don't want there to be."

Some participants even raised the possibility of corrupt links between the entertainment industry and the government, though this is something we are unable to verify, and would be a subject for future research. What does seem to be true is that no one government agency seemed able to take ownership of the issue of the safeguarding of children and young people in the entertainment industries. "A" notes that the newly established Children and Families Agency, an extension of the Cabinet Office, seemed at odds with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare about what might be needed to formulate bespoke policies, and, as mentioned above, the Agency for Cultural Affairs (itself a special body of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) lacks the remit to govern the industries it promotes. Moreover, co-author Suetomi spoke separately with Ministry for Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) officials in July 2024, from whom she surmised that METI was not able to reliably access or share data from relevant trade bodies in the entertainment industries, and that there is little ministry interest in regulation of child performance.

However, the lack of clarity about governance of child safeguarding in the entertainment industries is not solely an issue within government and between the government and the entertainment industries; our participants suggested that they hold for the interior of the entertainment industries themselves.

The closed and vertically integrated structure of Japan's entertainment industries

The above suggestions of the sort of media environment in which Japanese entertainment agencies are operating could conceivably lead to what McNeill (2023) has described as a "code of omerta" in the Japanese media surrounding allegations of abuse perpetrated by Johnny Kitagawa; a failure of stakeholders to address issues as a result of not wanting to upset those whom they perceive to hold power or sway, even if they have not been explicitly "pressured" to back off. Participants expressed concerns that a lack of internal accountability and transparency arose out of the interconnections between different companies. These interconnections derive from the organization of Japanese entertainment industry powers "into loose but very hierarchical *keiretsu*³-type organizations" (Marx 2012: 39), with smaller companies making use of the "network and power" (Marx 2012: 40) of their larger corporate associations in return for publishing rights.

Publishing and other intellectual property rights are valuable because they are the image or the work of performers, including those of child performers, which make money for agencies. Referring back again to the precarity of working in the entertainment industries, "A" argues that "The big-earners get the best treatment from the agencies,

and are always promoted on TV, by [big ad agencies such as] Dentsu... The 99%... earn a pittance... and are prone to exploitation." However, "A" also concedes that the entrepreneurial potential of social media has allowed some young creators to bypass this power imbalance.

"D" was concerned that the close connections between advertisers and entertainment agencies might lead sponsors or advertising agencies to turn a blind eye to abuse at any level of the entertainment agency, owing to their reliance on the star power of an agency's performers. "B" expressed a further concern about the vertical integration of the Japanese entertainment agencies, where single companies are responsible "for both TV production and talent management," leading to a lack of avenues for performers when they experience "harassment"; they cannot ask their management to pull them out of a project, because their management *are* the project.

Once the extent of Johnny Kitagawa's abuse came to light, prompted by the BBC documentary *Predator: The Secret Scandal of J-Pop* (Inman and Azhar 2023) and a press conference held by former Johnny's trainee Kauan Okamoto (FCCJ 2023), Japanese public broadcaster NHK, which would have previously employed performers from Johnny's Entertainment for flagship programs, ceased to do so. NHK announced in October 2024 that they were satisfied enough with the measures taken by the talent agency successor to Johnny's Entertainment, which is now known as Starto Entertainment, that they would recommence employing their stars (Kaneko 2024).

From October 2023, there have been two successor entities to Johnny's and Associates: SMILE-UP, which only handles compensation claims and support for victims, and is not involved in the day-to-day operations of managing performers, and Starto, which, as mentioned above, operates as an entertainment agency. SMILE-UP has a human rights policy that makes explicit mention of "the protection and safety of children" (*kodomo no hogo to anzen*) (SMILE-UP 2023). Meanwhile, Starto, the extant talent management wing of the former Johnny's and Associates, has a generic corporate human rights policy echoing the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry's "business and human rights" initiative (METI 2025) that makes no mention of the specific vulnerabilities of the children and young people it manages (Starto 2025).

In summer 2024, "D" was understandably skeptical about any ongoing efforts by Johnny and Associates' successor companies, arguing that "what SMILE-UP is doing is just for show," with fellow victim "C" agreeing that "SMILE-UP... is not fully addressing the issue as a company... They haven't set out anything of relevance." Participants pointed toward the need for child sexual abuse to receive more attention as a societal issues alongside bespoke reforms for the entertainment industries, as is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Lack of societal awareness of and support for victims of child sexual abuse

As victims of child sexual abuse perpetrated by Johnny Kitagawa in receipt of compensation from SMILE-UP's own scheme, "C" and "D" were both at pains to state that their

³ *Keiretsu* in general refers to Japanese companies with "close shareholding ties" (Flath 2022: 332), though in the context of the entertainment industries, it has the more specific meaning of companies who have close reciprocal ties through ownership of intellectual property rights instead of, or in addition to shares.

motivations in speaking out went beyond monetary ones and extended to trying to increase societal awareness of child sexual abuse, its prevention, and support for victims. “C” speaks of how he saw Kauan Okamoto’s press conference and felt that “it wasn’t right that [Okamoto] was left to cope with that all by himself,” having decided against going to the police himself when he experienced abuse as a teenager. “C” wants to “empower survivors” beyond Johnny’s, and to ensure they receive adequate support with their mental and physical health. “D” says:

There’s a difference between [monetary] compensation and mental health support. That care needs to be comprehensive. The psychologist SMILE-UP pays for is only available for 50 minutes a week, and because the relief committee [established by SMILE-UP] is independent of the company, they’re not able to listen to our suggestions on how to make things better.

