

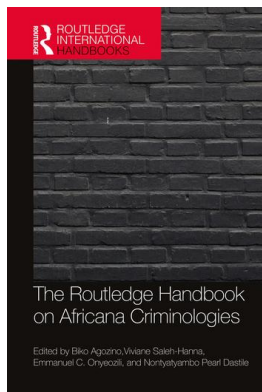
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14

GANGS, GANG DYNAMICS, AND GENDER

Exploring gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Wendell C. Wallace

Introduction

The presence of gangs is not a new phenomenon in the Caribbean. However, research on gangs in the Caribbean, especially Trinidad and Tobago, though increasing, is still in its infancy when compared to similar research in North America and Europe. In Trinidad and Tobago, theoretical and empirical research and evaluations are increasing with the goal of better understanding and responding to the pervasive issue of gangs. Several studies on gangs on the island document a robust and consistent relationship between gang membership and increased criminality. As main theories of gang involvement, the anomie and strain theories suggest that gangs provide a means of fulfilling the economic needs of individuals who are excluded from legitimate economic activities. This chapter explores gangs, gang dynamics, and gender in the context of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. The chapter also examines trends, current topics, and issues associated with gangs on the island.

The chief problem in any community cursed with crime is not the punishment of the criminals, but the preventing of the young from being trained to crime.

(W. E. B. Du Bois (1903))

The presence of gangs is not a new phenomenon since the earliest recorded historical papyruses have identified individuals who banded together for purposes that can only be described as “less than noble” or, more specifically, criminalistics and gang facilitated. Instructively, gangs, gang members, and gang activities are almost never in a state of flux and are therefore always evolving and modifying. The academic literature on gangs has pointed out that gang operations in one country may differ in terms of formation, structure, evolution, and operation (Katz, Choate, and Fox, 2010; Katz and Fox, 2010; Wallace, 2018).

Despite the inescapable fact that gangs differ in nature and scope, traditional definitions, theoretical explanations, understandings, and conceptualizations of gangs are usually constructed on Eurocentric scholarship at the expense of African, Caribbean, and Indigenous peoples' erudition. Quite notably, Agozino (2019, p. 105) points out that "The existing texts are few and are inadequate especially because they lack the points of view of people of African descent and Indigenous people. Rather, they represent the views of tourist criminologists."

The view espoused by Agozino (2019) is not restricted to any specific non-Western location nor is it the sole province of any one non-Western jurisdiction, but extends to all nation-states in the Global South, inclusive of Trinidad and Tobago. The end result of this exclusion of scholarly narratives on gangs in their social milieus by African and other Indigenous-based criminologists is referred to as "colour-coded exclusion" by the author of this book chapter and "methodological nationalism" by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009). Unfortunately, this exclusion and methodological nationalism has subtly created a gap in the criminological knowledge base as it relates to gangs and gang membership in African, Caribbean, and Indigenous jurisdictions. However, in the contemporary era, there are increased calls from scholars for a broader criminology. For instance, Bowling (2011, p. 363) submits that

Global criminology aspires to bring together transnational and comparative research from all regions of the world to build a globally inclusive and cosmopolitan discipline. . . . Transnational criminology goes beyond comparative analysis to explore problems that do not belong exclusively in one place or another and can therefore be understood by analysing linkages between places.

Instructively, it is within the framework of Agozino's (2019) and Bowling's (2011) pronouncements that the current research on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago is being conducted.

Research on gangs in the Caribbean, especially Trinidad and Tobago, though increasing, is still in its infancy when compared to similar research in North America and Europe. In Trinidad and Tobago, theoretical and empirical research and evaluations are increasing with the goal of better understanding and responding to the pervasive issue of gangs. Importantly, several studies on gangs on the island document a robust and consistent relationship between gang membership and increased criminality (Hill, 2013; Katz, Maguire, and Choate, 2011; Wallace, 2018). This relationship is premised on theories of gang involvement that draws on anomie and strain theories and suggest that gangs provide a means of fulfilling the economic needs of individuals who are excluded from legitimate labor markets.

Numerous definitions of gangs emanate from Europe, the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, Jamaica and St. Kitts, and Nevis. For example, Sharp, Aldridge and Medina (2006), define a gang as

a group of three or more that spends a lot of time in public spaces, has existed for a minimum of three months, has engaged in delinquent activities

in the past 12 months, and has at least one structural feature, that is, a name, a leader, or code/rules.

(p. 2)

Taylor (2013, p. 341) defines a street gang as

a group of three or more persons who come together in association and communicates a philosophy that they will commit violent acts on persons, deface or destroy property; who have a name, and communicate to others in the community that they are the most violent, callous, and most dangerous group in that community while claiming some specific, identifiable, self-proclaimed geographic location.

Van Gemert (2005, p. 148) and the UNDP (2012, p. 67) note that street gangs are “any durable, street oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity.” In Trinidad and Tobago, *gang* is defined by the Anti-Gang Act, 2018 to mean “a combination of two or more persons, whether formally or informally organized, who engage in gang-related activity.” In this chapter, a gang is conceptualized using the definition proffered by Trinidad and Tobago’s Anti-Gang Act of 2018 (Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2018).

