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## No Other Life

Gangs, Guns, and Governance  
in Trinidad and Tobago

*By Dorn Townsend*



A Working Paper of the Small Arms Survey

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Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

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Small Arms Survey

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

47 Avenue Blanc, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

**p** +41 22 908 5777

**f** +41 22 732 2738

**e** [sas@smallarmssurvey.org](mailto:sas@smallarmssurvey.org)

**w** [www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org)

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## About the author

Dorn Townsend has been a consultant and journeyman spokesperson for the United Nations in conflict and post-conflict zones. He has served in such hot-spots as Darfur, Georgia, Khartoum, and Iran, as well as at UN Headquarters in New York. His freelance reporting has appeared in the *Economist*, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Observer*. From 1998 to 2001 he managed programmes in Burundi for the NGO Search For Common Ground.

## Acknowledgements

This report explores connections among guns, gangs, and politics in Trinidad and Tobago. In that tiny Caribbean nation, many people owe their livelihoods to the public sector. For this reason, most sources were willing, sometimes even grateful for the opportunity, to speak about their country's violent footing—but only off the record. On that condition, numerous police officers, public prosecutors, diplomats, and civil servants offered their insights and critiques. Their assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Others whose assistance made this report possible include Father Jason Gordon, Daryl Heeralal, Andrew Johnson, Robert Alonzo, Neerad Tewarie, the staff of the police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit, Rachel Guiseppi, Ramesh Deosaran, Jaqueline Toney, the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association, and Dr Timothy Shaw.

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# List of abbreviations

<b>PNM</b>	People's National Movement
<b>SAUTT</b>	Special Anti-crime Unit of Trinidad and Tobago
<b>T &amp; T</b>	Trinidad and Tobago
<b>TTD</b>	Trinidad and Tobago dollar
<b>UNC</b>	United National Congress
<b>URP</b>	Unemployment Relief Programme
<b>USD</b>	US dollar
<b>WINAD</b>	Women's Institute for Alternative Development

## Executive summary

In the last decade, gun-related homicides in Trinidad and Tobago (T & T) have risen about 1,000 per cent. While higher rates of crime have permeated much of the island of Trinidad in particular, overwhelmingly violence is concentrated in relatively small, hilly, and dense urban areas on the east side of Port of Spain's central business district. On a per capita basis, the eastern districts of Port of Spain are among the most dangerous places on the planet and, as a whole, the murder rate for Port of Spain is comparable to that of Baghdad (Kukis, 2009).

One rationale for this escalation of crime and murder is that few consequences accrue to those responsible. In most years, fewer than 20 per cent of violent crimes are ever solved.<sup>1</sup> Even when police and prosecutors mount a case, it generally takes several years before it is brought to trial. During the intervening period, ample opportunities exist to kill or intimidate witnesses.

After being criticized for inaction for years, T & T's government is taking clear steps towards legal reforms that might prevent such practices. Presently being debated by the country's parliament is anti-gang legislation, including powers to allow the tapping of telephones and the holding of suspects caught with illegal guns for up to 60 days without bail.

But the violence in T & T has other roots too. Drawing on field research undertaken in 2009, this report finds that T & T's police-led efforts to curtail gun violence are mitigated by the government's direct financial support to urban gangs via public welfare programmes.

In exchange, come election days, these gangs have been frequently called upon to turn out loyal supporters and physically menace would-be opposition voters. These tactics are credited with helping the present regime cling to power in the context of an electorate narrowly divided by race.

Meanwhile, critics and even some senior members of government allege widespread police corruption. While recognizing that they may be unfairly tarnishing individual officers and units, these sceptics question the effective-

ness and willingness of police to crack down on fellow officers who facilitate and profit from crime. Because of such stories, and because they are perceived as unable to check the spiralling violence, public trust in the police is low (*Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 2009c).

To change this dynamic, national politicians may need to increase the activities of the more disciplined elements within the police while implementing programmes that do not enhance gangs outright. Put another way, probes may be required of sections within the police force and of possible mismatches of governmental policies that affect gangs.

Finally, security forces may need to change their tactics. Vigorous policing may only go so far regarding the situation in Port of Spain. With this in mind, following the killing of a soldier home on leave, the police and army recently attempted to conduct a stronger counter-insurgency-style operation—the army and police have been stationed on street corners in the concentrated areas where drug- and gun-related crime is high. However, this operation lasted only a few days and was more concerned with finding the soldier’s killers than attempting to break the authority of local thugs.

Without changing policing tactics, without modernizing anti-gang laws, without investigating corruption within the police, and without confronting the semi-official support extended to gangs, the likelihood appears modest of overcoming gun-related crime any time soon. 📍



# I. Setting the scene

In late April 2009, Sean ‘Bill’ Francis, 41—community activist, government contractor, mediator, ‘nefarious gang-leader’ (Kowlessar, 2009b), and suspected criminal mastermind—was gunned down while drinking beer near his home in the Morvant community east of Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago (T & T).<sup>2</sup> He was shot 50 times.<sup>3</sup>



Such violent deaths are not all that unusual. By one count, currently in T & T (with a population of 1.3 million), every 17 hours someone is murdered (Heeralal, 2008b). Most victims die from gunshot injuries. Yet this count obscures just how concentrated much of the violence is. Indeed, most homicides occur in particular hotspots in the capital's densely populated east side urban and hillside ghettos.

Sean Francis's assassination is emblematic of a change in generational leadership and a multiplication of gangs. Seven years previously, at the height of his power, Francis was openly consulted by the prime minister and opposition leaders (Kowlessar, 2009b). At that time, 25 or so gangs were operational. In what amounts to a 'drastic upsurge' (Deosaran, 2008, p. xi), this number, according to police, has tripled. Francis, it turns out, was one of the last of the gangster chieftains who conferred with Prime Minister Patrick Manning in 2002. At the time, the prime minister referred to these gangsters as community leaders, a designation that reveals how unclear such characterizations are in the Caribbean. With only a few exceptions, the rest have also fallen victim, one by one, to small arms.

This multiplicity of urban gangs has coincided with an increase in the numbers of killings. In 2008 some 550 murders occurred within T & T, a 366 per cent increase from 2000 (Deosaran, 2008, pp. iii). Against that backdrop of death by small arms, homicides due to blunt, sharp, or other instruments remained comparatively stable (Maguire et al., 2008, p. 65).

Gang-related violence is far and away the single most pressing security issue in T & T. Since 2007, T & T has overtaken Jamaica as the Caribbean nation with the most gun-related murders (Heeralal, 2009c). Firearms account for the majority of this bloodshed, prompting police to estimate that around 55 per cent of these murders were gang related.<sup>4</sup> In part because witnesses are intimidated or murdered, few of these cases are solved. Small wonder, then, that surveys show citizens as believing that the volume and severity of crime constitute the country's most important problem (Maguire and Bennett, 2008, p. xix).

This working paper offers a sketch of selected dynamics of this culture of guns and gangs. Reflecting aspects of this culture, Section II focuses on a recent shift away from the islands' relative stability to widespread acts of urban



Police in Port of Spain examine the body of a person killed as a result of violence between rival gangs. © Michael Bruce/Courtesy of *Trinidad Express*

violence committed by street-level gangs in poor neighbourhoods and outlines government attempts to deal with this change. Section III discusses the demographics of gangs complicit in the struggles for control of turf and governmental grants for infrastructure, while Section IV deals with the issue of police corruption. Section V discusses the methods used by gangs to generate funds while enlisting and retaining members. In Section VI the notion that guns are a tool of inter-gang communication is introduced via a depiction of regional, national, and local efforts to curtail armed violence. In the conclusion, it is suggested that a disconnect exists among the national government's various initiatives for keeping the peace and reducing violence.

