CARIBBEAN GANGS
DRUGS, FIREARMS, AND GANGS NETWORKS IN JAMAICA, SAINT LUCIA, GUYANA AND TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
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JULY 2024
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INTRODUCTION
Several Caribbean countries are registering an intensification of organized crime and rising incidence of lethal violence.\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\) A combination of risk factors including surging drug production in South America, the proliferation and competition of transnational and local gangs, and high availability and use of firearms have contributed to soaring homicide rates.\(^3\) Countries such as Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago currently register among the highest murder rates globally.\(^4\) Faced with exceedingly high levels of collective and interpersonal violence, some Caribbean governments, for example that of Jamaica have declared states of emergencies to fight violent crime\(^5\) while simultaneously ramping-up regional efforts to curb the trafficking of firearms and ammunition. There is a growing consensus among the heads of government of CARICOM countries that the crime and violence situation could deteriorate further still.\(^6\)

The perpetrators of collective violence in the Caribbean vary, though most are connected to a diverse array of criminal markets across the region. The determination of what constitutes a “gang” differs across the Caribbean.\(^8\) The capacity of these groups vary: there is no dominant configuration of criminal groups and criminal relationships across all locations in the region. Highly organized criminal networks and street gangs are involved in multiple transnational criminal markets spanning South and Central America, North America, and Western Europe. Larger, more sophisticated gangs alternately collude and compete with state actors and a host of non-state intermediaries to procure firearms and transport, transship, and traffic in cocaine, cannabis, and to a lesser extent heroin and amphetamines.

For the most part, smaller street gangs are more domestically oriented; some are politically connected and secure government contracts to provide resources and services that are historically underserved by the state.\(^9\) In addition to providing social welfare, these organizations often impose protection rackets within the areas they operate.\(^10\) These protection rackets allow these neighborhood gangs to engage in criminal activities ranging from selling drugs, trafficking in firearms, human smuggling, and contract killing to managing lottery scams, extortion, and racketeering. A small number of the region’s gangs are more organized and have expanded their criminal networks to facilitate transnational crimes.

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4 Ibid.
7 UNODC, International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) Version 1.0, page 98 (A gang is a group of persons that is defined by a set of characteristics including durability over time, street-oriented lifestyle, youthfulness of members, involvement in illegal activities and group identity. Definitions used by national law enforcement bodies may include additional elements and may in some cases deviate from this generic definition).
8 The term is often used to refer to various organizations, including youth street gangs, adult-based organized gangs, and established domestic and transnational criminal organizations, vigilante groups, and ephemeral groups of three or more people who undertake a serious crime together.
including the transportation and protection of drug shipments as well as firearms trafficking, human smuggling, and cyber-related crimes. In larger countries in the Caribbean such as Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, aggressive state-led anti-gang measures have accelerated the fragmentation or “splintering” of gangs, further heightening inter- and intra-factional violence and demand for firearms and ammunition.

While the overall number and membership of Caribbean gangs appears to have expanded, a relatively small number of them are involved in transnational trafficking of drugs, firearms, and other contraband. Only a handful of the hundreds of gangs active in countries such as Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago appear to be directly implicated in cross-border crimes such as the trafficking of cocaine and cannabis or smuggling of weapons. In many cases, well-connected gang leaders, including former inmates of US prisons, facilitate shipments by leveraging their networks from Colombia and Venezuela to North America and Western Europe. Meanwhile, local gang members may be subcontracted for “protecting” transshipment of drugs, sourcing firearms abroad (primarily from the US), and organizing local distribution and retail. However, most gangs in the Caribbean are inward-facing and connected to local political economies ranging from disrupting elections and securing government contracts to local drug dealing, prostitution, scams, and extortion. Rather than facilitate international drug shipments or human trafficking rings, gangs throughout the region are typically parochial and focused instead on protecting their territory.

The Caribbean region experienced a sharp increase in homicidal violence since 2021, largely because of heightened inter-gang rivalries. Some countries and jurisdictions currently register among the highest murder and violent crime rates in the world. From 2017 to 2022, firearms were used in more than two thirds (67 percent) of all homicides perpetrated across the region, far higher than the global average (40 percent). The combination of high cocaine availability, access to firearms and ammunition, gang fragmentation, entrenched corruption, and abundance of young males with limited opportunities act as critical determinants of the violent crime in the region. Prepared between November 2023 and January 2024, this report considers the regional and domestic dynamics of gangs and criminal markets across the region, with a specific focus on four countries:


12 Based on interviews with police officials based in Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago between November and December 2023. These observations also align with those of InSight Crime which also conducted extensive research on gangs in the Caribbean in 2023. See, for example, InSight Crime (2023) Caribbean profile, November 2, https://insightcrime.org/caribbean-organized-crime-news/caribbean/

13 The same trends are apparent in other Caribbean countries, including Haiti, where recent UNSC reports suggest that there is a small but effective network of gang members overseeing firearms procurement, shipment and distribution in the country. See UNSC (2024).

14 See, for example, InSight Crime (2023).

15 Based on interviews with police officials based in Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago between November and December 2023.

16 There were at least 89,100 firearm-related homicide victims in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021, including 55,070 in South America, 29,936 in Central America and 4,094 in the Caribbean. Caribbean, Central American and South American countries registered firearm homicide rates of 9.3, 16.9 and 12.7 per 100,000 respectively in 2021. See UNODC, Homicide and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023

17 UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023, Homicide and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, page 11, 2023

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The present study offers critical insight into the complex dynamics of gangs, violence and organized crime in the Caribbean region. By delving into the intricate dynamics of gang activities, drug trafficking, and firearm proliferation, this study contributes significantly to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goals 3, 8, 16, and 17.

**Good Health and Well-being:**
Violence is as a public health issue, because it affects the physical, mental, and psychosocial health of individuals, families, and communities. The effects range from increased physical injuries with loss of limbs and disabilities, to mental health disorders due to psychological distress, anxiety and depression, especially in the communities most impacted. One of the primary concerns addressed in the study is the impact of gang-related violence. Through evidence-based insights, policymakers and multidisciplinary practitioners can develop targeted strategies to mitigate the adverse health effects of gang violence, ultimately contributing to the advancement of SDG 3.
Partnerships for the Goals:
The study underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in addressing complex challenges related to organized crime and violence. By fostering collaboration between governments, civil society organizations, international agencies, and local communities, the study advocates for a collective and integrated approach to crime prevention and criminal justice reform. Through knowledge-sharing, capacity-building initiatives, and joint advocacy efforts, stakeholders can leverage synergies, mobilize resources, and implement evidence-based interventions to effectively combat gang-related crime and promote sustainable development in the Caribbean region, thus exemplifying the spirit of SDG 17.

Decent Work and Economic Growth:
The study underscores the economic ramifications of gang-related crime, particularly in the areas of employment and economic development. By disrupting lawful economic activities, perpetuating extortion schemes, and impeding investments, criminal gangs hinder efforts towards sustainable economic growth and job creation in the Caribbean region. Through comprehensive analyses of the socio-economic impact of gang activities, the study informs policy discussions on promoting inclusive economic opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship, and strengthening institutions to combat organized crime. In doing so, it aligns with the objectives of SDG 8 to foster decent work and sustainable economic growth.

Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions:
The study serves as a vital tool in advancing SDG 16 by addressing key dimensions of peace, justice, and strong institutions. By uncovering the root causes of gang violence, identifying the actors involved, and analyzing the efficacy of law enforcement responses, the study offers valuable insights into enhancing crime prevention, promoting access to justice, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Through evidence-based policy recommendations, it empowers governments and stakeholders to implement targeted interventions aimed at reducing crime rates, enhancing community safety, and strengthening the rule of law, thus contributing to the overarching goal of achieving peaceful and inclusive societies.
KEY FINDINGS

Serious and organized crime is a historic and persistent concern across the Caribbean. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, several Caribbean countries, given their strategic geographical location and policing and customs capacity deficits, serve as transit points for illicit drugs and destinations for illegal firearms. However, the criminal groups involved in serious and organized crime across the region are diverse. They vary considerably in terms of size, motive, activity, influence, and political connectedness. When counted, the number of gangs and gang members appears to be increasing in many of the region’s countries.

The proliferation of gangs and gang members has occurred alongside an observed increase in violent crime, including intentional homicide. The expanding scope and scale of criminal networks coincides with deepening corruption, financial crime, and weakening of state institutions. As is the case elsewhere, the region is registering a sharp increase in technology-facilitated crime, including cybercrime and cyber-fraud, with individuals and groups engaging in such criminal behavior or falling victim to it. Greater political attention is warranted to tackle issues of financial crime, including money laundering and the movement of the proceeds of crime.

Notwithstanding growing concern with the expansion and diversification of serious and organized crime across the Caribbean, the academic literature and official data offer a partial understanding of the dynamics and participants in the region’s criminal markets. This report seeks to fill this knowledge gap. It features insights from a mixed-methodology study that included: analysis of official UN and country-level statistics on drug and firearm seizures and associated criminal victimization; a review of the available academic literature; site visits to selected countries; and interviews with public officials and subject-matter experts. For illustrative purposes, the report focuses on the characteristics of drugs, firearms and gangs in four Caribbean countries: Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Gun-related violence has increased throughout the Caribbean since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago register among the top ten highest murder rates globally. Where data are available, they indicate that a majority share of the homicides are due to collective violence associated with criminal organizations or gang disputes, and most killings involve a firearm. Of note, men between the ages of 18 and 30 are the most at-risk group for both perpetrating and being victimized by gun violence in the Caribbean. Most of the firearms and ammunition used originates from the United States.

The culture of violence is deeply embedded and manifests across society. For instance, violence is represented in some popular music scenes, such as Trinidad’s “Trinibad”, a dancehall subgenre. Trinibad artists and their gang-affiliated associates have either engaged in or been victims of threatening and violent behavior, including homicide and drug trafficking. There is some indication that the popularity of the genre has allowed for gang-recruitment and expansion activities within the Caribbean. The general uptick in violence also includes non-gun related violence, while rates of gender-based violence are high wherever measured.

Several factors contribute to the ongoing levels of violence. Gang-related competition over drug trafficking and retail and high firearms availability are key variables. A number of criminal organizations are influenced by members who were deported (or migrated) from the U.S. and other jurisdictions over the past two decades. Importantly, there are high levels of impunity for violent acts throughout
the region. In addition, policing the illegal firearms trade is difficult, given the complex transnational network of sellers and buyers and the comparatively modest quantities of firearms trafficked. Some long standing gangs throughout the region are politically connected and have undertaken pro-social tasks on behalf of political and economic actors. These connections and activities provide political protection, which, in turn, allows the gangs to engage in unchecked criminal activity.

While most gangs are parochial, a small number of transnational criminal organizations are key facilitators of the drug trade throughout the Caribbean. Knowledge of these organizations is often limited. These organizations vary in terms of reach and size, but generally specialize in trafficking over a specific subregion or corridor. Generally, such organizations facilitate transshipment of narcotics and firearms throughout the Caribbean and will be more likely to be connected to criminal organizations in North America, South America, and Western Europe. Moreover, it is known that some business elites facilitate gang and trafficking activities in the Caribbean. While criminally involved actors may be recognized within these communities as “open secrets,” publicly available information regarding these entities and their activities is likewise extremely limited.

Each of the countries featured in the report exhibit certain geographical and geopolitical advantages to drug traffickers, given their proximity to South America, North America, or EU and African shipping routes. Some of the countries have significant local criminal markets, considering the size of their populations. For the most part, borders are not consistently patrolled allowing for the unsupervised movement of goods, or they have significant ports and port traffic that provide cover for the transshipment of illicit goods, making them ideal locations for criminal organizations to stage and redirect their illicit products. Local retail markets are often served by street gangs. Competition over local markets results in a large share of violent encounters.

