Article

The Impact of Gangs on Community Life in Trinidad

Ericka B. Adams[1], Patrice K. Morris[2], and Edward R. Maguire[3]

Abstract
Trinidad and Tobago has more than 100 criminal gangs, some of which engage in high levels of homicide and violence. Recent research has shown that gang members in Trinidad and Tobago are more likely than nongang members to be arrested for violent, property, and drug crimes. As gangs continue to proliferate throughout the Caribbean, there is a pressing need to understand the nature of these gangs and their impact on the communities in which they are entrenched. Using data from interviews with community members, police officials, and gang members, as well as ethnographic observations from 10 high crime, predominantly Black communities in the Port of Spain area, this article investigates the impact of gang violence and the role of gangs in these urban communities. Our findings reveal the dominant nature of certain gangs and their formidable role in controlling turf and using violence to retaliate and intimidate.

No legitimate employment opportunities can replace the lucrative, illegitimate, gang-based activities that the "dons," "community leaders," and their leading assistants now enjoy.

Griffin and Persad (2013, p. 108)

[1] San Jose State University, San Jose, CA, USA
[2] Georgia Gwinnett College, Lawrenceville, GA, USA
[3] Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ, USA

Corresponding Author:
Ericka B. Adams, San Jose State University, One Washington Square, San Jose, CA 95112, USA.
Email: ericka.adams@sjsu.edu

Violent crime, particularly homicide, poses a critical threat in Trinidad and Tobago's capital city of Port of Spain, with residents experiencing high rates of homicide in comparison to the rest of the nation (U.S. Department of State, 2018). In 2005, the homicide rates for the Besson Street and Morvant police districts, both located in the Port of Spain area, were 249 and 110 per 100,000, respectively, while the national homicide rate was 34.5 per 100,000 (Katz & Maguire, 2015). By 2017, the national murder rate was 35.9 per 100,000 (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Research from Trinidad and Tobago indicates that areas with higher concentrations of gangs have significantly more crime and violence. Prior studies have shown that various communities in Port of Spain have disproportionately high levels of gang-related crime (Seepersad, 2015). For instance, interviews with police officers from the Besson Street police district reveal that the majority of homicides there are perpetrated by violent gangs (Katz & Maguire, 2015).

Gang violence in the Port of Spain area poses specific national- and community-based problems. First, the level of violence undermines the nation's potential for growth, social development, and ability to attract development financing while simultaneously threatening human welfare and increasing the resources diverted to security measures (Griffin & Persad, 2013). Second, the levels of violence in the Port of Spain area make it difficult for government employees to provide consistent access to social goods such as security and basic infrastructure (Griffin & Persad, 2013). These community-based problems create a unique opportunity for gangs to fill some of the roles traditionally handled by the state.

This article makes four contributions to the literature. First, it describes the conflict between two dominant gangs, the Muslims and Rasta City, and the challenges this conflict poses for young men in the Port of Spain area, including restrictions on their movement and limited access to employment. Second, it outlines some of the economic initiatives gangs implement, as well as their formidable role in controlling turf and using violence to retaliate and intimidate. Third, it describes the important social and economic roles gangs play in their communities due to their economic strength and the relative absence of the state in many impoverished communities. Finally, this article situates findings on the nature of gangs in Trinidadian communities in the larger body of empirical research on gangs, most of which has taken place in developed nations.

Review of Relevant Literature

Gang Activity in Trinidad and Tobago

In Trinidad and Tobago, many gangs consist of 5–15 core members and have non-members who "lime"[2] with the group and respect their claim to a designated community turf. Approximately 90% of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago claim turf/territory (Deosaran, 2008; Katz, Maguire, & Choate, 2011; Townsend, 2009). Trinidad and Tobago's Anti-Gang Act No. 10 (2011) defines a gang as "a combination of two or more persons, whether formally or informally organized which, through its

membership or through an agent engages in a gang-related activity" (Hill, 2013, p. 50). Gang members are involved in various crimes, including "kidnapping for ransom, murder, extortion, protection rackets, drug trafficking, money laundering, gun running, prostitution, and trafficking in stolen automobile and automobile parts, and trafficking in human beings" (Griffin & Persad, 2013, p. 94). These offenses are similar to the types of crimes committed by gang members in parts of the United States (Decker, Katz, & Webb, 2008). Research shows that gang-related murders increased by 971% between 2000 and 2009 in Trinidad and Tobago, with many murders being attributed to gang rivalries and reprisals (Felix-John & Williams, 2013; Hill, 2013).

One estimate found that in 2012, there were 102 criminal gangs in Trinidad and Tobago (Seepersad, 2015). Most gangs consist of impoverished Afro-Trinidadian[1] males between the ages of 18 and 35 (Townsend, 2009). Gang leaders are usually young since they are often killed or incarcerated before aging out (Townsend, 2009). Gang members are more likely than the general population to report a previous arrest (Katz & Maguire, 2015). In fact,

> gang members were about five times more likely to have ever been arrested for drug sales; three times more likely to have ever been arrested for a violent crime, firearms-related crime, and drug use or possession; and approximately twice as likely to have ever been arrested for a property offense, sex crime or other crime. (Katz & Maguire, 2015, p. 189)

A study of arrestees in the Port of Spain area revealed that gang members are significantly more likely than nongang members to report being unemployed prior to their arrest (61.2% and 23.8%, respectively; Katz et al., 2011). Additionally, 38.1% of gang members note they receive their income from legal and illegal means, while 19% report no source of income (Katz et al., 2011).

In impoverished communities, particularly those in the Port of Spain area, the national government is unable to provide consistent access to public goods and services—that is, education, security, and basic infrastructure (Griffin & Persad, 2013). Due to elevated crime rates, civil servants and others (including utility companies and taxi drivers) are at times unwilling to enter poor neighborhoods to provide services. Internationally, limited human capital in areas of education and employment make transitions to adulthood difficult (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2013). Residents in communities encountering limited monetary, legal, and social services at times accept or benefit from economic resources and security services provided by street gangs (Hagedorn, 2005; Moore & Vigil, 1989; Vargas, 2014; Venkatesh, 1997).