A fundamental issue shaping the dynamics of gang violence and victimization is the unconstrained use of guns in T & T. The users by and large are members of gangs. At present there is some debate among police and security officials in T & T about how to classify gangs. But for the purposes of this working paper, the definition of gangs presently used by T & T's police will be adopted, namely:

*street gang or gang or organized crime or criminal street gang means any combination, confederation, alliance, network, conspiracy, understanding or other similar conjoining, in law or in fact, of 3 or more persons with an established hierarchy that, through its membership or through the agency of any member engages in a course or pattern of criminal activity.<sup>5</sup>*

Gangs in T & T differ from gangs in other parts of the region. With one or two exceptions, such as the Jamaat al Muslimeen (see below), most gangs in T & T are ephemeral, smaller, and not as interconnected as gangs in Latin America. Another important difference is one of scale. Whereas several large gangs in Latin America are multinational, with links to cousin gangs throughout the region and in the cities of the western United States, the majority of gangs in T & T have a very local orientation. 📍

## II. No longer a Caribbean idyll

As T & T entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was widely perceived as a haven of relative stability in the Caribbean. That is no longer the case. The scene is not so much a 'war zone' as a 'wild west', and it is no exaggeration to say that poor urban areas of Trinidad in particular have become magnets for lawlessness as rival gangs vie for control of the territory where drugs are sold. Whereas in 1998 the country saw 98 murders in absolute terms, by 2008 that number had climbed to 550.<sup>6</sup> According to police statistics, firearms were used in 437 of these killings and 322 were either gang or drug related. Even though many murders are not solved, during investigations police seek to determine whether the cause of a murder was gang related.

The murder rate in T & T has leapt to 42 per 100,000 (Nicholas, 2009), nearly double the average of 18.1 per 100,000 for the rest of the Caribbean (Geneva Declaration, 2008, p. 73). Depressingly, T & T's homicide rate in 2000 was 10 per 100,000 (Nicholas, 2009):

The explosion of violence has occurred during a period of unparalleled economic development. Owing to bountiful offshore deposits of oil and natural gas, up until the 2008/09 economic downturn T & T enjoyed one of the steadiest economic growth rates in the world: for over a decade, gross domestic

Table 2.1 **Murders in Trinidad and Tobago, 2006–08**

Year	Drug related	Gang related	Total murders	Firearm used
2006	77	159	371	269
2007	44	210	391	303
2008	29	293	550 <sup>a</sup>	437

<sup>a</sup> T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit cites 547 murders; however, here a total of 550 is used, because it is the more commonly used figure for 2008 murders.

**Source:** Extracted from T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit database and supplied to the author, May 2009

product expansion averaged above 3 per cent (and for many years above 6 per cent), allowing for a steep rise in per capita gross national income from USD 5,170 in 2000 to USD 16,540 in 2008 (World Bank Group, 2009).

Over the same period, the political regime has been edging towards a one-party system (Meighoo, 2009). The People's National Movement (PNM), which draws its support mainly from the country's residents of African descent, has lost only two elections since independence in 1962. The PNM regained power in 2002 after a close<sup>7</sup> and bitter election (Smith, 2002) against the United National Congress (UNC), a party that draws much of its support from the country's residents of Indian descent. Currently, the PNM holds 26 of the 41 seats in the country's Parliament.

## Politicians and gangs

While the country has a parliamentary form of democracy, the ruling party is seen as propping up its support by catering to, and sometimes relying on, suspected criminals. This strategy has worked. For instance, on balloting day in 2002, cases of voter intimidation were so numerous in some narrowly divided electoral districts that the UNC leadership felt compelled to offer a free door-to-door shuttle service and robust protection for would-be voters too scared to go to polling stations.<sup>8</sup> These offers were broadcast over the radio.

Several times in the last few years, the government has attempted to devise truces among heads of the largest gangs. The government's stated aim for meetings held in 2002, for example, was to settle local gang wars and so reduce the incidence of butchery. But the sessions also cemented a relationship whereby (now deceased) top gang bosses like Mark Guerra and Kerwin 'Fresh' Phillip were able to lead parallel public lives. As highlighted below, the government's behind-the-scenes interactions with gangs have not always seen the light of public disclosure, and these private sessions have prompted suspicions of government complicity with the gangs' criminal agendas. Saluted as community leaders<sup>9</sup> and (it is alleged—see below) bankrolled by the government, these men were also subject to continuous investigation by the country's police (*Trinidad Express*, 2008).

## The drug trade and guns

Operating outside of the day-to-day confrontations between gangs, international drug cartels exploit the Caribbean region as a crossroads between Colombia and Venezuela, on the one hand, and important drug shipment hubs like South Florida, Amsterdam, and Spain, on the other. T & T is just one of many islands like the Bahamas, the Netherlands Antilles, and the Dominican Republic that are overwhelmed by these drug shippers. 'For all the mayhem street gangs in Port of Spain create, far more drugs pass through Trinidad on their way to Europe and America', said one senior official with the country's security services.<sup>10</sup>

An indication of the scale of the trade can be gleaned from seizures by T & T police of drugs as recorded by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. In 2007 about 3.8 million kg of cannabis were seized, up from 2.25 million kg in 2006. During the same period, seizures of cocaine and heroin plummeted: whereas in 2005 and 2006 over 3.2 million kg of cocaine were seized by authorities, in 2007 only 167,000 kg were intercepted. In 2006 over 21,000 kg of heroin were seized; in 2007 the catch was only 162 kg (UNODC, 2009a, pp. 10, 24, 35).

Authorities in T & T claim that drugs are smuggled into the country mainly by sea on so-called 'Go-Fast' motorboats.<sup>11</sup> Large quantities of marijuana are said to come from nearby St. Vincent. More frequent patrols and seizures by the UK's Royal Navy in the summer of 2009 are said to have been responsible for higher drug costs in Port of Spain. The price of a pound of marijuana is said to have risen to about USD 1,200, from about USD 800–900 at the beginning of the summer.<sup>12</sup>

Cargoes of drugs occasionally are accompanied by supplies of firearms intended to be used for protection by dealers in these drugs. In some cases, illegal guns are used as a form of payment (Forbes, 2008, p. 7). Many of these weapons are made in the United States (UNODC and World Bank, 2007, p. 4):

## The increase in gun-related homicides

These illegal imports have facilitated a massive spike in the number of gun-related murders. As alluded to in this working paper's opening paragraphs, while the number of murders caused by sharp instruments, blunt objects,

Table 2.2 **Firearms and ammunition seized by police, 1998–2008**

Years	Firearms seized	Rounds of ammunition seized
1998	140	543
1999	129	247
2000	143	503
2001	173	817
2002	119	596
2003	238	581
2004	213	510
2005	289	910
2006	329	1,665
2007	322	2,215
2008	432	4,611
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,527</b>	<b>13,198</b>

Source: T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit, 2009

and asphyxiation have remained steady, gun homicides increased by over 959 percent between 1999 and 2008 (Maguire et al., 2008, p. 65):

The country has no domestic firearms-manufacturing industry. For a smuggled firearm, the cost on the black market ranges between TTD 5,000 (about USD 800) for a handgun or pistol to TTD 5,000–25,000 (about USD 800–4,000) for assault rifles and sub-machine guns like AK-47s and Uzis.<sup>13</sup>

## Guns for hire

Weapons of all types and calibres are also available for rent (UNODC and World Bank, 2007, p. 10). Over the last few years, there have been many cases of police and criminals leasing out their guns. Rather than charging a flat fee, rental prices are based on the size of the anticipated earnings from the crime that the borrower intends to commit. Thus, because the payoff is larger, renting guns for robberies of armoured trucks or kidnappings costs more than guns used for household or convenience store hold-ups.<sup>14</sup>



Also trumpeted in the country's newspapers and in interviews are accounts of weapons disappearing from police custody (World Bank, 2007, p. 3). Interviewees indicate that guns impounded by police following a raid can often be repurchased the next day from the same officers. One former gang member said:

*After I got out [of jail] these fellas [the police] come back to my house. I thought they gonna arrest me again but no, they wanted to sell me the pistol they took from me.<sup>15</sup>*

