

10 Things You Need to Know about Crime and Violence in Jamaica

It is widely accepted that citizen security and public safety are the principal challenges threatening Jamaica's growth and development. With support from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) CAPRI undertook the Transforming Citizen Security a Yaad project, and produced four reports on pertinent issues related to citizen security.

The reports covered police reform, the efficacy of anti-violence interventions, the relationship between scamming, gangs, and violence, and an in-depth analysis of Jamaica's contemporary gang dynamics. These were four critical issues that, expert stakeholders agreed, would benefit from up-to-date, evidence-based research and analysis, to move the debate, thinking, and policy forward.

Here's what we learned:

1.



Jamaica's response to violence is spread out across various national strategies, and different uncoordinated policy interventions. The effectiveness of social interventions is undermined by the tendency of programming to take place in silos, and fragmentation at the institutional and programmatic levels. This leads to duplication of efforts, and missed opportunities at collaboration that could enhance the interventions. There is no single identifiable body with a clear mandate, the necessary authority, and the resources to effectively carry out the role of a coordinating, monitoring, and evaluation mechanism with respect to all policies, and programmes relating to violence prevention.

2.



Social interventions are essential to change the drivers and correlating factors with the ongoing proliferation of violence, but they are not producing significant, measurable results, in large part because they are not evidence-based, sustained, or properly evaluated. That the interventions are not meeting expectations does not mean they should not be pursued; rather they should be approached with sufficient

resources and will so they can yield positive changes. Because of the absence of obvious results, key state decisionmakers place a low value on mediation and violence interruption as effective strategies, and on social interventions in general.

3.



Anti-violence intervention programmes must have built-in transparent, systematic, evidence-informed programme evaluations. Any social intervention should be modelled after interventions that have been empirically proven effective in similar contexts of extreme violence, psycho-social dislocation, and poverty. Interventions should establish baseline measures of whatever indicators they intend to change, against which the work can be evaluated, and, ideally, include control groups. Violence reduction/prevention interventions should work with existing programmes and organisations in the community and should prioritise sustainability and continuity. Building on existing collective citizen efficacy, local organizations should be supported with capacity building, governance training, leadership training, and succession planning, and new community-based organizations and leaders should be identified and supported.

4.



Police reform is critical. If Jamaica is to significantly lower the rates of homicide and other violent crimes, and weaken the power of criminal networks in the society, a renewed attempt at a thorough transformation of the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) is unavoidable. This transformation should bring the force more in line with democratic policing principles and methods of work, and make it

more effective as an instrument of crime prevention and control.

5.



Outside of law enforcement attempts to counter scamming, the tolerance for scamming must be tackled, specifically the notion of scamming being a victimless crime, whether through public relations strategies, awareness-raising campaigns, or other established vehicle for such endeavours. Tolerance should also be addressed by bringing to task the local businesses that benefit from scamming's proceeds, and by more openly problematizing their attitudes and actions.

6.



Since 2011, Jamaican gang dynamics have changed. The gangs have splintered: there are many more of them, they are more loosely-organized, and they are more violent. Their engagement with organized and transnational crime has changed: many gangs do engage in organized crime (localized extortion rackets, contract killings, robbery, and scamming,) and they are also engaged in cross border criminal activities, such as illegal drug trafficking where the drugs are primarily traded for arms. The links between transnational organized crime networks and Jamaica's violent gangs, however, are far more fluid and transient than once obtained, and to the extent that high level transnational organized crime is happening in Jamaica, it suits those actors better to avoid association with the violent gangs than to be involved with them. The historical relationship between partisan politics and gangs continues to transition from direct links between patronage, gang violence, and the electoral cycle, to less distinctive relationships that are speculated about, and seldom substantiated. Police corruption is a problem, largely in the form of police taking payment for tipping off gangsters, or directly participating in gang criminal activity. This corruption is also not well evidenced.

7.



A key channel for guns getting into Jamaica is through the island's extremely porous coastline. Modern, high-powered weapons are traded for Jamaican-grown marijuana, and for Colombian cocaine that is also traded for marijuana on the Costa Rican north coast. Where guns are the weapon in almost all gang murders, and thus undergird the prevalence of virulent violence in Jamaica, it is significant to note that, with the decriminalization of marijuana, and the

pausing of the eradication programme, Jamaican gangs and other criminals are literally and easily able to grow the currency needed to buy guns.

8.



Legislation is important, and can be effective, once prosecutors and law enforcement are aligned, and the capacity created to use the legislation efficaciously. Increasing the frequency and scope of financial investigations—ie, going “after the money”—with amendments to existing legislation, and building greater capacity between law enforcement, the judiciary, and the Financial Investigations Division, could yield greater gains in the fight against gangs and organized crime. Modifications in areas such as lowering the evidence threshold with regard to electronically-created evidence, could go a far way in prosecuting criminal and gang cases more productively.

9.



Maintain and emphasize the distinction between crime and violence. Many stakeholders are coming to a consensus that Jamaica does not have a crime problem, it has a violence problem, given the prevalence of aggressive infractions like murder and assault over personal possession crimes, such as robbery. Crime is largely done for economic gain, while violence is a cycle which thrives on previous acts of violence. This is seen in the fact that gang violence often does not have an apparent criminal material motive. Violence operates differently from crime, and, therefore, the measures to deal with violence are different.

10.



Civil society can and should play a critical role. Civic pressures for good governance, and the power shifts and structural changes that they help to bring about, contribute to improved state responsiveness. “Putting pressure” on the government is not enough. A coordinated effort that involves not only key civil society stakeholders, for example in the form of a social dialogue, but the population at large, duly made aware of the issues, including the finer details, should hold the government accountable.

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