

**IN BED WITH CRIMINALS:
GANGS AND POLITICS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

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Abstract

Crime and murder rates have increased alarmingly in the Latin American and Caribbean region, something which is linked to gangs and organised crime. Scholars cite the lack of state presence and inadequate state capacity as being major factors behind the rise of gangs. However, research findings suggest that the manifestation of powerful gangs stems from political patronage and policies implemented in the 1960s. Drawing on extensive fieldwork carried out in Trinidad and Tobago's gang-controlled areas, this article contributes to the emerging debate on the engagement of gangs by presenting new empirical evidence on how political patronage and social welfare programmes empowered gangs.

Keywords: urban violence, gangs, crime, Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago

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Introduction

Urban violence is prevalent in Trinidad and Tobago, and gang war played a big role in the country having one of the world's highest homicide rates. Several areas in Trinidad and Tobago are home to criminal gangs and have become notorious for high levels of violence and crime. In these neighbourhoods, gang leaders are referred to as community leaders and have become influential players, receiving official state contracts and delivering votes. The Commissioner of Police, Gary Griffith, claimed that the police cannot do their job while 'the state is funding gang members', a practice that has been ongoing for years (TTT Live Online, 17 July 2019a). The Minister of National Security, Stuart Young, also criticized that politicians 'think they have to get into bed with the criminal elements and particular persons associated with gang activity in order to win elections and make political mileage' (TTT Live Online, 2019b).

Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago have developed over decades and went from street-oriented 'steelbands' to financially and socially powerful agents of terror and fear. From a scholarly perspective, some researchers argue that the rise of organized crime and empowerment of violent groups is linked to a lack of state presence or inadequate state capacity (O'Donnell, 1993; Spergel, 1995; Kassimir and Flanagan, 2010; Risse, 2012; Griffin & Persad, 2013; Parkinson, 2013). Others point out that violent groups such as gangs are empowered not necessarily through a lack of state presence but rather thanks to 'state complicity' (Jaffe, 2012: 193) or their co-existence with state authority in a 'symbiotic relationship' as '(y)outh gangs have been a source of stability for local urban political systems' and 'a source of potential power for aspiring politicians' (Spergel, 1995: 120). With respect to evidence concerning gangs and politics, both historical (Thrasher 1927; Short & Moland 1976; Spergel 1995; Whyte 1993) and contemporary findings (Arias 2017; Clarke, 2006; Blake, 2013; Hagedorn, 2005; Jaffe, 2012) show that issues of violence, crime, and gangs are often 'home-made' and can be linked to the internal dynamics of political patronage and poorly designed policies and programmes.

This article uses the case of Trinidad and Tobago to examine the genesis of gangs and the influence of politics and, more specifically, to critically examine the effects of their political nexus. Gangs have historically grown and manifested over time in Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad's roots of organised violence originate from the steel-band movement, which began in the 1940s, and this article follows their movement into powerful violent gangs. The analysis of the historical development of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago shows that gangs gained power because of the state, not because of state absence. The roots of political patronage in Trinidad and Tobago can be traced back to the steel-band wars when politicians sought to manage and mitigate violence by implementing social works projects. Tracing the transformation of violent

groups over several decades, this article argues that social works programmes helped criminal gangs to emerge as job providers and turn gang leaders into legitimated community leaders in stigmatised areas in Trinidad and Tobago. I use the term ‘facilitative politics’ to refer to activities carried out by politicians or policies that enable criminal organisations – such as gangs – to socially, economically, and territorially empower themselves. In Trinidad and Tobago facilitative politics contributed to gang leaders gaining official status as community leaders with economic power and societal prestige as authorised dispensers of jobs. These projects empowered and led to the emergence of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago as they became the official job distributors and thus respected actors in their community. The recognition of them as legitimate community leaders contributed to the consolidation of their role as such. Therefore, facilitative politics have significantly contributed to the rise of gangs and the manifestation of their territorial power over decades.

In this article data derived from interviews with gang members, community residents, and experts working with gangs in Trinidad and Tobago about the experiences of gangs and gang empowerment over time. Such information should offer us multifaceted insights into the development of gangs and provide us with a deeper understanding of the issue which challenges the mainstream, state-informed, securitising reactionary discourse. The findings of this study contribute to the scholarly literature on security and urban violence and include policy recommendations in relation to limiting the gangs’ economic- and social-empowerment opportunities.

