

CARICOM REGIONAL SYMPOSIUM: VIOLENCE AS A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE – THE CRIME CHALLENGE

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“The Social Perspective on Crime and Violence: Gang Activity”

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Crime, Violence, Gang activities

- Crime, violence and gang activities are all part of a complex social phenomena in Caribbean contexts (Harriott & Katz, 2015; Wallace, 2013).
- This calls for explanations and understandings from a social perspective framework.
- Rather than solely examining perpetrators for the causes of crime, violence, and gang activities, social perspectives examines the social situation for explanatory/causal factors.

The Social Perspective

- Social perspective – gang activity is not an individual problem, but is shaped by broader social structures and cultural values that are often rooted in social inequality and injustice.
 - Social perspective - a framework that examines how social factors, e.g. poverty, inequality, and social norms contribute to criminal behaviours, gangsterism and violence.
- (1) People residing in poverty are more likely to engage in criminal/gang behaviours as they lack access to resources and opportunities for success through legitimate means.
 - (2) People who experience discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization have a greater propensity to engage in crime, gangs and violence as a way of expressing their frustration and/or to seek justice.

The Public Health Approach

- Globally, crime prevention and reduction programmes are now adopting a public health approach (Bucerus & Oriola, 2022).
- This approach does not replace CJS or other crime prevention approaches. Rather, it complements them by bringing a different view and other important actors, tools and resources to the task of crime prevention and reduction.
- The public health approach focuses on the well-being of communities as a whole (Bucerus & Oriola, 2022).
- Interventions focus on populations at greatest risk for injury (disease).
- The public health approach to crime prevention and reduction aims to preserve, promote and improve community well-being and safety.
- Emphasis - prevention of crime from occurring or reoccurring, rather than treating the consequences.

Gangs in the Caribbean

- Throughout much of the Caribbean, gangs are a societal problem (Wallace, 2013).
- Gangs develop from core structural problems and generally people join gangs as a result of a variety of socioecological factors.
- Attendant gang violence occurs due to complex interplays between individuals and gangs.
- There are societal impacts as a result of gang involvement (Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2021).

Communal violence.

Long-term deleterious effects on gang members/local and national communities.

The Big Question????????

- The question to be asked and answered is not, "Why does gang activity occur?" but rather "Why does this socially undesirable behaviour (gang activity) occur with greater frequency in some communities and circumstances than in others?"
- Answers to that question must then be used to frame interventions.

The Social Perspective – Gang Activity *

- Weak, frustratingly glacial justice systems. Low social control.
- Reduced communal social capital and community efficacy. Weak parenting.
- Stigmatization (communities and residents). Desire for instant gratification.
- Limited/Blocked legitimate opportunities. Limited community resources. Poverty.
- Benefits (turf control, exclusion, non-judicial justice). Greed.
- Enhanced status or prestige among friends (social mobility).
- Income from gang activities.
- Social relationships giving a sense of personal identity.

* Support from Harriott and Katz (2015), Gayle (2008) and research presently being conducted in Trinidad and Tobago and St. Kitts and Nevis - author.

The Social Perspective – Gang Activity *

- Pervasive community issue for law abiding residents.
- Leads to property devaluation.
- Reduced quality of life.
- Fear of crime.
- Community decay.
- Decline in communal activities.
- Decline in economic activities.
- Decline in provision of social services and amenities.
- Increased injury/mortality rates.

* Support from Harriott and Katz (2015), Gayle (2008) and research presently being conducted in Trinidad and Tobago and St. Kitts and Nevis – author.

Potential Responses

- Working with the local community.
- Engagement of **legitimate** community leaders.
- Partnering with social service agencies.
- Involvement of community members who have the respect of local gang leaders and community members.
- Addressing gang-related issues at multiple levels.
- Interagency collaboration, especially at the local level and across several levels of government, giving civic leaders a multidisciplinary perspective on issues related to preventing gang membership and gang-related activities.

Concluding Comments

- Crime and gang activities in the Caribbean cannot be viewed in isolation.
- Prevention and reduction efforts must adopt a multi-dimensional approach.
- Whole of society approach (government/public health/communities) should be utilized in the Caribbean.

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