

In Transit

Gangs and Criminal Networks in Guyana

By Taylor Owen and Alexandre Grigsby



A Working Paper of the Small Arms Survey

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Small Arms Survey

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

47 Avenue Blanc, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

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Small Arms Survey

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

47 Avenue Blanc, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

p +41 22 908 5777

f +41 22 732 2738

e sas@smallarmssurvey.org

w www.smallarmssurvey.org

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List of abbreviations

CANU	Customs Anti-Narcotics Unit
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CPG	Community Policing Group
DEA	United States Drug Enforcement Agency
DPP	Department of Public Prosecutions
HDI	Human Development Index
GDP	Gross domestic product
GPF	Guyana Police Force
GYD	Guyanese dollar
PCA	Police Complaints Authority
PNC	People's National Congress
PPP	People's Progressive Party
UDP	United Democratic Party
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

About the authors

Taylor Owen is a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at the Liu Institute for Global Issues and teaches at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of British Columbia. He is the senior editor of opencanada.org and is the research director for the Munk Debates. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Oxford, where he was a Trudeau Scholar. He has been a lecturer at the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Toronto, research fellow at LSE Global Governance at the London School of Economics, fellow in the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University, Action Canada Fellow, and a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo and Canada's International Development Research Centre. His research focuses on the definition, measurement, and policy implementation of human security, and on the local dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding. He writes widely on international affairs, politics, and the changing nature of the media. His published work can be found at www.taylorowen.com.

Alexandre Grigsby currently works on cyber security policy at Public Safety Canada. He has held various positions in the Canadian federal government, working on international human rights issues, security system reform, and policy advocacy. His research has primarily focused on the role of external intervention in peacebuilding processes. He holds a Master's in international affairs from the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University in Canada, where he specialized in conflict and national security studies.

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Preface

On 17 February 2008, a heavily armed gang assaulted the village of Bartica in Guyana's sparsely inhabited interior. The gang overran the local police station, killing three police officers, and then proceeded to terrorize Barticans in their homes (*Stabroek News*, 2008c). Using AK-47s, the gang murdered 12 people, most of them civilians, stole weapons from the police station, and robbed local businesses (Bowling, 2011, p. 9).

The assailants reported to Rondell 'Fineman' Rawlins, a notorious gang leader whose crew is suspected of having perpetrated a series of armed robberies and murders, including that of a Guyanese cabinet minister, since 2003 (*Stabroek News*, 2008e). Believing that the Guyanese authorities had kidnapped his pregnant girlfriend, Fineman declared war on the government in 2008. He promised to terrorize Guyana until the government returned her. Only weeks before the Bartica assault, Fineman's gang had attacked the village of Lusignan, killing 11 people (*Stabroek News*, 2008b; *Economist*, 2008). The following months would prove to be some of the most violent in Guyana's post-authoritarian history, with approximately two armed robberies and three murders occurring weekly (*Stabroek News*, 2009c).

Yet Fineman's reign of terror was short-lived; he was shot and killed by security forces in August 2008. Nevertheless, gang violence has remained a significant challenge in Guyana. Before the emergence of the Fineman gang, Guyana witnessed an increase in gang-related violence and a rash of killings by so-called 'phantom' squads. Hampered by scarce resources and limited operational capacity, the Guyanese Police Force has been struggling to combat gang violence. In public opinion polls, Guyanese consistently rate crime as one of the most pressing issues facing the country, after unemployment and economic woes (2008) and corruption (2010) (LAPOP, 2008; 2010). In fact, 80 per cent of Guyanese feel that the current levels of crime are a threat to their well-being (LAPOP, 2010). As crime and gang violence are known to scare off foreign investors, sap social development, and contribute to the flight of the coun-

try's elite, it is likely the Guyanese are right (UNODC and World Bank, 2007; Granger, 2010a).

The presence of gangs and organized crime syndicates has created drug and weapon problems in Guyana. According to the US State Department, Guyana is a transit country for Andean cocaine. The cocaine is trafficked from Venezuela either by air, land, or sea and then shipped to Europe and North America concealed with Guyana's export commodities (USDoS, 2010a). In 2004, the United Kingdom and the United States revealed that cocaine transiting through Guyana was hidden in cargo containers of coconuts, timber, fish, and rice (USDoS, 2005). Gangs also utilize the country's porous borders with Brazil, a major weapons manufacturer, to smuggle arms into Guyana and ship them to other countries in the Caribbean (Agozino et al., 2009).

Unlike cartel and gang activity in Central America and the Caribbean, however, gangs and organized crime groups in Guyana have received little international attention despite their active participation in the regional and global trade in illicit goods. This report seeks to examine the nature of Guyanese gangs and criminal networks and shed light on their activities. The report is separated into five sections, the first of which provides a brief history of gang violence in Guyana. Specifically, it examines the political and criminal nature of the gangs and how they differ. The second section reviews the theoretical approaches that seek to explain gang violence in the Caribbean, analysing their relevance to the Guyanese context. The following section considers the three types of gangs in Guyana and their activities. The fourth section explores how corruption and insufficient institutional capacity in the country's security sector sustain gang activity. Finally, the fifth section assesses the Guyanese government's policy response to the issues of domestic gang violence as well as international donor-driven initiatives.

This report provides a qualitative overview of gang and organized criminal activity in Guyana. As the country is severely under-studied relative to its Caribbean counterparts, the lack of adequate open-source and empirical data prohibits rigorous quantitative analysis. Some of the data compiled to support the assertions made in this report stem from author interviews and press reports;⁴ despite the authors' best efforts, however, it is possible that the biases present in the often divisive debate in and on Guyana may have been included.

Furthermore, much of the existing academic literature relevant to Guyana fails to address the specific issue of gangs. Given this dearth of information, this report can serve as a compilation of the existing disparate literature on the subject, reinforced by interviews with Guyanese. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of gang and organized criminal activity in the country. This volume is thus intended to form the basis for further inquiry.² 📄



I. Setting the scene

Guyana is an anomaly in South America. As the only English-speaking country on the continent, Guyana identifies primarily with its fellow former British colonies in the Caribbean, such as Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, rather than its immediate Hispanic, Portuguese, and Dutch neighbours (Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname). Relative to other South American states, Guyana’s population is small—only 750,000 people, 90 per cent of whom live along the Atlantic coast—leaving the country’s vast interior sparsely populated (Mars, 2010, p. 257). Georgetown, the country’s capital, is Guyana’s largest city with just over 200,000 people, followed by the cities of Linden and New Amsterdam, with about 410,000 and 18,500 inhabitants, respectively (EIU, 2011, p. 4).

Guyana’s economy relies primarily on commodity exports, mostly in the agricultural and mining sectors. The country’s largest corporation, GuySuCo, owned by the government, has a monopoly over sugar production that represents roughly 20 per cent of the state’s revenues (GuySuCo, 2011). Gold, rice, and timber are also important exports. The country’s per capita GDP has climbed steadily since its return to democracy in 1992; however, it is only in the last ten years that the GDP has caught up to its pre-debt crisis levels of the 1980s. While Guyana is still one of the least developed countries in the Caribbean, its Human

Table 1 Per capita GDP (USD 2000) and HDI in Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, 1992–2008 or available years

	1992		1996		2000		2004		2008	
	GDP	HDI	GDP	HDI	GDP	HDI	GDP	HDI	GDP	HDI
Guyana	673	N/A	885	N/A	942	0.552	987	N/A	1,104	0.599
Jamaica	3,331	N/A	3,647	N/A	3,479	0.665	3,721	N/A	3,824	0.685
Trinidad and Tobago	4,874	N/A	5,228	N/A	6,296	0.685	8,618	N/A	10,909	0.731

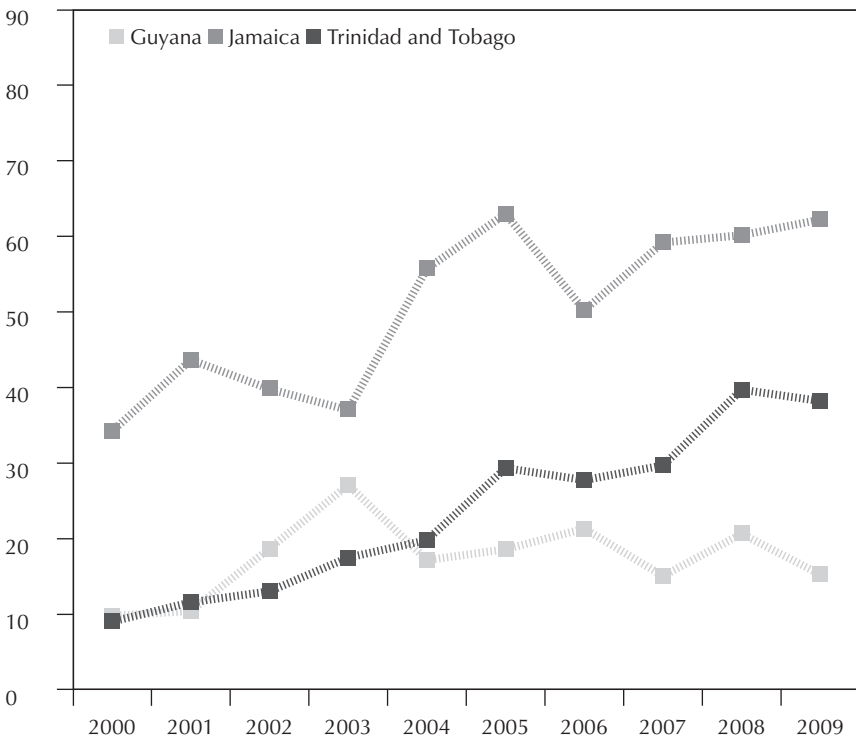
Sources: World Bank (2011a) and UNDP (2011)

Development Index (HDI), as measured by the United Nations Development Programme, grew in both 2000 and 2008, indicating that levels of education, the standard of living, and life expectancy are gradually improving (see Table 1).

