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Criminology and Criminal Justice 2009; 9; 287
DOI: 10.1177/1748895809336378

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Guns, crime and social order in the West Indies

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Abstract

This article examines guns, crime and social order in the West Indies. Set in the context of the region's colonial history, contemporary geopolitics and the growing availability of small arms, the article analyses the extent and nature of gun homicide and related phenomena in various locations across the English-speaking Caribbean. It explores some explanations for the disturbing growth in violent death and injury mainly caused by guns, focusing specifically on the nexus between drug trafficking, political patronage and armed violence and the resulting 'pistolization' of civil society. The article examines the impact of extant security practices and offers some directions for future policy based on the precepts of public health, peace-building, violence prevention, gun control and the pursuit of human security.

Key Words

Caribbean • drugs • firearms • homicide • security

Introduction

The islands of the English-speaking Caribbean are home to about five-and-a-half million people. In the contemporary period almost 4000 of them will die as a result of, and almost 12,000 will suffer serious injuries due to, criminal violence much of which is perpetrated with firearms. Criminological attempts to study the phenomenon of escalating gun violence in the

Caribbean frequently threaten to misunderstand the historical process of 'pistolization'. Pistolization, or weaponization more generally, refers to the process whereby handguns and other small arms become embedded in significant sectors of a particular civil society. Some civil societies are highly weaponized—or at least the men in them. An example of the former would be contemporary Yemen where the accoutrement of small arms is a badge of manhood (Hales, 2008). Obviously the historical path that Yemen took to the present is quite different than that of the islands of the Caribbean. As criminologists confronted with the everyday reality of life in post-colonial settings, we are all well aware that the weaponization of civil society in that region is part of the larger historical process of imperialism (Agozino, 2003). In the Caribbean context, as is well known, imperialism historically included the practices of genocide (against the original indigenous peoples of the region), slavery (of African people) and indentured servitude (of other peoples drawn from around the world), all of which could be described as crimes in contemporary uses of the term. In point of fact, these crimes were perpetrated primarily with the cudgel and the whip since, in the age before the mass machine production of small arms, the pistol was a remarkably ineffective weapon (Bellesiles, 2000).¹

Here we are concerned to understand how the social order of the West Indies has been affected by pistolization during the recent past but we cannot do so without first acknowledging the deeper history of which this is a part. The official history of the weaponization of civil society in the West Indies has yet to be written. This article will focus on research that has been conducted concerning guns, crime and social order in several of the countries of the Commonwealth Caribbean, that is: the English-speaking islands that are formerly colonies of Great Britain. Our view is inevitably partial but we would also argue that some of the insights of our analysis may be generalizable to other regions and communities on the peripheries of the global system. The effects of guns on crime and local social orders are, we feel, most acutely felt by people who are the least advantaged by the global social order of neo-liberal capitalism and the West Indies provides a laboratory where this hypothesis can be tested.

The past as prelude

The Caribbean region has a complex and often bloody history that can be traced back a long time (Diamond, 1999; Hillman and D'Agostino, 2003). There is an especially rich history about colonial policing (Anderson and Killingray, 1991, 1992) that can be usefully read alongside criminological (Harriott, 2000, 2003; Figueira, 2004; Harriott et al., 2004; Youngers and Rosin, 2005) and other scholarship concerning the security of the region (Courtman, 2004; Griffith, 2004). The legacy of the colonial past—genocide, slavery, the plantation economy and much else—is very much alive in the

contemporary Caribbean (Agozino, 2004). The cruel vein that runs through this history affects crucially the nature and organization of crime and social order in the region even as subsequent and more recent developments overlay and make more complicated those earlier social formations. This history is obviously complex and we cannot analyse it here. Instead we simply point to some particularly salient historical signposts.

The first of these is the advent of US interventionism after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Subsequent and connected to this was the process of decolonization and retreat of the European powers. This process was uneven, but it reached something of a crescendo in the aftermath of the Second World War. During the Cold War period American geostrategic hegemony in the region was on the rise, even while European decolonization accelerated. Of particular interest to us is the fact that three European countries—the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom—all maintained some police and security presence in the region, even up to the present time. The Cold War was obviously of broad significance to the region, and the legacy of the Cuban Revolution remains, but the significance of this in terms of crime and policing in the region is complex and not well understood. Of more direct, recent, criminological import was the Caribbean Basin Initiative launched by the Reagan Administration in the 1980s, which was accompanied by the imposition of IMF inspired ‘structural adjustment policies’. The neo-liberal turn affected the various Caribbean jurisdictions differently, but in general the region experienced skyrocketing inflation, rising unemployment, rising external debt and deteriorating living conditions. Increases across a range of measures of recorded crime, in some cases quite drastic increases, followed on from this. Violence, crime and social fragmentation, the latter increasingly taking forms of social apartheid, were pervasively associated with this trend in economic globalization in many jurisdictions and this was certainly true for the Caribbean region. The emergence of illicit and semi-licit markets in a range of commodities—including drugs, guns, financial services, endangered species, illegal timber and fish and human labour—were part and parcel of this trend.