The article proceeds in three parts. Following the methodological approach of this study, the first part outlines the theoretical accounts on the link between the state and gangs from the perspective of political science, sociology, and ethnographic studies, thus revealing the ambiguity of the relationship between gangs and both politicians and the local communities. I present both historical and contemporary notions on gangs and introduce the term ‘facilitative politics’ in more detail. The second part analyses the genesis of gangs and mechanisms of facilitative politics drawing on the case of Trinidad and Tobago. I shed light on the historical development of social works programs from its beginnings until today. The third part discusses the consequences of the rise of gangs, such as the financial and social empowerment, the socialisation of youth into crime and dependency on welfare programmes.

Method

This research project is an inductive, explorative case study based on a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I conducted field research in violent neighbourhoods on

the outskirts of Trinidad and Tobago's capital city Port of Spain – namely, East Port of Spain, Laventille, Beetham Gardens, and Sealots.

Interview participants were selected with the use of a refined sampling technique, the successive approach (Pawelz, 2018). This approach enabled me to carry out qualitative, semi-structured interviews and background talks with 39 people in Port of Spain and its adjacent areas. My interview participants included active and former gang members, former prisoners, teachers, social workers, youth workers, a pastor, a priest, an imam, youth church group members, musicians, regular residents from gang-controlled areas, steel-band players, active and former prison officers, police officers, and criminal gang intelligence unit (CGIU) officers. In addition, I had off-the-record conversations with 18 individuals, including two former gang members. I also took part in several events in gang-controlled areas (community meetings, walkabouts, and bible study meetings) and visited a maximum-security prison.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed with the computer programme F5, coded openly, and analysed using the computer programme Atlas.ti. I also critically examined the recordings and transcriptions of interviews conducted with active gang members to see whether there was any evidence of the gangs creating narratives about themselves, a practice that Brotherton refers to as 'myth-building' (Brotherton, 2015: 26). It is important to understand that shared narratives are based on gang members' self-perceptions or community members' perceptions of gangs. The location named in footnotes refers to the place where the interview took place and not necessarily where interviewed persons work, live or rule. For further reading on my research approach and methodology, see Pawelz (2018).

Politics and Gangs

Several scholars highlight the lack of state presence or inadequate state capacity as major influences behind the rise of gangs (see, for instance, Griffin and Persad, 2013; Kassimir and Flanagan, 2010; O'Donnell, 1993; Parkinson, 2013; Risse, 2012; Spergel, 1995). Yet, there is a long history of intimate relationships between gangs, and politics and politicians. The first studies on the political nexus of gangs emerged in the (early) twentieth century (Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1993). Thrasher (1927: 316) observed that politicians in Chicago became the 'patron saints' of gangs who, in turn, became a 'political instrument' for generating votes on election day. In a similar manner, Whyte (1993: 240) described the political organisation of gangs in Boston in the 1930s as 'a system of reciprocal personal obligations' based on the exchange of political favours (e.g. votes) and money. According to Spergel (1995: 120), gangs and politicians can have a symbiotic relationship, as in times of 'social unrest and political crisis,

the gang was recognised as an instrument of power and influence and could facilitate either the development of resources by new political leadership or continuing control by established political, organizational or community leadership'. Gangs of New York, Chicago and Philadelphia traditionally acted as a means of communication between elites and low-income populations (Spergel, 1995: 120). Jankowski (1991: 215) noticed that early studies on the relationship between gangs in American urban centres and the political structure found that gangs were commonly 'manipulated by the local political boss'. In the 1960s studies found that the political activity of gangs declined as they were 'politically apathetic and ignorant – 'unaware of and unconcerned with dramatic developments in civil rights and politics' (Short & Moland, 1976: 162). Hagedorn (2005) explains that in the 1960s and 1970s the political activity of gangs in the US declined due to the defeat of most left-wing and revolutionary movements, which led to demoralisation and apathy. The lucrative drugs business, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the rising destructive influence of multinational corporations brought the political activity of gangs back in the game. Short and Moland (1976: 163) explain that the political apathy of gangs 'changed drastically' in the late 1960s, when federal programmes directly subsidised gangs based on the assumption that gangs were 'indigenous community organizations with leadership potential.' In the 1960s, street gangs in Chicago became recipients of funds of community development and social service projects (Spergel, 1995: 121).