Still, roughly 35 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line of less than USD 2 per day and 19 per cent lives in extreme poverty, or less than USD 1 per day (UNDP, 2011). The country's poverty, among other factors, has contributed to the flight of Guyana's educated professionals, leaving it with the world's highest skilled emigration rate. Indeed, 89 per cent of the country's skilled professionals decide to leave the country and 47 per cent of high school students claim they plan to leave Guyana permanently within the next five years (UNODC and World Bank, 2007, p. 176).

Figure 1 **Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago homicide rates, 2000–09**

Homicide rate (deaths per 100,000)



Source: Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011

With regard to domestic public safety issues, Guyana fares quite well when compared to Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Guyana's homicide rate in 2009 was only 15 deaths per 100,000 people compared to Jamaica's astronomical 62 deaths per 100,000 and Trinidad and Tobago's 38 deaths per 100,000. Historically, Guyana has had a very low homicide rate, which rarely exceeded ten deaths per 100,000 before the 1980s (Harriot, 2002). As Figure 1 demonstrates, Guyana's homicide rate has increased significantly since 2000; since 2001, it has remained over ten deaths per 100,000.

Ethnic and political history

The country's ethnic make-up is unique and reflects the country's colonial past. The Indo-Guyanese are the country's largest ethnic group, accounting for 43.4 per cent of the population; they are primarily descendants of Indian indentured labourers imported by the British in the 19th century to work in Guyana's sugar plantations (GBS, 2002). The Afro-Guyanese are the second-largest ethnic group, a majority of whose members are descendants of African slaves brought to Guyana by the Dutch, the country's first colonial power in the 17th century. They now account for 30 per cent of the population (GBS, 2002). The rest of the population consists of persons of Amerindian (9 per cent), Chinese, and European descent (GBS, 2002). Ethnic tensions between the two primary groups, which have existed throughout the country's history, became significantly more acute during the country's turbulent transition from British colonial rule to independence between 1953 and 1966.

In 1953, the British permitted Guyana to hold its first legislative elections. The People's Progressive Party (PPP), the country's main political party, won resoundingly. At the time, the PPP had two leaders: Cheddi Jagan, an Indo-Guyanese politician who founded the PPP, and Forbes Burnham, an Afro-Guyanese who was the party's chairman. The multi-ethnic nature of the PPP allowed it to garner support from both sides of the country's ethnic divide, mainly lower-class, urban Afro-Guyanese and rural, middle-class Indo-Guyanese (Library of Congress, 1992). Over time, however, factions began to emerge within the PPP in the struggle to establish the party's sole leader. Jagan, then the premier and representing the Indo-Guyanese wing of the party, allocated

government jobs to his supporters and promoted policies that disproportionately favoured the Indo-Guyanese (Library of Congress, 1992).³ Resenting these moves, Burnham split from the PPP's base, forming his own faction.

The 1957 elections would be the first to feature Jagan and Burnham's PPP factions competing for government authority, and the ethnic undertones of the election were obvious. By virtue of direct appeals to the Indo-Guyanese community, promising more land for rice cultivation, improved working conditions in the country's sugar industry, and better business opportunities, Jagan's faction was victorious (Library of Congress, 1992). While Burnham's faction was able to maintain support among the country's poor Afro-Guyanese, it was unable to attract the crucial support of the black middle class, which supported the smaller United Democratic Party (UDP). In the aftermath of the election, Burnham appealed to the Afro-Guyanese community to rally their support for his faction and came out strongly in opposition to Jagan's policies (Library of Congress, 1992).⁴ In 1957, Burnham merged his PPP faction with the UDP to form the People's National Congress (PNC).

Jagan's tenure as premier between 1957 and 1964 was turbulent. The PNC and its supporters held large rallies and strikes in opposition to the perceived Indo-Guyanese favouritism practised by the PPP government. Jagan's supporters held counter-strikes and rallies, bringing critical sectors of the economy to a halt. Between 1962 and 1964, tensions boiled over as ethnically divided mobs sacked parts of Georgetown. According to Guyana scholar Mars:

over one hundred persons were killed and untold numbers uprooted from their homes, particularly in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods—a turn of events that led to the creation of polarized ethnic enclaves throughout the Guyana coastlands (Mars, 2010, p. 257).

The United Kingdom, still Guyana's colonial master, declared a state of emergency in 1964 and sent troops to quell the dissent and restore order. The move also allowed the British to restore some control over the country as they, along with the United States, believed Jagan to be too friendly with Communist regimes and sympathizers in the region.⁵ To reduce the tensions in the run-up to the 1964 elections, the British modified the country's constitution to allow for proportional representation in the legislature (Library of Congress, 1992).

The PPP was opposed to the measure, fearing that it would reduce its chances at an electoral victory. Given the cold war context, the British and US power brokers ignored Jagan's objections.

Under the new system the PPP won 46 per cent of the vote whereas the PNC received only 40 per cent; however, the PNC was able to form a coalition government with a smaller, pro-business party, the United Force, which had earned 11 per cent of the vote (Library of Congress, 1992). The PPP felt cheated from victory. The British removed Jagan from office and Burnham was sworn in as prime minister at the end of 1964. For the next 28 years, Burnham and his successor, Desmond Hoyte—also from the PNC—used the full gamut of state power to consolidate their control and cement their authoritarian rule.⁶

A gang history

Historically, two types of gangs have existed in Guyana: political and criminal gangs. The primary motivation of a political gang is to compel others to support or endorse a particular political party or policy through intimidation. While political gangs do not routinely commit illegal acts, their expressed goal is to fortify support for a political platform, which often results in violence. In the Guyanese case, episodes of political gang violence generally occur in the run-up to national elections. Conversely, criminal gangs explicitly engage in criminal activities, which range from petty drug dealing, as is the case with local street gangs, to large-scale narcotics and arms trafficking, as is the case with larger criminal organizations. While these categories often overlap, this distinction is helpful in differentiating between types of gangs and understanding their motives and activities.

Political gangs

During President Burnham's rule, gangs were frequently used to intimidate political opponents and to justify his continued use of emergency legislation, which permitted acts such as arbitrary arrest and detention. In 1980, Afro-Guyanese gangs began terrorizing the country in what became known as 'kick-down-the-door gangs' (Library of Congress, 1992). The gangs, tacitly supported by the PNC, were heavily armed—despite strong gun control legislation—

and often used military-style ambushes on their targets. Indo-Guyanese businessmen were routinely targeted, although it is unclear whether the attacks were ethnically motivated or simply criminal, given that the victims were usually wealthier than their Afro-Guyanese counterparts.

The Indo-Guyanese severely criticized the police for failing to secure effective protection for their communities. Perceptions of corruption and inequality worsened as the police would commonly arrive at the scene of a crime half-heartedly and sometimes hours after an attack had occurred (Library of Congress, 1992). Furthermore, the fact that the Guyanese police are largely Afro-Guyanese added to the Indo-Guyanese distrust of the security forces and reinforced ethnic tensions (Mars, 2009). The gangs' reign of terror lasted roughly five years and disappeared soon after Burnham's sudden death in 1985, giving further credence to allegations that he actively supported their activities (Library of Congress, 1992).

Political gang violence re-emerged after the country's first post-authoritarian elections in 1992. The PPP, still led by Jagan, had won the election, deemed free and fair by the international community (Mars, 2010). Angry PNC supporters remained hostile to the new government for three key reasons. First, having enjoyed political favouritism under the Burnham and Hoyte regimes, PNC supporters feared the loss of political influence given Guyana's winner-take-all Westminster political system (Mars, 2009). Second, the Jagan government was very slow in implementing its election promise of a Race Relations Commission, a bi-partisan initiative to heal the country's ethnic wounds. Third, when Jagan died in early 1997, Janet Jagan, his US wife of Jewish descent, succeeded him as head of the PPP and the party's presidential candidate. Her rise to power was controversial to PNC supporters as she was not part of the ethnic groups that had dominated Guyanese political life, and therefore not 'Guyanese' enough to hold the highest office in the land.⁷ The Indo-Guyanese had no qualms with Janet Jagan as presidential candidate as she was the wife of an Indo-Guyanese hero.