Responses to the region’s serious and organized crime and gang activity are variable and pursued by public, private and nonprofit entities. These responses often include regional cooperation, with support from the U.S., the EU and the United Nations. For example, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative seeks to prevent gang involvement and reduce gang-related violence. CARICOM-supported interventions are helping to mobilize firearm interdiction measures. Cure Violence initiatives, which focus on deploying a public health approach to interrupt the escalation of gang violence, have generated some success where deployed. Despite advocating for a public health response, several Caribbean governments have simultaneously stepped up their “tough on crime” measures, enacting states of emergency, promulgating anti-gang legislation, and instituting anti-gang units or authorizing heavy-handed policing strategies.

The results of heavy-handed police-led responses throughout the region have been uneven. While tough-on-crime policing strategies have resulted in an increase in arrests and drug seizures, an erosion of trust has occurred within the heavily policed communities. There is also concern regarding extrajudicial violence. Saint Lucia, for example, is under U.S. Leahy Law sanctions due to allegations of extrajudicial killings; at the same time, extrajudicial violence has been identified in Jamaica and Guyana. While regional cooperation has improved, capacity and information sharing appear to be low. Some criminal organizations have identified these gaps and appear to be reactivating the region.
Moving forward, evidence-based policy must be supported, and capacity expanded. To achieve these ends, information collection needs to improve; research regarding the criminal activities and violence within the region must be expanded, and cooperation and collaboration capacity increased, especially when responding to transnational trafficking activities. Consideration should also be made for multijurisdictional specialized units to respond to financial crime, cybercrime, and trafficking activities, especially given the constraints faced by smaller countries, which are consistently outmatched by organized criminals.
SECTION I.
Gangs and Gang Violence
Caribbean countries registered a sharp increase in homicidal violence over the past decade, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Muggah, R. and Aguirre, K. (2024) Latin America’s murder rates reveal surprising new trends, Americas Quarterly, June 18, retrieved from https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/latin-americas-murder-rates-reveal-surprising-new-trends/ and accessed on June 20 2024). Given their small populations, even a modest spike in murders can translate into sharp increases in prevalence rates (see Figures 1, 2). For example, in 2022, the homicide rate of Turks and Caicos, a drugs transshipment point between Colombia, Venezuela, and the Bahamas, climbed to 77.6 per 100,000, a doubling of the previous year.\(^{19}\) According to the Statistical Institute of Jamaica, the country’s 2022 homicide rate climbed to 52.9 per 100,000,\(^{20}\) with an estimated 70 percent of all documented murders connected to criminal organizations.\(^{21}\) Saint Lucia in 2022 recorded a homicide rate of 42.3 per 100,000 shattering the previous year’s record (neighboring Saint Vincent and Grenadines also experienced similar trends).\(^{22}\) Meanwhile, in 2022 Trinidad and Tobago’s homicide rate rose to 39.4 per 100,000, up over 22 percent from the year before.

According to data supplied by police, this increase was largely due to the violence resulting from gang disputes.\(^{23}\) Guyana’s 2022 homicide rate was 15 per 100,000, with reports emerging that the prevalence increased by over 36 percent in the first half of 2023.\(^{24}\)

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21 Extracted from UNODC data.


23 Trinidad and Tobago police reported 599 homicides in 2022 and 448 in 2021. See https://www.ttps.gov.tt/Stats/Crime-Totals-By-Month. Disaggregated homicide data was also supplied for the period 2010-2023 by the local authorities.

24 There were 82 murders in the first half of 2023 compared to 60 in the first half of 2022. See Kaieteur News (2023) Murders increase by 36.6 percent for first half of 2023, Kaieteur News, July 2, https://www.kaieteurnewsonline.com/2023/07/02/murders-increase-by-36-6-for-first-half-of-2023/
Figure 1. Homicide in the Eastern Caribbean (absolute numbers): 2013-2022

Source: https://data.unodc.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims
Figure 2. Proportion of homicides committed with firearms (percentage): 2013-2022

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significant share of homicidal violence in the Caribbean is attributed to gang-related disputes in urban centers. While data availability is uneven and of varying quality, between 20-40 percent of intentional homicides perpetrated in Caribbean countries is traced to organized violence, far higher than the global average. In Jamaica, for example, about 70 percent of all reported homicides in 2021 were linked to organized crime groups or gangs (see Figure 3). Meanwhile, between 2000-2022 in Trinidad and Tobago, an average of 33 percent of all reported homicides were specifically “gang-related”. Most violent deaths involve young males between 18-30, often residing in poor neighborhoods and situations of deprivation and marginalization. Indeed, young males are the most at-risk demographic group when it comes to perpetrating and being victimized by gun violence in the Caribbean.

25 See UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, Homicide and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, page 5, 2023


There are multiple spill-over effects of collective violence on interpersonal and gender-related violence. For one, Caribbean countries register above-average rates of sexual and gender-based violence. Recent surveys in Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago found that lifetime prevalence rates of four types of intimate violence, including intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual abuse, ranged from 39 percent (Jamaica) to 55 percent of all women interviewed (Guyana). Indeed, Jamaica already registers a significantly high femicide rate. Norms glorifying hyper-masculinity and expectations of men dominating and women submitting are prevalent. Likewise, high levels of impunity among perpetrators of gender-based violence are enabling factors.

The use of firearms, especially handguns, is a common feature of gang-related violence across the Caribbean. It is not just the availability of firearms that contribute to high levels of lethal and non-lethal violence, but also weak oversight and control and the impunity associated with...
their use.\textsuperscript{33} Pistols and revolvers – especially handguns produced by Glock, Beretta, Smith & Wesson, and Taurus – and to a lesser extent semi- and automatic rifles of various calibers are most common.\textsuperscript{34} In some countries, notably Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Haiti, increasingly high caliber firearms and ammunition are being seized.\textsuperscript{35} Although most firearms circulating in the region appear to be sourced originally from the US according to ATF traces,\textsuperscript{36} there are also instances of weapons and ammunition trafficked from Venezuela (in the case of Trinidad and Tobago) and diverted from police and private security arsenals.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite restrictive national firearms control legislation across the Caribbean and virtually no domestic manufacturing, weapons and ammunition are still comparatively widespread. This explains why over 15 members of CARICOM adopted a Caribbean Firearms Roadmap in 2020,\textsuperscript{38} with the goal of strengthening regulatory frameworks and reducing the illicit flow of firearms into and within the region.\textsuperscript{39} Nevertheless, US-sourced firearms and ammunition continue to be procured, traded and used by criminal factions to enforce contracts, settle disputes, and undertake retributive violence.\textsuperscript{40} In some cases, weapons are rented or leased to evade traceability. One reason for the persistence of weapons trafficking is that demand remains high among gang members and there is ample supply from neighboring countries, notably the US. A study of a sample of prisoners in Trinidad and Tobago, for example, describes mixed motives for the procurement of firearms including personal protection, peer pressure, the pursuit of criminal activity and financial considerations.\textsuperscript{41}

The complex transnational network of sellers and buyers and the modest quantities of firearms shipped throughout the Caribbean complicate efforts to disrupt gun and ammunition trafficking. Firearms are typically procured from “straw purchasers” in the US, including gang members, brokers, and members of the diaspora.\textsuperscript{42} For example, in 2023 the US convicted two Trinidad and Tobago citizens for conspiring to smuggle firearms in shipments containing sports gear and household items from the US.\textsuperscript{43} Weapons, parts, components, and munitions are frequently

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} See Bloomberg (2024) Murder weapons in Caribbean come mostly from America, Bloomberg, January 17, https://www.bloomberg.com/graphic/2024-us-made-gun-exports-caribbean-violence/
\item \textsuperscript{35} See, for example, Observer (2021) St James police seize 300 illegal guns in last three years, Jamaica Observer, March 22, https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/st-james-police-seize-330-illegal-guns-in-last-three-years/
\item \textsuperscript{36} Economist (2023) The Caribbean is awash with illegal arms, October 5, https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/10/05/the-caribbean-is-awash-with-illegal-american-guns
\item \textsuperscript{38} The full name is Roadmap for Implementing The Caribbean Priority Actions on the Illicit Proliferation of Firearms and Ammunition across the Caribbean in a Sustainable Manner by 2030 and the text is available at https://unilrec.org/en/publication/caribbean-firearms-roadmap/
\item \textsuperscript{39} See UNLIREC (2023) Third annual meeting of state of the Caribbean firearms roadmap, 14-15 November, https://unlirec.org/en/tag/caribbean-firearms-roadmap/
\item \textsuperscript{40} While the most commonly used firearms are handguns which are easier to conceal, there are also signs of increasing use of semi-automatic rifles and even grenades.
\item \textsuperscript{41} See Small Arms Survey/CARIMPACS (2023).
\item \textsuperscript{42} These trends have long been observed by UNODC and others. “One of the main strategies employed by arms traffickers to procure guns is the use of ‘straw purchasers’. These are acquaintances, relatives or persons hired to purchase guns in the United States from gun dealers, at gun shows, or directly from manufacturers.” See, for example, UNODC and World Bank (2007) Crime, violence, and trafficking to T&T: costs, and policy options in the Caribbean, March, pg. 157, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/Cr_and_Vio_Car_E.pdf
\item \textsuperscript{43} Weapons included various firearms and ammunition, including a Taurus G2C 9mm pistol, a SAR arms SAR-9 9mm pistol, a Taurus G3 9mm pistol, and a Ruger Security-9 9mm pistol. They were seeking to ship the items from Piarco International Airport in Miami in 2021. See US Attorney’s Office (2023) Two members of Caribbean arms trafficking ring sentenced to more than four years in prison, July 28, https://www.justice.gov/usao-mdfl/pr/two-members-caribbean-arms-trafficking-ring-sentenced-more-than-four-years-prison
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concealed in containers and shipped by sea, sent on commercial airlines, or transferred by post. There is also evidence of new technologies being used, including 3D printers, to produce untraceable homemade firearms known as “ghost guns.”44 Reports have also surfaced of the importation of “conversion devices” that can turn handguns into automatic firearms.45

Criminal gangs operating across the Caribbean are diverse and vary significantly in scale and organization.46 In fact, there are hundreds of different gangs operating across the region. While there is an emphasis among governments and media outlets to count gangs, most of them are ephemeral and with small numbers of members. In Jamaica, for example, there were as many as 379 separate criminal gangs identified in 2021, though just 262 were considered active and the rest described as “dormant” by the country’s National Intelligence Bureau.47 Most of these gangs – over 80 percent – were considered to be primarily turf-oriented while a small number exhibited more centralized leadership and sophisticated capabilities and were typically involved in organized crime.48 In Trinidad and Tobago, police identified over 140 gangs in 2023, with as many as 1,700 members (compared to just 900 several years ago).49 Meanwhile, in Saint Lucia, between 12-15 feuding gangs contributed to the country’s soaring murder rate.50 And in Guyana, the precise dimensions of gang involvement are less well understood, with most believed to be involved in procuring government contracts, local fraud, extortion, and intimidation of local communities.

Box 1.
Music and gang culture in the Caribbean

Law enforcement authorities across the Caribbean have expressed concerns about the linkage between ‘gangsta’ music and gang activity in the region. One prominent example of this linkage is so-called Trinibad music. Trinidad, which is a subgenre of dancehall music, can be described as “gangsta” dancehall. It is also referred to in the press as “murder music,” with themes revolving around gang life in Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad is popular, with good regional reach; the most notable artists tour and get airplay beyond the Caribbean in the US, Canada, and the UK. Moreover, some Trinidad groups openly fraternize with gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as in Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and elsewhere.

