

# CAPSULE

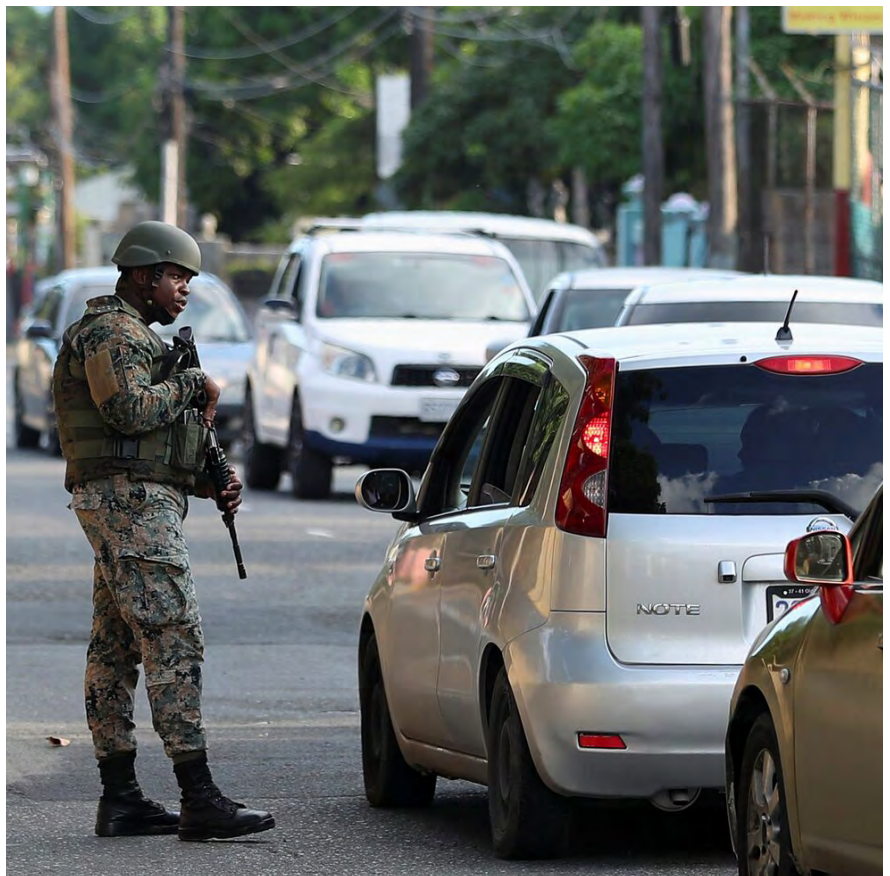
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CAPRI

## GROUND WORK FOR PEACE

Reorienting ZOSOs  
for Sustained  
Violence Reduction



This report evaluates the strategic framework and operational design of Zones of Special Operations (ZOSOs), a government initiative launched in 2017 to address Jamaica's high rates of violent deaths. ZOSOs aim to address volatile and vulnerable communities using a “clear, hold, and build” strategy derived from Counterinsurgency Theory. This strategy involves displacing gangs, maintaining a continuous security presence while fostering behaviour modification—winning over the “hearts and minds” of the residents—and community strengthening through social investments, including infrastructural work. This strategic review questions the efficacy of the “hearts and minds” approach that underpins the ZOSO strategy, noting its historical failures in other contexts. The analysis advocates shifting the perception of Jamaica's violence from merely criminal or cultural to one rooted in organised violence perpetrated by gangs operating from informal communities—a perspective embodied in the 2013 National Security Policy, yet not reflected in the activities of ZOSOs. These areas are identified as concerns due to their role in fostering high levels of violence.

## Theory of Change

Security operations that constitute the “clear” and “hold” phases of ZOSO, supported by a localise states of emergency, must be complemented by structural changes during the “build” phase to be effective. A key element of this strategy is the regularisation of semi-formal and informal communities as a catalyst for breaking the cycle of violence. This can be done by regularising land ownership in gang-prevalent areas. This reform not only empowers residents economically but also aligns their interests with the state's interests, thereby enhancing state legitimacy and fostering support for state governance over gang rule.

One of the pivotal aspects of land tenure regularisation is facilitating residential mobility: providing residents with the option to sell their properties and relocate, thereby disrupting entrenched social dynamics that favour gang control. This increased mobility helps to integrate informal settlements into the formal governance framework, boosting the state's capacity to enforce laws and maintain security.

By eliminating the structural and social conditions that allow informal communities to act as sanctuaries for gangs, land tenure regularisation directly reduces gang violence. That, in turn, frees up police resources for addressing non-gang activity while reducing the pool of contract killers, thereby also reducing non-gang violence.

Further integration of marginalised communities into the broader economy and society is achieved through enhanced infrastructure and improved service access. This reduces isolation and diminishes gang control, weaving these communities into the societal fabric where the rule of law prevails.