From an academic perspective, there is much research on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago (see Adams, Morris, and Maguire, 2018; Figuera and Wallace, 2016; Hill, 2013; Hill and Morris, 2017; Katz, Choate, and Fox, 2010; Katz and Fox, 2010; Katz, Maguire, and Choate, 2011; Katz, and Maguire, 2006; Wallace, 2013a, 2013b, 2018). However, the majority of these studies focus on the impact of gangs on communities, the language of gangs, drug trafficking and gangs, and youth gang involvement. To this end, analyses based on gang dynamics are rare, and even rarer are studies focusing on the genderization of gangs. The author of this book chapter cogitates that this constitutes a lacuna in the literature on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago’s context. In light of this lacuna, this chapter explores gangs, gang dynamics, and the issue of gendered gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. The chapter also examines trends and issues associated with gangs on the island. In sum, the current effort aims to close the gap in the criminological knowledge of people of African descent by examining the construction of gangs, gang membership, and the genderization of gangs with a specific focus on Trinidad and Tobago.

Importantly, this chapter is of much relevance to a wide range of individuals and institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean, as well as in the metropole as it offers important insights into specific risk factors, pathways to involvement and desistance, gang formation, and guidance for prevention and intervention efforts that can assist in the future development of solutions to address gang involvement and gang-related activities in Trinidad and Tobago. Further, this chapter is authored through the lens of a local and not a tourist criminologist (Agozino, 2019) and therefore serves to enhance our knowledge of a major problem affecting the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago through a localized lens: gangs and gang violence.

Research context

The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island nation in the southeastern Caribbean. Trinidad, the larger of the nation's two islands, measures 1,864 square miles and is home to nearly 96 percent of the nation's population of approximately 1.26 million people. Trinidad and Tobago is located seven miles off the northeastern coast of Venezuela between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean. The nation comprises about 1.26 million people, of whom 40 percent are East Indian, 37.5 percent African, and 20.5 percent Afro-Indian (Katz and Fox, 2010).

Trinidad and Tobago obtained its independence from Great Britain in 1962; however, it remains a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, and it continues to be highly influenced by British culture and law. Although Trinidad and Tobago was once an agrarian society, over the past 30 years, it become one of the wealthiest and most industrialized Caribbean countries, largely through petroleum production and the provision of regional finance. It currently reports one of the highest gross national incomes per capita and the second-fastest-growing economy in all the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. The island is one of the wealthiest, most economically developed, and most ethnically diverse countries in the Caribbean, with populations of African, Indian, Lebanese, Chinese, and European-descended people; however, the island is the home to several notorious gangs. The gang locations and prevalence rates are identified in Figure 14.1, which indicates that the locations

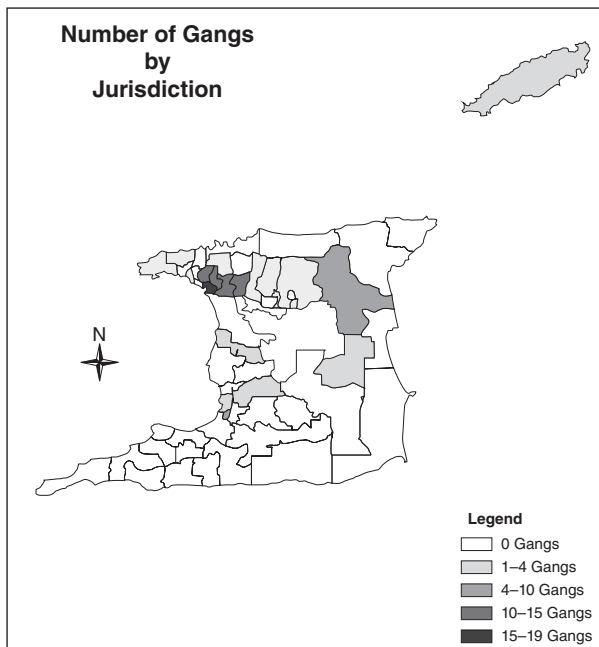


Figure 14.1 Gangs by jurisdiction in Trinidad and Tobago

Source: Katz (2009)

with the highest prevalence of gangs are the northern, western, and central parts of Trinidad.

Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Anecdotal and other evidence on gangs in Trinidad and Tobago suggests the prevalence of two major types of gangs on the island. The first is commonly referred to as street gangs or localized community-based gangs (Wallace, 2018) and the second, organized crime gangs. Street gangs or community-based gangs are found in many communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago, with a membership that is generally constituted of young persons of African and East Indian descent. On the other hand, organized criminal gangs (see Table 14.1) are generally organized and managed by the minority population of Syrians and Lebanese, who are better able to finance and conduct larger-scale criminal operations in a clandestine manner due to their financial status, power, and personal contacts. Table 14.1 explains the continuum of gang characteristics in Trinidad and Tobago, which differ from those of gangs in the U.S., which are typified in Figure 14.2.