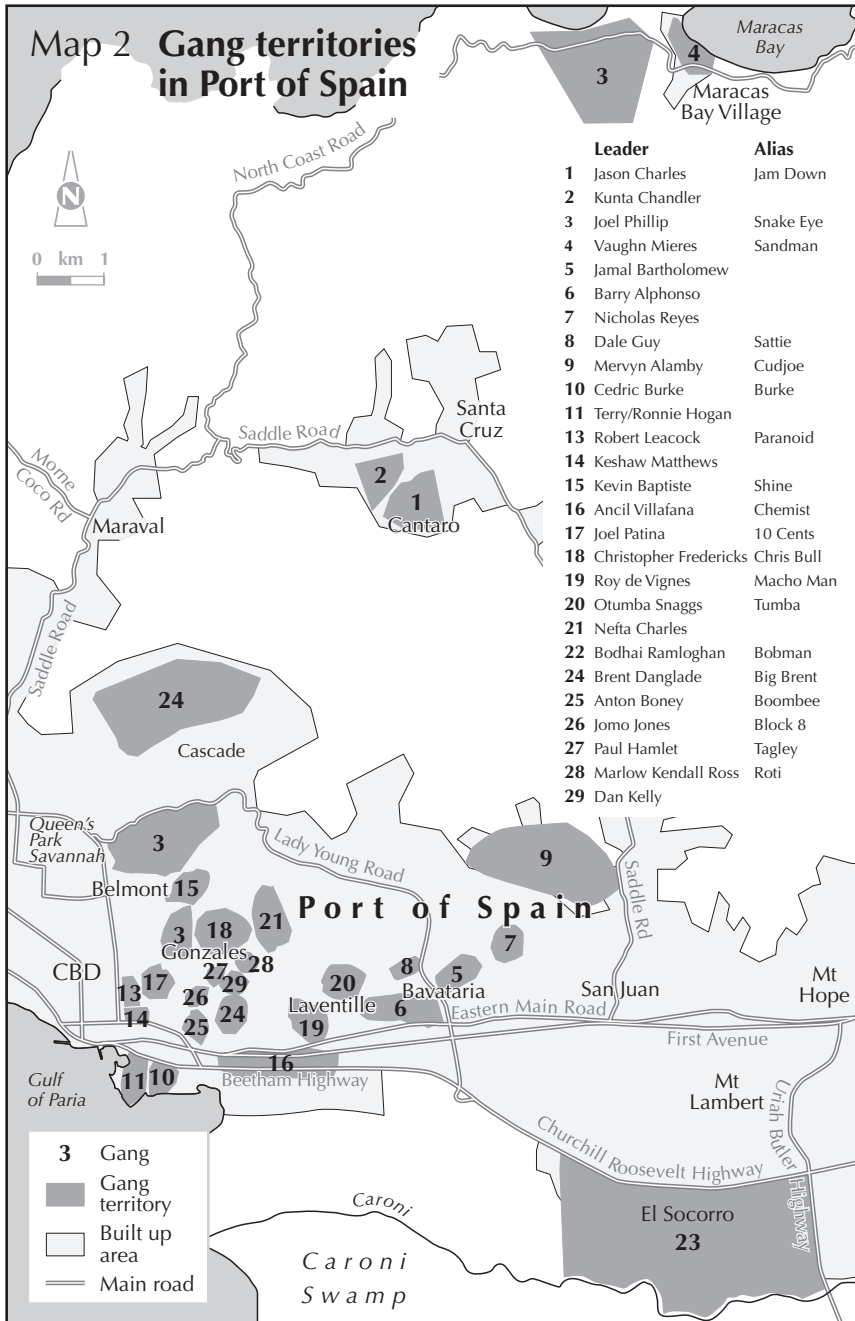
Stories of shady police dealings abound.

According to social workers in close touch with gangs, this leasing/renting practice is waning.<sup>16</sup> Gang members tell them that with more imports available, other sources of guns have become accessible and prices are going down. Many are said to come from Guyana and Venezuela, and enter the country illegally, usually dropped off by boats.<sup>17</sup> No empirical data is readily available on the extent to which guns confiscated by the police reappear on the streets.

## Legal ownership of firearms

It is possible to obtain a firearm legally, but this is a lengthy process, and not many applications succeed. After would-be gun owners submit an application to purchase from a licensed merchant, police investigate whether applicants have criminal records and deny requests from known criminals. During police interviews, applicants are asked why they want a gun and where it would be safely stored. Spouses are questioned too and are asked whether they object to a gun in their house. The applicant's fingerprints are also recorded and compared against prints taken from unsolved crimes.

Should all go well, the applicant is sent to the country's police commissioner, who has the authority to grant or deny all applications. This screening can take several months. Even after a permit is awarded, it can be revoked if the applicant fails to pass classes in firearm safety. No public records exist on how many applications succeed, but police sources indicate that the percentage is small. The rise in the availability of guns, therefore, does not seem to have come about via the legal route. 📌



Source: T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit, June 2009

### III. Who are these gangs?

Overwhelmingly, the violence is occurring among the country's poor, urban, African rather than its Indian or Caucasian residents. Primarily, city blacks are the victims.

According to Maguire et al. (2008, p. 60), higher homicide rates are evident in 7 of the country's 71 police station districts. The greatest danger has been in the Besson Street police station district in the suburb of Laventille. This old, congested area is mainly made up of one- and two-storey dwellings. The terrain is quite hilly and the roads are narrow. Some areas have no sewers or pipe-borne water except that from community taps located on the side of the road.

Not a shanty town, but hardly a tranquil setting, Laventille attracts immigrants from other Caribbean islands and many low-paid, unskilled workers. Although the national unemployment rate hovers around 5 per cent, in this area it is believed to be much higher, with many people only partially employed through Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) odd jobs.<sup>18</sup> The literacy rate is said to be about half the national average.<sup>19</sup> Residents of these neighbourhoods represent something of an underclass for whom crimes pay better than legitimate jobs—if they could get them.

Maguire et al. (2008, p. 60) further note that although only about 3 per cent of the country's population live within the borders of the Besson police station district, the homicide rate there is 249 per 100,000 people, comprising about 24 per cent of the killings throughout the entire country. This grim fact is often overlooked outside the country; yet comparisons with other violence-ridden cities suggest that Port of Spain is among the cities with the world's highest murder rates (*Foreign Policy*, 2008). Within Port of Spain, this violence is highly concentrated. Together, the seven police station districts around Port of Spain's hillside suburbs (i.e. Laventille, Morvant, and Beetham) have yielded about 60 per cent of all the nation's murders.

It is in these communities that the war between T & T's gangs is being played out. Many murders are of either street-level drug dealers or individuals associated

with gangs, regardless of whether the connection is real or merely perceived. Clashes seldom involve large-scale gun battles between gang adherents. More often, murders occur randomly; for instance, workers on a public works project hired by one gang delayed over-long when told to stop work by members of another gang who objected to the first gang undertaking projects in an area that the second gang considered to be its turf; consequently, ‘enforcers’ from the second gang gunned the workers down. Also, to warn fellow gangsters to avoid contact with adversaries, a gang member otherwise in good standing with his own group was killed by the group—his mistake was drinking beer with old friends who happened to be leaders of an opposing gang on adjacent turf. On other occasions, members who ventured to ‘lime’ (hang out) with gangs a few streets away have been killed on suspicion of disloyalty. In the Gonzales district, five gangs spar over 300 or so acres. Each presently holds one access route in and out of Gonzales and it can be fatal for gang members to trespass on the ‘wrong’ route.<sup>20</sup>

A number of top gang leaders are people who have been deported from the United States.<sup>21</sup> Many gang members are high school dropouts who come from low-income, socially disorganized families.<sup>22</sup> Drawing upon T & T’s oil and natural gas wealth, much money has been invested in mitigating the poverty of and strengthening social outreach programmes for this group. Neighbourhood opportunities like scouting, mentoring, and organized sports

**Table 3.1 Homicides in seven Trinidad police station districts, 2001–07**

Police station district	Number of homicides	% of national homicides	% area of T & T	% of national population
Besson St	404	20.4	0.25	3.05
Morvant	175	8.9	0.29	2.24
Arima	107	5.5	3.29	3.05
West End	97	5.0	0.69	2.50
Belmont	91	4.6	0.33	1.79
St Joseph	90	4.6	0.56	2.24
St James	55	2.8	0.13	1.33

Source: Maguire et al. (2008)

have all been deployed to encourage youth to fore-go the gun culture.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, a portion of this young African demographic is attracted by the quick money and the swagger that can go with belonging to a forceful, 'successful' gang with attitude.<sup>24</sup> Neighbourhood status or respect can then ensue, including regard by young women.

Importantly, educators claim that only a small percentage of young students join gangs. Belmont High School draws students from Port of Spain's toughest neighbourhoods. Out of an enrolment of 700, annually only about 20 drop out and join gangs.<sup>25</sup> In effect, schools are safe zones: if shootings are going on within a neighbourhood, parents commonly phone the school and request that their children stay in school until the shoot-outs are over. Police regularly visit school grounds and work closely with administrators to curtail on-campus gang recruiting and intimidation of students and teachers.