By 2001 there was widespread concern about crime across the region as a whole and a Task Force on Crime and Security was created by participating CARICOM (short for Caribbean Community) Heads of Government. In 2003 the Secretary-General of CARICOM issued a statement which said, in part, that, ‘no issue has concerned us more than the rising crime wave which threatens to envelop the region’ (quoted in Deosaran, 2004: 111; see also West Indian Commission, 1992). International attention mostly concerned the use of a number of Caribbean islands as transshipment sites in the supply of cocaine to North American and Europe and, to a lesser extent, the use of offshore banking jurisdictions in the Caribbean for the furtherance of various forms of white collar crime. At the local level the real problems concerned the rising tide of violence. Whether because of pressure by the international community regarding drugs and money laundering or the fear

and insecurity of local communities suffering the effects of criminal violence, by the early years of the 21st century, crime and insecurity had landed at the top of the governance agenda. We would argue that the agenda risks being distorted by the preoccupations of policy makers in the so-called developed countries, especially those of marijuana crop eradication (Youngers and Rosin, 2005: 303–37). We would argue further than the weaponization of civil society lies closer to the core of the issue of what is to be done about crime in the Caribbean.

Gun crime in the West Indies: a brief overview

Harriott (2002) has shown that over the previous two decades, the rate of violent crime increased in 10 Caribbean countries for which data were available. Jamaica had already been experiencing very high rates of homicide in excess of 20 per 100,000 by the early 1980s. That trend continues up to the present. In 2008 about 1500 people were killed by gun-fire in Jamaica (230 of them in shoot-outs with the police). For a country with a population of 2.7 million people, that yields a gun homicide rate of about 55 per 100,000. Harriott also provides data for the Bahamas, Saint Kitts and Guyana as further examples of Commonwealth Caribbean countries experiencing high and accelerating gun homicide rates over the previous 15 to 20 years. He provides further evidence of pistolization in his observation of increasing firearms prevalence rates in conjunction with homicide and robbery in Jamaica during the 1990s, followed somewhat later by similar trends in Trinidad and Tobago.

In Trinidad and Tobago, crime statistics published by the Central Statistical Office reveal that there were 137 murders reported in 1994, a rate of about 10.5 per 100,000. Over subsequent years a consistent pattern of declining numbers was evident. In 1995 121 murders were reported, declining to 107 in 1996, 101 in 1997, 97 in 1998 and 92 by 1999. The trend was reversed at the onset of the 21st century. Since that time there have been consistent increases in the number of reported cases of homicide ranging from 119 in 2000 to 370 in 2006 representing a three-fold increase across the seven-year period. In November 2008, a record high, exceeding 500 cases, was enumerated; a rate unprecedented in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. Based on public sentiment, such statistics are deemed alarming and warrant attention. Central American countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize have among the highest rates of homicide in the world with magnitudes in the vicinity 55, 45, 43 and 31 per 100,000 persons respectively in early 2007. For the same period, homicide rates of 49, 42 and 39 were reported for Jamaica, Venezuela and Colombia respectively. With a population of 1.3 million and a homicide toll exceeding 500 in 2008, Trinidad and Tobago joined the ranks of the Caribbean basin's 'murder capitals' with a rate of 26 per 100,000.

Guns, crime and social order in Trinidad and Tobago up close

In this section we draw briefly on data collected from the Police Service of Trinidad and Tobago for the years 2000–6 inclusive (St Bernard, 2006, 2008). These data pertain to 1688 cases of homicide which took place between January 2000 and December 2006, of which 1117 or about 66 per cent involved firearms. Table 1 displays the number of homicides in each of these years and shows the relative numbers of murders committed with or without a firearm. As can be clearly seen, firearms prevalence in homicide has been rising steadily. It is perhaps interesting to note that while the homicide rate for the country has risen slightly more than three-fold during the period the firearms homicide rate has risen by a factor of 4.4 and now accounts for three-quarters of all homicides in Trinidad. While this Table does not by itself explain why there is a rising tide of gun violence, it certainly does illustrate the trend.