It is within this context that PNC supporters protested, sometimes violently, and drew a heavy-handed response from security forces and PPP supporters. By the 1997 election, tensions had reached a boiling point. A subsequent PPP electoral victory led to violent clashes between supporters of both parties,

incidents of arson, a PNC boycott of Parliament, and Afro-Guyanese calls for civil disobedience (Mars, 2010). Each side saw the emergence of political gangs, whose members targeted and killed supporters of the opposing political party; these supporters were generally split along ethnic lines.

By 1999, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) had intervened twice in Guyana to halt the ongoing violence and foster a dialogue between the PPP and PNC. The results of the organization's efforts, however, were mixed. CARICOM brokered two agreements, but neither party implemented the conditions. This was due, in part, to the PPP and PNC's diminished incentive to actively oppose their political supporters' violence. Indeed, the PNC tacitly supported violent Afro-Guyanese activists because, in light of the highly centralized political system, it was one of the few ways to signal the PNC's grievances towards the PPP government. In addition, the PNC used these violent factions as leverage, demanding that a power-sharing deal, where PNC members could exercise executive functions in government, was the only way to end political violence and relieve ethnic tensions.

In response, and to assert control over the domestic environment, the PPP used the threat of Afro-Guyanese gangs to strengthen its support among Indo-Guyanese. The violence and tension created by this controlled use of force and intimidation during the pre-election period allowed the PPP to pin their campaign on their ability to keep the country stable. Thus, the PPP used the threat of Afro-Guyanese gang violence to justify extreme policing measures, such as extra-judicial killings, as well as the use of the army in a law-enforcement capacity.

For both the PPP and PNC, the perverse incentive structure created conditions for violent political gangs to emerge. It is within this context, and given the country's history of ethnic tensions, that gangs operated within Guyana for most of the last decade with tacit support from both political parties.

Criminal gangs

In contrast to the political gangs, Guyanese criminal gangs primarily facilitate the movement of drugs and weapons from neighbouring states to markets in Europe and North America (for drugs) and to the Caribbean (for weapons) (Agozino et al., 2009, p. 295). These contraband flows tend to over-supply the

local market. While these gangs may have political connections, they are not overtly political—they resist openly advocating for any particular political party or platform. In addition, criminal gangs in Guyana differ significantly from their counterparts in the region. Given the country’s size, Guyanese gangs tend to be much smaller than some of the entrenched posses in Jamaica, *maras* in Central America, or large cartels in Mexico. Nevertheless, the size of criminal organizations in relation to Guyana’s population and economy makes them a force to contend with.

Most criminal gangs in Guyana are critical to maintaining the country’s status as a significant transshipment point for drugs and arms. As noted above, the country’s vast and largely uninhabited hinterland, unmonitored borders, and weak law enforcement mechanisms make it ideal for criminal elements to smuggle significant quantities of cocaine through the country via Venezuela and Brazil. It is estimated that drug trafficking accounts for roughly 20 per cent of the country’s GDP, netting Guyanese traffickers approximately USD 150 million per year (USDoS, 2006).). In addition, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) finds that 1.4 metric tonnes of cocaine were seized in Guyana in 2006 (UNODC, 2011). Relative to other states in the region—such as Guatemala and Jamaica, which have earned a reputation for the same activities— cocaine trafficking via Guyana has not drawn much international attention, leaving the state with a relatively low profile among groups monitoring transit countries. However, a series of high-profile seizures in 2008 has led several states and organizations to recognize Guyana’s importance in the international drug trade (RCMP, 2008; USDoS, 2010a).

According to the Customs Anti-Narcotics Unit (CANU), Guyana’s specialized law enforcement section dedicated to combating drug trafficking, the majority of the country’s cocaine arrives via sea from Venezuela and enters Guyana through the mouth of the Pomeroon River along the country’s Atlantic coast (*Stabroek News*, 2009a). From there, the drugs are shipped through Guyana’s extensive network of inland rivers; many of the roads in the country’s interior remain unpaved and prone to seasonal washout, making this route unattractive. Once in Georgetown, the cocaine is repackaged to blend in with Guyana’s primary exports at the city’s port and is then shipped to the United States, Canada, or West Africa, either directly or through intermediary states.

The level of sophistication among Guyanese traffickers varies widely, with some simply concealing bags of cocaine under shipments of timber whereas others have tried to line boxes of hot pepper sauce with cocaine to avoid detection (*Stabroek News*, 2008f). The cocaine has also been known to skip the Georgetown route entirely as the drug traffickers sometimes transport their shipments to contacts in Suriname, who then export the product to the same destinations (*Stabroek News*, 2009a).

While much of the drugs are transported via Guyana's intricate river network, the country's numerous remote and often unmonitored airstrips make it easy for traffickers to import their products undetected. Small planes that originate in Venezuela or Brazil and transport cocaine and weapons use these sites to refuel. After local gangs have been paid off, the planes depart for Hispaniola, from where the cocaine is shipped to US markets through local intermediaries (*Stabroek News*, 2007a). In at least one instance the traffickers, failing to find a suitable airstrip, have been bold enough to build one themselves (*Stabroek News*, 2007b).

While guns and other weapons are also trafficked along similar routes, the bulk of the guns are smuggled from Brazil, home to Taurus, an important regional handgun manufacturer. According to the Guyana Police Force, 61 per cent of firearms confiscated in 2008 were manufactured in Brazil, with whom Guyana shares a vast and largely unpatrolled 1,200-km border (*Stabroek News*, 2009e). Once in Guyana, the guns, generally .32 and .38 calibre pistols, are either passed along to local gangs and business owners who use them for protection or to other criminal organizations in the Caribbean to protect the larger drug trafficking networks. Locally, a .38 Taurus sells for GYD 70,000–80,000 (USD 350–400); prices vary depending on whether the gun has been used in a previous crime, with a higher premium paid for 'clean' guns (*Stabroek News*, 2008a).

Criminal gangs have also been known to lead assaults on military barracks and police stations to steal higher-calibre weapons, such as AK-47s and shot-guns (*Stabroek News*, 2010h). Indeed, Guyana's military and police installations are notoriously insecure and the country is awash with military-grade weaponry. Ferguson estimates that there are approximately 19,000 military-grade rifles and small arms in Guyana, based on the latest figures available (Ferguson, 2007, p. 7). In the 1980s, when the Guyana Defence Force comprised an esti-

Table 2 **Total estimated small arms and light weapons in Guyana**

Group and sub-group	Estimated firearms holdings (rounded)
Guyana Defence Force	18,000
Air Force	150
Army	15,000
Navy	150
Reserves	3,600
Guyana Police Force	2,400
Civilians	110,000
Civilians—legal	56,000
Civilians—illegal	55,000
Total	130,000

Source: Ferguson (2007, p. 1)

mated 8,000 members, its small arms and light weapons holdings may have been commensurate with its strength; today, however, the force’s 1,100 troops cannot justify retaining the estimated 18,000 firearms in their possession (see Table 2). The surplus weaponry cached in barracks is an attractive target for criminal gangs, which use stolen high-calibre weapons to protect drug shipments and overpower poorly equipped GPF officers in the country’s hinterlands.

In addition to trafficking drug and arms, Guyanese criminal gangs are reportedly entrenched in some of the most important sectors of the Guyanese economy. Given the illicit nature of criminal organizations, it is difficult to assess the extent of their involvement; however, anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the larger organized crime groups use their significant land holdings to launder money and transport illegal products.⁸ Indeed, access to large swaths of land for forestry purposes makes it easier for traffickers to travel to and from the hinterlands unhindered. Buying mining concessions in the Guyanese interior also allows the traffickers to finance their operations through the sale of gold and diamonds (Granger, 2010b, p. 55). These industries, along with the real estate sector—a favourite money-laundering vehicle—provide an effective front for Guyanese criminal organizations to conceal their activities.

Finally, organized crime networks in Guyana are also believed to be active in the trafficking of persons. While it is difficult to estimate how many people are trafficked to and from Guyana, the United States asserts that the country is both a source and a destination country (USDoS, 2010b). Young Brazilian boys and girls are routinely trafficked across the porous Guyana–Brazil border, where they work as indentured servants in the mining and logging industries and as prostitutes, respectively (USDoS, 2008a). Amerindians in Guyana are particularly vulnerable to trafficking as they generally live in remote locations where law enforcement is weak and reporting is slow. According to the United States Agency for International Development, Amerindian girls are ‘duped into prostitution with promises of employment as waitresses and bar attendants at coastal establishments and in gold and diamond mining areas’ (USAID, 2006, p. 25). Given that Guyana’s organized crime networks enjoy close links to the mining and logging industries, it is highly likely that criminal syndicates play a notable role in facilitating the trafficking of persons in the country. 📄

II. A theoretical approach to criminal gangs

Historically, scholars examining the interactions and structures of gangs have focused their efforts on criminal organizations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Much of the literature describes gang relationships and their characteristics in major US cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. While this research has provided excellent theories to help explain the gang phenomenon in the Western world, it is of limited use in the study of gangs in the Caribbean.⁹ Indeed, the cultural and social factors that can influence gang activity vary widely from one country to another, making it difficult to replicate lessons learned across markedly different regions. Furthermore, Caribbean countries are characterized by their overwhelmed criminal justice systems, small populations, and vast unpatrolled coastlines—all of which influence the strength and structure of gangs (UNODC and World Bank, 2007, p. i). In the case of Guyana, the country's numerous rivers and vast interior compounds these problems, making it difficult for an under-resourced GPF to effectively monitor and disrupt gang activity.