The pay for gang members varies greatly. At the time of their deaths, some leaders, such as Mark Guerra, had accumulated expensive real estate, sports cars, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in their accounts. Most so-called 'foot soldiers' make only enough to get by, around USD 4–35 a day, depending on the size of territory controlled,<sup>26</sup> their rank in the gang, and the payoff from the crimes they have committed.

Many street-level gangs are thought to have loose vertical connections to higher-level crime syndicates that import guns and drugs. Syndicates also grow their own marijuana on farms in T & T. Yet the workings of these top-level groups remain murky. Reporters, social workers, and government officials speculate that these higher-up movers and shakers are members of the country's tiny Syrian community, working in concert with senior police. No hard proof of the existence of this shadowy network exists and no high-volume drug trafficker from T & T has ever been arrested in the country. These syndicates have either successfully insulated themselves from their day-to-day underground business or they appear to be protected; i.e. they are seldom arrested. Presumably, these highest-level ganglords have international connections, exclusive memberships, and millions of dollars a year in revenues. Possibly the most brazen criminal network is the Jamaat al Muslimeen (see below).

Few of the rank-and-file members of street-level gangs are female,<sup>27</sup> and neither are women in the upper levels of the hierarchy. Typically, they serve

as accessories rather than functionaries. Because girls can travel more freely between turfs, they are sometimes used as messengers.<sup>28</sup> It is not uncommon for gang members to have several girlfriends and children from different women, all living within the same constricted city blocks. These women are rewarded with proceeds from various criminal activities.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, modest efforts are being made by NGOs like the Women's Institute for Alternative Development (WINAD) within T & T and at a pan-Caribbean level to identify informal peace-building strategies that can be employed by women and young girls living in violent communities. Thus, as merely one example of the gendered activity that is taking place, WINAD seeks to engage women in 12 communities and empower them to 'become active change agents and advocates against gun violence within their communities' (WINAD, 2009, p. 8).

Especially in such communities, crimes now include robbery, extortion of local businesses, and kidnapping and ransoming of members of wealthy families. Over time, the average number of kidnappings has usually been well over 100, with the high-water year for this activity being 2005, when 203 people were abducted by gangs and freelance criminals working in groups of three or four.<sup>30</sup> A by-product of these crimes is the spawning of something of a growth industry throughout T & T in private security (Shah, 2006).

Members of gangs struggling for control of inner-city turfs tend to be young, male, and between the ages of 18 and 35.<sup>31</sup> Their leaders are usually young too. This is because the generation of street captains dominant in the late 1990s and 2000s have now nearly all been killed. Given the scale of gang battles over the last few years, many members either die or go to prison before they can 'age out'.

A class of professional criminals is said to be working independently, puppet-master-like, securely above street-level gangs.<sup>32</sup> These are particularly composed of members of the Jamaat al Muslimeen or other criminal networks who often supply gang vendors with resources.

Homicide victims are also predominantly male (88.6 per cent) (Maguire et al., 2008, p. 63). According to Maguire et al.'s recent study of victims who are both gang members and non-gang members, the average age of victims is 33 years (Maguire et al., 2008, p. 63):

Hughes and Short (2005) report that a:

*reading of the homicide case files suggests that the majority of cases ending up in the 'street homicide' category tend to be based largely in conflicts over turf, respect, drugs, girls or previous offenses carried out against either the offender or the offender's friends or loved ones.*

Also given as a motive for these deadly clashes is the drive to gain or hold onto cash governmental dispensations in the form of grants for public works. Commonly mentioned as a cause, too, is the impulse of young men to demonstrate their machismo.

Recruits to violence also vary. Interviews with police and social workers tend to reinforce the possibility that, in families, generations can fully embrace the gang lifestyle.<sup>33</sup> Delinquent acts are said to frequently begin at a young age, even as early as primary school. Gang affiliation then may be not only a rite of passage into adulthood, but an ongoing way of life.

Studies in T & T have identified punishment at home as more severe than punishment at school (Deosaran, 2008, p. ix). According to Nils Kastberg, the UN Children's Fund regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean:

*witnessing violence in the home or being physically or sexually abused, for instance, may condition children or adolescents to become victims or perpetrators.*  
(UNICEF, 2008)

Plainly put, the cycle is one of violence begetting violence.

Approximately three quarters (72 per cent) of all reported murder victims are of African descent (Maguire et al., 2008, p. 63), while just 18 per cent are East Indian. East Indians, who make up just over 40 per cent of T & T's population (Africans make up about 37 per cent), also belong to crime syndicates.<sup>34</sup> Yet differences exist: the African population has historically been urban, whereas T & T's Indians come from rural communities, where hierarchical 'headmen' rule (Naipaul, 1962). According to police, the organization of East Indian crime networks resembles Mafia-like arrangements,<sup>35</sup> i.e. hierarchy is rigid and centralized, with orders flowing from the top downwards. These groupings are compact and relatively few in number.

While police hold East Indian crime networks responsible for some murders, this community has not experienced anything like the terror inflicted on

lower-class African neighbourhoods. Critically, different East Indian groups tend to stay out of each other's way, but when disputes arise, they tend to be resolved by meetings between leaders. Certain codes are said to be enforced, e.g. never shoot police, avoid killing people's relatives, and so forth.<sup>36</sup>

According to police counts, roughly 80 gangs with a membership of no more than 1,200 people 'work' T & T.<sup>37</sup> Most of these gangs are relatively small, with about 5–15 members. The largest collectives rarely exceed 25. In-group loyalty is paramount. Unlike other gang cultures, few gangs have names or identifiers like tattoos or dress codes. Possibly because they function within such tightly confined locales, to some degree members have considerable neighbourhood renown and accordingly do not particularly need to publicly connote their identities.<sup>38</sup>

Thousands more people are associated with gangs in that they receive welfare paychecks, regularly hang out with gang members, and support gang hegemony by deferring to the commands of their local gang leaders. URP kick-backs are said to be distributed to community residents who are not affiliated with particular gangs. This largesse may be a way for these gangs to create goodwill and so diffuse community anger towards their damaging activities. Unfortunately, these hangers-on comprise many of those killed, usually as a result of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Despite recent press reports alluding to a strong presence of Jamaican gangsters, scant evidence currently exists that T & T's gang members actually are either immigrants, deportees, or forgers of links with underworld figures from other Caribbean or Central American states.<sup>39</sup>

## A significant gang leader

For a further sense of context, consider a colourful 'godfather' who was not completely home-grown. Mark Guerra was a teen member of the Jamaat al Muslimeen, a domestic organization with religious overtones that was also known for its criminal activities and its violent attempt to overthrow T & T's government in 1990. Jamaat dispatched Guerra to New York City in 1989, where he hustled drugs before returning to the islands in 1993 to ply the same trade. A significant gang leader who consolidated control of criminal activi-



ties across the nation, Guerra acted vigorously on behalf of both the Indian-centric UNC party when it was in power and then, when it was elected in 2002,<sup>40</sup> the African-centric PNM. His role was seen as vital in mobilizing votes in five closely contested electoral districts during the 2001 and 2002 national elections. Thereafter, Guerra was given the new portfolio of URP national adviser—a cabinet-level position. He is accused of using this aegis to cement his authority, sometimes with force, over other gangs.

Less than two years later, Guerra was assassinated. At the time, this welfare programme administrator owned luxury sports cars and several large estates. Theories abound about exactly why he was eliminated. One is that Guerra was killed by a disgruntled faction within his own organization. Another theory is that he was killed in revenge for the murder of another gang leader. A third possibility is that Guerra was executed because 'he was too big for his shoes' in transactions for the government's URP programme (see below). Ultimately, '[n]o one knows for sure' (Joseph, 2008).