In turn, political candidates in Chicago used gang members to 'getting the vote out, putting up election posters and persuading voters whom to vote for', and the street gang leader was 'being hailed as a community leader and visionary' by local politicians (Spergel, 1995: 122). In these structures of political patronage, gangs gradually became 'complex organizations' that combined 'community organizational, social support, political, and criminal business functions' and contributed to 'community resources, socio-political control, and a certain degree of stability' (Spergel, 1995: 123). Well-meaning efforts to encourage self-help projects and manpower training programmes for gangs inadvertently resulted in a surge in fraud, extortion, and violence. Both privately and government-funded programmes paid salaries of thousands of dollars a year to gang leaders, who enriched themselves even further by financially mismanaging and abusing these programmes (Short & Moland, 1976). In a similar manner, DiChiara and Chabot (2003: 78) argue that positive activities and political activism are a 'truly organic feature of the urban gang'. Yet, these programmes failed because gangs followed their own agenda, resisted social control, and when funds were stopped, gangs reacted with violence and posed a threat 'more serious than ever' (Short & Moland, 1976: 15).

Contemporary studies on gangs and politics have shifted their focus away from understanding the political nexus of gangs as a matter of instrumentalisation and manipulation towards an understanding of gangs as political actors who take on social roles in the community. Sánchez-Jankowski (1991) explains that the political involvement of gangs includes links to elected politicians, community leaders, government administrators of gang programmes, and non-profit community organisations. These exchange relationships can either be *expedient* (i.e. temporary and occasional) or *prudential* (i.e. continuous and institutionalised) (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). Recent findings suggest that exchange relationships between gangs and politicians tend to be prudential rather than expedient, and also complex and deeply rooted. For example, Bryan (2013: 221) concludes that gangs in Central America have become aware of their political power and their ability to control areas and are now social actors given their greater involvement in politics, real estate, and religious and community organisations. According to Bryan (2013: 233), when they become the de facto government, 'it is more than a security problem'. Arias (2017: 37) points out that armed groups often 'become an important part of existing political systems' as they connect 'the poor and working-class populations with political actors.' In Rio de Janeiro gangs play important roles in influencing votes and granting access to neighbourhoods for candidates (Arias 2017: 193).

Jamaica is another context in which the political nexus of gangs has been well researched. From 1940 until 1970, Jamaican gang leaders (referred to as 'dons') were hired as political thugs for major political parties (Blake, 2013). Jamaica's dons have not emerged due to a lack of state presence but rather because of 'state complicity' (Jaffe, 2012: 193). Jaffe (2015: 129) explains that the type of politics that is achieved through communal clientelism and dons is referred to as 'garrison politics' in Jamaica. By the 1980s, dons had become more autonomous and were 'no longer performing solely political mobilization tasks' but had begun to take over community-based roles (Blake, 2013: 57). This is in line with Harriot's (2015) observation that the Jamaican gangs' relationships with the communities give gangs political leverage and immunity against law enforcement. Gang leaders in Jamaica rely on a significant level of support from their community members, which they secure by providing social security, physical protection, employment, and an 'alternative form of dispensing justice' (Jaffe, 2012: 189). Dons also supply food, school supplies, and gifts, thus presenting themselves as 'benevolent providers and protectors' (Jaffe, 2012: 189).

Griffin and Persad (2013: 85) find that the activity of gangs in the Caribbean is 'connected to established political parties'. Local newspapers commonly report on the high levels of insecurity and crime in Trinidad and Tobago's capital, Port of Spain, highlighting the

crucial transformation of gangs, which 'have now become societal institutions that go beyond social purposes, and are coming to resemble governments in and of themselves' (Johnson, 2013). In the case of the Dominican Republic, Bobea (2010) observed a symbiotic relationship between citizens and criminals based on the provision protection and exchange of 'favors' in their barrio. Bobea (2010: 182) found that criminals enjoy a certain level of legitimacy and solidarity with barrio residents. This relationship is influenced by, among other factors, the isolation of the 'poorest and most crime-ridden zones' and a spatial fragmentation that 'limits mobility and imposes a virtual curfew' (Bobea, 2010: 177).

These examples call for a thorough examination of the relationship of politicians and criminal organisations such as gangs. In this paper I use the term 'facilitative politics' to refer to the activities, including policies, programs or projects, enacted by politicians and/or political parties which contribute to the social, economic and territorial empowerment of criminal organisations. These policies, programs or projects are direct or indirect subsidies to support poor segments of society, local leadership or community empowerment but also stimulate economic prosperity, social recognition and political consciousness of (criminal) individuals or non-state armed groups. When the gangs are rewarded with formal or informal contracts, it gives them the power to decide how to distribute jobs within the community. By providing jobs to the community, the groups gain strong support, approval and political power. *Facilitative politics* are thus closely linked to political manipulation, political patronage, electoral muscle mechanisms, intimidation, bribery or fraud. Facilitative politics can be considered a contributing factor to the rise of violence and organized crime.

