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Feature Article:

Crime in the Caribbean

By Guest Author Deanne D. Lashin

The proliferation of crime within the islands of the Caribbean has been a growing concern over the last few years. Countries such as Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, the Bahamas, Bermuda, St. Kitts and Nevis and most recently Aruba struggle to agree on a forward plan to combat their increasing crime rates. The latest event in regard to the disappearance of Natalie Holloway in Aruba, although tragic, has sparked much needed attention to the increasing crime problem in the Caribbean. The similar types and recent frequency of crimes among the Caribbean islands are not coincidental and are escalating at rapid rates. Institution of curfews, harsher punishments, reintroduction of the death penalty and increased training and recruitment of quality law enforcement personnel must be widely accepted as strategies and supported in order to succeed in the reduction of crime.

Just like the politics and crime solutions in the United States, the Caribbean has found themselves equally, if not more, challenged with the task of arriving at a plausible solution to their propagation of crime. Crime rates, despite the Caribbean's efforts, continue to increase at, what seems to be an uncontrolled pace. Bermuda, for example, sustained a "13-per-cent increase in violent crime from 2003 and a more than 20-per-cent increase from 2002" (Bermuda reports 20-per-cent increase in violent crime since 2002, 2005, para 2). Much of Bermudans and remaining Caribbean associates attribute their increase in crime to gang and organized crime related incidents, especially those involving drug trafficking and sales. National Security Minister, Dr. Peter Phillips, agrees with the majority stating "the illegal drug trade, which has expanded over the past 15 to 20 years, has led to the formation of organized crime groups in rural and urban Jamaica with linkages to overseas criminals" (National security minister urges Jamaicans to help police combat crime, 2005, para 3). Provided by the Economists Intelligence Unit, Aruba's Country Report notes issues related to organized crime as a primary goal for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. Aruba, in addition to their already depreciating tourism are dually concerned with a Jamaican based anti-crime program known as "Operation Kingfish", which may lead to "increase[d]...activity in the eastern Caribbean and Mexico, as some shipments move away from the Jamaica-Bahamas route" (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005, para 3). The islands of the Bahamas also endure organized crime related drug activity and according to their 2005-2006 Outlook within their Country Report, "cocaine trafficking ...will remain at a high level" despite their efforts to eliminate it (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005, para 3) In the 2002 United Nations report on crime trends in the Caribbean, researcher Anthony Harriott summarized the Caribbean's concerns as, countries are "worried about the emerging violence, drug dealing, and the formation of transnational trafficking networks, gangs and juvenile crime" (2002, p.14). Yet these concerns have not been ignored. Many countries in the Caribbean have recently implemented solutions to help reduce the instance of crime.

Described by travel sites as the small quiet twin islands, St. Kitts and Nevis also suffer from crimes similar to its larger neighboring islands. In an attempt to stop an already increasing crime rate, St. Kitts and Nevis has instituted a 2200 hour curfew for “children under 16 years, [and prosecuting those] ...who are in breach of the curfew,” this includes the parents of juveniles who are “encouraging these children in activities that would breach the curfew” as well (St. Kitts and Nevis police announce new measures to deal with crime, 2005, para 2,3). The curfew for St. Kitts and Nevis is well grounded. Each of the Caribbean islands suffering from gang related crimes notes a significant involvement by juveniles (Harriott, 2002). Other than their obvious size and population differences, St. Kitts and Nevis share their recent astonishment with rapidly accelerating crime rates. For the twin islands of St. Kitts and Nevis, it would take the disappearance of Dr. Billy Herbert, ambassador to the United Nations and the subsequent murders of the prime minister’s son and girlfriend to awaken them to the crime issue. St. Kitts and Nevis is not the only country to have instituted a curfew for juveniles. Jamaica, along with a juvenile curfew, has also instituted the use of military personnel to aid local law enforcement in the pursuit of lower crime rates. Yet, concerns of increased corruption and power have stalled the institution of military assistance in other parts of the region. For example, in December 2002, Jamaican politicians debated the use of the military to specifically reduce the overwhelming murder rate in their country. Proposed to the Joint Parliamentary Community to make a decision, the “committee remained deadlocked on the issue” much in part to the concern of granting too much power to the military to enforce local laws (Jamaica: Politician’s disagree about more powers for armed forces to fight crime, 2002, para 4). On the island of St. Lucia, resolutions to reinstate capital punishment via hanging have been agreed upon with the hope of deterring crime, more specifically capital offenses (St. Lucia Preparing to Resume Hangings, 2005). People’s Action Movement member Lindsay Grant hopes to help alleviate St. Kitts and Nevis of their crime problems through an “increase[d] ...number of magistrates [and to] ...undertake a comprehensive review of the laws and accelerate the establishment of family court” (St. Kitts and Nevis opposition calls for urgent attention to crime, 2004, para 6). Not too different a strategy from Grant’s, is the Chief Justice of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court Brian Alleyne’s plans to create “a community of judges throughout the Caribbean region in an effort to build what we call ‘collegiality’ a togetherness and awareness of what is happening from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and all learning from each other” (Caribbean Judicial Officials meet in St. Lucia, 2005, p.1). Among these many instituted solutions the main goal among them seems to be family related. With evidence suggesting a high ratio of juveniles involved in Caribbean crime, some “programmes may include very simple things such as systematic efforts to improve parenting skills” (Harriott, 2002, p.14).