The consequences of this trend are several. The interpretation of police data is, of course, notoriously difficult and one should not forget the large number of homicides that remain ‘unclassified’ (approximately 50%) in these police reports. Statistical analyses of police data reveal that gun prevalence in homicide cases ranges from a low of about 18 per cent and 33 per cent for domestic and neighbourhood altercations respectively to highs of about 96 per cent and 95 per cent respectively for cases involving gangs or drugs. Regardless of the appropriate classification for those cases left unclassified, these figures suggest that weaponization has a considerable (negative) effect on relationships in civil society.

What analysis of police data clearly shows however is that the victims of gun homicide are predominantly male (in the region of 90%), predominantly of African ethnicity (about 80%) and largely in the middle range of the age curve. In Trinidad and Tobago homicidal violence, both with and without the use of firearms, predominantly involves men in the age range from 15–24 (about 30%), 25–44 (about 50%) and 45–64 years of age (about 11%). For homicide cases across Trinidad and Tobago as a whole, males are more likely to be killed with a gun than any other way—73.3 per cent versus 26.7 per cent—whereas females are more likely to be killed by means other than

Table 1. Homicides, 2000–6

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of homicides</i>	<i>Homicides due to firearms</i>	<i>Percentage of all homicides due to firearms (%)</i>
2000	119	61	51
2001	149	83	55
2002	172	104	60
2003	229	146	64
2004	260	182	70
2006	389	272	69
2006	370	269	73

a firearm—73 per cent without a gun, 27 per cent with one. Analysis of gun homicide prevalence by police division reveals that it is primarily a problem in urban settings situated at the lower end of the social-economic scale. For example, 2006 data reveal that in police divisions in the poorest areas of Port-of-Spain—the country’s capital—about 83 per cent of homicides involve guns whereas non-gun homicide is about 17 per cent. On the other end of the spectrum on the largely rural and tourist vacation island of Tobago—the ‘Capital of Paradise’—non-gun homicides account for 86 per cent of the total whereas gun homicides amount to just under 14 per cent. For the period 2000–6 Trinidad and Tobago experienced 1688 homicides, of which 469 occurred in Port-of-Spain and 36 occurred on tiny Tobago.

The available evidence also reveals a worrying statistical relationship between the detection status and the usage of firearms in homicide. Put briefly, gun homicides are less likely to be solved than are homicides committed by other means. In 2006 slightly more than 20 per cent of gun homicides were solved whereas the detection rate for non-gun homicides was over 62 per cent. At the same time that there have been continuous increases in the proportion of gun homicides the proportion of unsolved cases has also risen. This leads to the worry that pistolization might accelerate in a flurry of tit-for-tat revenge and retaliation. The available police data seem to indicate that pistolization is not evenly spread across society in Trinidad and Tobago and that most of its worst effects are experienced by relatively poor mature men of predominantly African ethnic origin residing close to the urban core and involved in the illicit drug economy. There are worrying signs that weaponization is becoming more prevalent in Trinidad and Tobago. Political violence and the advent of a kidnap-for-ransom industry are two symptoms of a social problem that similarly involves access to small arms and light weapons. A question that therefore logically arises concerns the reasons for this trend.

Arming paradise

It is impossible to talk about guns, crime and social order in the Caribbean without mentioning the disastrous effects of the international war on drugs and its interpenetration with policy developments at the national level in the various jurisdictions of the region. In this section we draw upon research concerning transatlantic policing which explores transnational linkages between countries on the shores of the North Atlantic Ocean. The study that undergirds this part of the article was based on 160 interviews with people whose work relates directly to policing and security, including a variety of police-type agents: including police Commissioners, heads of drug squads, representatives of special branch and marine divisions and also customs, coast-guard, military, port and airport security personnel, immigration officials, intelligence agents, government ministers and civil servants (Bowling, 2005, 2006, 2008, forthcoming). One interesting concept that emerged during the

course of the project was that of 'human security', an idea which offers a new paradigm for thinking about ways in which people can be made safe and kept free from danger (Goldsmith and Sheptycki, 2007). The concept of human security was introduced in the United Nations Development Programme in 1994. From this perspective, security is not simply 'national security' (i.e. concerned with the security of the state per se) as the term has been conventionally defined in the field of security studies. The notion of human security, 'moves the "threat agenda" beyond incidents of political violence and disorder to include poverty, hunger, disease and natural disasters because these kill far more people than war, genocide and terrorism combined' (Sheptycki, 2008: 171). Pistolization connects to the human security agenda in interesting ways since one of its effects can be the undermining of social trust and thereby the fabric of the social and the global gun epidemic is a social problem that can be conceived of in terms of public health and epidemiology (Cukier and Sidel, 2006).

