

Making a mountain out of a molehill: myths on youth and crime in Saint Lucia

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This report² reflects a short summary of one year (2012) of ethnographic observations and ‘informal conversations’ with various stakeholders across Saint Lucia, a small Caribbean nation. The effort was undertaken to assess the profile of youth gangs and their members in order to add depth to existing analysis on gangs in the Caribbean by using one country as a model. This summary of the report focuses on the interaction between the cannabis and cocaine markets, and the role of youth in that trade on the one hand, and the increase in violence indicators on the other.

The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) and individual member states face shared challenges of youth involvement in crime, violence, gangs and other anti-social activities. It is not uncommonly heard the “drug problem” is to be blamed for this. This briefing wants to show this relation is far more complex and often misunderstood.

Saint Lucia is a small island state, one of the fifteen members of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). It became independent from the United Kingdom in 1979, and is situated in the south eastern part of the Caribbean and has a population of around 180 thousand.

The Caribbean region, due to its proximity to cocaine producers in the South and its well established trading links with Europe and North America is well positioned as a transit



zone, accounting for an estimated 25-30 per cent of cocaine reaching Europe.³ The main destination for the bulk of cocaine transiting Saint Lucia is Martinique and onward to Paris and beyond. The isolated coast lines and island geography contribute to the popularity of the sub region for the transshipment of cocaine.

The price differential between cocaine in Venezuela, where most trafficked cocaine reaching Saint Lucia comes from, and Paris provides lucrative opportunities for Venezuelan transnational trafficking groups. As is usual in any business venture,

Recommendations

- Decriminalize cannabis cultivation and possession for personal use
- Augment the education of young males with alternative educational opportunities
- Create micro economic activities that would allow young people to legitimately earn a decent wage.

the transshipment of cocaine also presents accompanying financial opportunities along the transit route. This extra potential income is attractive to many people who live in impoverished areas with low socioeconomic standards. Drug generated income enables transnational organised crime groups to challenge legitimate Caribbean governments, and to take advantage of political fragmentation.

It is believed that the south-north movement of cocaine operates in parallel to the counter flow of light weapons⁴. This contributes to national and regional instability, contributes to the rising homicide rates and fuels other organised crime activity across the region. It is often suggested that the flow of cocaine related earnings has allowed foreign exchange reserves to remain high in the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank despite the global financial downturn.

From the 1960s until the boom years of the 1990s, the economy was primarily driven by the banana industry. This gradually changed and is now focussed on tourism as the major foreign exchange earner. While the economy of Saint Lucia and the rest of the Caribbean have stagnated as a result of the financial crisis of 2008, the banking system remains 'over liquid' with few qualified borrowers. Government agencies, especially in law enforcement and criminal justice have been tainted by pervasive drug fuelled corruption⁵, further eroding public confidence in the police and in the State.

The Saint Lucia Cannabis market and Criminality

Saint Lucia has its own indigenous cannabis cultivation industry. The local cannabis trade is more diffused than cocaine sales, with more products from diverse suppliers. Since territory is small, the market depends more on personal contacts than on anything else. Young men are the main actors involved in the sale or brokering of cannabis, as are some older persons of whom some are women.

An interesting thread in the conversations held during this research were discussions of the proliferation of small scale, decentralized cannabis production as a consequence of having a group of idle cannabis-using young men with agricultural skills. Cannabis cultivation takes place in the same isolated valleys used for centuries as a place of refuge for brigands or thieves. These modern day "brigs" have turned their skill set into an agricultural occupation designed to replace income lost due to the contraction of banana cultivation, and many are now relying on cannabis cultivation.

The press regularly reports on police eradication exercises. Occasionally police wound a farmer, it is rare that farmers return fire or have firearms. Many times the fields are discovered and the crop destroyed but not one person is arrested. During the 18 months the research team has been tracking the market we noticed no appreciable difference in the supply of cannabis for sale, irrespective of the interdictions conducted.

There is little effort to view cannabis cultivation through an agricultural lens. With an agriculture lens we view the farmers as just that, a farmer who is growing a crop with a ready cash value in which he or she can feed their family and pay their bills. If the product is problematic to the State it then should embrace alternative development projects to provide alternative cropping and markets for the participating farmers to wean them off the cannabis. Instead on St Lucia, the State continues to view these farmers as criminal drug dealers requiring intense police interdiction efforts. Most farmers of cannabis do not have firearms, yet police arrive at eradications exercises heavily armed. It is sad to note that most of the violence around cannabis is perpetrated by the police in an effort to carry out drug control efforts.

The research of Carl Rogers on the nature of gangs, although referring to the US, is also relevant for other places, such as Saint Lucia. His notion on the strength of gangs today, as thriving institutions where

every other institution, including family, school and church, has crumbled, is a good description of the situation in the country. Rogers says that “joining a gang will provide an adolescent boy with some measure of protection” and that “gangs have taken over another function formerly held by the family”.⁶

This is especially true in the context of the marginalized parts of town, the ghetto, where poor, poorly educated, dislocated and criminalized cannabis using youth look to the ghetto community for support and guidance.