The recent increase in violent crime in the Caribbean has renewed the focus on gang activity in the region. Indeed, homicide rates in Jamaica jumped from 20.9 per 100,000 population in 1990 to 62.0 in 2009; in Trinidad and Tobago the rate jumped from 9.1 per 100,000 in 2000 to 38.2 in 2009 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011). In light of these dramatic increases, much of the Caribbean gang literature focuses on both these countries.¹⁰ Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago do differ from Guyana—which has a lower crime rate and a smaller population; as opposed to the United States and Central America, however, their similar historical and cultural heritage allow for meaningful comparisons with Guyana.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine specific causal mechanisms that lead to the emergence of gangs and related violence. Factors such as domestic abuse, psychological strain, and family fragmentation are oft-cited reasons for why a person might join a gang, but research has consistently shown that

correlations between these variables are generally not statistically significant, if at all (Rodgers and Muggah, 2009, p. 5). While it might be difficult to pinpoint the micro-causes leading to gang membership, the Caribbean gang literature highlights four macro-level structural factors that influence the emergence and sustainability of gang activity.

The most common explanation for the existence of gangs is the prevalence of poverty and inequality in a society. Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza (2002) note that while it is not poverty itself that contributes to crime and violence, its combination with severe income inequality can be an important factor (Heinemann and Verner, 2006, p. 12). Supporting these findings, UNODC finds that, on average, countries with higher Gini coefficients¹¹ tend to have higher murder and robbery rates, a very crude indicator of the prevalence of gang activity (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011).¹² It is therefore unsurprising that some of the highest crime rates in the world are found in the Caribbean as the region is characterized by one of the most uneven income distributions in the world, along with Latin America (Morley, 2001; *Economist*, 2010).

Yet the correlation between income inequality and violence does not apply to all countries equally. In fact, Guyana has a higher Gini coefficient than its neighbours but a significantly lower homicide rate. According to the United Nations Development Programme, Guyana has a Gini coefficient of 0.45, indicating that income distribution is fairly unequal (UNDP, 2009). The country has maintained an average homicide rate of 17.4 per 100,000 inhabitants over the last decade (UNDP, 2009; GBS, 2009; World Bank, 2011b); that rate is significantly lower than the 23.6 per 100,000 of Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana's closest Caribbean neighbour, which has a slightly lower rate of income inequality (a Gini coefficient of 0.4).¹³ In other words, the relationship between income inequality and violence is non-linear, suggesting that other factors better inform the vectors of gang violence.

The second most common explanation for the emergence of gang violence in the Caribbean is the breakdown of social and community structures. This theory holds that youths generally form gangs to replace dysfunctional or non-existent social institutions such as the family, school, or labour market (Rodgers, 1999, p. 4). Entering or forming a gang allows members to create a sense of purpose, connect with their peers, feel valued, and protect themselves

from those who would harm them. In addition, young members use gang membership as a way to earn respect through gang status and money, allowing them to attract women and gain the esteem of their male peers in the community (Leslie, 2010, p. 23). In doing so, they feel valued and perceive a sense of self-worth that they do not receive from wider society. The entrenchment of gangs—as evidenced by their contribution to the welfare of their neighbourhoods—generally takes root where there is a dearth of state services. Indeed, as Manwaring notes, certain posses in Jamaica help ‘the people in their “jurisdictions” with education, public health, and employment problems’ due to the state’s absence from some communities (Manwaring, 2007, p. 35). These actions, in turn, create a sense of communal solidarity between residents and the gang, permitting the latter to gain local support and maintain order over areas they control.

In Guyana, however, there is little evidence of this phenomenon. Contrary to Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana has no institutionalized community gangs that replace government welfare systems.¹⁴ Street gangs are generally composed of small bands of amateurs seeking to enrich themselves—not to gain the support and protection of the community. Furthermore, a strong gang culture that emphasizes community support and solidarity does not exist to the same degree as it does in other countries in the Caribbean.¹⁵ The sense of community responsibility and solidarity generally manifests itself in the form of remittances, whereby the relatively large Guyanese expatriate community sends money to relatives and funds infrastructure projects in their home-towns. Larger criminal networks that operate in the country, such as drug trafficking organizations, tend to stick to their core business and rarely, if ever, concern themselves with community initiatives.

A third explanation for the existence of gangs in a society is the availability of drugs and guns, although their presence does not necessarily imply that gang activity will proliferate. In fact, given the circular cause-and-consequence relationship between drugs, guns, and gangs, it is impossible to determine whether drugs and guns fuel gang activity or vice versa. What is clear, however, is that drugs and guns definitely exacerbate the problem. For example, drug trafficking requires guns and weapons to protect shipments. As Blumstein dryly notes, drug traffickers ‘are not likely to be able to call on the police if

someone tries to rob them' and they therefore use guns as a natural instrument to protect themselves and their product (Blumstein, 1995, p. 30). Thus, where drugs transit through Caribbean countries to their final destinations in North America and Europe, the presence of guns remains strong. As Agozino et al. explain,

firearms accompany the drugs like fleas ride on shipboard rats, but firearms stay behind on the islands and the effects spill over onto the streets long after the drugs have been moved on to more lucrative destinations (Agozino et al., 2009, p. 294).

In the Caribbean, gang members and the population in general use available guns to protect themselves. Indeed, people will resort to self-help methods of defending themselves, their families, and possessions in states where local police services are overstretched or mistrusted and where guns are easily accessible (Blumstein, 1995). The ensuing security dilemma subsequently increases the demand for weapons and fuels illegal trafficking networks, strengthening the gangs that facilitate the illicit small arms trade.

Compounding the drug and gun problem is the fact that many gangs are paid in product, rather than in cash (Bennett and Lynch, 1996, p. 24). Paying gangs this way allows a drug trafficking organization to expand its market, attract more consumers, and slowly transform transit countries into consumer countries. Trafficking organizations in Guyana are no exception. The country's role as a trans-shipment point in the global drug trade 'has resulted in large quantities of cocaine reaching local markets' thanks to gangs being paid in product (MoH, 2002, p. 13). Further, the larger criminal organizations pay the smaller local gangs in product to maintain stability in the Georgetown area and avoid attracting unwanted attention.¹⁶

In turn, this increased availability has led to a greater consumption of cocaine and its derived products. While alcohol has generally been the drug of choice for most Guyanese, the use of crack cocaine is on the rise and is alarming public health officials (*Stabroek News*, 2009f). This increase can only be explained by the spillover effects of the drug trade, given that Guyana itself is not a cocaine-producing country (USDoS, 2010a). The payment of Guyanese gangs in product thus introduces drugs that would otherwise be more difficult to access, significantly aggravating local substance abuse problems.

The fourth common explanation for the prevalence of gangs in the Caribbean revolves around the issue of criminal deportees from the United States. For years, politicians in the Caribbean have argued that steady flows of criminal deportees from the United States fuel gang violence in the region (Lundy, 2007; Melia, 2010). Under US law, non-citizens who are sentenced to more than a year in prison are automatically deported to their country of citizenship upon completion of their sentence. The law is partially responsible for the emergence of violent gangs in Central America in the 1990s.¹⁷ Caribbean politicians use the example of Central America to argue that deportees, who have been exposed to US gang culture, bring with them the skills required to run effective gangs and violent rackets. In 2010, roughly 200 people were deported to Guyana from the United States and Canada, many of them with criminal records (*Guyana Times*, 2010). Bharrat Jagdeo, the Guyanese president, as well as the GPF, have often blamed the deportees for making the country more violent (Martin, 2009; *Guyana Times*, 2010).

The deportee argument, however, remains deeply controversial among scholars who study gangs in the region. There is, in fact, little empirical evidence to support the link between deportees and rising gang violence (Martínez, 2007). An analysis by UNODC shows that ‘deportees have low repeat offence rates, and thus it is difficult to sustain the argument that they re-engage in criminality in their countries of origin’ (Martínez, 2007; UNODC and World Bank, 2007). Furthermore, in one of the few studies conducted on the issue of criminal deportees in the Caribbean, Griffin notes that deportees are no more likely to offend than their non-deportee counterparts (Headley, 2006, p. 44). Despite the lack of empirical evidence, anecdotal information continues to support the link between deportees and crime. For example, 72 per cent of all US deportees to Jamaica in 2004 had a criminal record and their arrival coincided with an increase in homicides on the island (Martínez, 2007, p. 8). Furthermore, in the case of Guyana, deportees tend to be stigmatized in their community, possibly making them prone to violence given their isolation and limited job prospects.¹⁸ The lack of consensus and empirical evidence to support or refute the link between deportees and gang violence in Guyana makes it impossible to definitively assert whether deportations are an important contributing factor to gang violence in the country. 📌

III. The three types of Guyanese gangs

In view of the aforementioned structural factors and Guyana's history of political gang violence, Guyanese gangs may be divided into three separate categories: small local gangs, political gangs, and large-scale criminal gangs. While there may be some overlap between the categories, notably the latter two, this typology provides a useful overview of the types of gangs that operate in the country.