## **Jamaat al Muslimeen: another influence for instability**

This T & T-based Muslim crime syndicate gained international notoriety in late July 1990 when it attempted to overthrow the national government. Converts to Islam, Jamaat members are mostly Africans born in T & T, but inspired by the Black Power movement in the United States of the 1960s and 1970s. In the organization's attempted coup, over 100 young men armed with smuggled guns fire-bombed the central police headquarters, hijacked the national TV station, and took control of Parliament for six days. Among the hostages captured was the then prime minister. What followed was a prolonged stand-off with the army. Thirty people were killed and 150 were wounded during the coup attempt. Afterwards, Jamaat members were sent to jail, which was followed by early releases for many coup plotters, including dissident leader Yasin Abu Bakr, a charismatic leader who had once served as a policeman in Canada (Garcia and Diederich, 1990).

By all accounts, Jamaat remains a powerful criminal force and is alleged to be responsible for numerous extortions, drug-selling and smuggling operations, money laundering, and kidnappings.<sup>41</sup>

Members of the group, including Bakr, were arrested on terrorism and weapons charges in 2005 after a series of bombings in middle-class neighbourhoods in Port of Spain. At the time, Bakr also stood accused of being implicated in the murder of dissidents within Jamaat. Also in 2005, a Jamaat member was convicted in Miami of trying to ship 60 AK-47s, 10 Mac-10 guns, and 10 silencers from Fort Lauderdale to T & T. In 2001 court papers indicate that these guns were intended for Jamaat use and for resale (Mozingo, 2006).

Despite Jamaat's radical stance, no connections are known to exist with worldwide Islamic terrorist organizations. The group thrives by intimidating rival gangs and public officials. Nevertheless, rumours persist regarding corrupt alliances among Jamaat, the current prime minister, and members of the state security apparatus. In the last few years, the state has tried to collect a USD 6 million debt it says is owed to it by Jamaat for damage caused to police headquarters during the coup attempt in 1990 (Fraser, 2009). In this connection, the government is seeking to seize ten properties said to belong to Abu Bakr.

A judgement delivered in the spring of 2009 by T & T's Privy Council determined the following:

*The essence of the agreement between the Prime Minister and Mr. Abu Bakr, on behalf of Jamaat, was that certain advantages would be given to the Jamaat out of state property in return for securing voting support for the Prime Minister's political party. In the opinion of the board, this was corrupt within the meaning and intendment of Section 3 (of the Prevention of Corruption Act 1987) and each party to the agreement was acting in contravention of the section. (Joseph, 2009)*

Bakr lost his appeal in the Privy Council in May. Yet the issue has not disappeared from T & T's national radar. In September 2009 High Court Judge Rajendra Narine determined the following:

*As far as the court is aware, no action has been taken by the appropriate authorities to conduct a thorough investigation of these allegations. The allegations made by the second defendant [Bakr] are extremely serious. If they are true, they strike at the heart of our democratic system of government. (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 2009b)*

In effect, Narine has called for an independent investigation. 🗣️

## IV. Police corruption

While some parts of T & T's police perform admirably, such as the Repeat Offenders Task Force, numerous interviewees say that elements of the police force operate in ways similar to those of gangs, i.e. they operate drug corners, control the inflow of drugs, undertake large robberies, and commit extra-legal murders. As of September 2009, 29 police were under suspension and 249 were facing formal criminal charges,<sup>42</sup> out of a total force of about 6,500.

Getting solid information on this situation is difficult and so much of what is related has to be acknowledged as hearsay. And yet there have been some notable instances of the system partially revealing itself. For instance, in 1992 Scotland Yard was hired by the government of T & T to investigate corruption within the police force (the *Economist*, 1992). After a few months, investigators gave up, allegedly because of lack of cooperation from T & T's police force.

In 2007 a police superintendent, Chandrabhhan Maharaj, opposed the selection of a fellow officer to lead an investigation into crimes carried out by police. At the time, Maharaj claimed that the force was massively corrupt, including playing a leading role in the island's drug trade (*Trinidad Express*, 2007). Claiming that corrupt practices reached all the way to the top of his organization, Maharaj feared that an investigation led by a member of the country's police force would result in a cover-up or inaction. Indeed, the officer chosen to lead the investigation had reportedly spent the previous two years inconclusively investigating the disappearance of 32 kg of cocaine from the police's storage facilities. At the time he came forward with these accusations, Maharaj was also urgently seeking permission to obtain a firearm as protection.

Social workers and gang members themselves say that the police are less interested in fighting crime than in managing it; i.e. a loose code of conduct exists whereby heinous crimes will be investigated, while in many parts of the country crime is tolerated in many police station districts. National polls reveal that only about one in ten citizens has confidence in the national police. Allegedly, with hard-working exceptions, police are seen as 'corrupt, lazy, incompetent and impolite' (*Trinidad Express*, 2009).

In particular, according to a senior public prosecutor, 'police corruption has become a crisis situation'.<sup>43</sup> Government members also acknowledge that elements in many branches of the police may openly benefit from crime. They may facilitate or ignore drug shipments, rent weapons to criminals, or shake-down citizens (including law-abiding ones) for bribes.

Despite several decades of complaints about such police criminality, up to now officers have not been tried in court, the norm being that officers do not collect evidence on their colleagues:

*No one was arrested because the force was divided between those who are themselves corrupt and those who are afraid to speak up, because they know (that) pointing out these problems can only hurt their careers.*<sup>44</sup>

Recently, tentative signs indicate that T & T's acting police chief, James Philbert, may be open to challenging his own rank and file. Thus, in September 2009 about 20 police were arrested and charged. The investigative work was undertaken by specially created police units, and trials are pending.

In August 2009, members of T & T's Criminal Intelligence Unit discovered seven illegal guns, drugs, and ammunition at a police station. The items were found hidden in the ceiling of the police station (*Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 2009a). All of the police officers from this police station were reassigned. Then, days later, another sweep of the offices of the new officers appointed to staff the police station revealed more hidden guns and drugs. 📄

## V. The modus operandi of the gangs

### Making a living

To survive, the main sources of income for gangs is the selling of marijuana and cocaine to neighbours who are users.<sup>45</sup> Usually, this income is supplemented by cashing in on government contracts from the federal URP (*Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 2008). Gangs typically thrive as hands-on completers of URP's small-scale public works programmes.

Another income-generating method is that gangs are permitted to greatly magnify the personnel needed to perform tasks such as lawn-mowing, cleaning up, and construction. Jobs that might require the efforts of only two or three labourers can be paid for as if 20 people had been employed. This fake work system even has its own name, 'ghost gangs'. To be sure, this bounty is a form of welfare valued by the down-and-out. Part of what strikes critics, however, is that the phenomenon can also involve brazen misrepresentations. In 2008, for instance, an investigation by the *Trinidad Express* (Heeralal, 2008a) revealed the names of some of the paid labourers as international celebrities Jennifer Lopez, Serena Williams, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

While each labourer is only paid a modest amount, usually around USD 5–25 per day, the 'take' can be considerable for gang leaders who bid on the contracts and administer URP and other programmes (e.g. Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Project programmes). In turn, these entrepreneurs dispense not only money to individuals on their 'payrolls', but also to causes and residents (single mothers, the elderly, extended families, gang foot soldiers, etc.) within the narrow areas that these leaders control (Heeralal, 2008a). Given this process, as well as the threat of violence for violating their expectations, gang leaders matter. The national government allocates about USD 400 million each year to the URP (Taitt, 2009), so considerable funds are at stake.

Of late, and on occasion, politicians have attempted to introduce URP reforms, e.g. in 2002 authorities proposed that retired police officers living in the

gangs' zones become the dispensers of URP funds. In effect, these retirees would serve as monitors or inspectors of the payrolls and projects. Following a meeting with Prime Minister Manning in 2002, however, gang leaders allegedly were able to prevent this 'unnecessary' accounting check (Heeralal, 2009b). Another form of accountability was eliminated in 2006 when a city councillor in Belmont was murdered. According to police, this killing was linked to the uncomfortable questions the victim was asking about certain URP projects.

It should be emphasized that these handsome URP contracts are contested among the gangs themselves. As boundaries between gang territories can be unsettled or somewhat porous, murderous reprisals can stem from members who sense that 'their' territory is being incrementally encroached upon by rivals. Police say that over 100 murders since 2002 have been of URP supervisors, foremen, contractors, and workers.<sup>46</sup> Criticism of the URP system has started to extend beyond the men in local neighbourhoods left out of the system, and judges, churches, and the media at the national level are also questioning the system. Even so, the payoffs continue.