Facilitative Politics and Its Implications

In Trinidad and Tobago, a small two-island state with 1.4 million inhabitants, there were 539 murders nationwide in 2019 (OSAC 2020). The high number of murders is linked to crime and gangs. Trinidad and Tobago's current security situation has evolved over a long period. The area of Laventille, located at the outskirts of the capital city, offers insights to understand the genesis of gangs in Trinidad and Tobago.

The genesis of gangs: the steelband movement

In the 1940s, musical steelbands playing drums made of oil barrels emerged in many communities all over Laventille. Steelbands from different communities soon became 'musical' rivals, but rivalry gradually involved violence. Steelband men and 'bad johns', a term used to refer to violent troublemakers who provided steel bands with protection, physically engaged in

violent street fights with rival steelbands, underlining the argument that Trinidad has ‘always had gang violence’.² Fights between steelbands, which flourished in the 1950s, and which took place on the streets, backyards and alleyways was referred to as ‘gang fights’ or framed as steelband wars or steelband riots (Neil, 1987: 11). An interviewed steel band manager explains that the ‘steel band was rooted in violence’ and that there is a clear connection between the steelband era and today’s security situation, as the present day ‘gunmen’ are the offspring of the ‘bad johns’.³ At that time, the violence was ‘so predominant and lawlessness prevailed to such an extent that the community had become a haven for social disturbance’ (Neil, 1987: 11). However, Neil argues that the violence did not originate from the steel bands but rather from the contextual factors in Laventille: poverty, unemployment, poor housing conditions, and low levels of education. As a result, Neil (1987) argues that Laventille’s slums became breeding grounds for crime and delinquency. The communities in Laventille became ‘the most lawless in the country’ and members of the steelbands were considered ‘barbaric and primitive’ (Neil, 1987: 20).

Facilitative Politics and its early beginnings

Once the government had determined that the violence in Laventille was linked to high levels of unemployment and poverty (Griffin & Persad, 2013), Prime Minister Williams at that time decided to meet with the rival steel bands in 1957 and discuss the issue of violence and unemployment. He subsequently introduced the Development Environment Works Division (DEWD) special works programme, which was designed to provide financial assistance to disadvantaged people (Commission of Enquiry, 2014: 1148) with the aim of calming the steel band riots. Former steelband member Albert Jones, who has been involved in the steel band movement since 1945, remembered the following:

We realized that the cause of all the trouble among the men was no work, and they wanted to work. They were unemployed and most likely, if they had something to occupy them, they wouldn’t be fighting. That was how the DEWD project came into being. They decided to have these guys clean the canals and do other roadwork (Jones, 2007: 77).

² Resident, Nelson Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 14 April 2015.

³ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

Because the government did not want to place civil servants or government officials in the notoriously unsafe neighbourhoods, the programme was implemented by having local leaders provide the goods and functions to members of the communities. But these local leaders attained their 'community leadership' through 'violent, inter-gang, intra-community contestation for power' (Griffin & Persad, 2013: 87). This meant that the most violent people, mostly gang leaders and former convicts, were installed as legitimate controllers of a government programme. Not only did the DEWD programme generate political support, it empowered those so-called 'bad Johns', as an interviewee who grew up in John John, Laventille, claimed:

[Prime Minister Williams] set up a social programme and put the most violent people in power. We used to call them bad Johns. He put them in power. ... That is how the PNM [People's National Movement] stay in power in Laventille.^{4,5}

The implementation of DEWD programme was the beginning of an electoral muscle mechanism, as 'the pan men started to support Williams and the PNM' (Jones, 2007: 78). In the 1950s and 1960s political parties began to use the 'services' of the steel bands during election campaigns. During the election periods in 1956 and 1961 steelbands are believed to have terrorised political opponents of the PNM (Bissessar & La Guerre, 2013).

DEWD opened the ecological niche for criminals and violent men to make money legally as coordinators of state-sponsored programmes.⁶ Gang leaders profited from the social welfare programmes as legitimate controllers of job distribution within their communities. This not only provided them with respect and power, it also enabled them to maximise their profits by creating 'ghost gangs' – that is, groups of workers who only (or partly) exist on paper but do not actually participate in the social work programme. These 'ghosts' would sign up as participants, but coordinators would keep the money paid by the state for them. Coordinators were thus able to 'cream off' money from lucrative contracts at the expense of the workers and other community members.⁷ Social programmes became a financial source as it provided money to 'young people who formed themselves into gangs and bought drugs and weapons'

⁴ Elderly resident, Beetham Gardens, Trinidad, 8 June 2015.

⁵ The citations I use are original quotes and have not been corrected for grammar. The reader will find notes or additional information only in cases where the Trinidadian way of speaking is not clear.