Internal migration as a result of the collapse of the local banana industry led to higher presence of young males in the capital of the island, unemployed and dislocated in society. The majority of the young men the team spoke with were in survival mode; poorly housed, under-fed, under educated, unemployed and seeking on a daily basis to scratch out a living for themselves and their families.

Cannabis use is illegal in Saint Lucia and its use, while widespread, is highly stigmatised while its possession is criminalised. Drug law enforcement targets public cannabis use, which is the predominant method of consumption amongst young street males.

The current socioeconomic situation is grim: high unemployment rates among young males have resulted in large groups of idle young men with limited skills. Compounding the employment challenge is the zero tolerance attitudes of the police toward public cannabis use and the high percentage of cannabis users among unemployed young men.

Penalties for students who are caught with cannabis at school or in uniform are dealt with by suspension or even expulsion if over the age of 16. It has become standard procedure for the school authorities to call the police in the case of a ‘drug’ offence. This event then often becomes a student’s first criminal justice contact with all the

implications of the stigma associated with being an offender.

The research shows that there is limited involvement by youth or other individuals in ‘gangs’ as defined by international standards. While crew associations exist in Saint Lucia, criminal activity, other than cannabis use, is far less widespread than popularly believed. Our findings suggest that gang involvement is not widespread, but that many out of school, unemployed internal migrants tend to congregate in groups.

With the exception of the use of cannabis, levels of criminality in these groups of young man are minimal. If cannabis was decriminalized, the crime level would drop dramatically.

Trafficking and petty transnational crime

A key finding of this report on “Youth, gangs and violence and their contribution to crime in Saint Lucia” is an analysis of the flow of illicit trade between Martinique and St Lucia. Despite various regime changes over the centuries, the informal movement of people and goods between these islands has always existed and a shared language (Kweyol), African ethnicity and cross island family bonds facilitate a fluidity of movement of goods and people across the 21mile/ 34 km wide channel separating the two. Evidence suggests that the movement and trade between the two islands that dates from before European contact.⁷

To this day all sorts of boats ply the waters between Martinique and Saint Lucia carrying licit and illicit cargoes. The illicit movement of goods, both legal and illegal, is a daily occurrence. There is the unscheduled but regular transit of pleasure yachts, tourist ferries, work boats and fishing pirogues, frequently moving north and south among the islands.

The ‘informal’ movement of goods and persons between Saint Lucia and Saint

Vincent to the south and Saint Lucia and Martinique to the north is often facilitated with bi-lingual⁸ Saint Lucians serving as intermediaries.

Researchers heard accounts of the smuggling of legal goods between Saint Lucia and Martinique to avoid health inspectors or taxation. Horse meat, turtle meat, cigarettes and tobacco products from Saint Lucia move illicitly into the highly regulated, heavily taxed market place of Martinique while French wines and inexpensive electrical goods and tools are among the items finding their way 'tax free' onto the informal Lucian market place. The research found no evidence of the irregular trade in legal good intersecting the cocaine and related firearms trade.

The possible intersection of the cannabis and cocaine trade has been a topic of interest among researchers and law enforcement for the past three decades. It has always been assumed that the illicit nature of each product would create an overlap in transport and distribution. The outcomes of this research do not support this assumption. Small-scale independent cannabis traffickers reported that they avoid contact with the cocaine traffickers. Key informants characterised the cocaine trade as violent and "serious". The findings of this research show that with some exceptions, the cannabis trade and retail markets are largely non-violent in nature. This contrasts with the cocaine trade where a culture of violence and deadly enforcement tends to prevail.

While there remains inadequate data on operational structures of the cannabis and cocaine trade, trafficking intersection, wholesale distribution networks and retail sales, this research indicates that the two products intersect much less than was commonly thought.

Cocaine transits Saint Lucia on its way through Martinique and then to Paris and beyond. It is of public knowledge that the most serious movements of cocaine arrive

in commercial shipments, bulk cargo or roll on-roll off coming primarily from Venezuela. This type of shipment requires a coordinated, transnational organisation to ensure the undisturbed, uninspected movement of the goods and it was regularly alleged that the trade was protected by corrupt Government officials including the police.

While there are exceptions, the individuals working in the cocaine trade are primarily more mature men and women, while most young people, if they are involved in drugs at all, were more likely to be involved in the petty selling and use of cannabis. According to the respondents the transshipment and local distribution of cocaine was often alleged to be controlled by a gang dominated by Venezuelans.

Perhaps more pertinently to the focus of this report is the 'petty' cocaine trade between Saint Lucia and Martinique. When large shipments of cocaine land in Saint Lucia for onward movement, some of the pure cocaine powder remains behind as an 'in kind' payment for facilitation of the transit. Most but not all of this 'in kind' cocaine is boiled up with baking soda to form a smokable base product, commonly referred to as crack or crack cocaine for sale in the local market. While much of this crack is distributed in small bulk packages for resale as 'rocks' throughout Saint Lucia for local consumption, some is carried to Martinique where its purity commands a price double of that of the Martinique made product.