Many of the youths and adults who form the greater majority of the “visible gang population” in Trinidad and Tobago reside in geographic areas that are so-called ghettoized, dysfunctional hot spots of crime. These individuals are often marginalized and discriminated against on ethnic, geographic, and social class by the business class, who share a somewhat symbiotic relationship with organized crime gangs. Members of the organized criminal gangs are often referred to as the “invisible population of gang members” and are viewed by the general populace as being untouchable due to their privileged social class. Quite often, members of organized criminal gangs reside in gated communities, protected by their wealth.

In their examination of gangs, Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) submitted that the structure of gangs in the U.S. was organized in a hierarchy as highlighted in Figure 14.2. Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) submitted that gang in the U.S. were generally

Table 14.1 A continuum of gang characteristics in Trinidad and Tobago

<i>Street gangs/localized community-based street gangs</i>	<i>Organized criminal gangs</i>
Informal leadership	Formal leadership
Community based	Locally based with regional and international connections
Loosely organized	Highly organized
Limited initiation	Formal initiation
Little to no crime specification	Crime specification/specialized crime
Fluid membership	Rigid membership
Short-term goals	Generally long-term goals
Multi-ethnic	Generally restricted by ethnic affiliation
Short-term membership	Long-term membership

Source: Wallace (2019)

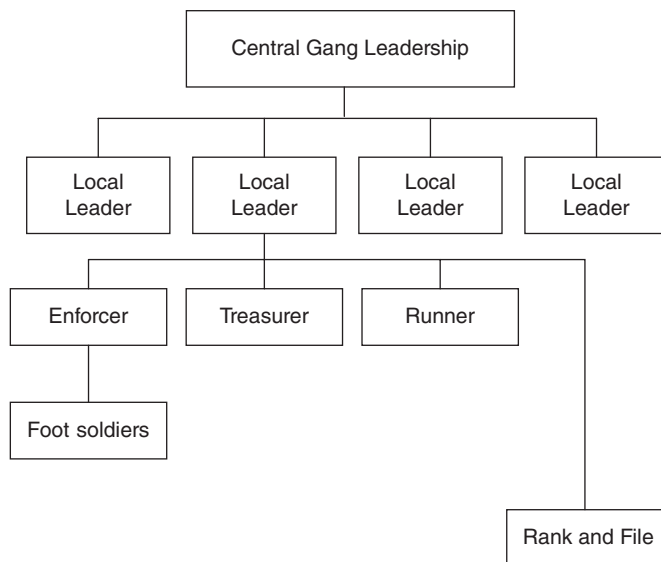


Figure 14.2 Organizational structure of gangs in the U.S.

Source: Levitt and Venkatesh (2000)

structured in a manner similar to legal business entities. For example, Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) cogitate that gangs in the U.S. are chaired by a central leadership of four to six individuals with responsibility for devising the long-term strategies and maintaining relationships with suppliers and affiliates in other regions of the country. Levitt and Venkatesh (2000) also posit that gangs in the U.S. are composed of local leaders, enforcers, treasurers, runners, foot soldiers, and rank-and-file members (see Figure 14.2). However, in Trinidad and Tobago, the structure of gangs is markedly different from that of gangs in the U.S. For example, Wallace (2019), in a lecture delivered at College of Science Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAATT), pointed out that the structure of gangs in the Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago, is markedly different from those in the U.S., Europe, North America, and Latin America.

In examining gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, it must be pointed out that gangs and gang descriptors as well as the structure of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago (and the Caribbean) are different from those in the U.S. (Wallace, 2018, 2019) “as no two gangs are alike” (Short and Hughes, 2009, p. 406). For example, the term *community leader* is frequently used to refer to gang leaders in Trinidad and Tobago, whereas the term *don* is used to refer to this category of individuals in Jamaica. Reportedly, the term *community leader* was ascribed to notorious gang leaders by then-Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Patrick Manning after meeting with them at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in September 2006 in an effort to facilitate peace within warring communities due to inter-gang rivalries on the island.

Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago are headed by an all-powerful gang leader or, paradoxically, a “community leader” (see Figure 14.3) as espoused in some quarters of the media. The gang leader directs the day-to-day activities of the gang, dispenses discipline, disburses finances, and determines which gangs and individuals will be targeted for rivalry and/or association. The next individual in the gang structure is referred to as the lieutenant or “second in command.” This individual is seen as the indispensable right-hand man of the gang leader and dispenses orders on behalf of the leader as well as conducting nefarious activities as directed by the gang leader. The lieutenant is privy to the intimate workings of the gang and the gang leader’s life and is viewed as the natural successor to the gang leader. Quite often, however, due to delusions of grandeur by the lieutenant or the desire for the leadership position within the gang, a power struggle ensues between the lieutenant and the gang leader, and this is often played out in a gang fracture, in which the lieutenant leaves the gang with a few trusted rank-and-file members, and/or the execution of the gang leader by the lieutenant and a subsequent grab for power. This situation is succinctly exemplified by the military-style execution of renowned local gang leader Vaughan “Sandman” Mieres, his wife, and two bodyguards, who were executed at Mieres’s seemingly impregnable fortress in Maracas, Trinidad, in June 2019, allegedly by his lieutenant, Durrel “Shorto” Raymond.