## Inner workings

Criminals are coming up with more ingenious ways to conceal their guns and drugs. This involves methods like cutting the locks on electrical panel boxes in publicly subsidized apartment buildings, stashing marijuana and cocaine (and presumably small arms) beside the electrical breakers, and replacing the government's padlocks with their own. Through the spreading of such stories, in addition to regular accounts of gunfire in troubled areas, the various activities of gangs are guaranteed attentive audiences. But what about gangs' more private inner workings? Only the beginnings of a depiction can be attempted here.

In the wake of robberies, rapes, drug incursions, and perceived slights by 'dread and evilous' outsiders, a fiercely independent gang can venture with evil intent beyond its own 'hood' (neighbourhood). Cliques may 'cuss-out' each other, using small arms to send the message that they are not to be messed with. 'I had to tell dem', one gang member explained to a clergyman trusted by the gangs, 'we ain't taking it no more . . . Is de only ting dey understand'.<sup>47</sup> The Catholic clergyman, Father Jason Gordon, later concluded, 'My

lesson of the year? The gun is a tool of communication', much more so than anger, taunts, shamings, or reasoning (Gordon, 2007).

Reducing resentments, clarifying misunderstandings, and otherwise mediating between such armed men is a perilous business. As another leader, recently released from jail and resuming control of his group from his 'lieutenants', told the same activist priest who was seeking a ceasefire:

*I just made up my mind we have to have war. I want you to leave; don't come back. In war, anyone moving between the sides can be seen as the enemy.* (Gordon, 2007)

If leaders do agree to put their 'pieces' aside and stop or reduce their wars, they may not mean it, as underlying tensions among the gangs may just be too incendiary and profound to bridge. Equally, one side may violate the spirit of an agreement, knowing that the other side eventually may 'come for' them (Gordon, 2007).

With the exception of a handful of social workers, priests, and mullahs (Islamic scholars), gang members say that few channels exist for negotiating among one another or for sharing information that might de-escalate neighbourhood eruptions of violence. In the view of a number of sources, the police may themselves have broken the law or acted in ways perceived as unfair. Out of resentment and fear that collaboration with police might put them or their families in danger, gang members seldom choose to work closely with law enforcement agencies.<sup>48</sup> 📄

## **VI. Efforts to curtail guns and drugs**

Some of the following discussion on attempts to control the drug trade may seem tangential to a report on guns and gangs in T & T. However, law enforcement authorities point to a strong connection between the smuggling of guns and the smuggling of drugs, and the one problem is said to fuel the other (Booth and Forero, 2009):

### **Regional efforts to curtail drug shipments**

In response to intense pressure from the US government, South American drug cartels have reportedly had to diversify their supply routes and methods. One example is the introduction by Colombian drug cartels of home-made submarines to ship drugs to North American coasts (Forbes, 2008, pp. 3–8). With the abundance of yacht and sailboat traffic, as well numerous unpatrolled shores in the Caribbean, it would appear that traffickers have stepped up their channelling of contraband through Caribbean waters.

Regional security has been on the agenda at the highest levels throughout the region. In 2002, at a Caribbean Community meeting of government ministers, the suggestion was made to form a Caribbean-wide agency for crime and security. The aim was to train enforcement officials, establish a regional information and intelligence-sharing network, and promote maritime cooperation and border security (UNODC, 2009b). In the last several years, culminating in a ministerial conference in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, a regional architecture has been devised of councils, advisory committees, implementation agencies, and meetings of operational heads (UNODC, 2009b).<sup>49</sup> These organizations, as well as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and regional drug enforcement groups, have agreed to address the threat of drug trafficking as a high priority. The Santo Domingo Partnership Mechanism commits Caribbean states to improving steps to prevent drug use and providing treatment for



users, and to strengthening the enforcement of legislation and judicial cooperation to fight drug trafficking and organized crime. In May 2009, a memorandum of understanding was signed with the United States allowing T & T to use eTrace, an electronic system used to trace illegal firearms (Renne, 2009).

## National efforts

Numerous tactics have been used to reduce gang violence. A social programme like the 18-month-old Citizen Security Programme is aiming to operate in 22 high-crime communities.<sup>50</sup> This outreach programme is modelled on similar programmes in Jamaica, Colombia, and Guatemala. It is also partly informed by a much-lauded programme called the Chicago Cease-Fire Project, and works with community-based organizations to focus on public education, conflict mediation, and street-level outreach activities.<sup>51</sup> The goal of the pilot programme is to target 'high need youth' aged between 7 and 24 years.

The Citizen Security Programme has four main goals: 1) reducing the level of homicides, robberies, and woundings in partner communities; 2) reducing injuries related to child maltreatment and to firearm, domestic, and youth violence; 3) increasing safety within partner communities; and 4) boosting collective effectiveness to prevent violence in partner communities.

To achieve these goals, the Citizen Security Programme has three main components: 1) organizing and mobilizing community groups to find solutions to the violence in their neighbourhoods, which, according to Martin Joseph (2008), the minister of national security, 'involves addressing issues such as youth violence, delinquency and anti-social behavior, child abuse and neglect and domestic violence'; 2) encouraging changes in the behaviour and culture of the police force through a venture called the Model Stations Programme, which features police station districts equipped with Victim Support Units; and 3) highlighting scientific data to help fight crime and violence.

It may still be too early to assess the impact of the Citizen Security Programme. Certainly, shootings and murders continue, and the country is on track for a record number of murders in 2009.

Assorted police tactics have also been tried. In March, following the killing of a soldier, who was murdered outside his home, police imposed a 6 p.m.

quasi-curfew in large parts of Laventille suburb (Kowlessar, 2009a). The number of police and security forces patrolling the area was doubled to about 200. To locate suspects, residents say these forces conducted unannounced house-to-house searches.

Recently, a joint operation involving about a hundred police and soldiers was initiated in Laventille and nearby Chafford Court. Adopting quasi-counter-insurgency tactics, police and army units have set up small bases in violent neighbourhoods. By living in these neighbourhoods, they hope to gain the confidence of residents, more quickly deter crime, and gain intelligence about gang activities. Given how concentrated violence is in T & T, this approach makes some sense. Yet, as suggested above, it has not proven successful. Police methods have been criticized as abusive and police have been accused of roughing up many people.<sup>52</sup> One official familiar with anti-gang tactics said:

*People complain, mostly those with the most to lose, gangsters and their families. Having the police in their area causes a drop in narcotic sales and whatever illegal activity is happening. . . . You may like to shoot the gangsters but you know you can't do that. . . . Spending time in one area works for a while but the criminals adjust and go somewhere else to start trouble. Then the police have to move to the next hot area.*<sup>53</sup>

Efforts are also under way to stop the supply of drugs into the country. Located seven miles off the coast of Venezuela, the island of Trinidad—self-described as the ‘heart of the Americas’—is a natural way-station en route to markets in North America and Europe. As T & T does not lie within the region’s hurricane belt, for several months a year its marinas turn into harbours for hundreds of private vessels, especially in Chaguaramas, a town west of Port of Spain. Authorities say that, although most boats belong to law-abiding tourists, a small portion serve as transports for arriving and departing shipments of illegal drugs.<sup>54</sup> One favoured technique for concealing their cargoes is to weld extra width below the water line along the boats’ sides.<sup>55</sup>

So-called ‘Go-Fasts’ cross quickly from Venezuela to T & T. Generally, these high-speed boats carry several crew members who purportedly drop off tens of millions of dollars’ worth of narcotics in quiet coves and at unguarded beaches. To throw off T & T’s coast guard, motorboats from Venezuela are believed

initially to travel the extra distance up to Tobago, which is a smaller and less densely populated tourist centre. Then, in the guise of tourists coming from Tobago, the 'Go-Fasts' circle back to Trinidad, the more important hub for drug deals.

Notable seizures have taken place. On one beach in the south, for instance, Trinidad's police came upon around USD 800 million worth of recently deposited drugs.<sup>56</sup> While the police indicate that they are thus making a dent in stemming the flow of drugs and guns, this claim is questioned by several residents with waterfront properties around Icacos, on Trinidad's southern tip, the closest point to Venezuela and presumably adjacent to a main smuggling lane.<sup>57</sup> These residents believe that the many 'Go-Fasts' seen coming and going are ferrying drugs (and some weapons), but are not apprehended because local police and coast guards 'must be' in cahoots with drug runners, and are not stopped and searched because authorities lack sufficient equipment to do so.

