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Policy Briefing

Understanding the connections between international drug trafficking and community gang violence in the Port-of-Spain, Trinidad

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1) Project summary

- This research project focused on the impact of transnational drug and gun trafficking on poor urban communities in eastern Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. These communities have seen violence soar since the mid-1990s as the city became a transshipment hub in the illegal drugs supply-chain.
- The project sought to understand impact of transnational ‘macro’ flows of drugs, and by association guns, on communities at a ‘micro’ level. We asked:
 - Does transnational organized crime create and influence patterns of male-led gang violence at a community level;
 - How do poor young men turn from relatively benign ‘corner kids’ into violent gang members who drive up murder rates, and;
 - How is this process connected with ‘macro’ flows of drugs and guns across the country?
- The project was interdisciplinary, combining researchers from International Relations (IR), Sociology, and Cultural Anthropology.
- The project was methodologically innovative using Trinidadian ‘Spoken Word’ workshops to conduct research with young people affected by violence in eastern Port of Spain.



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2) Key Findings

What did we learn by looking at the Macro, Meso, and Micro levels?

- **MACRO – ‘Residues’ of the drugs trade:** From an IR perspective, Trinidad is in a distinctive ‘macro’ position along the global illegal drugs supply-chain. It is a porous geostrategic transit point between South America and destination markets beyond, whilst the country is a comparatively minor destination drugs market. We found that gun trafficking coalesces around drug trafficking, and **residues** of these processes find their way into poor local communities, effectively turning Trinidad into a ‘**weapons sink**’, contributing to what we have termed ‘**residual violence**’ at the ‘micro’ level. What we mean by this is that the violence conventionally associated with ‘drugs and guns’ is only indirectly linked to drugs, but much more directly to guns because these two phenomena, although linked up to a point, have distinct political economies;
- **MESO – Community vulnerability a key connector to the international drugs trade:** A community’s susceptibility to violence depends on the way they connect-up to ‘macro’ level drugs trafficking networks, where geographical proximity to these networks is a key factor. Community susceptibility is best understood as a **collection of multifaceted local level vulnerabilities** generated by histories of colonialism, slavery, and continued marginalization and exclusion, creating a deeply fractured social contract where people have lost trust the state’s capacity to address local problems. **This generates a social terrain that prompts ‘micro’ level individual agents to seek opportunities through interlocution with the overarching drugs trade.** This draws in ‘residues’ of drugs followed by guns, from the international to the local, which galvanizes community violence;
- **MICRO – Gender roles, violent masculinities and gangs:** Violent masculinities in Port of Spain pre-date the drugs trade, but these masculinities have become the vectors for the recent homicide boom in the city, which are intensified by the easy availability of powerful firearms. Drug and gun residues galvanize community violence by prompting a gendered and cultural shift towards **violent gangland**



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masculinities specific to poor communities. Once established – both ontologically and normatively – this gendered gangland culture has proved remarkably resilient, contributing to the constant re-generation of gangs and high murder rates.

Summary: Transnational organized crime alone does not simply cause booms in community violence. Rather, when drug trafficking processes are proximate to vulnerable communities, a complex process of interlocution takes place, bringing both weapons and drugs into communities. This process generates increasingly violent forms of masculinity linked to gang culture, which drives the homicide rate upwards.

3) Recommendations

- **Distinctive Geostrategic Positioning.** The precise nature of violence in Trinidad is different to elsewhere; it reflects a particular geostrategic location within the hemispheric narcotics supply-chain. Interventions therefore need to be tailored with this diagnosis in mind;
- **Drugs and weapons should not be treated as a stand-alone technical problem.** Policy should focus on the way drugs and weapons connect and interact with vulnerable communities where we seek to reduce social violence;
- **Securitization measures need to consider how they address community vulnerabilities** to the drugs trade and why young males are attracted to gangs, or risk aggravating community violence;
- **Consider a gang amnesty, negotiation, and DDR program** to break ingrained cycles of gang violence. This ‘radical approach’ has shown tangible benefits in other settings;
- **Culturally relevant methodologies.** The use of distinctive local cultures in developing new approaches to collect sensitive data locally. Our ‘Spoken Word’ methodology has a working curriculum that can be rolled out – with some local tailoring – to places experiencing similar problems;
- **Integration of former gang members into social development work.** Identify, develop and use ex-gang members who have been through a process of transformation in social development work and as violence interrupters, they bring



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credibility and create rapport with young adults. They can often be far more knowledgeable about all the intersecting on the ground issues young adults face than the academics and professional experts.

- **Youth interventions:** Develop youth from programs such as our own to become violence interrupters themselves (pay them for this work) and by developing such a body of young people you can create a network of young people who can work together in violence interruption (see Jeremiah Ferguson for a good example).
- **Mainstreaming to change gender cultures that support community violence:** ‘Connect voices’ of vulnerable youth outwards to academic experts, professionals, ministry staff, outreach workers, etc., who can counter the myths young people together create around gender and violence; help them understand what is happening to them at a local level in connection to global processes (Govt of T&T could push this as a component for local CSR);
- **Mainstream gender/masculinities and violence sensitization into school education system from adolescence** and capacity build with local partners who work with youth through strategic workshops on skills development – these can be built up from our Spoken Word experiences.