

EDITORIAL

‘GANGS’

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The aim of the special issue is to draw together empirical research findings and theoretical accounts on the issue of ‘Gangs’. Following this editorial, this special issue comprises four selected, peer-reviewed articles.

In the first article, *Robert McLean, Ross Deuchar and Allan T. Moore* (University of the West of Scotland, UK) explore robbery within the illicit drug markets in Scotland. For their article the authors draw upon three separate (but related) qualitative studies on gang organisation and activities carried out primarily in Glasgow and surrounding towns between 2012 and 2020. Four overarching themes relating to robbery within illicit drug markets are presented: (a) the evolution of robbery; (b) the motivation for robbery within illicit drug markets; (c) opportunistic robbery in disorganised drug markets; and (d) planned and organised robbery in organised drug markets. McLean *et al.* show that robbery is a common occurrence at the lower levels of the drug trade, which tend to be ‘disorganised’ and involve retail-level dealers and ‘social suppliers’ (Coomber, 2006), and that robbery victims do not always fit the image of what could be the ‘ideal victim’ (Christie, 1986; see also Jacobs, 2000). Importantly, the authors make valuable recommendations for policing in Scotland and suggest that bespoke strategies matching the underlying local peculiarities are needed against the particular phenomenon.

The articles that follow in this special issue focus on Latin America and the Caribbean. The second article, by *Ana Isadora Meneguetti and Marcos Alan S. V. Ferreira* (Federal

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University of Paraiba, Brazil), looks into the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC or First Command of the Capital) and its development from a prison gang established approximately 30 years ago to a ‘transnational’ gang in expansion from Brazil to Paraguay since the 2010s. The authors have conducted an analysis of investigation files obtained from the Public Prosecutor's Office of São Paulo, and interviews with investigative journalists working on the PCC. The PCC, according to the authors, is not only a complex ‘structure’ that controls much of the drug trade in South America (see also Ferreira, 2019), and a challenge for the public security agencies (in the countries it is active); it also exposes underlying conditions such as flaws in the Brazilian prison system and the absence of the Brazilian state in many urban (and rural) areas. The insistence of the Brazilian state on ineffective, reactive and violent policies to combat drugs and organized crime in the country, further enhances the gang and its development, and facilitates its activities in Brazil and beyond.

In the third article, *Janina Pawelz* (University of Hamburg, Germany) draws on extensive research carried out with gang members, community residents, experts and other knowledgeable actors working with gangs in the violent neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Trinidad and Tobago’s capital city, Port of Spain. The author provides an interesting account of how - unlike other contexts in which the absence of the state facilitates gang formation and ‘organized crime’ activities (see Thoumi, 2014; Meneguetti and Ferreira, this issue) - political patronage and the poorly designed social welfare programmes implemented in the 1960s have empowered gangs socially and economically. The symbiotic relationship between gangs and political actors, and the nexus of “facilitative politics”, as the authors put it, “...had massive negative impacts, as [they] contributed to the socialisation of youth into criminality and gave rise to gang culture and violence. Governmental social works programmes empowered gang leaders by allowing them to distribute jobs among the unemployed youth, thus legitimating their status as community leaders”.

The fourth article, by *Adam Baird* (Coventry University, UK), investigates gang driven homicides in Belize and Trinidad, a phenomenon that boomed at the end of the 1990s. Drug transshipments have been considered as the main cause for these homicide booms but, according to Baird, these transshipments alone are a weak predictor of violence in the two contexts. On the basis of extensive ethnographic research that the author conducted between 2011 and 2019 in disadvantaged neighborhoods of eastern Port of Spain (Trinidad) and southside Belize City (Belize) for two separate research projects, the article highlights a range of “chronic vulnerabilities” contributing to the rise of street gangs, coupled with inflows of firearms that

led to increased, lethal violence. Within this context, the author argues that, in both of his research contexts, drugs transshipment and street gangs largely operate in separate spheres. “Teasing out the distinctions within, rather than conflating, the processes and multiple political economies of transnational organised crime”, as Baird suggests, “will provide a sharper explanation for the homicide booms in Trinidad and Belize ... [and] will inform sharper policy responses to both transnational organised crime and local gang violence”.

The short presentation of each article in this editorial does not, of course, do justice to the remarkable richness of the articles in the special issue. The authors offer an extremely interesting tour in some (predominantly) urban settings in which gangs operate: from wards of Glasgow and the poor Brazilian neighbourhoods to the twin cities at the Brazil-Paraguay border, and the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Port of Spain and Belize City. Moreover, they highlight not only (the evolution of) gang activities and how these may be conflated with other phenomena in popular discourses, but also the role ‘chronic vulnerabilities’ (Baird, this issue), politics, and policy play in the gangs’ formation and consolidation. Although this special issue is by no means exhaustive of gang-related issues, we hope that it will stimulate some further fruitful discussion on the topic. We would like to thank the contributors for their timely delivery of drafts, and the reviewers for their valuable comments and constructive criticism, as well as Elli Anitsi for her assistance with technical and production-related issues.

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