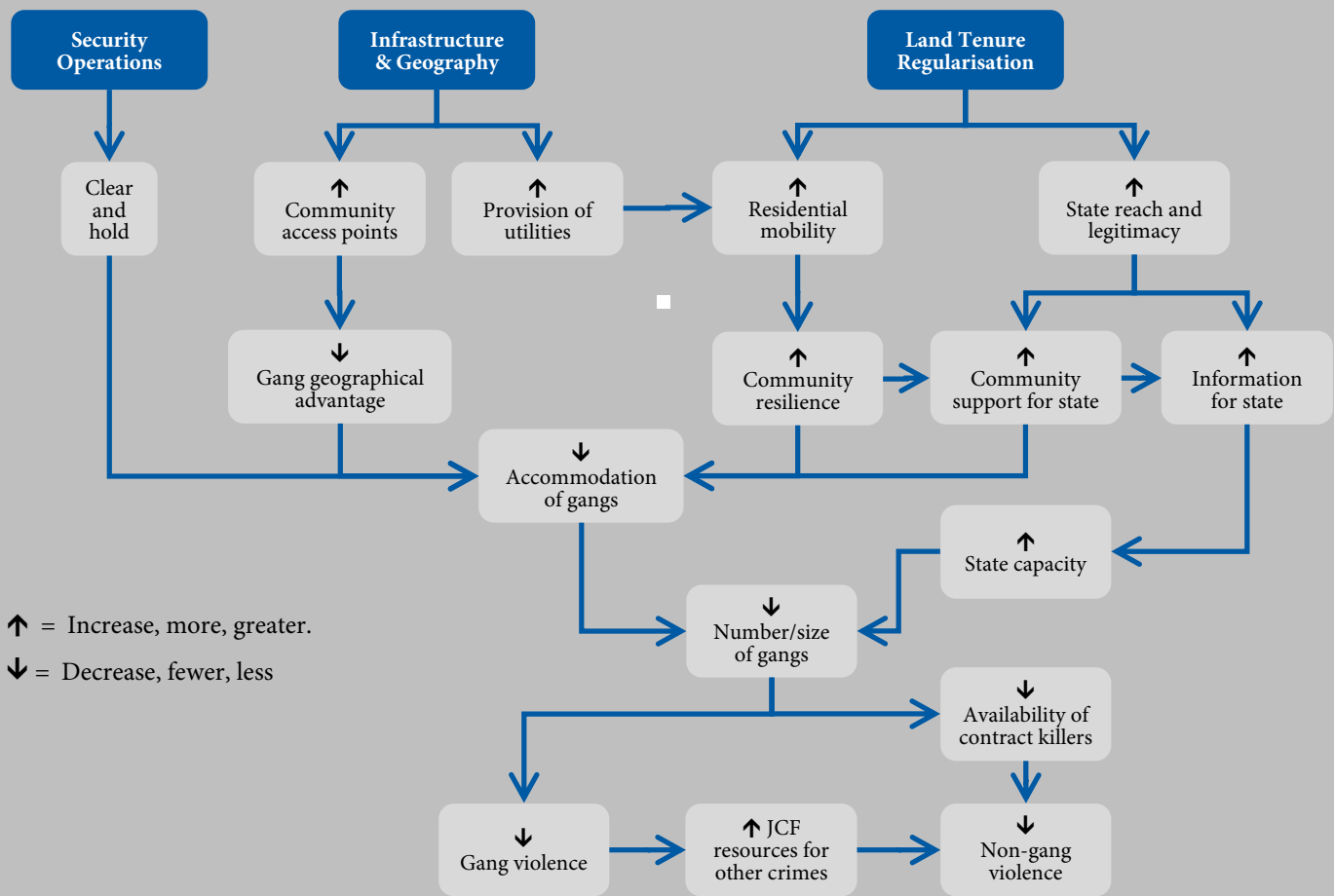
Economically, transforming “dead capital”, that which cannot be sold or used to earn a financial return, into viable economic assets through formalised land ownership brings multiple benefits.



Regularizing land tenure  
in informal communities  
will undermine gang  
strongholds, enhance  
community development,  
and increase state  
legitimacy.

This diagram shows the chains of events through which the recommended actions lead to the intended outcome of a reduction in criminal violence.

## Theory of Change



It promotes financial inclusion, encourages participation in the formal economy, and improves living conditions by giving residents the incentive and means to invest in their properties. This economic and social development is instrumental in fostering long-term peace and stability nationwide.

While ZOSOs provide a platform and policy window for violence reduction initiatives, reorienting towards land tenure regularisation is essential for sustained impact. This strategic shift can reduce organised violence in Jamaica, bringing the murder rate down from one of the top five most murderous countries in the world down closer to the world average.

## Recommendations

1. **Shift the ZOSO strategy away from winning “hearts and minds” to prioritising territorial control**, facilitated by the coordination of land tenure regularisation, infrastructure upgrading, and security operations.
2. **Maintain localised SOEs to support the trident strategy.** This will enable ZOSOs to operate without violent disruptions and reduce armed violence in the short term.
3. **De-prioritise social interventions aimed at behaviour modification**, to redirect focus and resources for the priorities above.



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