In a globalized economy, economic and political marginalization create ripe conditions for the growth of gangs (Hagedorn, 2005). As governments decreased spending on social institutions, groups of armed young men, including gangs, rose up to fill the void created by the retreat of the state. In Trinidad and Tobago, gang leaders become important intermediaries between the government and the community. Government officials select gang leaders, who are also referred to as "community

leaders," to distribute and oversee short-term public works employment projects within a community, often in exchange for securing residents' votes in upcoming elections (Griffin & Persad, 2013; Seepersad, 2015). With public works projects being valued in millions—TT300 million dollars in 2008[3]—prospective community leaders engage in violence, gang conflict, and intracommunity struggles as they vie for control of these projects (Griffin & Persad, 2013). Although the government's provision of services to impoverished communities is well intentioned, the relationship between government officials and gang leaders situates gang leaders as people capable of providing necessary resources to community residents and legitimizes their presence in citizens' eyes (Griffin & Persad, 2013; Katz & Maguire, 2015; Seepersad, 2015).

Government officials view "community leaders" as arbiters of violence within depressed communities and expect them to mitigate and contain crime within their neighborhoods (Griffin & Persad, 2013). In some communities, gang leaders serve as agents of social control, regulating the types of crimes that can be committed, designating which individuals can be victimized, and punishing gang members and nonmembers for carrying out unauthorized offenses (Maguire, Willis, Snipes, & Gantley, 2008). For example, some gang leaders boast about forbidding rapes, rescuing people who were kidnapped without permission, or administering harsh beatings to people who engaged in unsanctioned crimes (Katz & Maguire, 2015; Maguire et al., 2008). Gang leaders may also discourage members from engaging in behaviors that are disadvantageous to the neighborhood. For example, in a low-income community in Trinidad, a gang leader told his members to stop shooting at repair personnel, so they could enter the community to do their jobs (Maguire et al., 2008).

Based on their research in Trinidad and Tobago, Maguire, Willis, Snipes, and Gantley (2008, p. 71) argue that,

> the police are responsible for formal social control, but their capacity to control crime and violence in these neighborhoods is weak. Informal social control is provided by a number of institutions, like families, the faith community, schools, and a variety of social programs run by both government and nonprofit institutions. Unfortunately, one of the most potent forms of informal social control in the communities we studied is the gangs themselves.

In many such communities, gang leaders adopt a "Robin Hood" persona, providing basic goods and services to residents that the state is unable or unwilling to provide.

Theorizing Gang Activity in Trinidad and Tobago

As we discuss gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, it is important to note that there is debate about whether theories and concepts imported from developed nations are applicable to the developing world (Birkbeck, 1999; Cain, 1996; Johnson, Maguire, Maass, & Hibdon, 2016; Mahabir, 1988; Pryce, 1976). Theories meant to explain gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago may need to account for the unique sociopolitical characteristics of the country, including its small size, its status as a developing nation, and

its heavy dependence on tourism to sustain the nation's economy (Bennett & Lynch, 1996). Ethnic politics, gang violence, political corruption, and the drug trade influence local criminality (Bennett & Lynch, 1996; Cain, 1996; Katz & Maguire, 2015; Seepersad, 2015; Townsend, 2009). However, the immaturity of the nation's political and social institutions hampers the administration of fair and effective criminal justice systems that are capable of controlling violence and bringing offenders to justice within the rule of law (Bennett & Lynch, 1996; Hill, 2013). Following Cain's (1996) recommendations, this article seeks to engage with the knowledge produced on gangs in developed nations while focusing on the context-specific experiences of communities with entrenched gangs in Trinidad and Tobago.

Method

This project was part of a larger study on strategies to address gang violence and high crime rates in Trinidad and Tobago's capital city, Port of Spain. Trinidad and Tobago is a developing nation in the Caribbean, approximately 7 miles off the eastern coast of Venezuela. Although the nation is rich in energy resources, poverty remains a pressing problem (Kedir & Sookram, 2013). The guiding research question for this part of the study was "what impact do gangs have on communities in the Port of Spain area?"

Research Strategy

The authors of this article were part of a larger research team that carried out the data collection reported here. The research team consisted of nine individuals, four of whom were from the Caribbean including two from Trinidad and Tobago. Of the five researchers from the United States, three had more than a decade of experience conducting research in Trinidad and Tobago and had long-standing relationships with the communities under investigation. Eight of the nine researchers currently reside in the United States. Our positionality was determined in relation to the people with whom we were interacting (Merriam et al., 2001). Culture, nationality, place of residence, experience with the communities under investigation, education, gender, class, and race rendered individual researchers insiders or outsiders at different points during data collection (Merriam et al., 2001; Zinn, 1979). We were aware of our insider/outsider status throughout the investigation and the impact this could have on understanding the experiences of the people in the communities under investigation. During the research process, researchers met daily to discuss and review initial findings from our various methodologies. We compared notes, identified common themes, and clarified potential misinterpretations. As we continued to conduct research, we cross-checked our understanding of the communities with members from those communities to ensure our findings were consistent with community members' lived experiences.

We focused on 10 volatile and impoverished communities considered to be among the most dangerous in the nation, with high levels of gang activity and violence. Pseudonyms were assigned to each community to mask the locations. Data used in this

study were collected over a 2-year period (2015–2017) from multiple sources using various data collection techniques and incorporating the perspectives of several investigators. The hope was that triangulating across multiple data sources and methods would result in more valid inferences (Bailey, 2007; O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994). Semistructured interviews, focus group interviews, and ethnographic observations formed the core of our methodology; several members of the research team employed each methodology. Triangulation enabled the research team to develop a detailed understanding of gang violence in the communities under investigation and ascertain the effects of gangs on community life and organization.

