Book Review

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*Gangs in the Caribbean* is ambitious, insightful, troubling, yet promising. It provides various accounts of the emergence, evolution, organisational structure (or the lack thereof), threats, and potential solutions to the real and perceived problems with both gangs and organised crime in the Caribbean. However, with the direct and significant contributions that Anthony Harriott makes to the study of organised crime, and the relevant insights that some of the other authors offer on this subject, the volume would more appropriately be entitled “Gangs and Organized Crime in the Caribbean”.

Drawing from the contribution of selected scholars in the Caribbean and the United States of America (USA) who conduct research on different Caribbean islands, the edited volume makes a meaningful and timely contribution to these subjects which are among the most pressing issues in the Caribbean today. With its specific focus on realities associated with the causes, consequences and potential solutions to the ‘gang problem’ in the Caribbean, the book is a must-read for criminologists, sociologists, criminal justice scholars and practitioners, government agents, the business community, faith-based and other community organisations, and anyone interested in improving quality of life in the Caribbean region. Policy makers, criminal justice agents and heads of government in the Caribbean have not sufficiently embraced the value of sound social science research to inform policy, programmes, and interventions to address problems related to gangs and organised crime. It is hoped that the publication of *Gangs in the Caribbean* will help to change this reality.

The volume is the first comprehensive book that significantly informs the public about the state of gang-related affairs in our region. From the outset, the book clarifies the working definition of ‘gang’, and of ‘organised crime’. It adopts the van Gemert (2005) definition of gang: “any durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity” (3). Harriott’s (2001: 6) definition of organised crime is adopted: “enterprise activity, the use of violence (actual and/or threatened) and corruption as typical means, and exploitable relationships with the upper-world”. One important distinction between gangs and organised groups as defined is that while gang involvement and activities are conceptualised to be within particular age groupings, organised crime is presented as more of a lifetime career with criminals and members whose ages range from the very young to senior citizens. One wonders, however, why it is that in the introduction and specific chapters on gangs, the
authors limit the definition of gangs to youth (teens or early twenties) when their own research findings show that involvement can continue well beyond that age range.

With little exception, the dominant approach in Caribbean research is to conflate organised crime groups, crews and street gangs as if they are the same entities. By clarifying the distinct nature of gangs (street gangs) and organised crime, the authors set the stage for a focused discussion that is divided into two main sections: (a) describing the scope and nature of the Caribbean’s gang and organised crime problems, and (b) explaining the policies, programmes and interventions designed to address the gang and organised crime problems in the region, with varying degrees of success.

In the introductory chapter, Charles M. Katz defines street gangs and organised crime. With more specificity to street gangs, he explains their scope, nature, prevalence, gender and age, and organisational structure in the Caribbean. He goes on to highlight profiles of street gang criminal involvement in various Caribbean nations and the individual and community factors that influence their formation and persistence. In addition, Katz summarises the three main responses that have been or could be used to effectively address gang and organised crime problems in the Caribbean. He suggests that the best approach would be an “integrated, balanced, and locally appropriate” blend of the three: legislation, suppression, and prevention/intervention (13). Katz’s summaries of the chapters and explanation of how the idea of the book came about serve as a suspenseful precursor to the intellectual treats that follow.

Anthony Harriott, Lilian Bobea, and Randy Seepersad provide the first three chapters, which outline particular profiles of organised crime and gang problems. Harriott focusses primarily on organised crime, Baber on organised crime and gangs, and Seepersad on gangs, in Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago respectively. These chapters clearly establish that even among those larger islands in the region, the nature, extent, level of organisation, and developmental roots of street gang and organised crime involvement are quite different, with some general similarities. Harriott informs us about how some Jamaican criminal entities emerged from the ascendancy of local charismatic street figures and their followers. In various communities, organised crime leadership and formation grew from a blend of the failure by the state to provide certain basic needs and protection; citizen vigilante responses to supplement those needs created by the failed state; and manipulations of power by those self-appointed community protectors. These dynamics are topped by politically incited violence, police corruption and blends of non-systematic, trial-and-error responses to the problems. In such contexts (as also evident in Chapter 8, also written by Harriott) local dons became both perceived blessings and curses to the communities that they purport to protect. Harriott laments that more concerted efforts are not made to control problematic behaviours at earlier stages to avoid serious organised crime problems,