Insecurity in the Caribbean region is multi-dimensional and encompasses all the spheres indicated by the idea of human security and in interview this was clearly recognized by the various police-type personnel who work in the region. With very few exceptions, interviews indicated that the first order of priority for these agents tended to be focused on the drugs trade and its 'associated ills', which were typically seen as including increases in violent crime and homicide, firearms and ammunition, corruption, money laundering, precursor chemicals smuggling (for drugs manufacture) and terrorism. Some interviewees were keen to recognize other security risks created by economic weakness, poverty and inequality and lack of equitable sustainable development; health insecurity arising from the spread of HIV/AIDS, tropical diseases and other public health issues; as well as natural and man-made threats to the environment such as hurricanes and chemical spills.

The exact combination or permutation of perceived issues differs from island to island, between police customs and other security actors, and even individually, but the following quotation is typical: 'We would say narco-trafficking is the major security threat in this region and we would add its related ills: the importation of illegal firearms, illegal ammunition, the movement of precursor chemicals, money laundering and within recent years, terrorism.' To these professional actors in the field of human security guns and drugs are interlinked, but they do not often stop to reflect on precisely how. It is therefore useful to stress the causal order that is implied by their understanding: firearms accompany the drugs like fleas ride on shipboard rats, but firearms stay behind on the islands and the effects spill over onto the streets long after the drugs have been moved on to more lucrative destinations. The resultant weaponization means that dispute resolution is more explosive. As one interviewee put it:

The part that affects us most is not so much of the drug trafficking but of the firearms that accompany drugs. Drugs and firearms go hand in hand. The drugs come—firearms! It's as simple as that. And we have found that most of

those firearms coming through end up on our streets and end up as a result of our huge number of murders we encounter each year.

The link between drugs and crime is described in numerous ways in the criminological literature (e.g. Goldstein, 1985). The cost of drugs may require addicts to steal to support their habits; we can call this the 'compulsive-acquisitive crime link'. The psychoactive properties of some drugs—heightened emotional arousal, lowered inhibitions, aggressiveness, impulsivity and so on—may engender particular kinds of criminal behaviour; we call this the 'psychopharmacological link'. When it comes to the linkage between guns, drugs and crime we are talking about 'systemic links'. In interview, security sector leaders identified three specific systemic links between drugs trafficking and gun crime:

- 1 Guns are required to ensure contracts in an illicit market where there are often no other guarantors. Psychotropic drugs are an expensive commodity which generate considerable stockpiles of cash and product both of which are difficult to protect from rivals. In an environment where formal contract law is unavailable, it is almost an inevitable occurrence that guns will be acquired and made available through the crime networks used to distribute drugs.
- 2 A consequence of the availability of guns among those involved in the drugs market is increased violent conflict. Interviewees talked about different groups of people involved in the trade becoming embroiled in 'turf wars' or 'deals gone bad'. Economic and status competition quickly becomes deadly when deadly weapons are at hand and it is not unusual to observe cycles of tit-for-tat shooting incidents and killings and escalating violence.
- 3 Once the guns have been borne into local communities they may be used in other conflicts not directly intertwined with the drugs market themselves. Perhaps as a result of pharmacological effects or the compulsive-acquisitive linkages mentioned previously, but equally often from other types of conflict—relationship jealousy, status and disrespect and so on—more and more frequently social frictions result in gun-play simply because the players are armed.

The weaponization of civil society in the Caribbean is connected to the market in illicit drugs. Therefore, in order to understand it, it is important to understand the smuggling routes for drugs. There are numerous air and sea routes that transit the region connecting the Caribbean to Latin America, North America, Africa and Europe (see Figure 1). These transit routes form an opportunity structure for both guns and drugs, however, is it not quite as simple as saying 'the guns follow the drugs'.