Commonly, the claim is made that the weapon/drug smugglers are not long-time local residents, but South Americans from Guyana or Venezuela. For their part, senior security officials deny the existence of a special cadre of middlemen from abroad who have secreted themselves within T & T to funnel drop-offs from fellow foreigners.<sup>58</sup> Alternatively, one high-placed foreign security official posits the existence of a group of international distributors who are based within T & T itself.<sup>59</sup>

These conflicting perspectives by ranking law enforcement officials raise a series of possibilities. One, of course, is that the smuggling has been utterly undetected, i.e. the criminals (local or international) are effective at outwitting the authorities. This implies that one or several chains of T & T-based distribution managers have been able to conceal their entire, highly secret process of drug transmission. This kind of concealment would mean that millions of dollars are exchanged outside the national banking system, where large deposits must be reported to T & T's central bank. Details are fuzzy, but what is apparent is that no knowledge of arrests of smugglers of guns and drugs has entered the public domain. Equally, the USD 800 million worth of drugs that were found were probably only a small portion of the trade passing through T & T.

To staunch the flow of drugs and guns, T & T is building up its coast guard. A decade ago, confronted with a shortfall of qualified personnel, the scope of the islands' coast guard had been reduced. Now, however, three new 140-foot offshore patrol vessels and six fast patrol boats have been ordered and 400 maritime recruits are undergoing training.<sup>60</sup> As a consequence, T & T will possess the Caribbean's largest fleet, able to patrol widely and to function as a regional force for security.<sup>61</sup> Some think this regional emphasis is overly ambitious and that it would be prudent for T & T to attend more to its own waters.

The government's new radar system should also soon be in place, the better to detect small aircraft that might parachute contraband into the country. Security at the island of Trinidad's two airports has recently been enhanced—so much so that officials say it is virtually impossible to smuggle in weapons.<sup>62</sup> Terminals and their transients, however, are not necessarily drug free. Accordingly, the National Drug Control System has also been instituted, charged with the responsibility for tracking international shipments of chemicals used in the production of illegal drugs.

Because of the perception that police may not always be trustworthy in apprehending hoodlums, the government has created an elite squad called the Special Anti-crime Unit of T & T (SAUTT). The unit focuses on the task of boosting national forensic capabilities, as well as enforcing and supporting operations by T & T's Police Service. It appears to be modelled on the US Federal Bureau of Investigation. Although established five years ago, SAUTT has been challenged recently on its jurisdiction and authority to arrest (Bago, 2009a). While the established Police Service is run by a commissioner, the head of SAUTT reports directly to the Ministry of Security and the Prime Minister's Office.

As far as is publicly known, smuggled weapons have mostly come from Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana, and the United States. An analysis by one department of T & T's police force suggests that as Venezuela's army has modernized its stock of assault rifles, a glut of used models is being clandestinely off-loaded throughout the region.<sup>63</sup> During raids on homes, police have confiscated a number of these weapons. So far, the weapons confiscated have included Uzis, Tec 9s, assault rifles (like the AK-47, M16, and Galil), shotguns, grenades, and numerous handguns. Also found have been 9 mm, 5.56 mm, .45, and .38 calibre bullets.<sup>64</sup>

In the face of the spiralling murder rate, the numbers of criminals apprehended have remained about the same. Whereas ten years ago over half of murder cases ultimately were solved, today fewer than 20 per cent end with a conviction and prison sentence.<sup>65</sup> Although investments have been made in beefing up police resources, certain witnesses have tended either 'to forget' their evidence in court or to be killed before trial.

Up to now, the country's witness protection programme has been problematic. To begin with, accused parties are often able to phone from prison and harass witnesses who might testify against them. In such a small and watchful society, permanently relocating witnesses has been challenging: gossip about newcomers can get back to the gangs and even 'effective' relocations are jeopardized if the witnesses sneak home for visits; not surprisingly, such trips frequently end in their deaths, according to Judge Mark Mohammed (2009).

Legislation has been introduced for the admissibility in court of audio and video recordings of witness statements. This provision would thus allow the written transcripts of dead witnesses to be placed before a jury (Bago, 2009b). Also, comprehensive anti-gang legislation is currently (2009) being debated in T & T's Parliament. This legislation, comprising six components, requires a constitutional majority, and the ruling party has lately reached out to the opposition for support in this regard (*Trinidad and Tobago News*, 2009b). The legislation, called the Omnibus Legislation, seeks changes to white collar crime and money-laundering laws; confirms the formal establishment of the SAUTT (which is already operating); changes the way in which bail is granted; and seeks to enable authorities to tap telephones and otherwise electronically eavesdrop on suspects.

## Local efforts

A catchphrase among reformers in T & T is that all crime is local, meaning not only that it happens at the grassroots level, but that its resolution has to include the mobilization of these grassroots. Among community-serving professionals who try to reduce the effects of criminals' small arms are the clergy, including the priest cited above for his recollections of conversations with gang leaders. His bottom-up approach to keeping the peace includes the building of a coa-

lition with businesses, meeting regularly with gangs, involving poor urban communities in plans to enhance public amenities, and carrying out face-to-face mediation.

The church has also tried bringing gangs together for a Holy Saturday event. In one recent instance, after walking through contested streets and carrying one-word signs (proclaiming 'Goodness', 'Peace', 'Blessings', 'Love', and 'Unity'), parishioners and other residents joined gang leaders to agree on collaborative projects, e.g. feeding the community, distributing goods wholesale, creating a recreation club with a large-screen TV, and participating in sports days.

As he reflects on his hopes for the community of Gonzales, Father Jason Gordon envisages '[i]ntegral development through [gangs'] participation . . . [as] architects of their own destiny'. He recalls one turning point:

*We reached the playfield around 6:30 p.m. The sun had set and the acolytes had already lit the Easter fire. I spoke to the young men sweating on the court and they fell into the assembly. Paul said, 'De Fada [i.e. Father] have to pray. Let's form a circle.' . . . I invited each person to say something positive about Gonzales, then light a candle from the fire. It was the most profoundly moving Easter experience I have ever had. The positives and the candles being lit, the two gangs present with the Church and the Community . . . [After we moved inside the Church, we had] a conversation among the different constituents, building the logic for peace. Dialogue and Solidarity are the twin foundations.<sup>66</sup>*

The Gonzales community has won diverse awards for its transformation, which encapsulates literacy training, an arts programme for youth, forums on parenting and mediating skills, a Microsoft-funded training programme in technology, a six-week football competition, and more. In his budget speech for 2006/07, the prime minister commended the locale for creating T & T's leading community initiative:

*The Government is lending support to a very interesting project—the Pride in Gonzales project—which involves the collaboration of a number of government agencies, some NGOs and the private sector, all working to improve the social and physical conditions of the community of Gonzales and thereby producing a safer environment.*

*Mr Speaker, we urge other communities to adopt this or a similar model of community development and crime prevention. The Government will support all such programmes geared towards the restoration of peace and stability in our society. (Manning, 2006)*

Nevertheless, on occasion, setbacks occur. For instance, after an incident at a football game, a young man went home and came back with his gun. But the gang leaders intervened before a shooting materialized and sorted out the problem. As far as is known, the gun was removed from the community.<sup>67</sup> 🗨️

## VII. Conclusions: what next?

*'Gang Warfare Comes to Chaguanas'* (*Trinidad and Tobago Mirror*, 8 May 2009)

*'Four Killed on Bloody Weekend'* (*Daily Express*, 11 May 2009)

*'Gangs Terrorize Central Areas'* (*the Guardian*, 11 May 2009)

According to editors, newspaper circulation is climbing as readers strive to keep track of the havoc taking place around them. However, in the press, there is debate over whether gang disturbances ought to be covered at all. Some argue that front-page coverage glorifies and even champions criminal behaviour. Others maintain that the role of the press is to reflect what is happening in society. As such, the press is a force for change towards a less violence-afflicted and gun-ridden society. In a sense, it is helping to build a momentum for a civic order that would give greater security to individual lives. But among the media's audiences, an effective drive to reverse criminality has not taken hold.