Lilian Bobea’s review of gangs (pandillas or naciones) in the Dominican Republic reveals that while gangs are blamed as major threats to citizen security, little is known about them in terms of how they evolve, their methods of operation and the relationships with power structures. She introduces the conceptual framework of ‘transgressive ecosystems’ to describe the complex web of relations nested in plural violence involving state and non-state actors. In the Dominican Republic, gangs are not simply deviant
groups as they are made out to be in popular media; they are social entities that arise out of necessity and are intertwined with organised criminality. In that context, the state, which has monopoly over violence, but is facing decreasing legitimacy, is not willing or able to provide certain life necessities, and is struggling for control. Formal and informal social control agents sometimes become untraceably intertwined in informal economic relations that reflect a sort of “what goes around, comes around” cycle of justice. Such a cycle hosts rival gang members, police agents and organised criminals as intertwined victims and perpetrators of violence. As a potential solution, Bobea recommends practices such as those used in Barcelona, Spain, and Medellín, Colombia, which attempt to reintegrate youth gang members who are willing to abandon violence. They are rewarded with their own development of creative projects that cultivate ethnic pride and a sense of belonging among them.

Seepersad reports that in Trinidad and Tobago, gangs are an extremely serious problem that can grow to the point where they cannot be eliminated, if ignored. It is left to wonder if such a time has not already arrived. He presents police statistics to show the positive correlation between geographic concentration of gangs and the presence of various criminal activities. However, sexual crimes and kidnapping are not well correlated with gang concentration. No convincing evidence is presented to directly connect gang involvement with those crimes, and when there is not a strong correlation between geographical concentration of gangs and criminal behaviour, the author offers explanations for suppressor effects. Since one of the first rules in statistical analysis is that correlation does not mean causation, it is clear that there is a great need in Trinidad and Tobago, and in other Caribbean countries, to develop infrastructure for more reliable data (quantitative and qualitative) that directly and convincingly links gang affiliation with various criminal activities. Seepersad also makes a similar observation. He notes, further, that certain forms of heavy-handed gang suppression and truces have served more to solidify the legitimacy of gangs than to eliminate them. He, therefore, recommends approaches that show a good balance of suppressive and preventive strategies to address gang problems on individual, community, national and other levels. Such efforts, he argues, must be empirically linked to gang formation and violence.

It is often said that gang and organised crime involvement most frequently results in three outcomes: jails, mental health and substance abuse institutions, and death. Charles and Wilson reveal in Chapter 4 that the crime entrepreneurial experiences of members of a Jamaican posse in the South Bronx in New York have supported that saying. With few exceptions, posse members were able to exit the lifestyle to pursue legitimate economic opportunities but not without apparent psychological and other costs.

Chapters 5 to 9 collectively compare street gangs in Trinidad and the USA; outline how to undertake systematic investigation of gang problems in a country; examine challenges and promises of gang suppression and other efforts in Jamaica; and provide insightful details about the complexities of faith-based programming with gang-involved youth in the distressed community of Gonzales, Trinidad. These chapters collectively reveal that gang problems in the Caribbean may not always be what they appear to be on the surface, and programmes developed in other contexts such as the USA, or even in other Caribbean countries, may not readily address problems in other settings. Therefore, it is important for street gang interventions to be informed by well-designed quantitative and qualitative inquiries that provide intelligence not only on spatial and temporal correlates of crime and gang concentration but
also reliable and valid data that explains the specific processes through which criminality and deviance unfold. Programmatic implementations need to be based on those findings and careful research design must be employed to monitor, evaluate and calibrate interventions to overcome inevitable challenges.