Firearms appear to follow drugs shipments both large and small along established seaborne routes; in such instances they are mostly brandished in the context of protecting illicit economic transactions. However, guns also come in via other routes and means. For example, in Puerto Rico, of the 18,374 guns seized in the decade up to 2007, 60 per cent originated in the

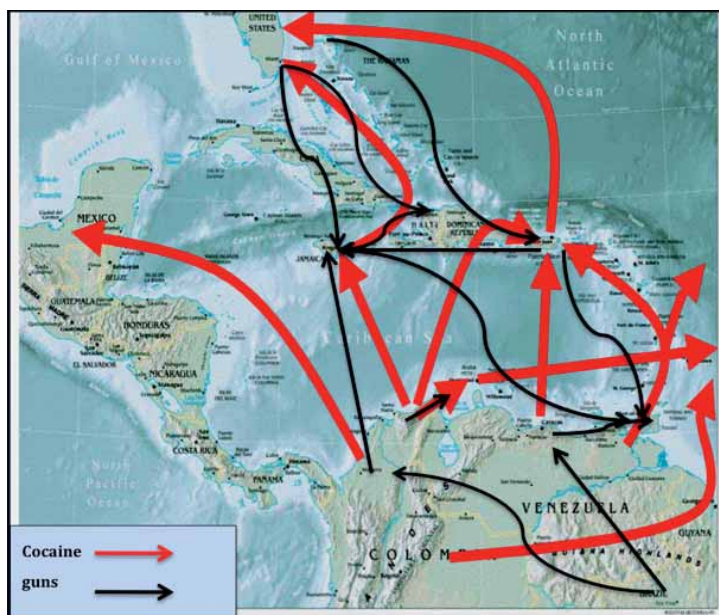


Figure 1 Major cocaine and gun trafficking routes in the Caribbean region

United States (Rivera-Lyles, 2007). In the Bahamas in 2006, the US Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) estimated that 73 per cent of illegal guns originated in the USA, mostly from Florida (Maura, 2008). It is clear therefore that the guns are flowing southwards from the USA against the flow of northward drugs. That is partly a matter of ease of supply—Florida has very liberal gun regulations, and export to Puerto Rico and the Bahamas are very straightforward. Further illustrating this latter point, in order to travel with firearms (including handguns or assault rifles) passengers need only inform the airline company and ground crew and ensure that the weapons are stored safely (i.e. are not loaded) before placing the items on the conveyor belt for stowed luggage. Many guns are bought in by ‘straw buyers’, individuals who buy weapons for resale in the clandestine market in Puerto Rico (Rivera-Lyles, 2007). There is also some evidence of complicity by airline staff and corrupt law enforcement officials in this activity.

There are also inter-island transit links fostered by small fishing boatmen. The islands of Haiti and Jamaica are reportedly linked in this fashion with Jamaican fishermen meeting in open waters close to neighbouring Haiti in order to exchange drugs for AK47s. Interviewees suggested that these guns originated in Eastern Europe. It is well known that somewhere near to two million of these types of assault weapons were delivered into the Central American region during the last days of the Cold War—not least during the Iran-Contra affair, creating a pool of arms that (like a pool of toxic waste) continues to pollute the surrounding environment. When it comes to firearms,

Brazil is a major manufacturing country and so it is not surprising to learn that it is a supplier to the Caribbean region through the transit countries of Guyana and Venezuela.

The proposition that guns are linked with the drugs business is well evidenced. For most interviewees, that link meant that the response to drugs and guns was one and the same—that a robust response to drug trafficking would reduce the problem of guns. However, the evidence also suggests that this is faulty thinking. This is the case because the war on drugs has been ineffective in limiting drug trafficking, and the current weaponized state of the illicit drugs market is largely due to drug prohibition and not some inherent connection between drugs and guns. In order to answer the negative social consequences of weaponization, it is first and foremost necessary to address the problem of guns.

The war on drugs has the specific goal of reducing the availability of drugs, within the Caribbean region (especially cocaine but seemingly more often marijuana—or ‘ganja’). The ultimate aim is to suppress the markets for these commodities in North America and Europe. This is called supply-side interdiction and it comes in a wide variety of practical forms. One example of these types of effort pools the resources of local island domestic enforcement (through the Regional Security System; the Association of Caribbean Commissioners of Police; and the Caribbean Customs Law Enforcement Council)—often completely financially underwritten with foreign police assistance. Accompanying the pool of local policing talent is an extensive allocation of law enforcement resources and personnel from the metropolitan countries—the UK, USA, Canada and the European Union—in effect piggybacking on and steering this effort. One example is ‘Operation Kingfish’, which was first mounted in 2004. This multi-national effort aimed to ‘take out’ a number of highly placed ‘drug kingpins’ involved in the cocaine trade through the region. Quite naturally it soon resulted in a significant number of arrests (51), the seizure of impressive amounts of cocaine (12 metric tons valued by the police at US\$5 billion) and some guns (although, in view of the numbers just discussed, 25 seems rather paltry) (Martin-Wilkins, 2004). In 2006 Jamaican police authorities speaking on behalf of Operation Kingfish reported another major operation which culminated in the seizure of 11 ‘luxury vehicles’ (including a Mercedes Benz, a Jaguar, a Honda and a Dodge Ram) and several thousand pounds of compressed marijuana. The ganja was said to be destined for Haiti in a ‘guns for drugs’ trade, but no weapons were reported seized (Sinclair, 2006).