As is the case with similar styles of music in Latin America and North America, most Trinidad artists have tenuous connections to the lives and events that they sing about.51 The most popular musicians are linked to Trinidad-based gangs, such as Muslim (aka 9), Sixx (aka 6), and Rasta City (aka Seven). Some financing of their musical output may come from gang

44 Trinidad and Tobago police arrested an individual in Caparo district charged with using 3D printers to make a ‘quantity’ of homemade weapons in August 2023. See, for example, Hamilton-Davis, R. (2023) Police find stash of untraceable 3D-printed ghost guns’ Newsday, 31 August, https://newsday.co.tt/2023/08/31/police-find-stash-of-untraceable-3d-printed-firearms-ghost-guns/.
45 See Newsdesk (2023) More conversion devices are being found in T&T, CNC3, April 26, https://www.cnc3.co.tt/more-conversion-devices-are-being-found-in-tt/.
49 According to the Trinidad and Tobago police, the number of gangs dropped from 211 to 129 between 2018 and 2020, and the number of gang members fell from 2,400 to 1,044. Interviews with Trinidad and Tobago Police Force on 9 December 2023 in Port-of-Spain.
50 Interviews with Guyana police force representatives in December 2023.
Caribbean gangs have evolved over time and exhibit varied criminal motivations. In some instances, gang traditions in Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago extend back to the mid-twentieth century. Many of the predecessors of the region’s contemporary gangs were in fact “self-help” and “neighborhood improvement” groups that operated in low-income and informal settlements where the state exerted limited presence. From the beginning, these entities were strongly linked to the prevailing music culture, including dancehall in Jamaica during the 1970s and steel bands in Trinidad and Tobago between the 1940s and 1960s. Increasingly militarized groups forged patronage networks with members of the political and economic elite, as well as the burgeoning entertainment sectors (see Box 1).

Across the Caribbean, politicians and civil servants regularly provided gang leaders with contracts in communities under their control in exchange for influencing voting outcomes and offering “protection”. Gang heads, or “dons” as they are often called, assumed the mantle of “community leaders” in their “garrison communities”. Even after periods of prolonged incarceration, many gang leaders maintained strong community loyalty and resumed public interactions with former and current politicians

58 In Trinidad, for example, competing steel bands frequently clashed over turf rivalries in the mid-1940s and 1950s. Gangs were formed in various communities, attaching themselves to their respective steel band group (e.g. the Desperadoes from Laventille Hill, the Invaders from Woodbrook, the All Stars from Hell Yard, and Casablanca from La Cour Harp. State-led stigmatization and crackdowns on steel band members exacerbated the problem. In 1957, it is claimed that Trinidad and Tobago’s first Prime Minister held talks with members of the Marabuntas and Desperadoes who were fighting in the Laventille neighborhood. A special works program was launched to create jobs which was later controlled by rival gangs.
Some Caribbean gangs are inevitably more influential, capable, and connected than others. While Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana are home to a small number of powerful gangs involved in international drug trafficking, the majority are made-up of smaller-order factions that are primarily focused on local territorial control and influence, as well as localized extortion, robberies, scams, and contract killings. In both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, some of the dominant gangs have “federated” under a handful of leaders. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, there are as many eight gang alliances. Unlike in Central and South America where loyalty to a single gang is often of central importance (and defection can be punished with death), there appears to be a higher level of fluidity between Caribbean gang members across factions. Moreover, some gangs have developed new skills and capabilities, including those passed on by formerly incarcerated gang members deported from the US. Several of the larger gangs also maintain territorial and social control from within overcrowded and under-serviced prisons across the region where imprisoned leaders recruit, build out their membership, and oversee operations from their cells.

Whether transnationally connected or operating in a highly localized manner, most gangs emerge in response to criminal opportunity and in conditions of social and economic deprivation. Several larger Caribbean gangs in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, for instance, have evolved to support the procurement, transshipment and trafficking of drugs, firearms and even people from South America to North America and Western Europe, in particular. For example, a handful of Jamaican gangs are involved in facilitating shipments of cocaine and cannabis to markets in North America and Western Europe, as well as to neighboring islands (including in exchange for firearms). One of Jamaica’s top gang leaders, the head of the transnational gang Shower Posse, Christopher “Dudus” Coke, was the island’s principal trafficker in the 1990s and 2000s until he was arrested in 2010. Coke is currently incarcerated in the US

63 Interview with Randy Seepersad, 5 December 2023.
64 In Jamaica, for example, some of the dominant gangs include area leaders, ground commanders and lower-level ground soldiers who serve as scouts and aides.
and is scheduled for release in January 2029. Another dominant gang in southern Trinidad and Tobago is reportedly heavily involved in managing human smuggling in partnership with Venezuelan counterparts, with funds allegedly laundered in the country and back to Colombia and Venezuela. And while most gangs seek to generate profits for their leadership, they also play a role in incubating a sense of belonging and identity to the rank and file. The composition of gangs is overwhelmingly of younger males, often lacking educational and employment opportunities and deeply suspicious of public authorities. While often short and brutal, gang life offers money, respect, belonging, and access to intimidate partners.

A relatively small number of Caribbean gangs exhibit transnational capabilities and networks that allow them to benefit from additional criminal rents. This is most likely when they are connected to drug trafficking networks linked to cocaine, cannabis, heroin, and amphetamine producing countries outside the region (especially Colombia and Venezuela). Several gangs and their intermediaries also source illicit firearms and ammunition, primarily from the US, and to a lesser extent South America and Western Europe (see Figure 4). Some may also acquire munition from local police and defense forces, as has been reported in Trinidad and Tobago. Gang leaders from across the Caribbean routinely make use of Diaspora connections, including in Canada, the US and EU countries and jurisdictions such as Curacao, Martinique, and the Virgin Islands. For example, Venezuelan criminal groups are believed to be reconstituting a handful of gang cliques in Trinidad and Tobago. Likewise, some gangs from Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are also reportedly linking up some operations with smaller groups in neighboring islands such as Barbados, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. In certain cases, the leadership may operate from higher-income countries to avoid scrutiny closer to home. For example, the presence of Jamaican and Trinidadian gang members in Florida and New York facilitates access to firearms in states with less restrictive controls and freight-forwarders to ship them in containers.

69 Interviews with Trinidad and Tobago police as well as representatives from CARIMPACS, December 9-10, 2023.
72 See Katz and Foz (2010), Higginson et al. (2018), and Seepersad and Bissessar (2013).
Figure 4. Types of Crime Identified in selected Caribbean Countries
The deportation of former convicts from the US to the Caribbean also amplified the transnational reach of gangs and the sophistication of their operations. During the 2000s, after 9/11 and the passing of the Patriot Act, the US ramped up deportations of criminal aliens.\(^77\) About 4,000 deportees were returned to Trinidad and Tobago alone by the mid-2010s.\(^78\) The export of hardened criminals connected with international networks generates negative impacts in destination criminal markets. According to local informants, many of these deportees were equipped with advanced criminal skills and connections, often exceeding the capacities of local police forces across the region.\(^79\) This contributed in cases to a “deportation model” of gang formation.\(^80\) However, deportees with narco-related skills tended not to be as motivated by street-level gang activities or egregious forms of gang-related violence. Instead, by leveraging Colombian and Venezuelan connections, some of these criminal actors mobilized to develop more direct contact with suppliers to transship drugs and firearms.

While a sensitive topic, it is widely recognized that Caribbean gangs frequently collude with state actors and private businesses. In the case of the larger gangs and gang federations, political and economic elites regularly make use of their services to influence elections in key districts and protect personal and commercial property and assets.\(^81\) In exchange, gang leaders may be granted privileged access to public contracts (e.g. construction) and protection from investigation, arrest, and prosecution.\(^82\) A small number of connected gangs facilitate the transshipment of illegal commodities – including drugs and guns, as well as smuggled migrants and trafficked people – with tacit or overt support from well-placed politicians, corrupt customs officials, and complicit police officers. According to the perceptions of key informants, it is often the smaller players that are charged and incarcerated while those higher up in the hierarchy often find their cases thrown out due to lack of evidence or judges that are compromised.\(^83\) The considerable impunity afforded gang leaders has emboldened some to diversify into new businesses, including migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation\(^84\) to lawful retail and services with high turn-over including car dealerships,

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\(^79\) Interview with Trinidad and Tobago police representatives on December 9 2023. Interview with Jamaican National Ministry of Security representative on 5 December 2023.


\(^83\) According to some informants (to remain anonymous) consulted by the author, surveillance infrastructure such as aerial radars and port scanners may be “inoperable” not just due to resource and capacity constraints, but also to facilitate the movement of illegal products.

There is limited publicly available information about the specific role of business and political elites in facilitating gang activities in the Caribbean, much less their wider involvement in criminal markets. Representatives from several regional and national intelligence agencies are aware that a small number of business people, often those engaged in import-export activities (e.g. cars and parts, agricultural produce, and oil and gas), and others involved in high velocity cash businesses (e.g. pharmacies, grocers, and casinos) are more likely to be connected to trafficking and money laundering. In some cases they may be involved intentionally, including organizing the preparation of consignments in air and sea ports in South America, North America, and Western Europe as well as bribing port and customs officials. In other instances, they may be unintentionally implicated, with their shipping infrastructure “hijacked” by criminal groups.

Until recently, many criminal investigations into powerful elite and gang leaders suspected of being involved in organized crime seldom made it to court and prosecutions rarely occurred. For example, between 2014 and 2019, Jamaica’s anti-gang legislation led to just two convictions while Saint Lucia did not produce any gang-related charges from the promulgation of its Anti-Gang Act in 2014 until 2022 when it established a gang investigation unit. However, Jamaica has recently made several major high profile arrests and indictments under the 2021 Criminal Justice (Suppression of Criminal Organizations) Act. Since 2022, the Jamaican Constabulary Force claims to have charged over 149 gang leaders and crime influencers and disrupted a total of 78 gangs. Likewise, Saint Lucia has also reported some positive outcomes in targeting gang leaders since implementing its own anti-gang laws, though violent crime rates have nevertheless continued to rise.

85 See, for example, La Vende (2014) Gangs shifting into legitimate businesses, Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, April 27, https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.381863.6485cac548; Loop editors (2020) Gangsters now cooperating across political lines, says Chang, Loop, January 10, https://jamaica.loopnews.com/content/gangsters-now-co-operating-across-political-lines-says-chang.
87 Interview with the financial crimes unit in Trinidad and Jamaica, December 11, 2023. Interview with Jamaica police, December 5, 2023.
89 In a 2020 trial, a single gang leader was convicted while 15 defendants, including a police officer, were acquitted. Amendments in 2021, however, broadened the definition of gangs and added new protections for witnesses. Since then, there has been an increase in gang prosecutions in Jamaica. See Doherty, S. (2023) Jamaica success in gang case but violence continues, InSight Crime, March 10, https://insightcrime.org/news/jamaica-success-in-gang-case-but-violence-continues/.
SECTION II.
DRUG MARKETS AND CARIBBEAN GANGS
A key driver of criminal markets and gang activities is the drug trade, particularly cocaine and cannabis. Record-breaking coca production in 2020 and 2021 contributed to surging trafficking in cocaine from Colombia, as well as Bolivia and Peru. The transshipment of drugs through the Caribbean has an extensive legacy. During the 1980s, for example, Colombian cartels moved an estimated 15 tons of cocaine daily from South America to the US. Indeed, more than three quarters of all cocaine seized between South America and the US during that period was intercepted in Caribbean countries. After interdiction efforts were stepped up by the US during the late 1980s and 1990s, Caribbean cocaine routes were temporarily disrupted, though not entirely. Steady demand in the US and Europe, in particular, led to the resurgence of large-scale trafficking, including via the Dominican Republic and Dutch Caribbean, but also more widely across the Eastern Caribbean.