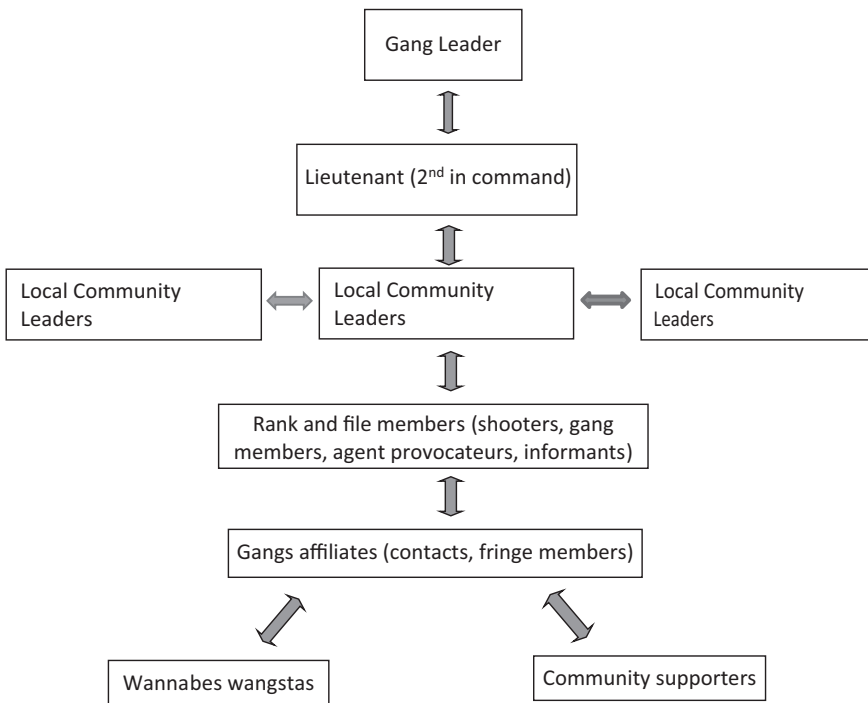


Figure 14.3 Organizational structure of gangs in the Trinidad and Tobago

Source: Wallace (2019)

Next in the gang structure are local community leaders. Local community leaders are gang leaders within respective communities. These individuals derive their power from the gangs they lead within their respective communities, but they are aligned with either the Rasta City or Muslim gangs and look to the main gang leader for direction. In Trinidad and Tobago, it is not uncommon to find gangs that are aligned with either the Rasta City or Muslim gangs operating within the same community, which may be divided by invisible “border lines.” Below the local community leaders are rank-and-file members (hard-core gang members in other jurisdictions, such as the U.S.). These are usually the older, more seasoned gang members – the individuals who are socially and criminally enmeshed in the gang, in most instances, for life. Included in this group are various categories of individuals with tasks and names such as shooters, gang members, enforcers, money collectors, agent provocateurs, and informants.

The next level of the gang structure includes persons who are referred to as gang affiliates. Gang affiliates, for example, include personal contacts and fringe members. Affiliate gang members usually consist of contacts in the public sphere and/or in the underworld, budding gang members, young criminals, and other individuals on the fringe of gang membership who have some personal commitment to the gang culture and are dedicated to achieving the level of recognition needed to attain rank-and-file status. At the lowest level are wannabes and community supporters.

Community supporters are not actually gang members, but individuals who view the gangs as entities of protection from invading forces (other gangs, police agencies), an exciting and adventurous group, or an entity in which they can have a sense of belongingness. These are the individuals who usually benefit from the largesse of local community leaders and who may act as lookouts and provide safe spaces for illegal goods, take riotous acts whenever community leaders are arrested or whenever law enforcement agents descend upon these communities in search of illegal activities, and seek to intimidate the police in the lawful execution of their policing duties. Wannabes or wangstas (imitation gangstas) are not actually gang members. These are individuals who view the gang as a substitute family, an exciting group that offers money, cars, parties, flashy clothing, and a horde of female partners. Wannabes may associate with known gang members and may boast of gang allegiance, but they have not been accepted into the gang or have not accepted the gang portfolio.

Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Some of the earliest gangs in 21st-century Trinidad and Tobago were led by individuals who were deported from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Europe, including, but not limited to, persons such as Kerwin “Fresh” Phillip, Mervyn “Cudjoe” Allamby, and Mark Guerra. These gangs tend to adopt the monikers of gangs from the metropole in order to create the impression that the local gang is connected to an international gang. Two examples of this phenomenon are the Gambinos gang of Dorata Street, Success Village, Laventille, which was led by Barry Alphonso, and the G-Unit gang of Port of Spain, which was led by Kerwin “Fresh” Phillips (a deportee).

This approach is based on illusion and mimicry and assists with the creation of a threatening image (Howell, 2012) of the local gang.