Operation Kingfish deployed specially vetted persons from, the Jamaica Constabulary Force, the Caribbean police intelligence community—largely Special Branch—Military Intelligence and a variety of internationally seconded officers. It utilized the full panoply of intelligence-led policing and the operational arm in Jamaica aimed to disrupt 12 identified criminal gangs. By 2005 spokespersons for Operation Kingfish in that country were claiming to have ‘dismantled one gang and disrupted seven’ (Williams, 2005). Unfortunately, it seems possible that the actual supply of cocaine through the islands of the

West Indies was not reduced markedly and murder rates across the region climbed upwards even as the operation progressed. According to one report, despite the advertised successes, police infiltration of criminal gangs during Operation Kingfish incited a deadly state of paranoia within the Jamaican Posse underworld with the perverse effect of increasing incidents of violence as rival groups battled over the continuing drug trade (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2006). What is quite certain is that the number of homicides rose in the wake of Kingfish, thus, while in Jamaica 975 killings were recorded in 2003, the toll for 2004 surpassed this figure with media sources reporting between 1445 and 1469 murders. From January to 25 November 2005, news sources reported that the number of homicides topped the 2004 record, with fatality figures ranging between 1476 and 1482. Already among the top four countries in per capita homicides—behind Swaziland, Colombia and South Africa—the trend looked set to continue (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2006).

The successes of Operation Kingfish were much vaunted. In 2005 Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson provided a further list of achievements: the seizure of more than 100 firearms, over 2000 rounds of ammunition, more than 50 speedboats and ‘large quantities of cocaine, hash oil, and ganja’, as well as the elimination of three illegal airfields. The law enforcement operation has been responsible for arresting 191 individuals, ‘including top gang leaders’. In November of 2005 the Jamaica Constabulary Force website announced that Operation Kingfish had achieved a number of results, including the seizure of 151 firearms, 42 motor vehicles, 53 boats, as well as making 258 arrests (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2006). Meanwhile, proponents of community crime reduction across the region continued to argue that more needed to be done to strengthen public health surveillance systems and use that knowledge to influence the security system more broadly with the hope of enhancing operational planning, guiding cross-agency prevention programmes and ultimately improving policy making.

We should remind ourselves that the primary reason for Operation Kingfish, and countless other similar operations across the Caribbean, big and small, is essentially counter-drug enforcement. At its most ambitious, the stated goal of drugs interdiction is to eradicate the drug trade entirely. The more modest goal is to reduce demand by driving up the market price of illicit drugs. It is sobering to observe that the estimated street prices of cocaine in Europe and North America has been steadily falling for over a decade (see Figure 2). There is a tangled web of market connections that link the illicit commodities of firearms and drugs and it is difficult to say anything meaningful about causal relations one way or another. Without rushing to conclusions of the ‘after therefore because’ variety, available statistical evidence shows that, during the time that the drug war has been progressed and intensified in the Caribbean, the price of drugs in the metropolitan countries has gone down and the number of gun-related homicides in the West Indies has gone up. Clearly this is not a winning situation, despite the presumed benefits of operational successes leading to arrests and assets seized.

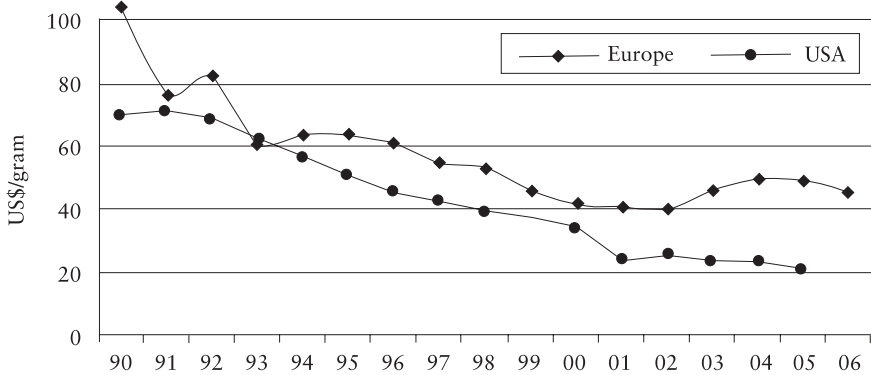


Figure 2 Wholesale cocaine prices in Europe and the USA, 1990–2006 (US\$/gram)