Local gangs and related criminals

Like most countries in the Caribbean, Guyana has a number of local gangs and notable criminals. Unlike other countries in the region, however, Guyanese gangs lack many of the characteristics that tend to define street gangs.¹⁹ Local officials, journalists, and members of civil society interviewed for this study indicate that gangs do not have identifiable gang signs, tattoos, clothing, initiation rituals, or 'codes'. They are generally composed of a leader with a small band of subordinates, but gang membership is fluid and therefore alliances often shift (Granger, 2010b, p. 64). Membership is so variable that some gangs form only when a criminal opportunity arises; once they have attained their goal, the bounty is distributed among members and the gang dissolves. It is also unclear whether local gangs have a designated area, or 'turf', over which they exercise control.

Demographically, gang members tend to be men in their mid-twenties to early thirties.²⁰ While Guyana is home to youth gangs, consisting of members in their teens and early twenties, these groups are far less widespread than in Central America or elsewhere in the Caribbean. According to a respected local journalist, Guyanese youth gangs tend to be mostly 'copycats of other gangs who are influenced by what they see in the media'.²¹ The copycat behaviour is exemplified in the 'Gaza vs. Gully' rivalry that originated in Jamaica and is now making its way to Guyana. Gaza and Gully are the nicknames of two well-known Jamaican dance hall lyricists who have been engaged in a feud

since 2006. The prevalence of dance hall music in Guyana has contributed to the spread of this feud among the country's high school students. Yet the rivalry is neither widespread nor entrenched; it is predominantly seen as a reflection of normal youth—rather than gang—culture.²²

In terms of their activities, local gangs play an important part in facilitating the drug and arms trade in the country. The larger traffickers and organized crime syndicates generally utilize the smaller gangs to move product around urban areas. The local gangs take a cut of the trafficked cocaine and use guns supplied by the syndicates for protection. Given that they are almost entirely paid in product, local gangs attempt to monetize their cocaine by selling it on the local market or using unsophisticated methods to ship it out of the country. They generally resort to using drug mules to smuggle cocaine through the country's main air transport hub—Cheddi Jagan International Airport—to destinations in the United States (BBC Caribbean, 2010). While mules have no set profile, anecdotal evidence suggests that they are generally Guyanese or US citizens with strong connections to the Guyanese diaspora, which has a heavy presence in New York City (*Stabroek News*, 2009i; Moseley, 2010). Countries such as Canada (and cities such as Toronto) and the United Kingdom are also home to significant diaspora communities. Mules complicit in the transfer of drugs through the international airport stand to make USD 8,000–9,000 (*Stabroek News*, 2009d). The remuneration remains a considerable incentive for unemployed Guyanese to attempt to smuggle cocaine, despite the risks.

The 'Five for Freedom' and the phantoms

Guyana experienced a string of political and criminal gang activity between 2002 and 2006. This violence was the result of simmering political and ethnic tensions between the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese communities. The significant rise in crime came after a prison break in February 2002 during Mashramani, a day-long festival that celebrates the establishment of the Guyanese Republic. Five Afro-Guyanese criminals escaped from the Georgetown jail, quickly formed a gang, and began a 'rash of robberies, carjackings, murders and kidnappings' (Korten, 2008). Calling themselves the 'Five for Freedom',

they primarily targeted the Indo-Guyanese, given their relative wealth and support of the PPP government (IRBC, 2003).²³ The fugitives, reflecting a popular sentiment among Afro-Guyanese at the time, accused the PPP of marginalizing them and implementing policies that favoured the Indo-Guyanese. They asserted that their attacks on the state leadership and their supporters were justified in that they defended the rights of the Afro-Guyanese (IRBC, 2003).

The Five for Freedom received the open support of the PNC and occupied the small village of Buxton, east of Georgetown, making it their base of operations. Sections of the town became enclaves for anti-government and anti-Indian activity, reflecting the widespread distrust and outright hostility between the groups. The gangs focused their attacks on the Indo-Guyanese and symbols of state power, such as police stations and army barracks. Using body armour, stolen assault rifles, and grenades, they were able to quickly overwhelm the police, who only had small-calibre firearms and a limited number of vehicles (Scher, 2009).

With the police unable to stop the killings, vigilante death squads took it upon themselves to restore order. These 'phantom squads', as they became known, targeted, tortured, and executed a number of Afro-Guyanese gang members. While few phantom squad members have been identified, many Guyanese believe that the PPP government tacitly supported their actions (Korten, 2008). The few phantom members who went public asserted that then PPP home affairs minister Ronal Gajraj remained in close contact with the vigilante squads and directed their operations. Before the accusations could be made in court, however, the former members were killed by unknown assailants. A public inquiry later cleared Gajraj of having direct involvement in phantom gangs but raised questions as to his associations with known and dangerous gang members (Korten, 2008).²⁴

Responses to these phantom squads was divided along ethnic lines. As targets, the Afro-Guyanese perceived every unexplained disappearance, maiming, or murder as the work of the death squads. The Afro-Guyanese gangs that fought the phantoms were seen as necessary to protect their communities, as the police, despite being largely Afro-Guyanese, was considered partial to the PPP government. Meanwhile, the Indo-Guyanese came to view the phantoms as a key way to quell the violence and restore stability to the country. For them, the lack of police capacity and slow responses to crime made the

phantoms a necessary evil to protect their neighbourhoods and communities (Malik, 2004).

In total, phantom gangs killed or maimed an estimated 200–500 people (USDoS, 2009a; UNGA, 2009; AI, 2010). During the period of heavy violence between 2002 and 2006, which became known as the ‘Troubles’, Guyana averaged 130.6 reported homicides per year compared to the 88.8 homicides reported since 1997, when the PPP assumed control of government (GBS, 2009). At least 25 police officers were killed during the same period (Korten, 2008).

The large-scale gangs

The large-scale criminal networks that operate in Guyana arguably pose the most serious challenge to the country’s security. Due in part to their political connections and weak law enforcement capacity, drug and arms traffickers are able to operate with ease. Unlike the smaller gangs that use the international airport to export cocaine, the large-scale gangs use the port of Georgetown, as it allows them to move more contraband and poses less risk. Interestingly, CANU, the country’s drug enforcement agency, has not been given the authority to monitor cargo that passes through the port. Those duties are the responsibility of the Guyana Revenue Authority, which has little to no experience in the area of drug enforcement. This division of labor has allowed large amounts of cocaine to go undetected while small amounts of cocaine and marijuana are interdicted at the country’s main airport (*Stabroek News*, 2010c).²⁵

Emblematic of the large criminal networks is Shaheed ‘Roger’ Khan, known as Guyana’s ‘most complete criminal’ (*Stabroek News*, 2009h). Khan, a fugitive who became wealthy through PPP largesse, was arrested in 2006 along with 11 others in a sting operation that interdicted 213 kilos of cocaine in Suriname.²⁶ He was later extradited to the United States, where he pled guilty to drug trafficking charges (Korten, 2008; *Stabroek News*, 2009h). Khan’s network was believed to play a key role in shipping large amounts of cocaine to the United States. In 2006, the US *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report* identified Khan as a ‘known drug trafficker’ and asserted that he used his considerable timber holdings in the Guyanese hinterlands to move drugs and weapons from Venezuela and Brazil north towards the Caribbean and the United States

(USDoS, 2006; Granger, 2010b, p. 55). He probably used his connections in Suriname to move drugs across the Guyana–Suriname border before they were shipped towards West Africa and Europe (*Capitol News*, 2011).

Khan is widely believed to have been the leader of the phantom gangs, a position that would have allowed him to eliminate rivals while maintaining control of the drug trafficking routes during the Troubles (Korten, 2008). A US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) informant who testified at the trial of Khan’s lawyer asserted that Khan had ordered the murder of political activists, informants, and whistleblowers (*Stabroek News*, 2009j). The same informant asserted that Khan had once complained that to run the phantom gangs effectively, ‘he would have to land 500 kg of cocaine per year into the US and Europe’ (*Stabroek News*, 2009j). Unrepentant about his role in the Troubles, Khan publicly boasted about providing information and assistance to the GPF, adding that he was ‘instrumental in curbing crime’ (*Stabroek News*, 2009g; Granger, 2010b, p. 67). In fact, Khan was helping the GPF so closely that he was caught in 2002 near a police cruiser loaded with weapons and maps of Afro-Guyanese villages, assumed to be planning a hit with current and former members of the GPF (Granger, 2010b, p. 75).²⁷

Khan’s ties to the authorities allegedly reached all the way into the PPP government. Testifying under oath, the co-director of Smith Myers, a UK-based telecommunications company, alleged that Khan used surveillance material that the firm had sold to the Guyanese government via a sales office in Fort Lauderdale, Florida (*Stabroek News*, 2009h). Leslie Ramsammy, the Guyanese minister of health, allegedly signed a letter authorizing purchase of the equipment on behalf of the government. Once the material had been delivered, a Smith Myers representative travelled to Guyana to train Khan to use the equipment, which was later allegedly used to spy on opposition members and Khan’s opponents. Both the government and the Ministry of Health adamantly deny any connection to Khan and the surveillance equipment (*Stabroek News*, 2009h).