One point that is clear from the discussions about street gang and organised crime interventions is that there can be severe latent effects that further legitimise gangs and organised crime groups. This legitimisation can increase criminal and violent activities after periods of brief, apparent decline. Much of this reality seems to be based on poor strategic planning that lacks clear and distinct immediate, mid-range, and long-term implementation of strategies. For instance, in situations of sudden surges in gang and organised crime violence, it may be useful to employ suppressive strategies that include a state of emergency and deliberate efforts to curtail the actions of confirmed persons of interest. However, this immediate strategy must be followed by more mid-range plans to address the conflicts or other situations that were most proximate to the spikes in violence. Moreover, those efforts should not compromise longer term efforts aimed at addressing root causes and the proper integration of marginalised citizens into the fabric of a productive nation.

Harriott ends the volume by summarising the key findings of contributing chapters, and he makes solid recommendations that are useful to researchers and practitioners alike. In a meaningful way, Harriott challenges future scholars and practitioners to reconsider the overarching negative overtones associated with the smallness of Caribbean nations and communities. He argues that while smallness comes with many challenges, it also has various advantages that, if harnessed appropriately, could do wonders to help with understanding and addressing the pressing problems and threats that gang and organised crime involvement pose in the Caribbean. He advocates transnational collaboration among law enforcement agents and governments to more effectively address street gang and organised crime issues and problems.

Gangs in the Caribbean’s timely contribution should be celebrated as a benchmark study that advances better understanding of the causes, consequences and potential solutions to the growing gang and organised crime problems in the Caribbean region. Future research on the subject, however, needs to extend the working definition of gangs in two important ways. First, the definition needs to be extended beyond specific reference to ‘street-oriented’ activities. For instance, there is early evidence of groups of people using the Internet as a space for deviant behaviours such as cyber-bullying, verbal assault and planning of criminal activities that result in physical injury or death to targeted others. Definitions should be broad enough to capture the potential increase in those activities. A definition should also be broad enough to capture group deviant activities that occur almost exclusively inside of institutions such as schools, detention centres, prisons, private homes, and other settings that are not streets, street corners, parks, or other public spaces. Second, the definition of gangs needs to extend beyond youth involvement, especially since there is already much mention on the streets of ‘oldheads’ who can be as young as in their thirties. Such age expansion of the definition will further facilitate future studies of a life-course approach to understand and address problems with such groups. This is important since little is known about how and when living gang members exit their groups or the lifestyle, and what roles they play at different stages of their career. As Harriott shows in his chapters, gang and organised crime membership can be intergenerational and it is critical to understand the factors that encourage or
discourage current and future generations to follow in the footsteps of their older relatives. Such information will be useful for conceptualisation, methods of inquiry, and effective prevention and intervention.

There is also a need to go beyond the idea that an all-out elimination of street gangs is the best solution to the region’s gang problems. This may no longer even be practical in countries with the most chronic problems. It would be more practical and beneficial to embrace a dominant framework as presented by Lilian Bobea. She advocates understanding and responding to gang and organised crime formation and problems as part of the constellation of affairs, intertwined with quests by mainly marginalised people to address their felt needs. This would be done in the context of failing states with a primary responsibility for improved quality of life and the legal monopoly over violence. Therefore, with those responsibilities, nations need to be better managed to improve quality of life and reduce corruption, marginalisation, and abuse of power. Based on the relative smallness of some Caribbean communities and countries, stubborn problematic elements must be addressed with swiftness and certainty. However, efforts ought to be calibrated, as much as possible, to preserve life and to improve the quality of existing lives rather than focussed on swiftly eliminating segments of society such as street gangs, and certain organised crime personalities and entities that seem too troublesome or problematic at particular points in time.

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