Presently, there are two major gangs in Trinidad and Tobago: namely, (1) the Muslim gang and (2) the Rasta City gang (Ellis, 2017; Wallace, 2019). In many instances, both gangs operate within the same communal space (Ellis, 2017; Wallace, 2019) but with different enclaves, and this has served to divide numerous communities. To some observers, the Muslim and Rasta City gangs are of recent vintage; however, research and gang scholarship point to the formation of these distinct gangs in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Historical criminal and other accounts point to the earliest Muslim gang as being led by Yasin Abu Bakr, leader of the Muslim religious group Jamaat-al-Muslimeen (JAM) and the earliest Rasta City gang as being led by the King brothers, Aldwyn and Frederick, who were both Rastafarians.

During the period from 1986 to 1991, Trinidad and Tobago was led by then-Prime Minister Arthur Napoleon Raymond Robinson and the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) administration. This was one of the most difficult periods in Trinidad and Tobago's history as the country was faced with a plethora of austerity measures, including restrictions on the government by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This was a period of immense belt-tightening, salary cuts, jobs losses, and increased taxation, as well as increased crime rates.

This period also coincided with the increase in drug and arms trafficking using Trinidad and Tobago as a gateway to the Americas and as a trans-shipment point. Under the guise of social cleansing of communities in Trinidad and Tobago from the scourge of drugs, Abu Bakr and his young Muslim loyalists frequently raided drug blocks and confiscated drugs from drug dealers, but instead of destroying them, the drugs were recycled and sold by Bakr and his troops, to the chagrin of the King brothers, who were then based in Laventille and were the leaders of the drug trade in Trinidad and Tobago at that time. It is reported that the King brothers were offended by Bakr's actions and reportedly retaliated by shooting at the JAM headquarters on Mucurapo Road, St. James, as well as attacking individuals belonging to the Muslim faith or suspected of being aligned with Bakr. Instructively, the attempted coup against the duly elected government of Trinidad and Tobago by Abu Bakr and his band of insurrectionists in 1990 put a halt to the burgeoning rivalry between Abu Bakr's Muslim gang and King's Rasta City gang. The author of this chapter submits that this is the genesis of the contemporary Muslim/Rasta City gang rivalry on the island.

Between 1990 and 2000, there appeared to be a hiatus in gang activities in Trinidad and Tobago; gang activities waned as the island underwent reconstruction from the fallout of the 1990 coup. However, starting possibly in 2000, gang activities on the island began to flourish once more, mainly under the guidance and leadership of deportees from the U.S., including notorious individuals such as Kerwin "Fresh" Phillips (G-Unit gang), Mervyn "Cudjoe" Allamby (Laventille Road Gang), and Mark Guerra (John John gang). Today, many factions of the Muslim and Rasta City gangs can be found in different communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago, led by different gang leaders who identify with a particular ideology, either Islam or Rastafarianism.

There are often conflicting numbers concerning gangs and gang members in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, Katz, Choate, and Fox (2010) submit that, in 2006, there were approximately 95 gangs in Trinidad and Tobago and approximately 1,269 gang members, with the majority of gangs concentrated in Port of Spain and the Western and Northern Police Divisions. In 2012, the Crime and Problem Analysis Branch of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service indicated that as of 2012, there were 102 criminal gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. According to Ellis (2017), by the end of 2015, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service estimated that there were 147 gangs, with 1,698 members in Trinidad and Tobago. Over the years, this number has fluctuated upward and downward (depending on the researcher); however, conservative estimates indicate that at present there are at least 100 gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, with approximately 1,500 members. This conundrum surrounding the actual number of gangs and gang members has much to do with the fluidity of gangs on the island as gangs may morph into one or become fractured into multiple gangs. Further, gang members move easily between gangs in urban and rural areas on the island due to migration.

Gangs and gender

Male gang members in Trinidad and Tobago

The academic literature on gangs submits the view that gangs may be constructed differently in terms of gender. As it relates to the gender composition of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, not much is known about demographics of gang members on the island, though anecdotal and some limited empirical data suggest that there are females in gangs, as well as a few female-headed gangs on the island (at some point in time). However, data on the demographics of gang members on the island point overwhelmingly to a preponderance of male gang members. For instance, in a study conducted by Katz, Choate, and Fox (2010) with a nationally representative sample of urban school students, approximately 40 percent of self-reported gang members were females (though this might have been an exaggeration by zealous female students). In sum, gangs can be all male, all female, or a combination of males and females with differing roles within the gang structure. This postulation is applicable in Trinidad and Tobago's context as the majority of gang functionaries on the island are male (Katz, 2015). The position that male gang members significantly outnumber female members in Trinidad and Tobago has found support from Wallace (2019), who used observations, media reports, and official police data to conclude that active (not passive) female gang members constitute no more than 5 to 10 percent of the total gang membership on the island.

Female gang members in Trinidad and Tobago

In Trinidad and Tobago, the number of female gang members is significantly smaller than that of male gang members (Katz, Choate, and Fox, 2010). Maybe it is because of this notion that research on females in gangs on the island is limited. Despite the

limited research on females and their involvement in gangs on the island, it should be noted that research on female gang involvement offers an interesting glimpse into a subject that has been historically under-researched (Wilkins, 2017), and this scenario is commonplace on the island. In Trinidad and Tobago's context, though female gang members are outnumbered by their male counterparts, research has indicated an increase in the number of females who are gang affiliated (see Katz and Fox, 2010; Wallace, 2013b).