As part of the larger study, we worked closely with residents hired as outreach workers to help reduce crime in 10 target communities as part of a government-funded community antiviolence initiative. Many outreach workers had prior gang membership or involvement with the criminal justice system but were no longer involved in crime. Focus groups and semistructured interviews were conducted at a local community organization with 12 outreach workers in 2015 and 11 outreach workers in 2017, to solicit details on the communities under investigation. The resulting information was used to develop probes for semistructured interviews with community residents. This local community organization was selected for the focus group because it was the base from which outreach workers engaged in gang violence prevention efforts. Negotiating access to the communities under investigation was crucial to successful data collection (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Outreach workers were respected and trusted members of their communities and were central to the research team's successful data collection. First, they participated in semistructured and focus group interviews. Second, the outreach workers introduced the research team to residents in and police officers servicing the targeted communities. Third, due to the high risk of gun violence within the selected neighborhoods, outreach workers and select police officers escorted the research team into the communities to enable the safe collection of ethnographic data.

As discussed earlier, our overarching goal was to observe, firsthand, gang life in Port of Spain, Trinidad. We therefore interviewed community members and persons with gang affiliations. We carried out 37 semistructured interviews and two focus groups. Our sample was diverse and included young males who had former or current gang affiliations, influential and respected local community residents, community residents affected by gang violence, police officers assigned to the communities of interest, and government officials. Interviews were conducted in locations in which our respondents spent time including their homes, neighborhood shops, street corners, yards, and local community organizations. Interviews were not tape-recorded. Instead, interviewers took detailed and extensive notes during each interview. Subsequent to each interview, the interviewer spent time recreating the interview and filling in their notes to ensure that all pertinent information was recorded. Semistructured interviews and focus group discussions lasted from 30 min to 2 hr.

Participants were not paid to participate in the study. All participants were over the age of 18 and provided informed consent. Study participants were informed that they could refuse to participate or end the interview at any time and that all notes associated

with the interview were anonymous and confidential. Names and all identifying information were removed from all transcripts and notes.

Through our ethnographic observations, we gathered detailed field notes containing "thick description" of the phenomena we heard and observed. Ethnographic observation enabled us to move past surface-level presentations of self and develop a richly detailed understanding of the phenomena of interest (Geertz, 1973). Ethnography enabled the researchers to get close to the routines, frustrations, and risks that formed the basis of citizens' everyday life (Grills, 1998). Making contact with respondents within their social world helped us get to know their world through direct involvement in it. We observed community life and socialized with residents in the target neighborhoods. As participants-as-observers, we walked along neighborhood streets and casually spoke with community members about their experiences living in communities identified as having major issues with gangs and gang violence (O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994).

Each member of the research team recorded important experiences in the field in their field notes (Lofland et al., 2006). Observations in communities, conversations with community members, and researchers' feelings were all recorded. Recording our observations and feelings around our interactions allowed the research team to keep track of how we laid claim to what we discovered (Lofland et al., 2006). The research team was open with community members about the reason for our presence in their communities. Being honest about our intentions fostered rapport and led to community members voluntarily revealing information about their experiences in their communities. As one indicator of the level of trust, gang members sent one of our researchers' photos of a homicide scene to which police had not yet responded.

Description of communities. Poverty and high crime rates characterize the 10 communities under investigation. We observed abandoned buildings, dilapidated homes, graffiti, and residences covered in bullet holes in many communities. One community tucked in the hilly slopes of the Port of Spain area resembled an active war zone. Bullet holes adorned the front and sides of two buildings in a condemned government-housing complex, slabs of concrete were missing from walls, and doors and windows were removed from their frames. Walls contained gang graffiti mourning the loss of fellow members and dramatizing gang life, including hand-drawn pictures of pistols and assault rifles. Young men gathered bottles filled with kerosene to form makeshift lanterns to memorialize fallen brothers. Although these buildings appeared vacant, they continued to serve as home for men, women, and children who had nowhere else to go when the buildings were condemned. In other communities, we observed less jarring images of low-income Caribbean life. Freshly laundered clothing was draped across clotheslines and broken fences to dry. Young men "limed" (hung out) around neighborhood shops, some community members walked around barefooted, and others were dressed in worn out clothing. While we observed vibrant community life in some neighborhoods, others were strangely void of people. For example, in one community, an empty playground was situated in the middle of three beautifully renovated buildings with a basketball court off to the side. There was an eerie silence

in this new low-income housing development; the streets were bare, the playground was deserted although children were home on vacation, and windows were closed. The neighborhood was too dangerous for community members to congregate and so the beautiful, newly constructed recreation facilities remained untouched.

Analysis Strategy

Members of the research team prepared all interview transcripts and field notes. Writing detailed field notes during data collection enabled the research team to organize our thoughts pertaining to respondents' comments and our observations in the field, identify areas where additional information was needed, and begin developing themes from the research (Lofland et al., 2006). Initial coding began during data collection and continued as the research team reviewed and added details to their field notes (Lofland et al., 2006). Interview transcripts and field notes were then uploaded into NVivo (Version 11.4.3) for focused coding. One researcher analyzed the data in NVivo. Nodes were developed and grouped into overarching themes. Reference counts were used to determine the most salient nodes for data analysis. Focused coding continued as the authors began writing this article.

Results

Gang Violence in Urban Communities

In the Port of Spain area, many opposing gangs live in close proximity to each other with only a street or drain (ditch) separating some rival groups. This poses a major security problem for residents. This section explores the nature and type of violence between two competing gang alliances (each comprising multiple individual gangs) in the Port of Spain area and citizens' restricted mobility due to the gangs' territorial borders.

The Muslims and Rasta City. Two alliances—the Muslims and Rasta City—control the majority of gang activity in Trinidad and Tobago. The names of these two groups allude to a possible connection to faith systems—the Muslim faith and Rastafarianism.[4] However, while some members of these alliances may be practicing members of the faith associated with the alliance's name, other members may subscribe to different religions or have no genuine attachment to a specific religion. The Muslims are affiliated with the Jamaat al Muslimeen, a Muslim militant group that was responsible for a failed coup d'état in Trinidad and Tobago in 1990 (Searle, 1991). Two members of the Jamaat al Muslimeen were also involved in a 2007 terrorist plot to set off explosions at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City (Hutchinson-Jafar, 2007). Rasta City formed in resistance to the perceived exploitation perpetrated by Muslim organized crime and street gang members. One study participant explained:

> Before the coup the Muslims used to run this town. If you were a Muslim, you got respect. They started going into communities and taking drugs because it was bad for the body. But instead of getting rid of it, they would give it to others to sell for them. Abu Bakr wanted everything for himself. He used to take money from kidnapping ransoms. In jail, some of the guys who are now Rasta City were Muslims. Some of them turned and started fighting the Muslims because the Muslims were taking advantage.