Drug transshipment and trafficking across the Caribbean generally runs from the Southeast to the Northwest. The ultimate destinations include North America and Western Europe alongside modest domestic consumption. There are at least two ways drugs are moved between the islands. First, cocaine, cannabis and other drugs are sent from Colombia and Venezuela directly to consumers in North America and Western Europe via sea freight and aircraft with periodic refueling off or onshore. Second, drugs are smuggled via “island hopping” to any number of jurisdictions with the goal of reaching suitable legal (or clandestine) airports and ports for redistribution. In addition, a modest share of drugs is destined for domestic consumption, both by residents and tourists. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, there was also a surge in drugs sent by postal service both within and outside the region. Complex networks of criminal actors and intermediaries, including a small number of Caribbean gangs, are frequently involved in transactions at each stage of the supply chain.

It is possible to infer broad trends in drug markets, including by monitoring seizures and estimating patterns of consumption. Of course, seizure data provides only partial insight into the dynamics of drug markets: official information on captured drugs represents only a modest sample of overall annual drug flows. Complicating matters, most Caribbean countries do not regularly or publicly disclose annual cocaine and cannabis seizures statistics. Nevertheless some data is officially reported to UNODC while other information can be procured through key informants and open sources. While such data can help assess the potential scope, scale and dynamics of cocaine and cannabis markets, interpretation should always be accompanied with caution. Indeed, any statistical analysis should be accompanied with field research and key informant interviews. The following sections consider basic trends in drug-related markets spanning four countries under review.

91 Ibid.
95 Interview with a former drug trafficker, November 19, 2023
Guyana

Guyana has long served as a key drug trafficking corridor, particularly for South American cocaine destined to the US and Western Europe. In the 1980s, Guyana was described as an “integral part of the South American smuggling route” involving Colombian cartels and the Italian ‘Ndrangheta as well as Venezuelan, Brazilian, and Guyanese gangs. The country’s physical proximity to Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname, and its strategic location on the Atlantic coast, enhanced its appeal to organized crime groups. What is more, counter-narcotics operations in neighboring countries such as Brazil generated “balloon effects”, encouraging trafficking factions to establish new cross-border routes in Guyana.

Given its pivotal role in drug transshipment, Guayanese authorities have received support from international organizations.


97 The country’s head of Customs and Anti-Narcotics Unit (CANU) claims the country is caught in the crosshairs of drug trafficking networks.


Drug and firearms trafficking routes in Guyana

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Source: Based on site visits and key informant interviews by UNODC

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Source: Based on site visits and key informant interviews by UNODC
from the US-backed Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) for over a decade.\textsuperscript{99} Assistance includes patrol boats, improved maritime domain awareness, law enforcement training, and community-based violence prevention programs, though there is growing pressure on Guyana to redouble efforts to disrupt narcotics trafficking and associated corruption.\textsuperscript{100} Narcotics are frequently concealed in outbound shipments, including timber, sacks of rice, and scrap metal.\textsuperscript{108} Some observers have expressed concerns about the lack of monitoring of exit and entry points, including the uneven application of scanning machines to detect illicit products.\textsuperscript{109}

Owing to record-breaking coca production and trafficking from Colombia during the COVID-19 pandemic,\textsuperscript{110} the scale of drug transshipment via Guyana is believed to have significantly increased. Cocaine seizures increased fourfold, from 126 kilograms in 2019 to 563 kilograms in 2021.\textsuperscript{111} Cannabis seizures also reportedly doubled in Guyana over the same period, from 770 kilograms in 2019 to 1,545 kilograms in 2021 (see Figure 5). The volume of cocaine and cannabis seized in Guyana in 2022 and 2023 are not yet officially available to UNODC.\textsuperscript{112} While drug seizures in the country have risen since 2019, they likely under-represent the scale of trafficking underway. Indeed, in 2020, Belgian police seized over 11.5 tons of cocaine sent from Guyana concealed in a shipment of scrap metal, described at the time as the "largest overseas

Drugs enter, transit, and exit Guyana by air, sea, and land. The primary routes for cocaine and cannabis include Colombia and Venezuela, with drugs transported by plane, vessels, and even a narco-submarine.\textsuperscript{101} Drugs also reportedly transit land borders and river networks via Brazil, Venezuela, and Suriname, including by drug mules, before reaching Guyana.\textsuperscript{102} For example, drugs are transported by boat up the Orinoco and Cuyuni rivers from Venezuela and the Essequibo River from Brazil. Once arrived in Guyana, drugs can be shipped directly to consumer countries or via transit jurisdictions such as Suriname\textsuperscript{103}, Curacao\textsuperscript{104}, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia\textsuperscript{105}, Virgin Islands\textsuperscript{106}, as well as West Africa.\textsuperscript{107} Drugs transported by plane, vessels, and even by Germany in Guyana rice, Stabroek News, August 112, https://www.stabroeknews.com/2020/08/12/news/guyana/canu-probing-huge-cocaine-find-by-germany-in-guyana-rice/, Guyana Chronicle, November 24, https://guyanachronicle.com/2020/11/24/ belgium-cocaine-bust-pulls-halt-on-scrap-metal-trade-here/

Drugs from Brazil, Venezuela, and Suriname, including byplane, vessels, and even a narco-submarine. They include Colombia and Venezuela, with drugs transported by plane, vessels, and even a narco-submarine. For example, drugs are transported by boat up the Orinoco and Cuyuni rivers from Venezuela and the Essequibo River from Brazil. Once arrived in Guyana, drugs can be shipped directly to consumer countries or via transit jurisdictions such as Suriname, Curacao, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia, Virgin Islands, as well as West Africa. Drugs transported by plane, vessels, and even a narco-submarine. They include Colombia and Venezuela, with drugs transported by plane, vessels, and even a narco-submarine.

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\textsuperscript{101} See Loop News (2024) Narco-Sub intercepted off Guyana with cocaine, Loop News, April 5, https://caribbean.loopnews.com/content/narco-sub-intercepted-guyana-cocaine.

\textsuperscript{102} See Jones (2020).


\textsuperscript{104} 100 See Loop News (2024) Guyana: two held after cocaine intercepted, Loop News, February 23, https://caribbean.loopnews.com/content/guyana-two-held-after-cocaine-intercepted.


\textsuperscript{106} One of the largest seizures ever recorded in 2017 involved 4.2 tons of cocaine worth an estimated $126 million at the time. It involved Guianese traffickers moving drugs through the US Virgin Islands. See https://www.dhs.gov/blog/2017/03/01/coast-guard-seizes-cocaine-worth-estimated-125-million


\textsuperscript{111} Guyanese authorities reported that this was the highest number of seizures in 10 years. https://newsroom.gy/2021/11/15/guyana-recorded-highest-seizure-of-cocaine-in-10-years/
drug bust ever, worldwide."¹¹³

The dimensions of several recent drug shipments reportedly heralding from Guyana are also unprecedented. In 2016, for example, the UK intercepted a vessel that had onboarded 3.2 tons of cocaine in Guyana in what was described at the time as the largest drug bust in UK history.¹¹⁴ In addition to the record-breaking Belgian seizure in 2020,¹¹⁵ another 1.5 tons of pure cocaine was intercepted in Hamburg the same year and traced back to Guyana.¹¹⁶ Jamaican authorities likewise uncovered over 139 kg of cocaine shipped in six containers from Guyana [on route to Haiti and China] in 2021.¹¹⁷ And in October 2023, Spanish police seized a Guyanese fishing vessel carrying over a ton of cocaine, including crew from Guyana and Albania.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, several Guyanese businessmen are also being investigated by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Homeland Security on suspicions of smuggling Colombian cocaine and illegally mined Venezuelan gold to the US, Europe and Middle East.¹¹⁹


It is not just the presence of sophisticated organized crime networks, but also state corruption that enables the movement of drugs in and out of Guyana. Corruption is a historic problem and has sustained gang activity. Gangs are frequently mobilized to intimidate voters and in return, politically-connected gangs are allowed to operate illicit enterprise with impunity. There are also reportedly tight links between foreign and domestic drug traffickers, Guyanese law enforcement and counternarcotics officials, and customs and port authorities in the country. Over a decade ago, Guyanese custom officials reported that as much as 60 percent of the cocaine entering the country was smuggled from Venezuela and then transferred to commercial freight vessels out of Georgetown, including to Suriname. Yet there are very few charges or prosecutions brought about against suspected traffickers. Criticism has focused on the weak scanning system overseen by the Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA), accusations the agency refutes. For its part, the GRA has initiated a partnership with the World Customs Organization (WCO) anti-corruption and integrity program to modernize processes and promote integrity.

A small number of Guyanese gangs have likewise established wide transnational partnerships, including facilitating drug transfers via large

129 Ibid.
commercial shipments and on commercial flights.  

130 In addition, Venezuelan criminal groups known as sindicatos are believed to interact with local Guyanese criminal groups along the countries’ shared border. 131 These groups, characterized collectively as “gangs” in the domestic press, impose protection on licit and illicit activities in rural Guyana and engage in pirate-related activities along the rivers that run along the borders of Guyana and Venezuela. In Guyana, as in the rest of the region, counting of gangs is emphasized. However, many gangs in Guyana are ephemeral and appear to have a small membership.


Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago serves as a major transit point for cocaine and cannabis in the eastern Caribbean. The country has long been affected by drug transshipment and trafficking and high rates of violent crime. For one, Trinidad and Tobago is considered a strategic location by organized crime networks due to its location: the southern tip of the island is just 11 kilometers away from Venezuela. The country’s physical proximity to Venezuela and the fact that it is outside the hurricane belt allows for year-around trafficking. What is more, strong cultural ties in southern Trinidad with Venezuela have ensured that the coastal region, including Icacos, Cedros, and Moruga, are sites of extensive trafficking of drugs, guns and migrants.

The primary supply route for drugs to Trinidad and Tobago is Venezuela and to a lesser extent Guyana and Suriname, with drugs


133 One of Venezuela’s key sources of drugs is the state of Monagas, just south of Trinidad and Tobago. Drugs and human smuggling are undertaken from the port of Guiria to Icacos in Trinidad. See Venezuela Investigative Unit (2023) Monagas: The missing link for Venezuelan drug trafficking, July 24, https://insightcrime.org/news/monagas-the-missing-link-for-venezuela-drug-traffickers/

134 Some elite properties in southern islands have been linked to major seizures. In 2004, for example, nearly 1,750 kilograms of cocaine was intercepted in Monos. More recently, the region has been the site of several high profile drug seizures. See, for example, Trinidad and Tobago Guardian (2024) Police make $184M drug bust in Cedros, Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, March 4, https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/police-make-184m-drug-bust-in-cedros-6.2.1940832.16f83c0dfe; Ghouralal, D. (2018) Venezuelan man arrested in $4.3 m cocaine bust, Loop News, May 3, https://lt.loopnews.com/content/venezuelan-man-arrested-43-m-cocaine-bust; and Loop News (2021) Cops seize $22M in cocaine, ganja in Moruga, Loop News, August 10, https://lt.loopnews.com/content/cops-seize-22m-cocaine-ganja-moruga.
Notwithstanding a perception among individuals consulted that drug trafficking increased since 2020, officially reported seizures decreased in Trinidad and Tobago over the past few years. While cannabis seizures increased from 2,890 kilograms in 2019 to 3,487 kilograms by 2021, they plummeted to 584 kilograms in 2022.\(^{137}\) Cocaine seizures also initially remained stable, from 320 kg in 2019 to 221 kilograms in 2021, and then declined to just 20 kilograms by 2022 (see Figure 6).\(^{138}\) It is likely that these figures significantly underestimate the extent of drug transshipment and trafficking in Trinidad and Tobago.\(^{139}\) It is worth noting that Trinidad and Tobago has, in the past, reported significant numbers of seizures.\(^{140}\)

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\(^{136}\) See also https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/prelaunch/6.3.2_Main_Studies/Transatlantic_cocaine_market.pdf