“C” and “D” both seem to think that SMILE-UP, and indeed Japanese society as a whole, misunderstand and misrepresent (perhaps willfully) what victims want, with “C” reporting on a meeting between a fellow survivor and Japan’s largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), saying “Even the Constitutional Democratic Party does not fully understand the feelings of the victims.”

“D” says they have asked for a meeting with Starto’s CEO to put forward their proposals, but, as of summer 2024, “has not heard anything.” One of “D’s” suggestions is an “easy-to-understand consultation service” for victims of child sexual abuse in the entertainment industries that SMILE-UP could help to publicize, owing to their direct connection to the issue. “C” is doubtful if people would actually use such a helpline or consultation service, “depending on how much confidence [the government and the entertainment industries] had managed to build,” and how comfortable people felt bypassing those in their own organizations who may be complicit. However, “C” is also hopeful that the increased profile of child sexual abuse in the Japanese entertainment industries might encourage more openness, which may in turn encourage the Japanese government to loosen their guidelines on what may be taught in sex education in schools, where there is, according to Harel and Yamamoto (2025: 303) “need for greater emphasis on individual empowerment.”

“A” and “B,” who are more familiar with how the government regulates the entertainment industries in Japan, both agree that there needs to be some sort of independent service for reporting and receiving support for those who are victims of child sexual abuse in the entertainment industries, or indeed those who suspect abuse. “B” suggests that this should exist “at the prefectural level,” similar to the local-government level Local Area Designated Officer (LADO), who manages such disclosures in the UK. “A” suggests “an independent service, run jointly by third parties and government agencies,” perhaps the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Cabinet Office, but reiterates their point that any measures specific to the entertainment industries are not likely to be supported by those industries, whose prerogative may be “to hide their own wrongdoing.”

It is beyond the remit of this research note as to whether it is universally appropriate for the Japanese entertainment

industries, and Japan as a whole, to move closer to a safeguarding model of preventing child sexual abuse, but it is clear that some change in how seriously the issue is taken as a societal problem is needed to increase the safety of children and young people in these industries.

Conclusions

This research note uses the “Japanese DBS” system as a starting point to consider what the barriers might be to extending the evolving understanding of child sexual abuse prevention to initiatives applicable to the Japanese entertainment industries. As “A” surmises, the DBS bill may be less of a milestone than hoped for in attempts to introduce preventative safeguarding logics into the Japanese entertainment industries, because the bill “only applies to people teaching the arts, and wouldn’t have applied to Johnny himself. It doesn’t apply to managers or the management side in general.”⁴

Since we conducted these interviews in summer 2024, Johnny and Associate’s successor talent agency Starto has worked with an “external committee” of legal and mental health experts (Isogae and Saitō 2025: 1) to monitor its own efforts to prevent child sexual abuse, and is reportedly seeking certification as a “private education and childcare operator” (Isogae and Saitō 2025: 4) from the Children and Families Agency, which could pave the way for compulsory compliance with the incoming “Japanese DBS.”

Will company-specific measures such as these have an impact, especially where training needs are unclear? Our participants seem to think not, and that it would take a legislative initiative applicable explicitly (if not specifically) to the entertainment industries, and/or some kind of external pressure or broader change in societal attitudes to child sexual abuse to force some kind of significant change. Such initiatives should go beyond the framing of child sexual abuse as an indicator of poor corporate governance and take into account the specific contextual vulnerabilities of young people in the entertainment industries in Japan. This is our main conclusion at this stage of our research based on the insights of our participants.

As Craig (2022: 271) argues, “no one tool or approach should be considered sufficient in either combating CSA⁵ or equipping both children and the adults responsible for their care with . . . the knowledge essential for preventing exposure.” Having now found issues in information-sharing and resourcing impeding the efficacy of systems to safeguard child performers in the UK during recent follow-up fieldwork in June 2025⁶, we see value in discussions between policymakers in Japan, the UK, and other countries, to

⁴ While “A’s” statement would have been correct at the time of interview, as the bill establishing the “Japanese DBS” system specifies that only “managers” (*kanrisha*) who actually “teach arts or knowledge to children” should undergo background checks if their employer is seeking certification (Children and Families Agency 2025: 23), a more recent set of draft proposals suggests that, pending future industry-specific guidance, eligible professions within private educational businesses could include “management staff” (*un’ei sutaffu*) (Children and Families Agency 2025: 33–35).

⁵ Child Sexual Abuse.

⁶ We are still in the process of writing up this fieldwork and hope to publish it within the next year.

facilitate best practices in preventing child sexual abuse in the global entertainment industries. We would therefore encourage an ongoing conversation on the applicability and application of safeguarding logics in the protection of children and young people from child sexual abuse in the entertainment industries in Japan.

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