A typology matrix for Guyanese gangs

Table 3 presents a typology of the main gangs in Guyana and their core activities. As noted above, there may be overlap between the political and criminal

Table 3 **Typology matrix of gangs in Guyana**

Type of gang	Motivations	Examples	Range of activities*
Local gangs	Criminal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small street gangs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-level drug-running • Opportunistic crimes
Political gangs	Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kick-down-the-door-gangs • Post-election gangs • Five for Freedom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political intimidation • Attacking political opponents • Voicing political grievances
Large-scale criminal gangs	Criminal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Khan network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large-scale drug and arms trafficking • Money laundering • Eliminating rival groups and opponents

* These activities are not necessarily applicable to all of the examples listed. They simply illustrate the range of possible activities that a gang could undertake.

gangs. For example, some of the kick-down-the-door gangs may not have been politically motivated. They could have been motivated by purely criminal factors, given that the Indo-Guyanese were, on average, wealthier than the Afro-Guyanese. Despite overlaps, the matrix provides some clarity in the complex world of Guyana’s gangs. 📄

IV. Sustaining gang activity: corruption and limited state capacity

Guyana is fertile ground for gang and organized criminal activity, largely because corruption is endemic in most levels of the country's political and official institutions. Indeed, it would not be possible for such large quantities of narcotics to be trafficked through Guyana without significant institutionalized corruption. According to Transparency International, Guyana is the second most corrupt country in the Caribbean, narrowly beating Haiti, which is generally regarded as one of the most corrupt states in the Western hemisphere (TI, 2010, p. 8). In a 2000 World Bank survey of Guyanese public workers, 92 per cent of respondents noted that corruption was a significant problem, particularly in the context of avoiding police harassment, regulatory compliance, and taxes (Chêne, 2010). Corruption, especially in law enforcement and the judicial system, plays an important role in allowing gangs and organized crime elements to operate with impunity. Furthermore, as discussed below, corruption is amplified in a country whose economy rests almost exclusively on cash-based transactions. While there is no 'hard' data to help assess the extent of corruption—a function of its illicit nature—anecdotal evidence suggests that it plays a significant role in sustaining gang activity in Guyana.

The cash economy

Guyana's cash economy makes it difficult to bring corruption under control. Indeed, cheques, debit cards, and credit cards are not widely used or accepted (*Kaieteur News*, 2010). Most Guyanese use cash for day-to-day transactions; in fact, in 2005, 30 per cent of university students paid their university admissions in cash (Roberts, 2006, p. 15). It is not uncommon in Guyana for locals to buy big-ticket items such as cars and houses entirely in cash. An entire economy that rests almost solely on cash is extremely prone to abuse by gangs and criminal organizations as there are no records of transactions and little oppor-

tunity to ‘follow the money’, reducing the risk that bribes to local officials will be detected.

The lack of transaction records renders accurate reporting of corruption levels difficult. Based on available information, Guyana’s informal economy represented roughly 31 per cent of GDP in 2008, or nearly USD 600 million (Thomas, Jourdain, and Pasha, 2009, p. 28). To be sure, not all of this money is funnelled towards corruption; it also represents illegal activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering, or tax and regulatory evasion. However, these figures represent a considerable proportion of the total Guyanese financial system, underscoring the problems that can accompany a cash economy.

Law enforcement and oversight mechanisms

The Guyanese Police Force, the country’s most important law enforcement institution, is widely perceived as corrupt (*Stabroek News*, 2010d). Its susceptibility to corruption rests on three key structural factors.²⁸ First, the force is chronically understaffed, making it difficult for officers to conduct their duties effectively. The GPF is estimated to have between 2,400 and 2,880 members to police a population of 750,000 people (Jane’s, 2010). In 2010, Minister of Home Affairs Clement Rohee acknowledged that the force would require an additional 700 people (400 constables and 300 corporals) to police the country effectively (Jane’s, 2010). This lack of capacity and understaffing severely limits the GPF’s ability to patrol Guyana’s internal waterways, a key transit route for the country’s drug trade (Granger, 2010b, p. 37).

Low wages—which limit the GPF’s ability to attract and retain new recruits—represent the second major structural problem. The average monthly salary of a junior officer is roughly USD 160, less than the average civil servant’s monthly wage of USD 200 (Granger, 2008). As a result, according to David Granger, a well-respected retired brigadier general in the Guyanese Defence Force, ‘only the less educated show interest in joining and often for the wrong reasons’ (Granger, 2008). In the commissioned ranks, many officers have only completed their primary education, given that more emphasis is placed on seniority rather than on innovation, merit, or competence (Granger, 2008).

The GPF's third major structural problem is that higher-ranking officers have little incentive to be responsive to the complaints of front-line officers. Under the Guyanese Police Act, the Guyanese Police Association has 'no powers to make representation in relation to any matters of discipline, promotion, transfer or leave or any other matter affecting individuals' (Guyana, 1998, para. 43(2)). Furthermore, the Police Association must be 'entirely independent of and unassociated with any body outside the Force' (Guyana, 1998, para. 43(2)). In other words, police officers have no institutional mechanism or recourse to voice their concerns about working conditions, pay, and other issues that affect the day-to-day operations of the force. In the end, these dynamics create resentment and disenchantment within the GPF, making officers more likely to accept bribes and resort to corruption to increase their earnings.

Given these structural conditions, it is unsurprising that officers attempt to bribe or 'shake down' the population they are sworn to protect. The Guyanese press is replete with police corruption stories, from officers taking a bribe from small-time drug dealers to spare them from prosecution to officers keeping money retrieved from robbery suspects (Persaud, 2009; *Stabroek News*, 2010j). In the most extreme cases, members of the police force switch sides, joining the larger drug trafficking networks to enrich themselves. Indeed, the Khan network was rife with former regular members of the GPF and the Target Special Squad, commonly known as the 'black clothes' police, a now-disbanded secretive police unit alleged to have conducted a rash of extra-judicial killings during the Troubles. Two well-known drug traffickers—and possibly lieutenants of Khan's—Ricardo Rodrigues and Lloyd Roberts, were both ex-policemen whom Khan recruited to protect his organization and interests (Al-Jazeera, 2009; *Stabroek News*, 2010b). At this writing, both men, along with other former policemen and Khan's other associates, were wanted by the GPF in connection with execution-style murders (*Stabroek News*, 2010i).

The willingness of police officers to accept bribes and to join organized crime groups has led the Guyanese population to mistrust the GPF. According to public opinion surveys, 20 per cent of Guyanese said that they had no trust in the police and 47 per cent of respondents indicated they had less than medium confidence (LAPOP, 2010).²⁹ In the 2010–11 edition of its *Global Competitiveness Report*, which measures whether businesses are able to rely on the police service,

the World Economic Forum ranks Guyana 114 out of 139 countries, behind regional neighbours such as Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago (WEF, 2010). Furthermore, as already noted, the GPF is overwhelmingly Afro-Guyanese, leading to charges by Indo-Guyanese that crimes against them are rarely investigated and that they are routinely harassed (Freedom House, 2010). According to a 2004 inquiry into the actions of the GPF, there are five Afro-Guyanese for every Indo-Guyanese member of the force (Mars, 2009, p. 510).³⁰ Due to this imbalance, Indo-Guyanese businesses tend to rely on private security providers or their own weapons for protection rather than the GPF.³¹

Nominally, the Police Complaints Authority (PCA), the GPF's oversight body, is responsible for investigating accusations of corruption, abuse, and ill-treatment. In practice, however, it is chronically under-staffed and completely dependent on the police chief and the minister of home affairs. Since the PCA does not have the power to investigate any complaint, it refers the matter to the GPF, which then conducts an internal investigation and produces a report that it submits to the PCA. In other words, the GPF investigates itself. The PCA has no investigative powers and can only make a non-binding recommendation for disciplinary action towards the offending officer if warranted by the report (*Stabroek News*, 2010f). Furthermore, the Ministry of Home Affairs dictates the PCA's staffing and budget allocations, undermining the oversight body's independence. As a result, the reporting process is slow, cumbersome, and potentially biased, with complaints generally taking more than two months to be resolved (*Stabroek News*, 2010f). These hurdles do not seem to have deterred the Guyanese population, however. In 2009, the PCA received a complaint every 48 hours for infractions ranging from conduct unbecoming of an officer to the improper use of force and extra-judicial killing (*Stabroek News*, 2010d; 2010f).