\(^{138}\) Other drug seizures in Trinidad and Tobago include hallucinogens (84 units in 2021), NPS (12.7 kilogram in 2022) and sedatives and tranquilizers (35,200 units in 2021). It is also worth noting that some 200 kilograms of cocaine were found attached to an LNG carrier in Point Fortin in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2019, https://www.offshore-energy.biz/cocaine-found-attached-to-lng-carrier-in-trinidad-and-tobago/. Also, a consignment of 800 kg of cocaine and 5.8 kilograms of cannabis was seized from the MV Elizabeth, registered in Trinidad and Tobago, in St Kitts and Nevis by the Joint Maritime Control Unit. Five Trinidad and Tobago residents made up 5 of the 7 crew. See EU (2022) Cocaine, cannabis seizures in St Kitts supported by SEACOP, https://illicitflows.eu/cocaine-cannabis-seizure-in-st-kitts-supported-by-seacop/


A string of reported drug seizures in Trinidad and Tobago in 2023 suggest that the drug economy is thriving. In May 2023, for example, the police service, with support from the US DEA,\textsuperscript{141} seized over 168 kilograms of cocaine in Chaguaramas that was destined for the US, the largest single bust in the country’s history.\textsuperscript{142} And in August 2023, another 46 kilograms worth of cocaine were also washed ashore in Fishing Pond, North Manzanilla, Manzanilla, Mayaro, and Guayaguayare after a boat reportedly containing three tons of cocaine capsized.\textsuperscript{143} The police also detected cocaine packed into car parts destined from Trinidad and Tobago for

\textit{Antigua.}\textsuperscript{144}

While Venezuela is reportedly a source of firearms in Trinidad and Tobago,\textsuperscript{145} the vast majority of weapons used by criminal groups and gangs are reportedly sourced from the US.\textsuperscript{146} Some handguns and assault rifles were suspected of being exchanged in “guns for drugs” and “guns for food” trade with Venezuelans, though the extent of the trafficking is unclear.\textsuperscript{147}

However, Trinidad and Tobago police authorities\textsuperscript{148}
CARIBBEAN
GANGS
DRUGS, FIREARMS, AND GANGS NETWORKS
IN JAMAICA, SAINT LUCIA, GUYANA AND TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

contend that most weapons are procured illegally in the US (including Florida, Georgia, New York, and Texas), and shipped directly to Trinidad and Tobago or via Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the Dominican Republic.148 Weapons, components and parts typically enter through the country’s two largest legal seaports in Port-of-Spain and Point Lisas as well as the Piarco international airport. Assault rifles are also increasingly common, due to high local demand, low cost, and the ease of moving products through customs and excise.149

Measures to reduce firearms and ammunition availability since the 2010s have intercepted weapons, but not diminished demand.150 On the one hand, there are very limited prosecutions of high-level dealers, brokers, and shippers. Roughly 400 firearms seized annually in the 2010s and this doubled to 1,054 by 2017 before declining to 600 annually. By 2019, SSA estimated some 8,154 illegal firearms in circulation (parliamentary debate suggests 43,000, of which 8,550 were licensed and 32,450 held illegally) in 2019. According to the Crime and Problem Analysis (CAPA) unit, 4,376 firearms were seized in the country between 2017-2021.151 However, reports periodically emerge of firearms seized from criminal groups returning to the streets.152 And in 2023, there is evidence of increased importation of firearms and ammunition by gun dealers for “non law enforcement purposes”, including military-grade weapons and 5.56mm and 7.62mm ammunition.153 The Trinidad and Tobago police recently reported the largest gun seizure in its history in 2023: 13 weapons including M16, Uzi, AK-47, and Draco rifles.154155

Historically, a small number of criminal kingpins monopolized the trafficking of cocaine and cannabis via Trinidad and Tobago. An official commission of enquiry during the late 1980s reported that the Medellin cartel was flooding the country with cocaine destined from the US and Europe.156 One of the early pioneers was Nankissoon Boodram, or “Dole Chadee”, who was active during the 1980s and executed in 1999.157 There were reports at the time of high-level collusion between drug traffickers and senior police officials.158 Reports have also emerged of possible involvement of Jamaican criminal groups operating out of Trinidad and Tobago since the 1990s.159 A growing concern locally is the increased presence of Venezuelan


149 An example is SASMAN Sales LCC that reportedly assists local firearms dealers access firearms from the US.

150 In 2019, SSA estimated some 8,154 illegal firearms (parliamentary debate suggests 43,000, of which 8,550 were licensed and 32,450 held illegally) in 2019. A recent Small Arms Survey/ CARIMPACS (2023) study estimates that there are 10,500 licensed owners and 19,434 registered guns (63,577-84,769 circulating illegally).


158 Ibid.

159 Allegations of Jamaican drug traffickers involved in drug trafficking networks have swirled for over a decade. There were concerns at the time that such messages were scapegoating immigrants. See https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/jamaicans-running-trinidad-and-tobago-drug-networks-report/.
gangs and criminal groups, some of whom are alleged to be smuggling in firearms (see Box 2).  

Box 2. 
Venezuelan gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago currently registers the highest per capita number of Venezuelan migrants in the world. It has received at least 60,000 Venezuelan migrants since 2015; however, the government only officially acknowledged the existence of migrants beginning in 2019. Since then, the national authorities have introduced restrictions on migration, requiring a “migration registration framework.” Some 16,523 Venezuelans registered through this framework, while the rest did not (and 112 were sent home, owing to “serious” criminal records).

The influx of Venezuelans has triggered some xenophobia as well as concern about rising insecurity. While studies suggest that migrants are no more likely to commit crime than locals, the capture of a high-level gang member in 2019 set off alarm bells. Authorities arrested Darwin “El Culón” García Gibori, the leader of the Evander gang, along with seven other Venezuelans and a Trinidadian fisherman, in Port Fortin, in southern Trinidad. The gang is involved in both extortion of boats carrying Venezuelan migrants as well as ferrying drugs and arms.

Evander, also known as Deltano Liberation Front, is a comparatively large gang that has been involved in violence in Trinidad. It comes from the Venezuelan state of Delta Amacuro where it controls parts of the local criminal market at a key port. In 2019, the group’s leader was killed by Venezuelan police (CIPCC). The gang reportedly has over 650 members and was involved in the killing of three Venezuelans in Trinidad. Gang members reportedly transit the country illegally, seeking construction jobs while also engaging in drug and arms selling.

According to police and immigration officials, Evander has embedded members with local gangs. There are also concerns that some former gang members provide services to various gangs, including Muslim in Port-of-Spain, as well as gangs in Port Fortin and Chaguana. Gangs may be involved in drugs and weapons, but also prostitution. Some smaller Venezuelan gangs have also reportedly migrated to Trinidad and Tobago, attracting migrants with opportunities of (informal) employment. Evidence of tensions between local gangs and Venezuelan groups is also appearing, as Trinidadian middlemen, who had previously facilitated drug and firearms trafficking, are being sidelined.

The number of criminal gangs in Trinidad and Tobago has expanded dramatically in recent years. In 2023, for example, 186 gangs were reported with approximately 1,700 suspected gang members countrywide, down from a 2019 peak of 211 gangs with 2,450 suspected gang members. Nearly all street gangs align themselves with an umbrella gang. Notable gang factions in Trinidad include: Muslim (aka Muslim City and 9), “an informal federation of disaffected groups of mostly Afro-Trinidadian Muslim men loosely affiliated with the ideology


161 See Mahabir, R. (2021) Venezuelan migration to Trinidad and Tobago: An understanding of crime, gangs and extremism, unpublished.

162 An umbrella gang is a top-level gang that can set the terms of engagement in various settings, including on the street and within prisons. An umbrella gang can also set the terms of informal protection arrangements and illicit markets. Gundur, R. V. (2022). Trying to Make It: The Enterprises, Gangs, and People of the American Drug Trade. Cornell University Press.
of the 1990 coup". Rasta City (aka Seven), which is a collective that was initially defined largely in opposition to the Muslim identity of the former group; Sixx (aka 6 and 6ixx), which is a group that splintered from Rasta City; and EBG (aka 8). Other notable gangs include Boombay Gang, Police, and Tyson.

Although most of the country's street gangs operate in Port-of-Spain, they are allegedly spreading across the country to secondary cities and towns. The country's dominant gangs and gang federations reportedly face growing competition from smaller street gangs along the country's East-West Corridor. As noted above, a relatively small number of larger gangs are heavily involved in the drugs and firearms trade, and have also diversified into criminal activities such as human trafficking from Venezuela, contract killings (in Trinidad and Tobago, and abroad, including neighboring countries and as far away as Angola), kidnapping, extortion, illegal quarrying, ATM fraud, and racketeering.

Present gang culture and alignments do not indicate an ideological affiliation. For instance, though Muslim has its roots in Jamaat al Muslimeen's ideology, its current leadership does not appear to promote this ideology and is willing to collaborate with organizations that are neither Muslim nor Black, such as the Venezuelan gang, Evander (see Box 3). The strategic associations for the umbrella gangs' subsidiary gangs allow for better access to firearms via their membership and resulting connections. While gangs may retail drugs, the development of gang culture and the increase in violence are not anchored in transnational organized crime; instead, these outcomes are the result of intergenerational impoverishment that causes social vulnerability.

Available data indicates that the overall number of gang members and gangs present in Trinidad and Tobago is increasing. About half of all gang members are between 19 and 25 years of age; the other half are over 25 years of age. Roughly a third of murders committed in Trinidad and Tobago are deemed to be gang-related; most of these murders are committed with a firearm. Most gang-related murders occur in Trinidad and Tobago's population centers in the northwestern part of the country. The average age of the leadership in Trinidad and Tobago's street gangs is likewise falling, and this decrease in age has been associated with an increased use of violence between gangs. No reporting of gang association and membership variance exists; intra-gang movement, from street gangs to umbrella gangs, and their leadership structures are also unknown, along

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164 See, for example, Bruzual, A. (2023) Gang culture escalating in T&T, Daily Express, December 6, https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/gang-culture-escalating-in-tt/article_953db24-924c-11ee-b2cf-7d717bc311c0.html. The country’s Strategic Services Agency also forecast that gangs would spread outward from ‘traditional areas’ as far back as 2019. See Alexander, G. (2022) SSA expected gangs to spread since 2019, Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, May 20, https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/ssa-expected-gangs-to-spread-since-2019-6-2.1495687.76249. The assistant commissioner of police also reported that gangs had spread from Trinidad to Tobago. George, K. (2023) ACP: Trinidad gangs infiltrating Tobago, Trinidad and Tobago Newsday, May 10, https://newsday.co.tt/2023/05/10/acp-trinidad-gangs-infiltrating-tobago/.

165 See Counter-extremism violence project (nd) Trinidad and Tobago: Extremism and terrorism.


169 See USAID (2023) Trinidad and Tobago data ppt (unpublished), based on police expert surveys, homicide and intelligence data, and a survey of Tobago school youth and detained youth.


with the nuances of intra-gang cooperation arrangements and leadership structures.\textsuperscript{172}

According to Trinidad and Tobago’s Strategic Services Agency (SSA), gangs have also started splintering and becoming more violent.\textsuperscript{173} As gang leaders are imprisoned or killed, younger cohorts emerge with less discipline and a higher level of aggression. Local informants speak of how the four major factions and many of the smaller gang affiliates are getting younger in Trinidad and Tobago. Frustrated younger members use more extreme violence to supplant leadership and to be noticed.\textsuperscript{174} As the Muslim gang faced internal instability, competing gangs moved in to take advantage of the leadership vacuum, resulting in a dramatic escalation of inter-gang violence (see Box 3). The SSA (2021) detected a “noticeable shift in leadership due to elimination or prolonged incarceration – “younger and more violent leaders are emerging and existing gangs are disaggregating with an accompanying level of animosity towards each other.