The perceived double standards with which members of the Muslims operated inspired some former members and other community members to oppose them.

The Muslims and Rasta City are thought to control access to firearms that enter Trinidad and Tobago; smaller individual gangs become affiliated with one of these two groups to gain access to weapons and other commodities. As certain street gangs in the Port of Spain area gain access to weapons, they perform targeted strikes against and engage in shoot-outs with rival gangs. This violence results in significantly elevated rates of injury and death and traumatizes the populace in the communities where these incidents occur with regularity. Describing violence caused by these gang alliances, community members explained:

> There are a lot of stabbings and shooting within the community. The shootings come from rivalries with opposing gangs.
> Our soldiers[5] are known to target their victims very well. Very few do you hear that a Muslim hit a noncombatant. They are calculated strikes against the enemy. While on the other side [Rasta City], . . . anyone out of a Muslim stronghold could get shot, they don't really care who.
> In the community, and in Trinidad, the main problem is gang warfare. You have different sects who make this violence more critical. People in different gangs were once friends, they know each other's capabilities and limits. This could make things even more dangerous.

The regular use of military-inspired terminology like "soldiers," "noncombatants," "calculated strikes," and "enemies" conveys the severity and deep-seated nature of gang violence within the Port of Spain area. Although rival gang members may have grown up with each other, gone to school together, and played with each other as children, some now view each other as mortal enemies. In fact, gang members' familiarity with their opponents' capabilities may play a significant role in increasing the danger in these communities because rivals are able to identify their opponents and exploit known weaknesses more easily.

Observing the violence between young men from neighboring communities, residents in the Port of Spain area viewed the rivalry between the Muslims and Rasta City as absurd. One community member exclaimed: "Violence is senseless and the people warring one another is the same people who play together, live together." The reasons for the tumultuous relationships and many times senseless acts of violence between rival gang members who are school mates, friends, neighbors, and even family members were clearly not fully understood by many community members. Not only

have former friends engaged in violence against each other due to gang conflict but families have been separated due to gang rivalries. One study participant shared:

> Some families have actually broken up because of the divisions of the gang territories. You have some cousins living in Muslim City[6] and others living in Rasta City and they shooting at each other. You even had brothers that are warring against each other because of where they live.

Considering the personal connection between many gang rivals, and the view of several community members that the violence is senseless, we further probed the reasons underlying these types of interpersonal violence. One study participant noted:

> It looks easy to you, but there is nothing easy about it. This is a war that we born come see and we are willing to die defending our turf. Muslim City is the problem. They killed my brother right there in the street . . . he was just 16.

With many gang members losing family and friends to violence, or having been victimized themselves, defending their turf and protecting their community has become a way of life.

In conjunction with personal reasons for the continuation of gang wars, defending one's drug turf or territory was expressed as a rationale for rivalries between the Muslims and Rasta City. Rivalries between gangs are amplified on the streets because of a profitable drug economy. Several participants shared:

> Muslim City and Rasta City does be fighting over the territory.
>   Ibis Street is controlled by the Muslims. You have about 25 people selling coke just on Ibis Street. Each person makes about $2,000 [US] per week. That is $50,000 per week just for drug sales on Ibis Street. . . . [B]oth gangs want to control Ibis Street and so you could expect killings, shooting, and a lot of robberies.
>   Ibis Street to Lawrence Street is the biggest kill zone in East Port of Spain.[7] It is in this area that drug sales are most profitable. Approximately $14,000 TT is made in this area, per week, per dealer. This area, once controlled by Rasta City, is now under the control of the Muslims.

Ibis Street, described as the most profitable street for drug sales in Trinidad and Tobago, usually has a lot of gunfire as gang members protect their turf or attempt to reclaim lost territory.

Borderline issues. Our study found that there are numerous invisible boundaries between gang territories in the Port of Spain area. According to one male participant, "The boundaries can be . . . a street . . . or simply a drain that opposing gangs must not cross." Although invisible, these borders structure the lives of many young men, including nongang-involved youth, dictating where they can and cannot go. One respondent conveyed this with the following statement: "there are still many places we cannot go to, places that are controlled by the Muslims like Ibis Street and Wright

Ford." Another respondent noted: "There are a lot of shootings. We cannot walk out of the community and pass near the bridge near Ibis Street." Within the Port of Spain area, citizens' freedom of movement is limited since gang members are exceedingly protective of their territory and seek to eliminate any potential threat within their borders. According to another study participant: "Young men in the communities don't know areas out of where they live. They can't go there." Young men are particularly vulnerable to victimization if they wander into or pass through the wrong communities since gang members view unknown males, and males residing in rival communities, as potential threats to their turf.

Entering the wrong community has proven deadly for many young men. Several respondents described cases in which people were threatened or killed for crossing borderlines.

> One youth got 18 bullets. He used to live in Muslim City and his mother moved to Rasta City. The young man still had friends in Muslim City and he wanted to go visit them. When he was going back into Muslim City to see his friends, he was shot and killed.
>
> There was an incident right here in Port of Spain, right by the traffic light. He was in enemy territory so he didn't want to stop at the light. He ran the light and got into an accident. When he came out of the car the guys realized that he was an enemy so they started to put things in place to kill him.
>
> So my relative lived in Muslim City and he was allowed to go into Rasta City to see his girlfriend. He got locked up [and] while in custody, the guys from Muslim City and Rasta City got into an argument. My relative now put in his mouth and started speaking against the guys in Rasta City. . . . Now when everyone was released on Ash Wednesday, the gang leader from Rasta City gave this order "If anyone from Wright Ford comes across here, kill them." My relative went across to check his girlfriend and got killed.

Reports of gang members shooting at or conspiring to shoot young men who enter their communities abound in the areas studied. Simply going into a neighboring community to visit friends or family has become life-threatening for residents, particularly men, in the Port of Spain area. The perceived threat posed by some women and elders is lower and so they experience fewer restrictions on movement. As one participant shared, "Certain women and some elders could go between communities."