⁶ Pastor, Maraval, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 4 May 2015.

⁷ Elderly resident, Beetham Gardens, Trinidad, 8 June 2015.

(Commission of Enquiry, 2014: 1132). In short, social work programmes were the key that ‘unlock[ed] the revolution’.⁸

DEWD was on the road to becoming a monster. ... Created to quell violence, today it is the source of unbridled murder and strife. (Trinidad and Tobago Newsday, 2003)

Over the years, a new generation of social work programmes took over: the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) and the Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP). URP provides short-term employment for unemployed people on a rotation basis, whereas CEPEP is an agency of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development on the base of contractual work, which focuses on ‘environmental protection, enhancement and beautification’ of the environment (Ministry of Works and Transport, Trinidad and Tobago, 2016; The CEPEP Company Limited, 2016). Despite the URP and CEPEP both being designed to only temporarily bring unemployed back into the labour market, they actually became the only employment opportunity in low-income areas.⁹ According to a former gang member, who spent many years in prison before eventually leaving behind the ‘life of crime’ (as he would say):

When the ‘URP gangs’ started, the politicians used to offer contracts to the baddest person in the community who sometimes they call community leader. So the politicians would give them the contracts to do work within the community and they [gang leaders] would use this contract now to influence the young people.¹⁰

A prominent government-empowered gang leader is Mark Guerra, a US deportee and top gang leader who was tremendously influential among Laventille’s youth (Felix-John & Williams, 2013). In the early 1990s Mark Guerra became the URP National Advisor, reportedly made thousands of dollars per month and soon became known as the ‘don of Laventille’ (Griffin & Persad, 2013: 101; Commission of Enquiry, 2014). The *Trinidad Express* pointed out that ‘Guerra’s access to URP funds gave him extraordinary power over a grassroots constituency which, as required, could be used as ‘an army for whoever was willing to pay’ (Trinidad Express Newspaper, 2009). In 2002 Mark Guerra campaigned for the PNM in marginal constituencies

⁸ Resident, Rose Hill, Laventille, Trinidad, 23 May 2015.

⁹ Resident, Nelson Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 14 April 2015.

¹⁰ Former gang member, St. James, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 12 May 2015.

alongside Patrick Manning, helping to secure Manning's return to the office of prime minister (Griffin & Persad, 2013).

So the PNM had plenty say through the gang leader. Mark Guerra get the youth to come out into rallies. Because they know they would get work, get a job, so they would come out. So the [political] leaders have to take the blame for what they did.¹¹

In the early 2000s meetings between high-ranking politicians and gang leaders took place more frequently. These meetings officially took place with 'community leaders', but 'in truth and in fact, these "community leaders" were really gang leaders' (Commission of Enquiry, 2014: 1131). The most notable of those was Patrick Manning's meeting with several influential gang leaders at the Ambassador Hotel in Port of Spain in 2002. To this end, these social programmes 'became a breeding ground for criminals and the development of gangs' (Commission of Enquiry, 2014, p. 206).

Current situation

Today, facilitative politics have manifested in the form of URP and CEPEP programs as well as state contracts handed out to construction companies run by criminal elements. The Joint Select Committee on National Security¹² investigated links between politicians and crime in 2020 and came to the conclusion that '(l)inks between politicians and gang leaders have proven to be the catalyst towards homicides in this country' (The Joint Select Committee on National Security, 2020: 17). The Commissioner of Police, Gary Griffith, repeatedly spoke out in public for contracts not to be given to criminals as it feeds organized crime (TTT Live Online, 2019a). He claimed that several gang leaders have benefitted from multi-million dollar contracts, a practice that has been in place through Housing Development Corporation (HDC) and URP for years. In a press conference on national security matters in February 2019, Minister of National Security Stuart Young, affiliated with the PNM party, said that 'unfortunately, it appears as though the UNC party thinks they have to get into bed with the criminal elements and particular persons associated with gang activity in order to win elections and make political mileage'

¹¹ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

¹² The Joint Select Committee on National Security is established by the House of Representatives and the Senate, and is mandated to consider and report to the Parliament, whenever necessary, on all matters related to the national security policy of Trinidad and Tobago. In the early 2020 the committee held an inquiry into crime, security, safety and protection of citizens with the objective of gaining an understanding of current dynamics of crime and obtaining an update on the policy and plans in place to combat crime effectively.
<http://www.ttparliament.org/reports/p11-s5-J-20200228-NATSEC-Ri-Crime.pdf> (Accessed 20 September 2020)