Box 3.
The influence of Islam on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Homegrown violent extremism, influenced by Salafi Islamic teachings, is a concern in Trinidad and Tobago.\textsuperscript{175} Significant issues are related to the presence of an established, long-standing radical and militant Islamist community; the operation of Islamist fundamentalist organization Jamaat al Muslimeen, its influence over or association with Muslim, a significant umbrella gang in Trinidad and Tobago and the activities of radical clerics; and the number of terrorist fighters that Trinidad and Tobago has sent to Syria.

Trinidad and Tobago’s Islamic population, one of the largest per capita in the Americas, is formed by two groups: those of Indian origin and their decedents (Indo-Trinidadians and Tobagonians) and Afro-Trinidadian and Tobagonian converts.\textsuperscript{176} Official figures estimate that 5 percent (76,300) of Trinidad and Tobago’s 1.526 million population is Islamic; the figure could be 8 to 13 percent (122,000-198,000) due to under reporting of new converts.\textsuperscript{177}

The Indo-Trinidadian and Tobagonian Muslims, whose ancestors typically arrived from the Indian subcontinent, are, for the most part, well-integrated moderates who generally do not figure into the extremist Islamic tradition within the country.\textsuperscript{178} The Afro-Trinidadian and

\textsuperscript{172} See USAID (2023).
\textsuperscript{173} See Douglas (2022).
\textsuperscript{174} An example of the destabilizing effects of gang fragmentation is the case of Anthon Boney, erstwhile head of the Muslims gang, who was shot in September 2021 by men in tactical gear. His assassination triggered internal fighting of Muslims, a union of gangs with over 600 members.

\textsuperscript{175} McCoy, J., & Knight, W. A. (2017). Homegrown violent extremism in Trinidad and Tobago: Local patterns, global trends. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 40(4), 267-299.
Tobagonian Islamic community has a more recent tradition, which draws on an array of influences, most notably the Black Power and Nation of Islam movements of the United States and the Pan African movement associated with Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. This community is the one most frequently associated with extremist Islamist ideology in Trinidad and Tobago.

The most significant Islamist organization in Trinidad and Tobago is Jamaat al Muslimeen, which was founded by the late Imam Yasin Abu Bakr in 1969. By the mid-2010s, Jamaat al Muslimeen was more diffuse; several splinter groups emerged from its original iteration. Jamaat al Muslimeen has a complex past: it has operated as an Islamist organization, engaged as a civil society actor, acted as a political broker, and, in 1990, attempted a coup d’état.

Since the coup attempt, Jamaat al Muslimeen has exerted control over some of Trinidad and Tobago’s criminal enterprises by taxing illicit businesses and street gangs. Nearly all gangs align themselves with an umbrella gang. One umbrella gang, Muslim, historically has been “an informal federation of disaffected groups of mostly Afro-Trinidadian Muslim men loosely affiliated with the ideology of the 1990 coup;” however, no significant continuance of this ideology appears in the contemporary gang context.

An unusually high per capita rate of foreign terrorist fighters has emanated from Trinidad and Tobago. Most of these foreign terrorist fighters have been men from middle-class backgrounds from the “revert” Afro-Trinidadian and Tobagonian radical Islamic community, they have not been linked with gang members. Most have been killed, captured, or imprisoned in the Middle East or North Africa. Several mosques serving the Afro-Trinidadian and Tobagonian Islamic community are run by radical clerics; their activities are not secretive and are known to authorities. No successful terrorist attacks of note have occurred in Trinidad and Tobago; nonetheless, former members of Jamaat al Muslimeen were convicted for a 2007 plot to bomb John F. Kennedy International Airport. After the death of Abu Bakr in 2021, the organization has not been publicly accused of engaging in criminal activity.

A 2020 Joint Select Committee on National Security determined that “links between politicians and gang leaders have proven to be the catalyst towards homicides in this country”. Public contracts are widely recognized to feed organized crime. In Trinidad and Tobago, gangs emerged from steel bands that were initially rivals which graduated to violence between so-called “bad johns” (especially in Laventille). Social work programs – including the Unemployment Relief Program (URP), the Community-based Environment Protection and Enhancement Program (CEPEP), and the


180 Ibid.


186 Ibid.

Housing Development Corporation (HDC) have long been mediated by “community leaders” (gangs) that reinforced local power structures.\(^{188}\) Interviews with senior police, customs, and revenue officials indicate that there is a high level of reported complicity among political and business elite in facilitating drug and weapons trafficking.\(^{189}\)

Trinidad and Tobago has invested billions of Trinidadian dollars in crime control, though results are mixed.\(^{190}\) The principal policing intervention involved the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service’s establishment of a Criminal Gang and Intelligence Unit in 2012, which continues to operate.\(^{191}\) Trinidad and Tobago also established an Anti-Gang Act, first passed in 2011; the latest iteration was updated in 2021.\(^{192}\) Violence interruption programs have also been attempted. For example, Cure Violence supported “Project REASON” which ran from 2015 to 2017 and was assessed to have reduced violence in the areas in which it operated.\(^{193}\) A Cure Violence program was re-established in 2019, though also suspended soon after.\(^{194}\)

In Trinidad and Tobago, as in other countries, uneven police capacity and high impunity empowers gangs and fuels violence. Senior police officials confirmed that they were often overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge, and struggled to identify, detain and arrest suspects.\(^{195}\) Arrests and prosecutions of higher-level gang members are rare, with low-level rank and file often convicted instead.\(^{196}\) Police claim to struggle with investigating murders and a backlog of cases, further undermining trust and support from neighborhood residents. In some cases, the police even need to request support from gang leadership to identify suspects, accumulate evidence, and undertake operations.\(^{197}\) According to an informant that works on gang violence reduction, this has the unintended side-effect of amplifying gang leadership legitimacy and credibility.\(^{198}\) Moreover, high levels of police corruption not only reinforce latent power structures of gangs, but also reinforce community reluctance to cooperate. Finally, the closed and proximate nature of communities also affect police willingness to prosecute gangs, not least because gangsters know where police and their families live.

A key challenge for Trinidad and Tobago relates to disrupting the entry of illicit and smuggled goods, including managing border controls and customs, and addressing corruption in state agencies that manage imports and exports. The adoption of a more proactive stance to address drugs and firearms trafficking is essential. Customs and excise have a critical role to engage with transnational organized crime, even if there are challenges with respect to capacity and oversight. Improving scanning of goods entering legal ports (and expanding

\(^{188}\) A widely cited example is Mark Guerra, a US deportee, who was a URP adviser in the early 1990s and came to be known as the “don of Laventille”. He was tremendously influential in mobilizing youth votes, including for the election of a Prime Minister.

\(^{189}\) Interviews conducted in Port-of-Spain between December 9-12, 2023.


\(^{191}\) See Trinidad and Tobago (2012) New unit will focus on gang-related crimes, May 15, https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/new-unit-will-focus-on-gang-related-crimes/article_630462ec-0476-54e3-a90f-679a29a4eb60.html


\(^{195}\) Interview with Trinidad and Tobago police representatives, 10 December 2023.

\(^{196}\) Interview with Trinidad and Tobago police representatives, 10 December 2023.

\(^{197}\) Interview with Trinidad and Tobago police representatives, 10 December 2023.

\(^{198}\) Interviews conducted in Port-of-Spain between December 9-12, 2023.
investigations into potential criminal activity in selected private and unregistered ports are priorities. Officials interviewed in Trinidad and Tobago also recommended the creation of a Firearms Interdiction Unit that could, if properly resourced, managed and connected to US counterparts, could contribute positively to reducing the supply of firearms to the country.199

199 Similar recommendations have been made in the past by a security consultant, Gavin Heerah. See, for example, John-Hall, R. and Bassant, M. (2022) Custos officers complicit as illegal guns pass through ports, Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, November 6, https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/customs-officers-complicit-as-illegal-guns-pass-through-ports-6.2.1566575.9e7c675ca7.
Saint Lucia

Although Saint Lucia has long experienced drug trafficking, there are signs of increased volume over the past five years. The earliest reports of Colombian and Venezuelan drug traffickers operating in the country extend back to the mid-1990s. The primary transit and holding area at the time was the Vieux Port and drug-related violence involved disputes over cocaine and cannabis. Then as now, foreign traffickers colluded with a small number of domestic criminal groups which appears to have increased the incidence of criminal violence. The country’s first national drug control and prevention secretary was appointed in 1998, and the Drug Unit, Special Services Unit, and Police Maritime Unit recently expanded international cooperation with the US, EU, and other countries.

Saint Lucia’s particular strategic value for criminal groups is its proximity to Martinique (and by extension the EU). The modalities of drug trafficking in Saint Lucia share several

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203 Ibid.


205 Ibid.
characteristics with other smaller island states in the Caribbean that do not have large infrastructure to receive container vessels. Rather than delivered by large shipping freight, drugs are typically transported via offshore airdrops or fishing vessels and then transported by smaller vessels to the coastline.\textsuperscript{204} Drugs are then either repackaged or shipped directly via boat (and less likely air) to neighboring islands. Several actors may be involved as intermediaries or brokers, including foreign nationals. A review of open source data on seizures suggested that once drugs arrive in Martinique they may be transported directly to Western Europe, including by private yachts. In 2023, for example, the French navy, known as the Forces Armées aux Antilles, intercepted a sailboat far off the Martinique coast, seizing 1.2 tons of cocaine in 44 separate bales.\textsuperscript{207}

The scale of recent drug seizures suggests that Saint Lucia is enmeshed in a wider transnational drug network spanning South America, the Caribbean, and North America, and Western Europe. Drugs, principally cocaine, are shipped from Colombia and Venezuela, including via Trinidad and Tobago, and often transferred to Martinique and onward to France. Drugs are also reportedly transshipped from Saint Lucia to Barbados, and on to markets in the US and UK. For example, in April 2020, 210 kilograms of cocaine were intercepted off the eastern coast of Saint Lucia by French authorities.\textsuperscript{208} Another 116 kilograms of cocaine were seized in L’Anse Cork in Dennery in July 2022, supposedly destined for the UK.\textsuperscript{209} And in October 2023, some 480 kilograms of cocaine involving boats from Saint Lucia were collected by the Forces Armées aux Antilles.\textsuperscript{210}

Firearms are also commonly used in gang-related criminal violence in Saint Lucia. While traditionally acquired from drug dealers and by theft, weapons are primarily sourced from the US and enter Saint Lucia through legal ports, facilitated by weak oversight from the Customs and Excise Department.\textsuperscript{211} Weapons are used by gang members in larger and secondary cities, and sold on to affiliates in Martinique. The Saint Lucia police have seized a growing number of firearms since 2021. There were 109 illegal weapons recovered in 2023, up from 71 in 2022 and 88 seized in 2021. Most intercepted weapons consisted of pistols, followed by rifles.\textsuperscript{212} According to the Saint Lucian police, most firearm offenses occurred in the Central Division, with just over half of all reported incidents resulting in an arrest.\textsuperscript{213}

While relatively fewer in number than Jamaica or Trinidad and Tobago, gangs are active in Saint Lucia, several of them competing to control drug distribution.\textsuperscript{214} Gang activity on the island can be traced back to the 1980s,\textsuperscript{215} though levels of violent crime have trended upward over the past five years. Reports of gun violence in Vieux Fort and Castries often identify suspects and victims but do not name specific gangs or criminal

\textsuperscript{206} Interview with representatives of IMPACS, December 12, 2023 and with InSight Crime researchers that visited Saint Lucia, January 2024.
\textsuperscript{211} Interviews conducted by Antonio Valverde with Mr. Wayne Charnley, Mr. Fitzroy Bailey, Mr. Martinus Cooper, and Mr. Lester Byron in Saint Lucia on 11 December 2023.
\textsuperscript{212} There were 74 pistols confiscated in 2023 (compared to 57 in 2022) and 9 rifles between 2021-2023. See Gaillard, S. (2024) RSLPF successfully retrieves record number of illegal firearms in 2023, St Lucia Loop, January 8, https://stlucia.loopnews.com/content/rslpf-successfully-retrieves-record-number-illegal-firearms-2023.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
organizations. There are an estimated 12-15 Saint Lucian gangs, clustered for the most part in Castries and Vieux Fort and distributed in smaller towns such as Dennery, Anse La Raye, Gros Islet, and Soufrière. Most of them are led by a single individual, are comprised of young men, ranging in age from their late teens to their 30s (there are reports describing school-aged children being recruited into gangs) and are community-based. For the most part, gun-related violence appears to be motivated by gang feuds and localized disputes over turf.