Now consider a counter-factual thought experiment. Imagine the situation in which the 1988 UN Convention on Drugs and Psychotropic Substances had instead kick-started a worldwide prohibition of small arms and light weapons which in turn led to a pan-Caribbean counter-firearms policy. Although politically difficult, such a prohibition might not be practically as difficult as drugs prohibition. Indeed, on the face of it, it seems that gun control should be easier than drug control (see Figure 1). It is, of course, impossible to say what would have happened if, in 1988, transnational policing around the world had embarked on measures to collect intelligence on movements of firearms and to interdict them. One thing seems certain though. If, after 20 years of firearms prohibition, both guns and ammunition had steadily fallen in price and availability had risen, prohibition would be declared a failure. The current reality in the Caribbean is that there are both prospering illicit drugs markets and increasing weaponization resulting in murder and mayhem. This situation is not lost on local island police officers. They understand that the policy choices are not theirs to set. In interview one respondent stated that their international partners,

are interested in acting on what's affecting them at the moment ... we have a lot of firearms trafficking in the region, for use in the region, but yet we don't have the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms here because the weapons are not going north, it's only drugs that are going north, but that's not their concern, that's not their interest.

Further, if the priorities were reversed and guns were the main focus with all of the enforcement resources available in the region 'we could in very short order reduce homicides in this country, *very* short order'. See Table 2.

The problem may simply be that counter-drug enforcement has not yet been tough enough. Maybe in another decade the drug war will be won, but the signs are not good. In the meantime, it is difficult to avoid concluding that the war on drugs itself may be causally related to the weaponization of the region. The prohibition of drugs has contributed to the creation of a very

Table 2. Gun control should be easier than drug control

<i>Guns</i>	<i>Drugs</i>
Built in factories	Grown clandestinely
Serial numbered	Unregistered
Metal—easily detected	Vegetable—hard to detect
Manufacturers registered	Growers undocumented
Distributors licensed	Distributors unlicensed
Purchase documented	Purchase undocumented

large illicit economy. That economy has been repeatedly and deliberately destabilized and disrupted by law enforcement action which has created a climate of fear and distrust in that market. Gradually increasing numbers of guns were introduced into this scenario, at first as one of the tools of the informal ‘policing’ in that market and later as a more generally available commodity in the illicit economy. In the prevailing climate of fear and distrust, guns created their own demand. Guns were put into the hands of political enforcers, gangsters, bandits and young people who use them casually. The story of arming paradise is more complicated than this brief account, of course (see Gunst, 1995; Rabe, 2005). The process of arming paradise is but one element in a larger geo-political and economic social order in which the Caribbean countries have little influence. The pistolization of civil society hurts the least well off the most and nowhere is this more true than in the islands of the West Indies. This raises questions about what is being done to confront this state of affairs.

Injury surveillance, violence prevention and small arms control in the Caribbean

Violence has been recognized as a major public health problem in the Caribbean region as a whole (World Bank, 2007). As yet, however, the potential role of injury surveillance data to guide prevention programmes that would maximize the use of scarce resources available to target prevention activities, remain largely untapped in the Caribbean region (Warburton and Shepherd, 2004). In Wales, a review of a process of sharing Accident and Emergency data with police concluded that ‘judicious sharing of unique information about location and times derived from A&E patients was a powerful and effective means of targeting police and other local resources to bring about violence reduction’ (Warburton and Shepherd, 2004: 474). Too little of this has been done in the Caribbean.

Promising practice can be found in a hospital-based surveillance system in Jamaica which has captured data on the profile of violence-related injuries over the past 10 years. This provides a valuable alternative data source for looking at violence other than police statistics. The Jamaica Injury Surveillance

System (JISS) captures data electronically from the Accident & Emergency departments at major government hospitals in the country. The JISS collects data on violence-related injuries with consideration for who was involved, where the incident occurred, indications of the circumstances in which it occurred and precisely how the violence was carried out. Data generated by the JISS have provided policy makers with considerably detailed knowledge. In 2006 over 30,000 visits were made to the islands' 22 hospitals. In 2004 when hospital data were compared to police statistics this showed that, except for gun-shot wounds, the hospital data revealed two times more violence-related incidents than did police records. Among the increased incidents recorded by the surveillance system not recorded by police were incidents of sexual assault, stab wounds and intentional lacerations. The JISS provides a detailed risk profile of a subset of the hospital data gathered from the nine major government hospitals island-wide. The JISS data in 2006 related to 13,150 violence-related injuries (VRIs) and it revealed that males accounted for 58 per cent of these VRI visits and were 1.4 times more likely than females to be injured in a violence-related incident.