(TTT Live Online, 2019b). Young identified, among others, the housing minister and former managing director of the Housing Development Corporation as responsible for contracts being given to gang leaders' construction companies (TTT Live Online, 2019b). The Joint Select Committee on National Security also stated that the minister 'had meetings with major criminals, notorious gang leaders with promises of a \$40 million state contract on ascension into office' and claimed that the minister 'was closely linked with senior gang members and gave a state contract to the gang member to build a police station.' The police station in question, which I have visited during my field research, was built by the construction company Rico Development owned by Kenneth 'Spanish' Rodriguez, a well-known alleged gang leader. The police station was one of many buildings, including apartment houses and a stadium in Beetham Gardens, residents and police officers pointed out to me as having been built by dubious construction companies.

Another prominent example of facilitative politics is the case of Cedrik 'Burkie' Burke, alleged gang leader in Sealots. He was the owner of a security company Goodfellas Security Company and construction company Burke and Co Ltd, and made headlines when he appeared at MP Marlene McDonald's swearing-in ceremony as Minister of Public Utilities at the President's House in 2017 (Trinidad and Tobago Newsday, 2020). The Trinidad Guardian cites McDonald claiming she was unaware of Burke's reputation as a gang leader and saw him as a 'true constituent and true patriot of the People's National Movement party' (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian 2020). McDonald was fired two days after her ceremony because of her affiliation with Burke. When Burke died of Covid-19 in September 2020, McDonald sent her condolences to his family (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 2020).

Impact of facilitative politics

Financial impact

Gangs gain economic power and societal prestige through contracts to implement government service programs in a community. Gangs managed to convey the perception that nobody can come into their communities and implement a project without their consent and without integrating a certain percentage of local workers.¹³ A pastor explained that the welfare projects and construction projects have been infiltrated by gangs, who now exercise the power to decide who can come into their community and who gets a job.¹⁴ Financially empowered gangs were able to purchase sophisticated weapons such as high-powered assault rifles and machine guns,

¹³ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

¹⁴ Pastor, Maraval, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 4 May 2015.

which they used to secure their borders and expand their territorial power. In this regard, the social programs became a financial source as it provided money to ‘young people who formed themselves into gangs and bought drugs and weapons’ (Commission of Enquiry 2014: 1132). Police officers of the Besson Street Police pointed out a paradox that lies within the social work programs and contracts:

The government hands them [gangs] a million dollar project and they use the money to buy expensive guns that they use against us!¹⁵

The Joint Select Committee on National Security comes to similar conclusions:

The profit acquired from the State in these contracts, whether LifeSport, CEPEP, HDC, Colour Me Orange, have been used to purchase more firearms, hiring more gang members and putting hits on other gang members to get their state contracts.¹⁶

Furthermore, the Joint Select Committee on National Security claims that facilitative politics cause a growing imbalance between the financial base of the police service on one hand and criminal entities on the other.

The result is that the Police Service is demoralized because the Government, the Opposition, the State and politicians, want the police to reduce crime but criminals are given more funding than the TTPS [Trinidad and Tobago Police Service] to purchase more sophisticated weapons, hire more persons, get more profit, pay more persons in the community to tip them off so that if a raid is done, nothing is achieved.¹⁷

These structures enabled political candidates to legitimately and directly use gang leaders for election campaigns to mobilise voters.¹⁸ An interview partner points the finger at politicians when it comes to dealing with the situation of crime and insecurity:

¹⁵ Police officer, Besson Street, Laventille, Trinidad, 24 April 2015.

¹⁶ Joint Select Committee on National Security, 2020: 18.

¹⁷ Joint Select Committee on National Security, 2020: 18.

¹⁸ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

[The gang issue] is not going to be solved unless they [politicians] deal with what they did 20–30 years ago. It has become worse now and there is no way they can control it, but they just feed it by giving it more URP and CEPEP and hope they vote for you. Mickey Mouse game.¹⁹

Gangs fiercely defend the source of income via social works programmes and contracts. One police officer I spoke with believed that eliminating these social programmes would lead to ‘revolts and violence’,²⁰ as an elderly resident from Beetham Gardens also noted:

[The gangs] control the ‘ten days’, CEPEP, and URP. They control that, within any government, because all of them fear violence. So we are in a dread situation.²¹

Gangs in Trinidad and Tobago have succeeded in manifesting structures of facilitative politics through the effective threat of violence and the proliferation of fear and terror. Gangs realized that that ‘everybody is afraid of death’.²² To this end they became powerful actors in their communities, and the politicians, as well as non-state agencies, have ‘virtually sold out to the gangs because of fear’.²³ Fear and terror is what they use to bargain with the government. To push politicians to pay attention to them and to remind them of their power, gangs ‘have them see a skeleton’²⁴ and ‘drop some bodies’.²⁵