Saint Lucia’s gangs are comparatively small scale, but there are risks of some of them becoming more regionally connected. Historically, street gangs such as the Death Row Crew were established in the late 1980s with as many as 20 members and oversaw local criminal rackets including drug retail and robbery. The Death Row Crew regularly entered into conflicts with smaller territorial gangs such as the Border Line Crew which also operated in the capital, Castries. More recently, however, gangs from Trinidad and Tobago, including Sixx and Rasta City, have attempted to recruit young people in Castries. There are also reports of Jamaican criminal groups operating in Saint Lucia, including packaging and trafficking drugs for international and local distribution.

Owing in large part to disputes between gang members, violent crime rates have steadily increased in Saint Lucia. The country reportedly registered a rise from 28 murders in 2015 to over 76 in 2022, a homicide rate of over 42 per 100,000. Another 75 homicides were reported in 2023, 70 of which were gun-related. During interviews with local officials, it was noted that greater investment is needed in controlling arms flows, supporting violence prevention initiatives in underserved communities, and professionalizing law enforcement and associated domestic legislation to improve transparency and accountability.

Although Saint Lucia passed the Anti-Gang Act in 2014, charges and convictions did not occur until 2022, after the Royal Saint Lucia Police Force (RSLPF) established its Gang Investigation Unit. The Saint Lucian Senate approved additional police powers to the RSLPF via the “Suppression of Escalated Crime (Police Powers) Act 2023,” ostensibly to

216 See Editorial Staff (2023) Relative says teenage homicide victim was in a gang and knew he would die violently, November 25, https://stluciatimes.com/159583/2023/11/relative-says-teenage-homicide-victim-was-in-a-gang-and-knew-he-would-die-violently/


221 These Trinidad and Tobago gangs have reportedly tried to associate themselves with Saint Lucian school colors, and their activities are believed to have contributed to modest riots and increasing violence among minors. Interviews led by Antonio Valverde (UNODC), 11 December 2023.

222 Ibid.
respond to the criminal activity. The RSLPF likewise expanded counternarcotics activities, particularly its Major Crimes Unit, Special Services Unit, Traffic Enforcement Team, and Criminal Investigations Department. Saint Lucia is subject to Leahy Law sanctions from the US due to allegations of extrajudicial killings; these sanctions limit funding to the RSLPF.

229 See CNW (2022).


Jamaica

The frequency and scale of officially reported drug seizures fluctuated in Jamaica in recent years. Yet there is a perception that the scale of drug trafficking, particularly of cocaine, is increasing. One reason for this may be enhanced supply since COVID19, including from Colombia as noted by the Jamaican authorities. Jamaica has bolstered its drug interdiction capacities, including maritime, customs and police surveillance, and expanded international cooperation efforts with CARICOM, the US and other partners. Jamaica reportedly strengthened the Jamaica Customs Agency (JCA) and expanded collaboration among the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF), the military, the Major Organized Crime and Anti-Corruption Agency (MOCA), and Interpol, among others.

Jamaica has long served as a transit country for cocaine and a major producer and exporter of cannabis, among other drugs. Cocaine arrives in Jamaica via Colombia and Venezuela, and indirectly from the Eastern Caribbean and the US and other partners.


and Central American countries. Primary destination countries for both cocaine and cannabis include the US, Canada, UK, and EU member states, including via neighboring countries such as Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Barbados. Drugs enter Jamaica in at least one of two ways: plane and boat. In addition to Ian Fleming International Airport in the capital, Kingston, there are several private airstrips and many private planes that traverse the country. Alongside the major seaports, a hub for shipping cargo, are an estimated 150 unofficial entry-points, most by sea.

The total volume of drug seizures made by Jamaican authorities oscillates by year. At least 24,000 kilograms of cannabis and 2,000 kilograms of cocaine were seized in 2019. The total volume of seizures reported by authorities declined to 1,500 tons of cannabis and 356 kilograms of cocaine by 2021 (see Figure 7). The scale of seizures reportedly increased in 2022 and 2023, though total numbers have not yet been confirmed. For example, in October 2022, Jamaican authorities made a record seizure of 500 kilograms of cocaine, worth an estimated $25 million, along with another 500 kilograms of cannabis reportedly destined to Canada on a private jet. In January 2023, Jamaica reported one of its largest ever drug busts, including a shipment from Colombia of some 1,500 kilograms of cocaine stored in 50 separate bags. And between October and November 2023, Jamaican customs authorities made ten separate seizures of cocaine involving a scheme to reportedly ship the product to Thailand.
As noted above, there were an estimated 379 separate criminal gangs in 2021, though roughly two thirds were considered active, and the remainder were classified as “dormant” by Jamaica’s National Intelligence Bureau. Most of these gangs are considered “first generation” owing to erratic and unsophisticated leadership and focused on protecting territory and controlling retail. A small number are categorized by the authorities as “second generation,” more centralized and organized.

Several of Jamaica’s older, more powerful gangs have splintered over the past two decades, contributing to an escalation of factional violence on the island. The situation became increasingly complex following the arrest of Christopher “Dudus” Coke in 2010, the erstwhile head of Shower Posse, then Jamaica’s primary cocaine and trafficking network. Founded by Dudus’s father, the Shower Posse had a presence spanning cities in Jamaica as well as in Miami, New York, and Toronto. Since Dudus’s arrest, no other traffickers appear to have managed to secure dominant control of drug trafficking routes.

As noted above, there were an estimated 379 separate criminal gangs in 2021, though roughly two thirds were considered active, and the remainder were classified as “dormant” by Jamaica’s National Intelligence Bureau. Most of these gangs are considered “first generation” owing to erratic and unsophisticated leadership and focused on protecting territory and controlling retail. A small number are categorized by the authorities as “second generation,” more centralized and organized. As in most other Caribbean countries, Jamaica’s gangs are predominantly an urban phenomenon. Among the areas with the densest aggregation is the Corporate Area of Kingston. Indeed, most of the gangs are operating in Kingston Western, Kingston Central, Kingston Eastern, St Andrew Central, and especially St Andrew South police divisions.
After soaring upward in 2021 and 2022, homicide and violent crime rates appear to have modestly declined in 2023.246 Jamaican authorities, notably JDF, JCA and the major organized crime and anti-corruption agencies, attribute recent improvements to stepped-up counter-gang measures including an anti-gang task force launched in 2022, the arrest of gang members, and firearms seizure interventions.247 The Jamaican authorities stress that they are not negotiating with gangs.248 Jamaica has undertaken several efforts to reduce gang numbers and gang violence since the turn of the century; the efficacy of these efforts has been questioned.249,250

Over time, Jamaica has introduced an array of legislation intended to target serious and organized crime. For example, the anti-gang legislation, Criminal Justice (Suppression of Criminal Organizations) Act was first enacted in 2014 and then revised in 2021 to allow for the prosecution of groups via joint enterprise (secondary liability) prosecutions.251 In addition to these measures, Jamaica has declared states of emergency to deploy the army, increase police presence, and stop, search, and arrest people without a warrant.252 In February 2023, for example, Jamaica launched the Joint Anti-Gang Task Force at the Specialized Operation Branch.253 The Task Force’s members receive training both as soldiers and as police officers. The Task Force also is meant to improve the sharing of intelligence across Jamaica.254

A number of civil society violence interruption programs exist in Jamaica, including the Peace Management Initiative,255 the Trench Town Peace and Justice Centre,256 and VETO, a Cure Violence program.257 The Violence Interruption Program of the Citizen Security and Justice Program ended in 2020, despite saving Jamaica’s health system an estimated $70 million Jamaican dollars (approximately $450,000 USD).258 A 10-year National Action Plan is also reportedly under development by Jamaica’s Commission for Violence Prevention.259

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248 See CNW (2023) Jamaica’s PM confirms no negotiations with gangs.
252 See McDuff (2019).
254 Ibid.
256 Ibid.
257 See Hinck, M. (2023) Jamaica hospital’s cure violence program receives over $1 million to address gun violence in our community, Jamaica Hospital Medical Center, March 13, https://jamaicahospital.org/newsletter/jamaica-hospitals-cure-violence-program-receives-over-1-million-to-address-gun-violence-in-our-community/
SECTION III.
REGIONAL AND NATIONAL RESPONSES
Drug trafficking, firearms smuggling, and gang violence are all widely acknowledged by government leaders as a serious and growing problem in the Caribbean. These issues have been singled out as constituting regional and national security threats in successive CARICOM reports and declarations for the past decade.\(^\text{260}\) Drug and firearms seizures and profile gang killings are a regular feature of media reporting across the region. The underlying correlates – including youth unemployment, income and social inequality, poor education, and family breakdown – are widely acknowledged. Meanwhile, proximate risk factors such as drug trafficking, arms availability, and persistent gang tensions are increasingly well understood. Conversely, there is insufficient knowledge regarding what occurs to the proceeds of these crimes throughout the region, and how gangs diversify into technology-facilitated crimes (see Box 4).

Multiple parallel drug markets are operating across the Eastern and Western Caribbean. First, there are high volume, low risk, offshore markets involving the transshipment of cocaine from South America to North America and Western Europe. These drug shipments involve transnational drug trafficking networks and a small number of gangs and are facilitated by corrupt customs and shipping agents with involvement of some political and economic elite. Second, there are an array of smaller volume, higher risk, inland markets involving cannabis and to a lesser extent cocaine for local consumption, including by residents and tourists. The latter is facilitated by gang members and migrants, usually as part of an ant-trade involving small fishing boats.

As in the case of drugs, there are also several parallel firearms markets that operate across the Eastern and Western Caribbean. First, there are markets integrated with drug trafficking, with weapons often “traded” for drugs or sold on to local markets after drugs “pass through” countries. Second, there are markets linked directly to the US (and to a lesser extent Venezuela) that are intended to supply gangs directly. Weapons may be sent directly in consignments or through “ant trade” and via islands. In the latter case, weapons are procured in the US via straw man purchases or, in the case of Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, acquired via Venezuela from both state and non-state sources.

Both drug and arms trafficking markets and corridors are dynamic and responsive to external shocks across the Eastern and Western Caribbean. Large consignments of cocaine are shipped from Colombia via several routes, including Venezuela, Guyana, and Suriname, before moving northward directly or indirectly to Curacao, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia, Martinique, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and upward toward Jamaica or onward to North America and Western European markets. In some cases, large shipments may be broken down into smaller units to evade detection. The trade in cannabis tends to be more distributed from smaller islands (where production costs are lower) to Trinidad and Tobago and from Jamaica to other islands and onward to North

American and Western European jurisdictions.

The Caribbean features a complex system of interconnected criminal markets that require comprehensive global, regional, and national responses. Guyana, for example, increasingly serves as a hub for drug trafficking into the Eastern Caribbean that not only involves powerful Colombian, Venezuelan, and Brazilian criminal factions but also cartels and mafia from Mexico, Italy, and Spain. Meanwhile, Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Lucia are serving as transit countries for cocaine (and a source country for cannabis in the case of Trinidad and Tobago), while Jamaica serves as a node for the transit of both cocaine and cannabis via the Western Caribbean to neighboring countries and clients further afield. Caribbean, US, and EU-backed measures to crack down on gang leadership are also generating unintended outcomes. Some gang leaders lower their profile and go underground while others are killed or imprisoned and replaced with ever more violent contenders. As seen elsewhere in the world, gang splintering tends to be violence generating.