Government officials in Guyana are well aware of the corruption problem, although Guyana's president expressed astonishment upon learning that there were roughly 90 police officers facing criminal charges (*Stabroek News*, 2010d). That same year, Minister of Home Affairs Clement Rohee allegedly declared in a statement to customs officers that:

*the tentacles of drug trafficking have reached into Guyana's national institutions, with the effect of destroying the integrity of some of their functionaries through corruption or the get-rich-quick syndrome (Stabroek News, 2010e).*³²

In another statement, Rohee noted the ‘loose’ behaviour of police officers across the country, criticizing them for ‘slackness’ (*Stabroek News*, 2010d). Despite repeated criticism of the GPF, the government has been slow to address the issue. Officer pay remains low and the government seems disinclined to increase it.³³ The recommendations from the 2004 inquiry into the actions of the GPF have only recently been adopted by Parliament after a six-year delay, and critics express doubts regarding whether they will be fully implemented (*Stabroek News*, 2010g).

While generally perceived as less corrupt, CANU, the anti-narcotics unit, is handicapped by insufficient enforcement capacity. It only has 36 staff and six vehicles to monitor drug trafficking in a country the size of the United Kingdom (Granger, 2010a). In addition, half of the staff members work at their desks (*Stabroek News*, 2009b). Given these conditions, it is impossible for the fledgling unit to effectively monitor roughly 100 airstrips in addition to the thousands of kilometres of largely undefended border region that Guyana shares with Venezuela, Brazil, and Suriname.³⁴

The judiciary

Further contributing to Guyana’s corruption woes is the country’s slow and overburdened justice system. While there is little hard evidence to prove that the system itself is corrupt, noticeable inefficiencies and a lack of capacity prevent the Guyanese from having faith in the system, making it vulnerable to corruption. Brain drain has depleted some of the country’s best talent, leaving courts—and judges benches in particular—poorly or under-staffed.³⁵ According to the Inter-American Development Bank, Guyana has approximately 3.5 judges and magistrates per 100,000 persons, a ratio far lower than that of other judiciaries in the region. Trinidad and Tobago, for instance, has 6.3 judges per 100,000; the Dominican Republic has 7.0; and Saint Kitts and Nevis has 15.0 (IDB, 2006, p. 3). Vacancy rates in Guyana range between five and 50 per cent (IDB, 2006, p. 5).

This small judiciary makes it difficult for Guyanese courts to adjudicate matters in a timely fashion. In criminal matters, it is common for convicted persons to languish in prison for several months, if not years, while they await their sentencing (Fund for Peace, 2010). To speed up the process, GPF officers have

the power to prosecute low-level criminal charges (non-indictable offences that carry a prison term of fewer than five years). Only some GPF officers receive legal training as there is no formal obligation for them to do so (IHRC, 2007, p. 41). This system effectively puts the police in charge of arresting as well as prosecuting suspected offenders. In addition, since 1998, the Magistrates' Court, the court of first instance for most civil and criminal matters, is continually backlogged, with more cases being filed than decided (IDB, 2006).

In light of these inefficiencies, many of the higher-profile drug traffickers and gang members are charged, prosecuted, and jailed in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Granger, 2010b, p. 117). At this writing, the Guyana Ministry of Justice was implementing a justice sector reform programme with financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank, hoping to reform the system and make it more accountable. As is generally the case with similar projects, however, implementation has remained 'sluggish' (IRBC, 2009). 🇬🇪

V. Domestic and international responses

Domestic efforts

The Guyanese government has faced considerable challenges while grappling with the country's gangs and criminal networks. Shortly after the 2002 prison break, the government, in concert with the opposition, established a commission of inquiry to examine the actions of the Disciplined Forces—the GPF, the Prison Service, the Fire Service, and the Defence Force—during the violence. The panel consisted of several prominent and well-respected members of Guyanese society, such as judges and retired military officers. In 2004, the commission presented its final report to Parliament—with 164 recommendations. The focus of these recommendations was the proposed modernization of the GPF through improved training standards, diversified ethnic composition, and enhanced data gathering capabilities to better inform public safety policy decisions and ameliorate day-to-day police operations (*Stabroek News*, 2010g). While the report was unanimously accepted by Parliament the same year it was released, it took the government more than six years to accept its recommendations and even longer to begin implementing them (*Stabroek News*, 2010g). Such delays reveal significant challenges inherent in overhauling the largely colonial police force, which has changed little since the 1960s (IDB, 2005).

One of the ways the government aims to reform the GPF, and its other public safety institutions, is through the Citizens Security Programme. The USD 15 million programme, which began in 2006 and is funded in large part by the Inter-American Development Bank, is designed to accomplish three key goals: (1) strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of Home Affairs to gather and analyse data to provide evidence-based policy solutions; (2) modernize the GPF by providing it with training, tools, and organizational restructuring to improve its investigative capacity and public accountability; and (3) implement community-based services to prevent crime and provide front-line services for at-risk persons (IDB, 2005). In his most recent update on the programme,

the minister of home affairs highlighted some of the programme's accomplishments, including the development of a new training programme for the GPF and the establishment of a Crime and Social Observatory to gather data (MoHA, 2011). With the project slated for completion by the end of 2011, it is too early to ascertain whether its goals will be reached and whether it has had any discernable impact on crime or gang violence.

In addition to the programme, the Guyanese government has taken a number of legislative steps to counter gangs and criminal networks; it has passed anti-money laundering, plea-bargaining, and wiretapping legislation. Despite these measures, however, there is a significant lack of capacity in the GPF, CANU, and the Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to effectively utilize these tools (USDoS, 2009b; 2010c; Granger, 2010b, p. 27). Furthermore, the country's criminal legal system lacks legislation on conspiracy and racketeering, which would clarify and simplify the GPF's procedures for investigating organized criminal gangs while setting standards for the DPP to prosecute them (USDoS, 2008b). To its credit, the government has developed several anti-drug strategies, and a new five-year plan was being drafted at this writing (Earle, 2010). In the past, however, very few of the previous plans' goals have been achieved and thus there is little expectation that the forthcoming plan will achieve improved results (*Stabroek News*, 2010a).

The government also relies heavily on its Community Policing Groups (CPGs) to assist the GPF in maintaining law and order. Created in 1986, CPGs are locally formed policing groups that help patrols and alert the GPF in the event of a crime. The groups began partially as community self-defence organizations and vigilante groups during the Burnham and Hoyte administrations. Their role was to act as neighbourhood watch groups in areas where the GPF's presence was limited. Over time, however, the groups were absorbed into the country's public safety architecture and are now overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs; they generally carry out the same functions.³⁶ The groups have access to guns, vehicles, and boats that they can borrow from local GPF detachments.

The Guyanese model of community policing differs greatly from the traditional model of community policing exercised by police forces around the world (GHRA, 2003; Mars, 2009, p. 513). Traditional community policing is a philosophy according to which police officers work in close collaboration with the community in the hopes of preventing or resolving crimes more quickly as they

gain the community's trust. In contrast, Guyana's concept of community policing involves non-police groups that patrol the streets and, in some cases, replace the local police force altogether. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, there are 272 CPGs with a membership of approximately 4,695 people—a larger force than the GPF (Granger, 2010b, p. 108).

The CPGs have come under severe criticism, both inside and outside Guyana. Local human rights organizations, along with the Disciplined Forces Commission, have argued that the CPGs are prone to vigilantism and create a parallel law enforcement agency, instead of assisting the GPF with its duties (GHRA, 2003; Mars, 2009, 514). As a result, the GPF has begun to suspect the CPGs of usurping its authority (Granger, 2010b, p. 109). Furthermore, since CPGs are often located in bastions of PPP support, critics allege that they fail to adequately protect areas where the GPF actually requires assistance; instead, they are thought of as a political militia answerable only to the PPP (Granger, 2010b, p. 108). In contrast, the government asserts that CPGs serve as an effective tool for combating crime and improving community safety (MoHA, 2011). To date, no publicly available independent studies have been conducted to examine their effectiveness or the role that they play in community safety.

International efforts

International actors have attempted to assist Guyana combat its gang challenges through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, with largely mixed results. One of the most ambitious attempts to assist Guyana was a 2007 security sector reform programme offered by the United Kingdom through its Department for International Development. The USD 5 million programme was expected to improve the GPF's operational capacity while creating a legislative framework for better security sector accountability and financial management. In 2009, however, the United Kingdom cancelled the plan because 'the Government of Guyana had made little progress on the plan's key provisions' (USDoS, 2010a, p. 320). The Guyanese government, in turn, expressed its dissatisfaction with the United Kingdom's methods, accusing it of encroaching on Guyanese sovereignty by attempting to dictate how the country's security apparatus should be reformed (Granger, 2010b, p. 23).