The leaders in society, the political and religious leaders, have left a void that the areas have gotten so bad and so unmanageable that they themselves, the leaders, are afraid to go in.²⁶

On top of that the most notorious gang-controlled areas, Laventille, Beetham and Sealots, happen to be strategically located on the capital’s main artery: the main highway and bus priority route that leads in and out of Port of Spain. This East–West corridor connects the capital city with the international airport and the rest of the island to the east. It is of high importance

¹⁹ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

²⁰ Police officer, Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF), Hearts and Minds Unit, El Socorro, Trinidad, 13 May 2015.

²¹ Elderly resident, Beetham Gardens, Trinidad, 8 June 2015.

²² Resident, Beetham Gardens, Trinidad, 8 June 2015.

²³ Pastor, Maraval, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 4 May 2015.

²⁴ Resident, Beetham Gardens, Trinidad, 8 June 2015.

²⁵ Community activist, IATF (Inter-Agency Task Force), Hearts and Minds Unit, El Socorro, Trinidad, 15 April 2015.

²⁶ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

for getting in and out of the capital city, and a roadblock could cut off the city from the rest of the country. A community police officer pointed out that gangs are well aware of their geostrategic location:

What they [gangs] doing is not the ultimate for them, they just doing enough to show the government: "I could give you more trouble than you could handle."
They could start shooting people in the traffic.²⁷

Presently the tendency is that politicians have no choice but to grant gang leaders contracts and cash, as they will otherwise face violence (Commission of Enquiry, 2014: 1146). An Imam from Port of Spain explained, politicians cannot go to certain parts of Trinidad and Tobago 'unless gang leaders pave the way for their entry'.

There are areas that are off limit for them [politicians]. There is no way they can go. They cannot go on Nelson Street, on Duncan Street, Beetham, Sealots, they can't go in there. They would chase them out!²⁸

Social impact

Socially, facilitative politics in Trinidad and Tobago had massive negative impacts, as it 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 provision of contracts gives them official legitimacy in the community, and politicians reinforce this role when they refer to them as such. Official meetings of politicians with gang leaders, such as the prominent Mark Guerra in the early 2000s, made long-lasting impressions on local youth:

Children seeing that the prime minister talks to Mark Guerra. Indirectly he [the prime minister] is saying that it is ok to be a gang leader or community leader!²⁹

A Catholic priest in a church in a gang-controlled area explained that gang leaders became like kings in their neighbourhoods and could 'walk into any store and just get what they wanted'

²⁷ Police officer, IATF (Inter-Agency Task Force), Hearts and Minds Unit, El Socorro, Trinidad 15 April 2015.

²⁸ Imam, St. James, Port of Spain, 1 June 2015.

²⁹ Resident, Duncan Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 25 May 2015.

after meeting high-profile politicians.³⁰ The recognition of gang leaders as legitimate community leaders by politicians, the police, and community members validates the violent and criminal means they employed to become leaders. Discussing his own criminal career, former gang member said that:

Being a gangster is a good thing because you get the respect of the community, not only respect but fear. ... They even get respect from politicians. I mean everything that would happen in the community, people would come to you first because they see you as the person who has the influence and the power within the community. So you find a lot of youth looking up to that and they glorify the life of crime.³¹

A resident of Nelson Street, a notorious area in East Port of Spain, observed why youth are vulnerable to joining gangs in his neighbourhood:

Most of them [young boys] come from single parent homes, scarce means, and what the drug lord or the gang leaders offering them is irresistible to them. They see these guys driving the best cars, wearing the best brands ... Prada and Nike and Jordan, and the best-looking women around them. So that's an attraction.³²

The now deceased gang leader Mark Guerra had the financial power to hand out clothes, goods, and other items to Laventille's youth, becoming the 'Santa Claus of his area, as he showered gifts to the less fortunate' (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 2008).

The provision of social welfare programmes had unintended side effects as it created what interview partners referred to as a 'dependency syndrome'. The first programme, DEWD, as well as its predecessors, were designed to cater for the poor and unemployed, but many more people became interested in participating as it meant money for little work. Eventually, even skilled workers (e.g. tradesmen, shoemakers, and carpenters) decided to join the DEWD programmes, which had an impact on work ethics and diversity of labour (Jules, 2007). Despite his good intentions, Prime Minister Williams had set in place a system that did not encourage people to seek employment. The social welfare programmes opened an income opportunity which neither required (higher) education nor job qualifications. For a few hours of work a day, people could make a living, and whole families and neighbourhoods became dependent on

³⁰ Representative of Catholic church, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1 May 2015.