Afraid to pass through areas controlled by gangs hostile to people from their community, some youth have dropped out of school, and others are hesitant to venture out of their community in search of employment. The risk of victimization for crossing borderlines is strong and keeps some young men trapped in their communities. As noted by several study participants:

> It have some men who cannot leave their area or they would be killed. There are men who can only see the sea from the hill.
>
> People can't cross certain areas. They will shoot people from areas they are not from. I am trapped in my community.

The borderline is the main violence problem close to here. Some of these boys cannot go into other areas, which makes it difficult for them. The youth cannot pass to go out of the community and find work so they are basically stuck here.

The words "I am trapped" convey both literal and figurative meanings. Young men are literally trapped in their communities because they place themselves at risk of death or serious injury if they pass through rival gang territory. At the same time, these words convey a strong sense of hopelessness and helplessness about the prospects for their own future and that of their families. Violence has shrunken their world to the housing development, the few small blocks, or the single hill that comprises the turf claimed by the gang that controls their area. This limited worldview is especially true for the young men involved in gangs. They may be able to see the beauty of the ocean from their community on the hill, but the waters remain out of reach. Within this limited territory, young men must be inventive to ensure that their needs are met, including earning a living and taking care of their families.

Impact of Gang Rivalries on Residents

In communities ravaged by gang violence, many residents, particularly young men, feel trapped in their neighborhoods with limited opportunities for employment. We explore how borderline issues related to rival gangs, and protracted violence within the Port of Spain area, have limited the employment opportunities for residents within these communities, particularly the young men.

Creating a sense of safety. Communities nestled in the Port of Spain area are ravaged by poverty and devastated by violence. The close proximity of rival gangs results in formidable violence as groups "rain fire" on (shoot up) buildings in their opponents' territory. Rivers, drains, bushy hill tracks, and other obscure routes provide gang members with access in and out of rival neighborhoods. Walking around the neighborhoods under investigation, we observed community centers, apartment buildings, and other community structures littered with bullet holes. Due to the persistent threat of violence, many streets, playgrounds, and community centers are deserted.

To ensure their children's safety, parents opt to keep their children inside at all times, even when school is not in session. This strategy of self-imposed ecological imprisonment was also observed by Adams (2012) in North West Trinidad. In addition to restricting the amount of time they spend outdoors within their community, residents articulate strategies to organize activities within their homes to increase their safety. To lower the risk of being shot by stray bullets while indoors, residents have stopped using bedrooms and living rooms that face the streets. To further increase their sense of safety, as noted by a study participant, "people sleep on the floor to avoid being shot by stray bullets that come through their windows." We visited one home where bullets passed through an exterior wall, then through an interior wall, and finally fell to the floor in the kitchen after hitting the back of a refrigerator. Several children were in the home, but thankfully nobody was hit. The same was not true for a

young man sitting on a stoop across the street who was killed in the shooting. Here, we see the everyday lives of residents in the Port of Spain area, even those unaffiliated with gangs, dramatically impacted by gang violence. Their activities both inside and outside their homes are structured by the level of gang violence present within their neighborhoods.

Outdoor community life is more likely to be observed in areas with controlled access points. For instance, the buildings in Ibis Street are situated behind a wall with narrow gates that enable people, but not vehicles, to enter the community. Young men are stationed on either side of the gates, conspicuously observing those who enter and exit the community, as if on guard. The buzz of community life (i.e., playing dominos, braiding hair, and hanging out) is located in the rear of the community, far away from the entrance and the reach of rival gang members. In Flamingo Drive, protection strategies are sophisticated. A roadblock is situated at the community's entrance, manned by a young man who looks no older than 14. As the researchers' vehicle approaches the blockade, the young man "on duty" inquires about the reason for the visit and then runs into the community to speak to someone. He quickly runs back to our vehicle and removes the roadblock to grant us access. We are granted access only because we are in the vehicle with respected local community outreach workers who are not perceived as a threat by the gang leader. Once our vehicle enters the community, the barricade is replaced.

The protection strategies implemented in the communities under investigation go beyond physical barriers or young men on guard duty. Community members explain that gangs institute rules to guide criminal activities within communities. The deputy gang leader of Baxton Hill explained:

> The whole place in Baxton Hill is safe for the people who live in here. We have a type of order that we don't allow harm to come to anyone in the area. The old gang members were only preaching violence but we are not on that. . . . When people do good they are congratulated and when they do bad they are punished. It is an eye for an eye. The whole community has this order.

The deputy gang leader clearly criticized former gang leaders for their inability to make community members' safety a priority. His words reveal a perceived responsibility for ensuring that residents in his jurisdiction are safe and the authority to praise persons who exhibit exemplary behavior and punish those who violate the "order." The physical barriers, the young men on guard, and the rules gangs implement in the Port of Spain area exemplify the various roles gangs play within communities. These gangs view themselves as agents of social control within their depressed communities. Here, we see gangs replacing the state's responsibility to ensure safety within its jurisdiction and punish those who violate the social order.

Employment opportunities. The communities in the Port of Spain area are notorious in Trinidad and Tobago. Stories of the violence from these neighborhoods abound in the national news and in citizens' conversations about crime. One consequence of this

notorious acclaim is diminished employment prospects for community members in the Port of Spain area. Young men in many communities within the Port of Spain area report difficulty in finding jobs. Expressing their frustration with unemployment, community residents noted:

> Twenty-six year olds can't get work and we can't take that pain. We vote ministers in but they are not implementing anything for the people in this area.
>
> It is very difficult for the youth in this community to find work. . . . Take for instance my daughter, she has her CXC passes [high school exams] and was not able to find any work. She had to go all the way to Tobago and she was able to get a job across there and so that is where she lives now.

Here, we see community members' anguish around unemployment. One young man said, "we can't take that pain," expressing the agony of unemployment and the pain associated with not being able to pay for basic needs. Another young woman left Trinidad and went to Tobago to secure a job.

Residents from the Port of Spain area who search for employment outside their neighborhoods report limited success due to employers' perceived negative perception of their communities of residence.