The United States—a major destination of drugs exported from Guyana—has been assisting the Guyanese government in tackling its anti-drug efforts. Cooperation between the DEA and its counterparts in Guyana (the GPF and CANU) has been rocky, however. The DEA and other US law enforcement agencies are hesitant to share police intelligence with Guyana, fearing that it might compromise ongoing investigations (EIU, 2011). This concern may partly explain why the DEA has been reluctant to establish a liaison office in Georgetown, despite the Guyanese government’s long-standing request. Another explanation may be linked to the Guyanese government’s failure to comply with the US call for a safe and secure location for the agency (*Stabroek News*, 2009b).

As part of its Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, the United States is providing assistance to Guyana to improve security in the country and the wider region. Of the USD 45 million allocated to the programme, Guyana will receive approximately USD 3 million to be spent largely on equipment and training. The United States will supply urgently needed patrol and interceptor boats, along with communications systems. It will also provide training to Guyanese authorities to improve their ability to detect weapons, narcotics, and additional contraband at the country’s ports of entry. Finally, it will fund juvenile offender rehabilitation programmes to reduce recidivism (USDoS, 2010c).

At the regional level, CARICOM, headquartered in Georgetown, is actively engaged in promoting regional tools and mechanisms to increase Caribbean cooperation in tackling the problems associated with drugs, gangs, and criminal organizations (CARICOM, n.d.). Through its organs and partner agencies, such as the Implementation Agency for Crime and Security, CARICOM supports member states in promoting improved intelligence cooperation, establishing standardized law enforcement operating procedures, and tracking the trade of small arms and light weapons throughout the region (IMPACS, 2009). Despite Guyana’s membership in CARICOM, however, it is unclear to what extent the country participates in the organization’s crime-fighting and security efforts. 🗨️

Conclusion

In comparison to its Latin American and Caribbean neighbours, Guyana exhibits limited gang and organized criminal violence. Strong street gangs such as Jamaica's posses or Mexico's cartels are generally absent. Nevertheless, there is real cause for concern as Guyana's local gang and organized crime issues have the potential to develop into a much larger problem. This assertion is supported by three observations.

First, there is a sentiment in Guyana that the arrest of Shaheed Khan, the country's most notorious drug trafficker, means that gang and violence problems are largely a thing of the past. However, many of Khan's associates still remain at large and continue to maintain the network that he helped establish (Al-Jazeera, 2009).

The underlying ethnic tensions between the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese also remain largely unaddressed, further deepening mutual mistrust. In addition, with recent presidential and parliamentary elections completed in November 2011, and given the country's history of electoral violence, there is a real threat of political gang violence should the Afro-Guyanese community feel under-represented once more in the country's governing institutions.

Finally, with US counter-narcotics efforts focusing on shutting down the Pacific corridor (Colombia, Central America, and Mexico), there is a possibility that the Caribbean could re-emerge as a key trafficking zone. With its poorly monitored ports, porous borders, intricate river network, and weak security sector capacity, Guyana is an ideal alternate for drug traffickers who want to ship their goods through the country and into the Caribbean.

The presence of gangs and organized crime syndicates in Guyana also has long-term implications for the country's economic and social development. In interviews conducted for this study, many respondents said that drug trafficking and organized crime were not necessarily a problem in Guyana as the country does not produce narcotics on a large scale and there is no widespread drug abuse problem. Guyanese, in general, argue that the country is merely

a transit point for drugs and that there is not much they can do about it. In essence, there is a general sense of apathy about the issue.

While the costs of drug trafficking may not be felt immediately, they have negative consequences that slowly erode the institutions of government and people's trust in them. Corruption, a vital factor in drug trafficking and money laundering, is the most obvious example. Corruption creates widespread mistrust of the government and security sector, raises the costs of doing business, increases low-level criminality, hinders democratic politics, and contributes to high emigration. Drug trafficking has a host of social costs, many of which are already evident in Guyana. Should the country maintain its general sense of apathy towards gangs and organized crime, Guyana's security situation will only continue to deteriorate. 📄

Endnotes

- 1 About 30 interviews were conducted in Guyana between 29 February and 10 March 2011. Attempts were made to meet with top government, opposition, media, and academic leaders. In addition, the authors reviewed a wide range of research and journalism on Guyanese politics and organized crime history in the lead-up to the field research and in the writing of this report.
- 2 At this writing, Guyana did not have an established definition for ‘gangs’ under its criminal legislation. This report thus uses the term ‘gang’ as outlined by Trinidad and Tobago, as it is largely applicable to gangs in Guyana. For the Trinidad and Tobago definition, see Townsend (2009, p. 20).
- 3 Jagan’s pursuits included land reform and union legislation as many Indo-Guyanese were landowners and worked in the country’s important sugar industry.
- 4 In appealing to their respective communities for support, both Jagan and Burnham used racial and ethnically tinged language, reinforcing the divide between the country’s dominant groups.
- 5 In 1960–61, Jagan refused to impose a blockade on Cuba; he had previously professed his admiration for Stalin, Mao, and Fidel Castro (Library of Congress, 1992). In those years, Jagan met with Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, who paved the way for Cuban loans to Guyana.
- 6 While the earlier years of the Burnham rule were more authoritarian (that is, less accepting of dissent), the Hoyte regime, beginning in the late 1980s, slowly relaxed limitations on dissent in response to internal and international pressure.
- 7 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011.
- 8 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011; author interview with Raphael Trotman, co-founder and former presidential candidate, Alliance for Change, Georgetown, Guyana, March 2011.
- 9 Wood and Alleyne (2010) provide an excellent review of the most relevant current scholarship on gangs in the United States, Canada, and Europe.
- 10 See, for example, Harriot (2002), St. Bernard (2009), Townsend (2009), and Leslie (2010).
- 11 A Gini coefficient provides a standard mechanism to measure inequality in a society. It measures the income distribution in a society on a scale from zero to one, with zero indicating that everyone in a given country has the same share of national income, and one indicating that a single person owns the entire country’s income.
- 12 There are significant issues with using homicide rates as an indicator for the prevalence of gangs in a society. For one, gangs tend to be more involved in petty crime, such as low-level theft, rather than homicide, a far more serious crime (UNODC and World Bank, 2007, p. 72). Given the lack of open-source disaggregated data on crime statistics in Guyana, however, homicide statistics arguably represent the most reliable type of data.
- 13 See Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2011).
- 14 Author correspondence with Gerry Gouviea, Georgetown, Guyana, February 2011.
- 15 Author correspondence with Norman MacLean, Georgetown, Guyana, February 2011.
- 16 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011.

- 17 For more on the impact of deportees on the emergence of gangs in Central America, see Rodgers, Muggah, and Stevenson (2009).
- 18 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011.
- 19 For a discussion on this point, see Rodgers and Muggah (2009).
- 20 According to the Inter-American Development Bank, 80 per cent of perpetrators of crime in Guyana tend to be male repeat offenders and high-school dropouts who are unemployed or under-employed (IDB, 2005).
- 21 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011.
- 22 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011.
- 23 It is important to note that the Indo-Guyanese community was targeted primarily for their wealth, and not solely due to their ethnic background. Indeed, during this period, wealthy Afro-Guyanese were also targeted (IRBC, 2003).
- 24 After the inquiry, Gajarj was appointed Guyanese high commissioner to India (Korten, 2008).
- 25 Author correspondence with Enrico Woolford, editor-in-chief, *Capitol News*, February 2011.
- 26 Khan's companies were routinely awarded government contracts and allegedly received favoured land deals for his timber concessions (*Stabroek News*, 2008d).
- 27 While Khan was arrested as a consequence, the charges were eventually dropped (Korten, 2008).
- 28 For more on the workings and history of the GPF, see Mars (2002) and GHRA (2003).
- 29 Respondents were asked to gauge their trust in the GPF on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating no trust and 7 indicating absolute trust. The 47 per cent represents the cumulative response of those who answered 3 and below.
- 30 The inquiry, also known as the *Disciplined Forces Commission Report*, investigated the Guyanese Defence Force, the Fire Service, and the Prison Service as well.
- 31 Author correspondence with a member of the Guyana Chamber of Commerce, Georgetown, Guyana, February 2011.
- 32 The Guyanese government's information agency later sought to disassociate the minister from his comments.
- 33 Author correspondence with a member of the Guyana Chamber of Commerce, Georgetown, Guyana, February 2011.
- 34 While CANU is generally perceived as less corrupt, little is known about the organization. Formally, the unit is the responsibility of the Guyana Revenue Authority, yet it is often the minister of home affairs who answers for the unit in the press. CANU was not established by any legislation, making it doubly difficult to ascertain its mandate, accountabilities, and oversight mechanisms.
- 35 According to the 2002 census, roughly 40 per cent of people born in Guyana are no longer in the country (Kirton, 2006, p. 5).
- 36 In one of its recommendations, the Disciplined Forces Commission proposes the implementation of a legislative framework to formalize the existence of the CPGs, particularly by clearly establishing their role, functions, and accountability mechanisms (Mars, 2009, p. 514). It is unclear whether such a framework now exists.

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