Instructively, in Trinidad and Tobago, women and children are often used as pawns in the war against the police whenever they (the police) arrest gang leaders and their affiliates for retaliatory purposes, such as rioting, looting, blocking streets by burning debris, etc., to highlight their plight whenever an "innocent" gang member is killed, whether by the police or by rival gangs and for confrontations with the police to demonstrate their displeasure at law enforcement efforts. In Trinidad and Tobago, women are also used as gang accessories to transport illegal drugs, to act as agent provocateurs, to put unsuspecting individuals in place for robberies and murders, and to act as lookouts for rivals, especially state witnesses to serious crimes when a gang leader/member is arrested, charged, and incarcerated. In sum, a large number of females, whether members of a gang or gang affiliates, tend to become involved due to the presence of family members in the gang (Wallace, 2013b) or even a spouse or lover (see Valdez, 2007 for support).

Female gang membership and involvement

White (2017) alludes to the historical phenomenon in which the role of females in gangs has been a neglected subject for scholarly researchers. Continuing, White (2017) points out that traditional research on gangs tended to focus on male involvement in gangs and that female gang members were stereotypically viewed as maladjusted females who were attached to male gang members either as girlfriends and/or dependents or in some other way. According to Wallace (2019), there are at least four typologies of female attachment to gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. The typologies include:

- 1 Females who belong to all-male gangs and perform subordinate roles within the gang.
- 2 Females (often called cliques) who are affiliated with male gangs and who conduct all-girl crimes together.
- 3 Female gangs (very limited and appear sporadically).
- 4 Females who are both passive and active supporters of gangs within their communities but who may not be directly linked as gang affiliates or gang members. These females may reside in gang-penetrated communities, and their passive or active support is premised on financial support and/or safety and security.

In the past, some females in gangs on the island established their own rules, were not subordinates of male gang members, viewed themselves as being equivalent to male gangs, and conducted their criminal activities in a manner similar to that of male gang

members. In fact, Wallace (2013b) points to the existence of at least two female gangs on the island in the recent past; however, interestingly, the leader of one of the female gangs referred to them as “cliques.” Research in Trinidad and Tobago conducted by Katz and Fox (2010), Wallace (2013a, 2013b) and Hill and Morris (2017) on girls and gangs indicates that females join these gangs for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, culture, communal dysfunction, conflict, poverty, lack of legitimate opportunities, financial stability, a substitute family, power, safety, elevated social status, and low levels of educational achievement. In recent times, however, there appears to be a blurring of the lines as it relates to females as constituents of all-female gangs, and the phenomenon appears to have waned, if not disappeared altogether from Trinidad and Tobago’s jurisdiction. Nevertheless, females are a constant presence in gangs on the island, irrespective of their increasing limitedness and/or roles. For those who doubt the influence of females in gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, the names of deceased Lily Layne (queen of a drug empire in Arima) and Beverly Nurse-Taitt, who took control of the John John gang after the gang’s leader and her husband, Mark Guerra, was executed are stark reminders of females in gangs on the island.

Gang dynamics

Social dynamics of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago

Despite the number of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago and the criminal behavior and violence they perpetrate on the island, there is little empirical literature related to gang dynamics on the island. Instructively, gang dynamics are an important aspect of understanding gangs and gang involvement on the island. The following paragraphs attempt to explain gang dynamics and their operations in the jurisdiction.

As indicated earlier in this discourse, the two major gangs that exist in Trinidad and Tobago are (1) Rasta City and (2) Muslims. While these two gangs dominate the gang landscape in Trinidad and Tobago, there are several smaller autonomous gangs that are either unaffiliated with Rasta City or Muslim gangs or breakaway gangs that form due to the fracturing of a larger gang. Some of the smaller autonomous gangs that are unaffiliated with either the Rasta City or Muslim gang frequently interact with both gangs as deemed necessary for financial reasons as well as for their survival. The best example of a breakaway gang is the Unruly ISIS gang of Enterprise, Chaguanas, in Central Trinidad. Between 2015 and 2017, the Unruly ISIS gang, headed by Abdul Wakeel, a.k.a. “Krysis” (who reportedly was deported from or resided in the U.S. for a period of time), terrorized the Enterprise community and surrounding areas and drew attention to the area due to the heinous nature of their acts. Reportedly, the youthful and overexuberant members of Unruly ISIS were upset after being banned from the main neighborhood mosque in Enterprise by the mosque’s Imam. Allegedly, the fracture was due to the perceived inaction of the Imam, who was accused of being too soft on members of a neighboring Rasta City gang that often “warred” with the Muslim gang members in Enterprise. The dynamics at play in the inter-gang crisis between the Muslim gang and the breakaway Unruly ISIS gang indicated an internal struggle for power as members of the Unruly ISIS are believed to have been

responsible for murdering several prominent Muslim gang members on their home turf – Enterprise – and seemed to have found support from radical Muslim mosques and their leaders in the Rio Claro and Carapo areas of Trinidad.