> The area is stigmatized. When you are going for an interview you have to change your address. If the employer sees you are from this area you will not get hired. They will tell you "thank you, we will be in touch." As soon as you put another address, you get hired. The people in this area are very angry due to the lack of opportunities they have.
>
> Some of these gang members are only hoping for something to eat. Businesses are not willing to assist then in getting a job because where they are from.
>
> The people in these communities . . . sometimes cannot go into other communities. People don't want to give them work.

Just as having an African American sounding name can make it more difficult for job applicants in the United States to find good jobs (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), residents in the Port of Spain area were convinced that disclosing their true address would make it much more difficult to find a job. Mothers in these communities shared with us their hope that their sons would someday be able to join the military since the hiring process was thought to be less biased than in the private sector; mothers whose sons had already joined the military proudly shared photos of their sons in uniform.

Constrained by limited viable options to earn a living, young people in the Port of Spain area believe that "you do what you have to do to make ends meet." Finding alternative pathways to achieve financial security—whether legal or illegal—becomes a matter of survival. Some young people become reliant on gang members for the provision of food, clothing, and jobs. Two study participants shared:

> People from East Port of Spain find it extremely difficult to secure employment outside their community. . . . Young men in particular rely on gang member[s] to provide them with employment opportunities.
>
> A young man might be seeing brands and he want to wear them too. The gang leader looks at him and sees that he does not have anything. He buys food for him; he buys clothes for him. These guys, when the leader buys them a sneaker they then feel like they owe the gang leader.

Once gang leaders make these concessions, young people become indebted, feeling an obligation to honor the gang leader's requests. This becomes a vicious cycle. One respondent explained: "The gangs brings a lot of violence to their communities and this violence makes other people in the country shun them but they [community members] then have to rely on the same gang members for help." Due to high rates of violence in communities in the Port of Spain area, young people experience difficulty leaving their areas to find jobs or getting hired by employers outside their neighborhood. Forced to rely on gangs for economic survival, young people may become part of the very entities responsible for endangering their communities.

The diminished employment opportunities in these communities result from the borderline issues and the stigma associated with residents from the Port of Spain area. As discussed in the previous section, borderline issues restrict residents' access to employment since young men may experience difficulty leaving their community in search of work.

Economic Initiatives

To combat the lack of employment available to residents living in the Port of Spain area, gangs have developed a variety of initiatives for their own economic survival. Although many gangs sell drugs to generate income, community members report that gang members are currently developing alternative strategies to earn money. One respondent shared: "Right now it is not about drugs with most of these gang leaders, it is about government contracts." Gangs rely on farming, protection rackets, casinos, and government contracts to earn money.

Farming. Several gang leaders in the Port of Spain area responded to the lack of jobs in their neighborhood by establishing farms. In 2011, the gang leader in Montville built a poultry coop with a dirt floor, concrete and wire fence walls, and galvanized metal and wire fence roof. This well-constructed poultry coop allows the gang leader to raise chickens and ducks to sell for a small profit and feed people in the community. In Baxton Hill, coconut trees, banana trees, chadon beni (a local herb similar in flavor to cilantro), and mint leaves are some of the produce and herbs clustered next to a pig farm. In explaining how the idea for the farm originated, a deputy gang leader shared:

> The people in Baxton Hill are hungry. . . . The people in the community have to eat and so we started our own business. . . . We are currently raising pigs. We have a mother pig and she had two babies. . . . To really get our farm off the ground we need some money.

A more successful farming initiative remains elusive since the young men are waiting for economic support from the government to compensate their labor on the farm. This is unfortunate because some activities to ensure the farm's development (e.g., clearing bush on the land to enable the sowing of crops) could be done with limited capital investment. The young men could obtain cutlasses and clear the bush without compensation. The farm in Baxton Hill is one of several economic initiatives attempted by the deputy gang leader. He said: "Everything out there, I have tried. I have a construction company. I have an NGO. But, when you go to the ministries with legitimate ideas, they just making promises and nothing happening." It is possible that ministry personnel viewed these initiatives as dishonest which may have impacted their likelihood of being funded. Regardless of whether funds are obtained from the government to help the farm's development, it is evident that in both Montville and Baxton Hill, gang leaders are developing initiatives to earn money.

Protection rackets and casinos. In Buccooville, the gang leader relies on protection rackets and casinos as sources of income. Protection rackets begin with gang members following wealthy families and recording details about their schedules, which are then presented to the head of the household. For example, respondents explain that the gang leader may meet with a businessman and tell him "where his wife works, what time she goes to work, what route she takes to work, and what time she comes home." Details may also be provided about the businessman's children's schedules. At this point, the threat and "offer" for private security is made, "If I wanted to, I could take out any of your family members. From now on, I will be in charge of security for your family." The offer of security services is more compulsory than negotiable. Wealthy families may feel they have to hire the gang leaders to ensure no harm befalls their family.

The planning and coordination used to structure protection rackets are also used to extort money from cruise ships and party boats entering the waters near Port of Spain. The gang members pull small fishing boats alongside larger vessels. They then board the vessels, make their way to the bridge, hold up the captain, and require him or her to call the owner/manager of the vessel. Gang members threaten to rob passengers if they do not receive a "tax" from the vessel. Respondents indicate that the owners/managers generally go along with the extortion since the alternative, having their passengers robbed, could be detrimental to their business. This practice is reportedly so common that almost all cruise ships and party boats entering the waters surrounding Port of Spain pay money to the gang leader of Buccooville.

In conjunction with security rackets and extorting money from cruise ships and party boats, the gang leader in Buccooville operates a small casino in his community with electronic gaming tables and traditional pool tables. The gang leader has developed inventive, yet illegal, ways to earn money. One of the most problematic

aspects of these activities is the level of organization exhibited by the gang. The level of organization and sophistication associated with these crimes could make it difficult to diminish the strength of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago.

Contractual work. Contractual work through the "Unemployment Relief Programme" (URP), "Community-based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme" (CEPEP), and construction contracts are a primary avenue through which gangs currently earn money. The government of Trinidad and Tobago uses public works projects to provide unemployed citizens with short-term employment opportunities and has done so for many decades. In low-income, high crime communities, public works contracts are awarded to gang leaders who then hire and distribute payment to community members (Griffin & Persad, 2013).