Caricom Chairman, Dr. Kenny Anthony, has been proactive in the pursuit of “designing and implementing solutions and strategies to combat crime across the region” (New Caricom chairman calls for regional resolve to combat crime, 2005, para 2). Anthony believes the region’s crime statistics are a vivid example of “inability of Caricom countries to cope with the unprecedented levels of violence and brutality,” he further

implies drastic measures must be taken. (New Caricom chairman calls for regional resolve to combat crime, 2005, para 4).

Very different from the United States, countries in the Caribbean do not have the assistance of their citizens to aid law enforcement. At the 26th Annual Caribbean Community Summit (Caricom) which took place July 3-6th, 2005 National Security Minister Dr. Peter Phillips called upon the local citizens of Jamaica to assist law enforcement in their pursuit of justice, stating, “it is not [just] a matter of what the police is going to do, but it’s a matter of what we are going to do [as a community]” (National security minister urges Jamaicans to help police combat crime, 2005, para 11). In the past, Jamaicans as well as other members of the Caribbean have been hesitant to assist local law enforcement in the apprehension of criminals. Much of this apprehension is attributed to gang related “finger pointing” and a fear of retaliation and exposure of their identities. (St. Lucia to launch crime stoppers programme, 2005, para 4). In fact, the United Nation’s recognizes “in some countries, a basic obstacle to improved police effectiveness is poor police-citizen relation” (Harriott, 2002, p.17).

However, among concerns for their own peoples’ livelihoods, there are those which potentially affect their tourism (New Caricom chairman calls for regional resolve to combat crime, 2005). Already Aruba expects decreased revenue as a result of the disappearance of Natalie Holloway (Aruba, 2005, para 1). Many if not most of the islands of the Caribbean are dependent on tourism to financially support their countries. Instances of increased tourist robberies in Antigua have “officials worried that such incidents will create serious problems for the country’s tourism industry” (Antigua and Barbuda, 2005, para 3). Jamaica, along with Antigua and Aruba is also concerned with the current and future effects crime has on tourism. Minister of National Security, Dr. Peter Phillips while addressing the Pan Caribbean function in August of 2004, stated “organized criminal activities ha[ve] reached unacceptable levels with gangs linked to the illegal drug trade now venturing into other criminal activities” (Green, 2004, para 8). His statement was followed by verbal concern that “crime is a major deterrent to business” creating a huge problem, as tourism is the Caribbean’s primary source of business (Green, 2004, para 10). Even the United Nations concedes the Caribbean’s growing concerns “with crime against tourists” (Harriott, 2002, p.14). Caricom Secretary-General Edwin Carrington is also troubled by the increasing crime as it applies to tourism stating “crime can destroy all we have achieved and frustrate any efforts to achieve more” (Crime to top agenda at annual Caribbean Community Summit, 2005, para 3). Nonetheless, the battle against crime in cooperation with identified corruption has made reduction a serious challenge.

Fighting the battle of crime is extremely difficult if those enforcing it are partaking in the same criminal activities. The countries of the Caribbean face corruption issues on a daily basis. According to Anthony Harriott, crime researcher for the United Nations, “the CCM report...estimates that drug corruption provides the Caribbean civil servants with some US \$320 million in income annually. This is not an insignificant problem” (2002, p.12). In order to help eliminate corruption many islands of the Caribbean have begun revamping the requirements, training and screening utilized to hire members of their local

law enforcement teams. Just as quality personnel are an issue for the United States, it also presents a challenge to the Caribbean. Anthony Harriott suggests in the 2002 United Nations report on crime trends in the Caribbean that initiatives to solve the crime issue must include “police/criminal justice modernization” (p.15). This means “more advanced training and higher educational requirements for police officers and investigators” (Harriott, 2002, p.16).

It seems more than coincidental that the islands of the Caribbean, big and small, are tormented by crime of similar causes and types. While many of these islands including St. Kitts and Nevis, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Bermuda and Antigua have instituted new potential solutions to reduce crime, their efforts draw much controversy. For example, the curfew of St. Kitts and Nevis seems well accepted, yet the military involvement in Jamaica does not. Not only are the Caribbean governments concerned with the reduction of crime, but they also resolve to combat issues of corruption. Drug trafficking in correlation to gang related crimes are a multi-million dollar industry, it will likely take a multi-million dollar investment to rectify it.

The United Nations’ Office on Drugs and Crime report on crime trends in the Caribbean and responses mentions several potential strategies for getting the crime rate under control. However, before an effective battle against crime can ensue, we must understand the roots of crime in the Caribbean. According to the United Nations the emergence of crime is rooted to the following causes: poverty, unemployment, social marginalization and inequality, the illegal drug trade, corruption, the trafficking of firearms, the deportation of criminals, and the effectiveness of the existing criminal justice systems and consequent waiving of sanctions (Harriott, 2002). It is obvious that several of these roots are uniquely identified in the Caribbean’s pursuit of resolving crime. Even though the United Nations recognizes “the structure of the crime problem varies considerably across the Caribbean” it also acknowledges the similarities between the types of crime and their participants (Harriott, 2002, p.14). The strategies proposed and instituted in the Caribbean are a step in the right direction. However in order to ensure their applicability and success the strategies must “systematically treat the root causes of crime” (Harriott, 2005, p.14). A unified approach is necessary to fight the Caribbean’s related crime problems. While the problem is notably severe, as the communities and countries of the Caribbean work together the success of their proposed solutions will substantially increase.

Deanne Lashin is an employee at the Alameda Sheriff’s Office Crime Lab, and aspires to be a researcher and author in the field of criminology and legal statistics.