Another aspect of gang dynamics in Trinidad and Tobago involves invasive gang excursions into enemy territory to eliminate or attempt to eliminate rival gang members or even community residents who are perceived to be supportive of the resident gang in the particular community. These invasive excursions into enemy gang territory and the subsequent media and social media attention are widely felt and are impactful as they serve to fuel fear within “warring” communities on the island. Instructively, the increased level of criminality, as well as the heinous nature of violence perpetrated by gangs on the island generally, has a public character and invariably leads to increased levels of fear. Gang dynamics on the island also revolve around their operations. While the operations of gangs in a global context are generally the same, gangs in Trinidad and Tobago show some key differences. For example, unlike gangs in the metropole that use graffiti to mark turf, gangs in Trinidad and Tobago generally utilize invisible border lines, assaults, and killings of rivals who cross these border lines as ways to delineate territory and express dominance.

Gang dynamics in Trinidad and Tobago also extend into the labor market, with gangs fighting over contracts and income generation and even creating corrupt schemes and practices to extort monies from legitimate businesses as well as the government. In many parts of Trinidad, especially in the Central, Northern, and Western areas of the island, gang dynamics are also seen in the role that gangs play in the provision of a range of goods and services, including, but not limited to, income-generating activities, alternative governance, dispensing justice and discipline, and acting as de facto providers of employment (Ellis, 2017). Instructively, consecutive governments of Trinidad and Tobago have attempted to provide economic opportunities for residents of many marginalized communities on the island through the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) and later the Community Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP).

Both URP and CEPEP are responsible for maintaining the environment in communities throughout the island and provide short-term contractual employment for individuals in the lower socio-economic strata. However, due to gang dynamics, many gang functionaries have organized and registered small businesses in order to win contracts for the provision of environmental services and the construction of box drains. In instances where companies that are not resident in the community where the contract for service was awarded, gang leaders utilize intimidation tactics to coerce external contractors to provide employment for their gang members, who quite often do not show up to work or who provide minimal labor while expecting full remuneration. This scheme is an extension of a previously tried and tested method referred to as “ghost gangs” under the URP. With ghost gangs, gang leaders submit the names of individuals to perform duties with URP agencies; however, in many instances, these persons are either dead or simply provide their personal details without ever going to the job site. These individuals are literally “ghosts” – hence the name “ghost gangs.” However, the names of the “ghost workers” are submitted for payment, and when payment checks are received,

the gang leader collect a substantial percentage of the monies while doling out the remainder to the “ghost” worker.

Gangs in Trinidad also supply a degree of alternative governance in their area of control. Instructively, Ellis (2017) points out that in the context of the perceived corruption and nonresponsiveness of the legitimate authorities, gangs have imposed their own codes of justice on the neighborhoods they control (in some cases in writing) and have become involved in resolving domestic disputes such as spousal abuse or helping parents deal with unruly children. Further, gang leaders have also become involved in providing resources for community members on an individual basis, such as providing monies to indigent parents for the purchase of food and/or schoolbooks for their children.

Another social dynamic of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago relates to the fluid nature of gangs in on the island, and this is markedly different from many non-Caribbean gangs. Importantly, gangs in Trinidad and Tobago are based on locales or community ties as they are localized (Wallace, 2018) and fluid in nature. This fluidity of gangs on the island means that unlike in gangs in an international context, gang members can and do move from one gang to another, for example, on moving from urban to rural areas. This is premised on the communal nature of gangs. Wallace’s (2018) pronouncement has found support from Townsend (2009), who notes that

Another important difference is one of scale. Whereas several large gangs in Latin America are multinational, with links to cousin gangs throughout the region and in the cities of the western United States, the majority of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago have a very local orientation.

(p. 20)

Risk factors for gang membership in Trinidad and Tobago

Similar to pronouncements in the international sphere, there is no single risk factor for gang membership in Trinidad and Tobago; rather, it is a convergence of several risk factors at the same time and place that greatly increases the risk. Risk factors for gang membership on the island include individual risk factors such as juvenile delinquency, drug use, and involvement in violence. Another risk factor for gang membership on the island is family risk factors or factors associated with one’s family: for example, weak parenting, low parental education, family poverty, low family socio-economic status, proviolence attitudes, child maltreatment (abuse or neglect), lack of parental supervision, inconsistent parenting, and residing with a gang member (cousin, uncle, brother, father, etc.). Other risk factors for gang involvement in Trinidad and Tobago are related to low academic achievement and/or schools in hot spots of crime (school risk factors); association with delinquent/criminal peers (peer risk factors); and community dysfunction, easy access to guns and drugs, communal fear of crime, high community crime rates, and overexposure to guns, drugs, and violence as normative practices (community risk factors).