Government-funded URP, CEPEP, and construction contracts provide citizens with compensation for short-term employment to clean and maintain streets and drains, repair buildings and other community structures, or even to erect new buildings. These contracts are one of the major sources of employment in impoverished neighborhoods, and some community members rely on these projects for economic survival. One study participant told us "it is very difficult for the youth in this community to find work. If the construction was not here, there would be no other ways for the youth to get money." Similarly, a young study participant from Baxton Hill explained: "We have no jobs in the area. We feed the community through URP jobs and some people have CEPEP work." For many community members, the availability of public works contracts was inextricably connected to their ability to feed their families; when contracts are available, they are able to work and provide for their family's basic necessities, but when this work ends, they are unable to meet their most basic needs.

In securing public works and construction contracts, gang leaders may be placed in charge of budgets ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars to ensure projects are completed and employees are paid. With large budgets at their disposal, some gang leaders use a portion of the money to complete the work and embezzle a portion of the funds for their own purposes. Commenting on gang members' access to economic resources through these contracts, community members explained:

> The guys from Rasta City succeeded because of the contracts they are getting. These contracts are at times for $2 million. When they get that money they could buy two cars and some guns.
>
> [Leader of Rasta City] is trying to stay off the radar but has a $6.5 million contract in Noel to build.
>
> They [gang leaders] identify what is small crime and they have moved off of small crimes with the help of the government. Because instead of the government giving more reliable people contracts, they have given the contracts to the same gunmen, Muslim and non-Muslim.

Community members believe that contracts provide economic empowerment to gangs. These contracts provide gang leaders with the opportunity to earn larger sums of money than what could be obtained through more conventional street crimes, or as one respondent noted "small crime."

The earning potential associated with public works contracts makes them a major source of contention between rival gangs. Violence erupts as gangs vie to control these lucrative endeavors in the Port of Spain area. Several study participants shared:

> People get killed for those contracts. It's about survival for those guys.
>
>   My relative's wife was killed. My relative was a gang leader who started a race for the government contracts. And by killing his wife, his rivals were sending a message to him.
>
>   The violence comes when the fellas from down the hill run up here and shoot up the place because they not getting any work down the hill and we have work up here.
>
>   There was a program refurbishing HDC [Housing Development Corporation] buildings in Port of Spain. I got selected for this program. You could get killed for that program because a lot of people want them for ghost jobs. I got 50 names. Instead of putting ghost names, I would give 50 guys work and then rotate the names so different people could get work. After that closed off, I was a URP coordinator. Again, you could do ghost jobs here but I never did that, I would always give the men work.

The earning potential associated with public works contracts is so great that gang members have shot and killed many people in an effort to win or defend these contracts.

Gang leaders also rely on violence as they attempt to obtain construction contracts from reputable contractors. If a nongang-affiliated contractor gets a construction contract to build something in a gang-controlled neighborhood, the reputable contractor must obtain permission from the gang leader before commencing work. Permission is usually contingent on the reputable contractor paying the gang leader a tax to work in the neighborhood or subcontracting the project to the gang and keeping a portion of the earnings for themselves. If a reputable contractor skips this vital step, the gang leader may send members of the gang to shoot up the construction site.

> In the East West Corridor,[8] contractors must deal with the gang leaders. When contractors have not dealt with the gang leaders, gunmen have gone to the construction site and told the workers to go. If they did not leave, they would be shot.
>
>   You cannot go and bring [Big Name Contractor] from down south to do no building here and [Big Name Contractor] half build the thing because he not living here and in three years the building fall down and the government change so nobody cares. Is better that I buss my gun and run [Big Name Contractor] out of here and if you want a contract done you have to go through me.

The rationale given for gang members taking construction contracts from reputable companies goes beyond the desire to earn money. Residents believe reputable companies engage in shoddy work in volatile communities due to the lack of long-term oversight for these projects. Community members believe outsiders do not care about

their neighborhoods, so it is up to members of the community to ensure any work completed is done well. For instance, in one community in the Port of Spain area, we observed a community center and were told that it was built by gang members and in another community, a "pan yard" (a place where "steel pan" bands play Calypso music) was under construction. The young men from the area completed every part of the community center including laying the foundation and doing the plumbing and electrical work. In yet another community in the Port of Spain area, a gang leader won the contract to build a medical center. Regardless of the intentions of gang leaders in obtaining contracts, or government officials in providing them, contractual work attracts high levels of gang violence to the communities under investigation.

It is clear that gang leaders rely on several strategies for earning money outside of traditional types of street crime. Through farming, protection rackets and casinos, and contractual work, an elaborate system has emerged to enable gangs to earn money both legally and illegally. Many of these endeavors require a high level of skill, organization, and connection to public officials. By securing public works contracts, and providing jobs and other basic necessities to community members, the gangs in the Port of Spain area have sought to assume more legitimate roles within their communities. Katz and Maguire (2015) and Griffin and Persad (2013) support the notion that the relationships between gang members and political leaders legitimize gangs and enable them to serve important social and economic roles within depressed communities. Our findings reveal that while gangs engage in and attract violence within depressed communities, they also play an important role in mobilizing resources to sustain residents in their respective neighborhoods, providing security within the community, and leading public works projects funded by government contracts. These roles, traditionally fulfilled by the state, are becoming appropriated by gangs in the Port of Spain area.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings provide useful insights about the social organization of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. The nation is home to numerous individual street gangs that tend to organize geographically around the neighborhoods in which their members reside. Although each individual gang has its own leadership and identity, most of these gangs are affiliated with one of two larger umbrella groups or "supergangs" known as Rasta City and the Muslims. These two groups are locked in a bitter and deadly conflict that threatens the well-being of gang members, their friends and family members, and the communities in which they are based. From 2010 to 2015, the communities we examined had a mean annual homicide rate of 137.6 per 100,000. This is about 29.5 times higher than the mean annual homicide rate in the United States and about 139.5 times higher than the mean annual homicide rate in England and Wales during that same period.[9] Our findings with regard to violence in these communities are consistent with results from earlier studies on the extent to which Trinidad and Tobago's gangs rely heavily on violence for both expressive and instrumental purposes (Katz et al., 2011; Maguire et al., 2008).