The public health perspective on violence supported by the JISS recognizes the social costs via a proxy measure expressed in terms of economic costs. In Jamaica in 2003 the economic costs of criminal violence were nominally valued at approximately US\$20 million per annum (Francis and Harriott, 2003). The epidemic of homicide in Jamaica can be seen in the raw homicide figures. Keeping in mind that the country has had a relatively stable population, the annual number of murders rose from about 484 in 1984 to 1450 in 2004. Analysis of A&E data reveals that gun violence accounted for only about 7 per cent of admittances in 2006 with 'sharp object' (39%), 'blunt object' (32%) and 'bodily force' (15%) accounting for more instances of violence resulting in hospital admission, even if these were not ultimately instances of lethal violence. Almost half (44%) of violent incidents resulting in hospital admissions took place in public while a further substantial amount (41%) took place in private dwellings. Half of the incidents involved mere acquaintances and a further 17 per cent involved total strangers. Violent incidents perpetrated by friends (5%), family members (11%) or intimate partners (15%) amounted to less than a third of all admissions, with the remainder (4%) accounted for by enforcement personnel. By far the most prominent reason recorded for hospital admissions for VRI is 'fight' (76%), with other types of violence accounting for relatively small percentages: sexual or child abuse (6%), public order and police shootings (5%), burglary (5%) and drug/gang related (2%).

As previously discussed, the epidemic of violence that this surveillance programme has identified is complex. From a public health perspective the epidemic of violence is not simply reducible to gang activity. Pistolization is occurring within a broader context which includes the effects of neo-liberal governmental policies and the resulting social disorder experienced in marginalized communities. In 2004 the Violence Prevention Alliance was launched in Jamaica which aimed to use the public health platform and

social crime prevention approaches in order to advance violence prevention (Government of Jamaica, 2004). Without prejudice to efforts on other islands of the West Indies, this project represents the best attempt at operationalizing a 'Safe Communities Concept' anywhere in the Caribbean region. Through practical projects it has aimed at preventing violence by fostering community dispute resolution mechanisms, promoting community governance, better health and education and helping to improve police–community relations. These are nothing short of valiant efforts, but they go against the tide of weaponization. It is a sad fact that by January 2006, and despite the efforts of the many people and organizations involved in the Violence Prevention Alliance, Jamaica had achieved the dubious distinction of 'murder capital of the world' (BBC Caribbean, 2006).

At that time Haiti was well recognized as highly volatile and violent. Less well known, perhaps, was the fact that police leave had to be cancelled in St Kitts the month before while in Guyana police were reporting a 50 per cent increase in gun crime, including some horrific shooting incidents (BBC Caribbean, 2006). The pistolization of civil society was clearly a growing problem across the whole region, but Jamaica, where five people a day were being killed (mostly by gun-fire), seemed situated at a central vortex for the weaponization of the West Indies. In the circumstances, the meagre capacities of local public health and community practitioners, there and virtually everywhere across the region, were dwarfed by the task.

Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from Mackie (2005), Braziel (2006) and Giroux (2006), in our attempts to study and understand the escalating weaponization of civil society in the Caribbean region, we understand the historicity of pistolization as a process accompanying imperialism. Weaponization worst affects those communities least able to organize themselves to overcome the post-colonial situation. It is well recognized that, in general, 'there has been an over-reliance on the criminal justice approach to crime reduction in the region, to the detriment of other complementary approaches which can be effective in reducing certain types of crime and violence' (UNODC, 2007: i). Alternative approaches to violence reduction are being tried, but public health and community prevention approaches are less well funded than are law enforcement efforts, especially with regard to counter-drugs operations. This might be seen as ironic or paradoxical, given that in the police and security sector there is growing talk of the human security agenda. It is not, however, because the current over-emphasis on the prosecution of the war on drugs in the region is demonstrably exacerbating the processes of weaponization. Arguably, human security approaches ought to complement nicely public health approaches. In the end, we are forced to conclude that the pernicious effects of weaponization ought to be the central focus for international crime control efforts in the region. However, realistically, the record

of the colonial and post-colonial past (Agozino, 2003) suggests that the technologies of domination in place in the Caribbean region, and in the Global South more generally, are hardly likely to fulfil a human security agenda.

Note

- 1 Indeed, according to Bellesiles (2000: 423), it was only after the Civil War in the United States that individuals began to purchase handguns in significant quantities: 'Arms production took off in the Civil War, never to settle back down'. The benefits to consumers of the mass production of pistols were not felt outside of American borders until much later.

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