An often-overlooked factor for gang involvement and one that may be unique to Trinidad and Tobago is referred to as “individual geographic profiling” (IGP) by

the author of this chapter. IGP refers to a process by which police officers (as well as employers at private, nonstate business) in Trinidad and Tobago, a largely homogeneous society, rely on subtle generalizations based on area of residence (geography) and not on objective evidence or individual behavior as an investigative technique for criminal investigations, for deciding that an individual was engaged in or is likely to engage in criminal activity, and to subject people to invasive stops, searches, and identity checks. In using IGP, police officers on the island analyze individuals based on their area of residence and decide that individuals who reside in predetermined locales are more likely to be criminals because of the area in which they reside. These locations are frequently connected with high rates of serious crimes and gang activities and are referred to as hot spots of crime. Instructively, IGP results in discriminatory decision-making, and there are numerous examples of police officers (and employers) in the jurisdiction targeting people across a range of national contexts based solely on their areas of residence.

For individuals who reside in these hot spots of crime on the island (mainly African-descended people), gang involvement is a way to circumvent anomie caused by IGP when legitimate opportunities for advancement by residents in these socially disorganized communities are blocked. Hence, the social disorganization theory continues to enjoy strong empirical support as a macro-level explanation of gang presence in these communities on the island. Based on the foregoing, many of the individuals in Trinidad and Tobago who become embroiled in the gang lifestyle are victims of “multiple marginalities.” The multiple marginality model, as espoused by Vigil (2002), posits that gangs develop due to poverty, discrimination, marginalization, and/or the fragile existence of youth in urban and suburban areas. In light of Vigil’s (2002) pronouncement, many gang members in Trinidad and Tobago reside in areas that are socially, economically, and geographically isolated and are therefore marginalized from mainstream society. Another rationale for becoming involved in gang activities builds on anomie and strain theories and proposes that the gangs in Trinidad and Tobago’s jurisdiction provide a means of fulfilling the economic needs of individuals who are excluded from legitimate labor markets based on a multiplicity of often-vacuous notions.

Addressing the gang problem in Trinidad and Tobago

Katz (2015) believes that it is important to differentiate between crews, street gangs, and organized crime in order to accurately and effectively diagnose and respond to problems associated with each group. Instructively, addressing the short- and long-term problems posed by gangs is a daunting prospect; however, numerous policymakers, police, and political executives generally proffer and rely on short-term solutions to the long-term problem of gangs. Instructively, addressing the problem of gangs is premised on systematic understanding of gangs, a step that few legislators in the Caribbean are willing to undertake (Katz, 2015).

In seeking to address the gang issue in Trinidad and Tobago, a multiplicity of actions and interventions have been attempted; however, the success of these interventions remains unknown as these programs ended either acrimoniously or without being evaluated and, in some instances, both acrimoniously and without evaluation.

The following paragraphs attempt to shed light on past efforts that were aimed at responding to and addressing the gang problem in Trinidad and Tobago.

Many legislators in Trinidad and Tobago hold the antiquated view that crime and gang activities are legal, rather than social, problems, and successive governments since 1995 have all gravitated mainly towards legal interventions, such as newer pieces of legislation, denial of bail, hot-spot policing, and harsher sentences at the expense of social and welfare programs. An examination of efforts aimed at addressing the gang problem in Trinidad and Tobago reveals a plethora of legal-based interventions. This includes legislation (Anti-Gang Acts of 2011 and 2018); a state of emergency in 2011, which resulted in hundreds of young African males being arrested and hauled off to jail but few being convicted; knee-jerk reactions, such as attempts to give soldiers police powers; lockdowns; joint police/army patrols; political flirting with gangs; creation of a gang unit within the TTPS; and the award of construction contracts to gang leaders. Many of the aforementioned interventions lacked a social interventionist approach and invariably failed to curb gang activities in the jurisdiction; however, social intervention programs, such as the Hearts and Minds Programme of the TTPS, police youth clubs, and the well-conceived but poorly implemented and subsequently corrupt Life Sport programs, are examples of promising initiatives that sought to address the gang issue in Trinidad and Tobago's jurisdiction.

It is submitted that in seeking to treat the gang issue in Trinidad and Tobago, prominence must be given to providing opportunities for marginalized youth. This gang prevention strategy is based on the notion and the principle that providing individuals, especially youth, with educational and employment opportunities may reduce gang involvement. Opportunities include activities such tutoring, remedial education, job training, and job placement.

Conclusion

Globally, scholars have been conducting research on gangs with a latent and covert Western bias, which have served to preclude the voices of African and indigenous criminologies. The end result is that much of what is known about gangs in many parts of Africa and the Caribbean is written by "tourist criminologists" (Agozino, 2019, p. 105). Instructively, there are still many areas of academe in relation to gangs, gang dynamics, and gender that have yet to be researched in Trinidad and Tobago by locally based criminologists. Overall, while gangs in North America and Europe have many similarities to gangs in Africa and the Caribbean, they are different in numerous ways, including, but not limited to, their development, evolution, growth, and orientation. It is because of these differences that contemporary scholars have been calling for more research on this topic due to the limited focus on gangs from non-Western perspectives within academia. This chapter is a response to the call for non-Western discourses on gangs and places focus on gangs, gang dynamics, and gender by examining the gang landscape in the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago through a localized, non-Western lens. In sum, the importance of this chapter to academic scholarship on gangs should not be discounted as it sheds light on gangs through the lens of a non-Western scholar operating within a non-Western space.

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