Our results suggest that street gangs in the Port of Spain area have adopted a diverse set of strategies, both legal and illegal, for earning money. This is consistent with a theme in the gang literature in which gangs engage in opportunistic "cafeteria style offending" rather than specializing in a particular offense type (Klein, 1995). The gangs we studied engage in several conventional forms of illegal behavior to raise money, including drug sales, extortion, and murder for hire. Another principal source of funding for gangs in Trinidad and Tobago is the nation's government, which has a long history of having its programs taken over by gangs and organized crime groups. For example, in 2012, the government launched the Life Sport program to provide recreational and educational activities for at-risk young men. In 2014, the program was terminated after auditors found that it had been infiltrated by criminals who engaged in "fraud, theft, questionable payments, and other criminal activities" (Alexander, 2014).

Although government funding programs like the URP, the CEPEP, and other contractual mechanisms have noble intentions, they continue to be co-opted by gangs and to fuel the violence that threatens the nation's vitality. Thus, the violence problem in the nation is, to some extent, indirectly funded by the government. The fact that legitimate government programs and contracting mechanisms have been routinely penetrated by criminal gangs is reminiscent of a common theme in the organized crime literature: the infiltration of legitimate enterprise. For example, scholars have documented the role of Mafia groups in infiltrating the public procurement process in Italy (Caneppele, Calderoni, & Martocchia, 2009). A growing literature also focuses on the role of organized crime in infiltrating legitimate businesses (Vander Beken & Van Daele, 2008). A key question in criminology is the extent to which street gangs constitute organized crime groups. The research evidence suggests that most street gangs are too disorganized, insufficiently led, and apolitical to constitute organized crime groups (Decker, Bynum, & Weisel, 1998). At the same time, certain gangs do evolve and begin to exhibit characteristics of organized crime groups. The extent to which some gangs in the Port of Spain area have begun to infiltrate legitimate government contracting and private businesses raises important questions about whether they have risen to the level of organized crime groups.

Just as organized crime leaders sometimes engage in prosocial acts to benefit their communities, gangs in the Port of Spain area fulfill a number of roles in their communities. They provide protection and economic opportunities to impoverished persons in their neighborhoods, thus replacing some of the roles traditionally held by the state. Gang leaders are routinely described in the media as "community leaders" and interact often with members of parliament. One gang leader told us that he does not allow rape in his community and that anyone violating this prohibition would be punished severely. Unfortunately, government capacity issues provide easy opportunities for gang leaders to step into the void, fulfilling roles that are ordinarily reserved for the state, and enhancing their own legitimacy in the process. This results in a curious duality in which gangs are largely responsible for many of the problems in their communities—especially the extreme levels of violence—but in the absence of the state, gangs have also become a key resource for their communities.

Gang violence appears to exert serious limits on the mobility and economic opportunities for many young men. Gang violence imprisons some residents in their neighborhoods and limits children's opportunities for recreation in community spaces. It also exposes children and adolescents (as well as other residents) to extreme levels of trauma, thus potentially limiting their growth and development and perpetuating the cycle of violence (Maguire & Fishbein, 2016; Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). For many young men growing up in the communities we examined, the inability to move about freely (for fear of crossing gang boundaries) and biased hiring practices make it difficult to leave the community and to find legitimate work. These dynamics set in motion a spiral of decay in impoverished communities in which residents find it difficult to imagine a way out of the circumstances into which they were born.

The findings reported here highlight the complexity of the gang problem in Trinidad and Tobago and the implications of these difficult issues for residents in the communities we studied. In this challenging context, addressing the gang problem defies simple solutions. Instead, multifaceted solutions that are based on a clear understanding of these communities and that employ the right mix of prevention, intervention, and suppression components are sorely needed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Afro-Trinidadian refers to Trinidadians of African descent.
2. "Liming" is a local term used in Trinidad and Tobago (TT) as a synonym for hanging out or socializing with others.
3. The exchange rate between TT and the United States is 6.74 and 1. Thus, public works contracts are valued at approximately US$44.5 million.
4. Rastafarianism is a liberation-theological movement that seeks "to empower Blacks by providing them with a positive self-identity, one that purges the minds of its members of notions of White superiority and Black inferiority and addresses the vicious cycle of false identity and self-hatred" (Barnett, 2006, p. 874).
5. Gang members in TT often refer to themselves as soldiers.
6. "Muslim City" refers to the communities controlled by the Muslims.
7. "East Port of Spain" is one of the geographic locations within the Port of Spain area.
8. "East West Corridor" is one of the geographic locations within the Port of Spain area.
9. From 2010 to 2015, the mean annual homicide rate in the United States was 4.67 per 100,000 according to data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. During that same period, the mean annual homicide rate in England and Wales was 0.99 per 100,000 according to data collected by the Home Office.

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Author Biographies

Ericka B. Adams is an assistant professor in the Department of Justice Studies at San José State University. She earned her PhD in Criminology, Law, and Justice from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her current research interests center on the impact of violence on communities in Trinidad and Tobago, the exclusionary practices that accompany a criminal record, and whether criminal expungement transforms the lives of those who have been previously incarcerated. Her articles have been published in *Feminist Criminology, Punishment and Society*, and *Race and Justice*.

Patrice K. Morris received her PhD in Criminal Justice from Rutgers University and is currently a faculty member at Georgia Gwinnett College. Her research interests focus on neighborhoods and violent crime, homicide in the Caribbean, and institutional corrections. In 2010, she received the prestigious Richard Block Dissertation Award for Outstanding Dissertation Research from the *Homicide Research Working Group* at the American Society of Criminology annual meeting. Her articles on crime and justice issues in the Caribbean have been published in the *British Journal of Criminology and International Criminal Justice Review*.

Edward R. Maguire is a professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. He earned his PhD from the State University of New York at Albany in 1997. His professional interests include policing, violent crime, and research and evaluation methodology. He is also interested in criminology in developing nations.