Several national governments across the CARICOM region have expressed concern that drug trafficking, gang fragmentation, and insecurity could worsen in the coming years. Disruptions of traditional drug routes in Central and South America is intensifying pressure on small island states with very modest maritime, aviation, and terrestrial capacities to close criminal markets. Sensing opportunity, some dormant criminal networks are reactivating across the Caribbean region. As a result, there are a significant number of street gangs with a high capacity for violence and in a position to serve as sub-contractors. Yet most governments consulted have limited resources for tackling the interconnected threats posed by organized crime. Owing to limited police, justice, penal and customs capabilities, even a comparatively modest flow of drugs and firearms can prove to be immensely destabilizing.

Box 4.
Financial and Technology-Facilitated Crime in the Caribbean

A corollary to the drug and firearms trades is the financial proceeds that sales of those products generate. Nonetheless, despite the importance of the revenues of crime, how these proceeds are transported, how they are laundered, and their role in corruption, the dynamics of illicit finance are still under prioritized by policymakers. Recent research into these processes and their impact in the Caribbean has explored the evolution of anti-money laundering policy and regional capacity across the region. However, coverage focuses on primarily larger jurisdictions and jurisdictions that have histories of being financial centers.

Meanwhile, FATF has undertaken an array of mutual evaluations with Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago in order to improve their compliance with standards to address money laundering and illicit financial flows. For example, FATF has recognized that Saint Lucia, via its citizenship by investment program, has a risk of facilitating the activities of illicit financiers who make use of the program to gain access to other markets. Research suggests that money laundering, resulting from fraud and drug sales, creates a downward pressure on economic growth and underwrites corruption throughout the region.

The nature of the laundering of the proceeds of organized crime, including drug and weapons trafficking, varies, depending where on the supply chain the proceeds are generated. Lower-level actors generally do not generate sufficient funds that require complex laundering activities and can invest in day-to-day expenses and in their local economies. For more powerful traffickers, however, the quantities of cash they generate require laundering to facilitate ongoing illicit activity and to fund life/styles generally.

Moreover, the cash liquidity that results from significant traffickers' illicit businesses allows them to weather product losses due to interdiction or theft and maintain business continuity. Despite the attention paid to trafficking generally, bulk cash transfer still represents a reliable, low-risk means to transfer the proceeds of crime. Given the role of illicit funds, interdiction and anti-gang efforts are insufficient in reducing illicit enterprise within the region; such efforts must be undertaken in concert with anti-money laundering oversight and efforts to identify and interrupt illicit money flows.

Additionally, some gangs and organized crime groups in the region have diversified their criminal activities, including into digital spaces. Although cyber fraud, extortion and related scams are not limited to such groups, there are indications that several gangs are migrating online. For example, U.S. federal courts have already started prosecuting cases involving Jamaican citizens running fraudulent lotteries and romance schemes. The increase in cybercrime also triggered the CARICOM Cyber Security and Cybercrime Action Plan, which is overseen by IMPACS, and the creation of a specialist unit within Jamaica’s MOCA. Nonetheless, as capacity to police financial and cybercrime within the Caribbean remains modest, ongoing monitoring of trends in both areas is recommended to ensure capacity investment is effective.

Nevertheless, a growing array of regional, national, and subnational initiatives are being pursued to disrupt gang-related activities, including their involvement in drug markets. At one end of the continuum are military and police-led security responses that often combine intelligence, armed forces, and law enforcement assets. Interventions can span multiple countries and jurisdictions and involve the sharing of information and coordinated activities to degrade criminal markets and apprehend crime leaders. At the other end of the continuum are crime prevention measures to strengthen the rule of law and target hot-spot areas and at-risk young people. These latter efforts typically involve public authorities and non-governmental organizations in partnership with bilateral, multilateral, and philanthropic groups.

The surge in criminal violence in parts of the Caribbean is hastening regional cooperation on controlling firearms. A CARICOM crime summit in April 2023, for example, emphasized...
the importance of strengthening regional cooperation to fight crime and violence, underlining the importance of “public health” focused responses. CARICOM also stressed the specific role of criminal gangs, drugs, and firearms, calling for improved forensic capacities and sharing of data, upgrading of criminal justice systems, a renewed focus on at-risk young people, and legal action against US firearms manufacturers and retailers. Stressing their concern, leaders from across the region announced a “war on guns” focusing on firearms trafficked from the US, and CARICOM, established a Crime Gun Intelligence Unit with ties to US law enforcement agencies. Caribbean officials have also stressed the importance not just of supply, but also demand reduction programs, including through mediation initiatives.

Regional cooperation with the US has expanded in recent years. One initiative, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CSBI), sought to apply a comprehensive approach to gang violence prevention and reduction. Amid growing pressure from Caribbean countries, the US has likewise stepped-up cooperation to prioritize the disruption of illicit firearms trafficking.

While advocating for crime prevention and public health approaches in regional fora, several Caribbean governments have simultaneously stepped up their “tough on crime” responses. For example, the Saint Lucian authorities have scaled their crime prevention operations though appear to be severely tested by well resourced criminal networks. The RSLPF is primarily responsible for law and order and has a comparatively high level of public trust (though instances of police brutality are noted). It oversees the Drug Squad and Marine Unit—which along with Customs and Ports Police, are focused on disrupting trafficking in and via Saint Lucia. However, these groups have weak maritime capabilities, limited funding, and poor intelligence.

Likewise, the Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago governments have dramatically expanded their gang suppression activities over the past decade. Jamaican authorities issued the Gang Suppression Act in 2014 but this resulted in just


273 An example of a gun violence mediation initiative is Cure Violence, including its programs in countries such as Trinidad and Tobago via local intermediaries such as Spirit Ministries. Interview, December 12, 2023. See, for example, Maguire, E. et al (2018) Evaluating Cure Violence in Trinidad and Tobago, IADB, November, https://publications.iadb.org/en/evaluating-cure-violence-trinidad-and-tobago

274 US agencies primarily responsible include the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US State Department Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) as well as an assortment of implementing partner agencies. See US State Department notes such as https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/183768.pdf and https://www.state.gov/caribbean-basin-security-initiative for more information.

two convictions by 2019. Amendments in 2021 broadened the definition of gangs (allowing police to charge those assisting gangs) and added extra protections for witnesses. Jamaica has also imposed several “states of emergency” and conducted a number of military and police operations, most recently Operation Relentless in April 2023. Meanwhile, Trinidad and Tobago signed an Anti-Gang Act in 2011 (and an Anti-Gang Bill in 2021) to criminalize gangs and allow the arrest, without a warrant, of anyone reasonably believed to be affiliated. The police also recently launched the gang reduction and community empowerment (GRACE) project (funded by US INL) to build trust in communities wracked by gang and police-related violence.

In the wake of spectacular drug interdictions and mounting international pressure, Guyanese authorities have taken steps to improve regional cooperation, including counter-narcotics, anti-gang and anti-money laundering activities. For example, Guyana joined the Regional Security System (RSS) Asset Recovery Interagency Network of the Caribbean and the country’s Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) signed bilateral agreements to support intelligence gathering. Likewise, port control programs have been in action for over a decade. Recent examples of partnership include enhanced support from the US and UNODC to expand security in ports through enhanced oversight of containers and training of port control units, coast guard, and members of the GPF, GRA, CANU, and MARAD.

However, according to recent evaluation from the OAS, Guyana does not adequately implement actions to identify organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking and related crime. What is more, it has only limited participation in operations and investigations with other countries to dismantle organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking and related crimes. Previously, Guyana formed a task force to target a specific group, the Five for Freedom, which was comprised of escaped prisoners. Guyana started drafting but never implemented anti-gang legislation. Guyanese law enforcement has limited capacity to police its expansive border; criminal activity in the rural communities may remain a problem. It is unknown how Venezuela’s recent attempt to claim western Guyana will impact criminal activity in the area.

The results of these and other measures are uneven. On the one hand, they have resulted in significant arrests and mixed outcomes in terms of drug seizures. Since 2022, for example, the Jamaican authorities have arrested close to 150 gang leaders and strengthened measures...
to reduce arms flows. In 2023, the authorities convicted 15 people of gang membership and firearms possession for murder. Measures to arrest Trinidadian and Tobago gang leaders have also expanded dramatically. On the other hand, the removal of gang leaders has also resulted in the splintering of many gangs and increased inter- and intra-factional violence as groups compete over territory and drug trafficking routes. Heavy-handed measures to tackle criminal groups such as drug cartels and gangs can trigger increased violence, as in the case of Trinidad and Tobago. In 2021, for example, Trinidad and Tobago’s strategic services agency (SSA) predicted a new violent crime wave due to the fragmentation of key gangs that would lead to an "increase in murders, injuries, shootings and other violent crimes". Trinidadian gangs have not only diversified into new business, from fraud and money laundering to robbery, human smuggling, and illegal gambling, they are also accessing higher caliber firearms, from domestic sources as well as from the US and Venezuela.

A range of preventive measures, including ceasefires, truces, and informal negotiations, have also been explored in the Caribbean. In some cases, truces appear to contribute to short-term reductions in homicide, however the evidence on their effectiveness is mixed. Preventive approaches that deploy trusted intermediaries to disrupt or interrupt violence before it escalates are credited with positive outcomes. Cure Violence, a group that treats violence as a public health problem, has demonstrated positive outcomes in both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. The so-called Project Resolve Enmity, Articulate Solutions, Organize Neighborhoods (REASON) initiative was supported between 2015 and 2017 in Trinidad and Tobago and is credited with reducing homicides by 45 percent in 16 neighborhoods. However, funding was discontinued in 2017. A follow-up program called Building Blocks also reduced shootouts between 2020-2022 but was discontinued in 2022. By contrast, gang-led truces and ceasefires are typically more reactive: while they may temporarily reduce fighting, these agreements are frequently violated and are followed by rapid increases in retributive violence.

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Figure 8. Summarizing national responses to organized crime

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<tr>
<th>National Counter-Gang Policy</th>
<th>GUYANA</th>
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<th>SAINT LUCIA</th>
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<td>Gang investigations unit established by RSLPF (2022)&lt;sup&gt;302&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Gang reduction and community empowerment GRACE (INL, USAID) and Social development crime prevention action plan (CARICOM, UNDP)&lt;sup&gt;303&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Firearms Act (2000323, 2020 revised)&lt;sup&gt;317&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>SEACOP (EU)&lt;sup&gt;320&lt;/sup&gt;, AIRCOP&lt;sup&gt;321&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>SEACOP&lt;sup&gt;321&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>SEACOP&lt;sup&gt;322&lt;/sup&gt; and 4 mobile scanners in 2024, 1 functioning coast guard vessel and AIRCOP&lt;sup&gt;323&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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300 See https://www.thehabarinetwork.com/4-caricom-members-launch-anti-gang-programmes


302 See https://thevoicestt.com/2022/06/gang-investigations-unit-established-in-saint-lucia/

303 See https://www.thehabarinetwork.com/4-caricom-members-launch-anti-gang-programmes


311 See https://www.issup.net/knowledge-share/resources/2022-06/jamaica-update-national-drug-policy

312 See https://www.vertic.org/media/National%20Legislation/Saint_Lucia/LC_Money_Laundering_Act.pdf

313 See https://liu.gov.tt/aml-ctf-acts-and-regulations/


CARIBBEAN GANGS
DRUGS, FIREARMS, AND GANGS NETWORKS IN JAMAICA, SAINT LUCIA, GUYANA AND TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

UNITED NATIONS