³¹ Former gang member, St. James, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 12 May 2015.

³² Resident, Nelson Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 14 April 2015.

DEWD, URP, and CEPEP. A resident explained that these programmes were counterproductive as they ‘encourage[d] the people to be lazy’.³³ While certain parts of the society were increasingly prosperous, the less fortunate segments of society became dependent on social works programmes. An interviewee pointed out that social works programmes contributed to a society that was vulnerable to trying to make easy money:

The government began those massive social problems where they were giving money for doing nothing. In those days, it was called DEWD. So those eras led the foundation to what we now have: demotivated, low-class [people] who then come to find easy money.³⁴

According to their statements, parts of society became vulnerable to illegal income opportunities and fell victim to what they referred to as ‘get-rich-quick’ syndrome³⁵ – which directly relates to the rise of crime and gangs:

What you find is that the young boys drop out of school early because the gang is more profitable. Fast money! They know how to get quickly ten thousand dollars!³⁶

Another resident explained that social works programmes contributed to lethargy, as people became dependent on government projects and started to wait for someone to bring contracts into the community. This would typically be gang leaders, who are the legal coordinators of these programmes and distributors of jobs within the community. In contrast, a gang leader argued that certain parts of the society are purposefully kept in dependency in order to control them, stating that the economic deprivation is a purposefully orchestrated move to ‘keep the people poor’ in order to facilitate the politicians’ own social mobility at the expense of the population.³⁷

Conclusion

Using the case of Trinidad and Tobago, this article examined the genesis of gangs and the influence of politics. This article shows that facilitative politics have significantly contributed to the rise of gangs and the manifestation of their power over decades. I use the term facilitative

³³ Resident, Nelson Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 14 April 2015.

³⁴ Representative of Catholic church, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1 May 2015.

³⁵ Resident, Nelson Street, East Port of Spain, Trinidad, 14 April 2015

³⁶ Mother, Beetham Gardens, Trinidad, 5 June 2015.

³⁷ Gang leader, Trinidad, 3 June 2015.

politics to refer to activities carried out by politicians or policies that enable criminal organisations – such as gangs – to socially, economically, and territorially empower themselves. In Trinidad and Tobago facilitative politics contributed to gang leaders gaining official status as community leaders with economic power and societal prestige.

I argued that we should not only focus on how to design coherent and effective social policies or regional strategies to limit gang violence but also learn lessons from cases of gang violence from around the world. Findings from cases across Latin America and the Caribbean show that gangs, and politicians and political parties have developed a relationship based on political patronage (for instance see, Blake 2013, Arias 2017, Jaffe 2015 or Sánchez-Jankowski 1991). The case of Trinidad and Tobago shows us that gangs can grow into powerful organisations with the help of political patronage, contracts, and social works programmes rather than merely due to the absence of the state, as much scholarly literature suggests. The implementation of social works programmes and the appointment of gang leaders as legitimate controllers thereof led to the financial and social empowerment of gangs. These activities of what I refer to as facilitative politics are continuous and institutionalised – or prudential as Sánchez-Jankowski (1991) would term them. The question that arises is why politicians would not simply stop financing social work programs and handing out contracts. The answer is that it is difficult to intervene in structures of reciprocal benefits that have developed over decades. Similar to what Short and Moland observed in the United States, a deadlock situation emerges as gangs threaten to react with violence more serious than ever, if the steady flow of contracts is stopped. Gangs fiercely defend the source of income via social works programmes and contracts and even manifested the structures of facilitative politics through the effective threat of violence and the proliferation of fear and terror. Another impact of facilitative politics is the dependency on social works programs and contracts that families and neighbourhoods have grown into. This dependency is also an issue when considering to stop financing social works programs: at the current deadlock situation something like this could backfire, as thousands of people in poor areas would lose their only small income and – as a consequence – become even more dependent on the support of gang leaders.

Having traced the transformation of violent groups over several decades, this article showed that social works programmes helped criminal gangs to emerge as job providers and turned gang leaders into legitimated community leaders. In Trinidad and Tobago, gang power is shaped by the symbiotic relationship with the state, not by its absence. Yet, the phenomenon of gangs is highly complex and can barely be traced down to individual influences; the transformation of gangs is multicausal, complex, and heterogeneous.

Interventions designed to promote peace often fail to identify and address the determinants and origins of urban violence. Further, comparative and longitudinal, studies that analyse the consequences of government-led programs are recommended.

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