

Sherill V. Morris-Francis, Camille A. Gibson & Lorna E. Grant (eds.), *Crime and Violence in the Caribbean: Lessons from Jamaica*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2019. 235 pp. (Cloth US\$ 95.00)

The editors intend for this volume to fill an important gap in our understanding of crime and violence in Caribbean society, pointing to the general consensus among scholars of the region that “not nearly enough is known about the levels and causes of crime” (p. xvi). Accordingly, the eleven chapters include discussion of recent trends, economic and social costs, geospatial distribution, gangs, drug trafficking, money laundering, cyberspace, deportees, murder-suicide among Jamaican immigrants in the United States, and the sociocultural nature of crime and violence. Because the islands of the Caribbean are situated along a major drug trafficking route to North America, they are highly susceptible to the depredations of transnational criminal organizations. We thus need answers to the following questions. What are the principal factors that engender crime and violence in the Caribbean, and what perpetuates it? And why, despite relative political stability, democracy, and economic openness does this region continue to be plagued by crime and violence?

The authors provide informed discussion of these issues, but the book falls short on at least two grounds. First, it overrates the promise of generalizing from the Jamaican experience, and secondly, the analytical approaches are informed by American and Eurocentric models rather than being grounded in local Caribbean sociocultural realities.

The volume focuses on the Anglophone Caribbean (and more specifically Jamaica) rather than the whole Caribbean. Given significant and substantive variation across the region, Jamaican experiences are not generalizable. For example, unlike Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Belize, which are ethnically plural, Jamaica is predominantly Afro-Caribbean. The party system in Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago reflects profound ethnic characteristics, while a politics of color and class typifies party structures in many other parts of the region. None of these social, economic, cultural, and political dynamics, which have strong impact on the nature and patterns of crime and violence across the region, is incorporated meaningfully into the analyses in this book.

Although gangs do proliferate throughout the region, their emergence and evolution differ from one island to another. Jamaica’s gang culture has had long, clientelist ties with the country’s two-party political system, and while many factors have restructured these relationships, gangs remain central to the “tribal politics” and the garrison communities in which they operate with relative autonomy. No similarly institutionalized relationship between gangs and politics exists elsewhere in the region. With regard to illicit markets, both Jamaica

and Trinidad and Tobago are situated next to major drug-trafficking areas: Jamaica is close to the Bahamas drug trafficking chokepoint, and Trinidad and Tobago is a mere seven miles from Venezuela—a transit point for drugs as well as criminals and weapons entering the country from an internally embattled Venezuela. These geographical and geopolitical factors strongly impact the nature and pattern of crime and violence. Additionally, the collapse of the oil and gas economy in Trinidad and Tobago has created another set of challenges that are not addressed in *Crime and Violence in the Caribbean*.

The volume suggests that the Bahamas, with its comparatively high per capita GDP, is not as likely as Jamaica to experience crime and violence. But this hypothesis linking economic-growth/development to reduced-crime-and-violence is not supportable given that Trinidad and Tobago, arguably the richest country in the region, experiences very high levels of crime and violence.

Perhaps the most concerning aspects of the book are the contributors' attempts to provide explanations based on European and North American sociological theories and models that treat Caribbean countries as institutionally, culturally, politically, and economically similar to those in the developed world. While these approaches may offer some useful insights, they do not capture the realities on the ground. Very little effort is made to explain the impact of Caribbean cultural norms, some of which vary from one Caribbean country to another, on patterns of crime and violence. There is no analysis of the role that lack of institutional capacity to implement programs capable of generating economic growth while engendering citizen security has on crime and violence. Ineffective police forces, an overwhelmed judiciary and court system, and an increasing lack of faith in both the police and the courts often results in community-level "justice." Moreover, the witness-protection option is not a viable tool because potential witnesses fear reprisals against their families. These institutional weaknesses, therefore, often lead to police officers engaging in extrajudicial actions against suspected criminals. Finally, the centrality of economic openness and geography (size and location), along with the paradoxical role of democracy, is missing from the book's analyses.

By relying on extra-regional theories and models and failing to examine the local cultural and institutional factors that contribute to crime and violence, this volume falls short of its stated goal.

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