Rather than directly and unequivocally pursuing an anti-gun policy, different agencies of T & T's government are responding to a range of incentives and conflicts that affect the domestic flow of small arms. By rewarding gun-using gangs with contracts for infrastructure work, federal politicians are undercutting police efforts to minimize the introduction and use of weapons. What thus is unfolding is a trade-off between law and order, on the one hand, and patronage, on the other.

Also arrayed as a force for change is a mix of the usual advocates of peace, order, and good government, namely the police, social workers, educators, citizens in general, and reformist politicians. So far, these forces have been uneven in their success.

Arguably, for shifts to take hold, the forces mobilized against a vibrant and dynamic civic society need to be weakened. If a majority of this working paper's respondents are to be believed, elements of the police and coast guard either



avert their eyes to the illegal trafficking or are colluding with the criminals. Just by way of a quick application of a general principle, additional resources could be allocated to dealing with criminal elements within the police and coast guard so as to disrupt the flow of guns and drugs from abroad. SAUTT, the newly created elite police unit, could become an effective force against this sort of malfeasance. Still, the way of doing things corruptly—in some, but certainly not all, of T & T's security circles—may be so entrenched that a need may exist for additional correctives (e.g. government agencies, popular movements, and political coalitions).

T & T's society, though small in size, is sufficiently complex such that a variety of forces stand arrayed against efforts at improvement. In distressed communities, the killings and intimidations ordered by gang leaders enable a lawless exchange of drugs and guns. This exchange is in those leaders' best interest, and not for the general good of the overall community, but it is difficult for powerless individuals to stand up against these gang leaders. Also arrayed, or covertly arrayed, against such pressures for stability are the leaders of political parties who cultivate goodwill with gangs. When the authorities succeed in brokering peace between rival gangs, the payoffs of that cultivation are benign and can be appreciated. But at the same time, elements of the political regime tend to undercut civic order by actions that reinforce gangs: tolerating swollen and therefore bogus payrolls for infrastructure projects; avoiding a process of public bidding for these contracts; and—not least—inflating the criminals' symbolic importance by dignifying them as 'community leaders'.

The above progressive and retrogressive forces are only suggestive of what is unfolding with regard to gangs and guns in T & T. Other markers of the problem may be brought to the fore. In turn, concerned stakeholders may develop a viable strategy for peace, while controlling elements of the violent status quo.

In any event, the nation's problem of guns is not going to go away. Steps by the government to bolster law enforcement and curb smuggling are hobbled by a worsening of civic attitudes, i.e. citizens are downright cynical about the ability of the state to reverse the mayhem caused by guns and gangs.

Investments in boats, personnel, social services, and education can only go so far toward staving off drug/gun smuggling and gang activities. The argument can be made that deep change to this most formidable problem will only occur when senior segments of the government are persuaded to abandon their handouts to criminal elements through institutions like the URP. Until then, different arms of government will work at cross purposes. 🗨️

# Endnotes

- 1 Author telephone interview with public prosecutor, September 2009.
- 2 While about 130,000 people live in Port of Spain, the metropolitan area stretching from Arima in the east to Chaguaramas in the west has a population of about 600,000 (*Wikipedia*, n.d.).
- 3 Four men were charged with murder. As of September 2009 they are awaiting trial in Port of Spain.
- 4 Author interviews with T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit officials, April–May 2009.
- 5 Email from T & T Police Repeat Offender Task Force, 27 May 2009.
- 6 Statistics provided by T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit.
- 7 The PNM defeated the UNC in 2002 by a margin of about 25,000 votes out of the 608,000 cast. In four constituencies, the difference was less than 1,000 votes; see *Trinidad and Tobago News* (2002).
- 8 Author telephone interviews with former PNM parliamentarian, September 2009.
- 9 Officials refer to gang bosses as ‘community leaders’ (a positive) rather than ‘gang leaders’ (a pejorative).
- 10 Author interview with senior intelligence officer, Port of Spain, 9 May 2009.
- 11 Author interview with foreign drug enforcement official, Port of Spain, 8 May 2009.
- 12 Author telephone interview with police official, October 2009.
- 13 Author interview with Muslim gang member, Chaguanas, 11 May 2009.
- 14 Author interview with senior police officer, Port of Spain, 30 April 2009.
- 15 Author interview with former gang member, San Fernando, 10 May 2009.
- 16 Author interview with social worker, Port of Spain, 9 May 2009.
- 17 Author interview with Trinidad National Security Office official, September 2009.
- 18 Author interview with Father Jason Gordon, Port of Spain, 11 May 2009.
- 19 Estimates provided from interviews with educators and social workers.
- 20 Author interview with Father Jason Gordon, Port of Spain, 11 May 2009.
- 21 Author interview with Trinidad National Security Office official, September 2009.
- 22 Author interviews with social workers and educators, Port of Spain, April–May 2009.
- 23 Presentations at a symposium of the T & T Crime and Justice Commission, Port of Spain, 8 May 2009.
- 24 Author interviews with police, Port of Spain, April–May 2009.
- 25 Author interview with Jacqueline Toney, former principal of Belmont High School, 11 May 2009.
- 26 Author interview with gang member, Port of Spain, May 2009.
- 27 Author interviews with police, Port of Spain, April–May 2009.
- 28 Author interview with Jacqueline Toney, former principal of Belmont High School, 11 May 2009.
- 29 Author interviews with gang member, Port of Spain, May 2009.

- 30 Author interviews with T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit officials, April–  
May 2009.
- 31 Author interviews with social workers and police, Port of Spain, May 2009.
- 32 Author interviews with police, reporters, and a foreign security official, 3–11 May 2009.
- 33 Author interviews with T & T Police Repeat Offenders Task Force officers, April 2009.
- 34 The rest of T & T's population is either mixed (18 per cent), white (0.6 per cent), or Chinese  
(1.2 per cent).
- 35 Author interview with National Security Ministry official, Port of Spain, May 2009.
- 36 Author interviews with social workers, gang leader, and crime reporters, Port of Spain,  
May 2009.
- 37 Author interviews with T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit officials, April–  
May 2009.
- 38 Author interviews with T & T Police Repeat Offenders Task Force officers, April 2009.
- 39 Author interview with National Security Ministry senior official, 8 May 2009.
- 40 Elections held in December 2001 resulted in a split parliament, with both the UNC and  
PNM winning 18 seats. General elections were subsequently held about a year later, in  
October 2002, which were won by the PNM.
- 41 Author interviews with police, Port of Spain, May 2009.
- 42 Author interview with police, Port of Spain, September 2009.
- 43 Author interview with senior public prosecutor, September 2009.
- 44 Author telephone interview with public prosecutor, September 2009.
- 45 Author interviews with police, Port of Spain, May 2009.
- 46 Author interviews with officers from different branches of T & T Police.
- 47 Author interview with Father Jason Gordon, Port of Spain, 11 May 2009.
- 48 Author interviews with gang members in Laventille and Chaguanas, 9–10 May 2009.
- 49 The Santo Domingo Pact was signed on 10 March 2009.
- 50 Author interview with National Security Ministry administrator, November 2009.
- 51 For details of the original programme, see Chicago Cease-Fire Project (n.d.).
- 52 Author telephone interview with police officer, Port of Spain, October 2009.
- 53 Email from Port of Spain police official, October 2009.
- 54 Author interview with foreign drug enforcement official, Port of Spain, 6 May 2009.
- 55 Author interview with National Security Ministry senior official, 8 May 2009.
- 56 Author interviews with National Security Ministry officials, Port of Spain, May 2009.
- 57 Author interviews with residents of Icacos, Trinidad, 4 May 2009.
- 58 Author interview with National Security Ministry senior official, 8 May 2009.
- 59 Author interview with foreign diplomat, Port of Spain, 7 May 2009.
- 60 Author interview with National Security Ministry senior official, Port of Spain, 8 May 2009.
- 61 Author interview with National Security Ministry senior official, Port of Spain, 8 May 2009.
- 62 Author interview with foreign drug enforcement official, Port of Spain, 6 May 2009.
- 63 Author interview with T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit officials, 29 April 2009.
- 64 Author interview with T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit officials, 8 May 2009.
- 65 Author interview with T & T Police Crime and Problem Analysis Unit officials, 8 May 2009.
- 66 Author interview with Father Jason Gordon, Port of Spain, 8 May 2009.
- 67 Author interview with Father Jason Gordon, Port of Spain, 8 May 2009.

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