Despite most of the cocaine being converted into crack, some of the powder remains in its original state for use primarily among the upper classes and tourists who come to Saint Lucia seeking inexpensive cocaine. With the exception of the main tourist areas of the north of Saint Lucia, powder cocaine is rarely seen on the street. Interviewees outside of the tourist areas consistently replied they had never even seen powder cocaine.

On the other hand, the majority of cannabis available for sale in Saint Lucia is either

locally grown or originating in Saint Vincent, a neighbouring island. What is not needed for local consumption is exported. Cannabis for export is mainly sent to Martinique to take advantage of its higher sales value in Euros. There is also a transshipment trade of Vincentian cannabis to through Saint Lucia to Martinique. Young men are involved in this trade as an economic activity and a means to obtain high quality cannabis for their own use.

Instigators of violence in the community and repressive policy responses

In Saint Lucia there is a distinction between violent behaviour that is deemed morally repulsive and punishable by the state, such as murder and rape, and behaviour that, while criminalized, enjoys the approval or large sections of the population. Examples of the latter include most extrajudicial killings of ‘bad boys’, homophobic violence, corporal punishment of children and domestic and gender based violence. In contrast to prevailing thought, violence in the ghettos is often associated with territorial disputes over ‘crack’ markets.

Aside from these territorial disputes, researchers found very few dynamics that lead to violent confrontations in the poor neighbourhoods, known as ghettos. Interviewees were asked what would instigate violence in their community. The overwhelming response was that the violence that takes place in ghettos is often a reaction to heavy-handed incursions by the police. Given the pervasive nature of cannabis and the ‘protection’ of the cocaine trade, drug control operations often target cannabis rather than cocaine interdictions. Many individuals interviewed related stories of the police aggressively confiscating cannabis and other drugs, but not making arrests. It is commonly believed that these seized drugs would find their way back into the market place by civilian accomplices.

Most of the young men interviewed related

that they would try to be respectful to the police but despite that, the police regularly used degradation and excessive force in their interactions with them. They conveyed that for the most part the police were consciously disrespectful, intimidating, and provocative. It was related by many that when the police are challenged, they often uttered the statement: “I am the law”. Perceived ‘disrespect’ was mentioned as a major cause of violence in the ghetto. This may be due to the general lack of respect that these young men get from the authorities and by society in general.

Following a far second is violence associated with alcohol use. When probed for other initiators of violence, respondents often reported that alcohol use had the tendency to lead to violent altercations. Alcohol-induced clashes over women were the second most common cause of violence.

In 2011 the Prime Minister of Saint Lucia was accused of using controversial methods, in order to save the country from gang war and violence. It is alleged that the security forces resorted to extra-judicial killings to eliminate those deemed to be part of the criminal element. Police killings were always framed as gang-related and/or drug-related, justifying the extreme use of force with the premise of drug control.

Through the first decade of the 21st century there were three to four individuals killed by police each year. In 2011 that figure increased dramatically to 12. There was a record of 54 homicides in 2011, including the 12 extra-judicial killings by the police and one by an armed security guard. This was a three-fold increase in police related homicides from the previous year. So grievous were these killings that the US Department of State “made a policy decision to withdraw training and material assistance to the Royal St. Lucia Police Force due to credible allegations of gross human rights violations.”⁹

As the figures below show, 2007 was an anomaly with a greatly reduced number

of homicides. As the figures below show, 2007 was an anomaly with a greatly reduced number of homicides for that year. 2007 was the first full year of the newly elected government in power. The new government condemned the lax nature of law and order of the previous government and won the election promising to take back the country from the criminals. Soon after the election, a truce was brokered by the newly elected member of Parliament from Castries Central, Mr Richard Frederick. Mr Frederick, an attorney, built his reputation representing individuals alleged to be involved in the cocaine trade. He was well known and respected by many of the criminal element for his able defence of their legal issues. The truce was short lived and

the sanctioning of their “actions” and by the pledge by the new government to prosecute members of the Royal Saint Lucia Police Force (RSLPF) for any wrong doing. This had the effect of curbing the most overt and grievous acts of violence. There was a decline in murders in 2012 as well as an improvement in the number of homicide cases solved during 2012. Interestingly enough the RSLPF web site stopped publishing crime statistics in 2007 and has not been updated since.¹⁰

Official figures show 44 murders were committed in 2012, down from the record 52 in the previous year. The following statistics were provided by an unnamed source at the Royal Saint Lucia Police Force that responded to a Facebook request for data:

Homicides	
2006	43 homicides, including 4 police related incidents
2007	27 homicides, including 2 police related incidents
2008	39 homicides, including 3 police related incidents
2009	39 homicides, including 2 police related incidents
2010	48 homicides, including 4 police related incidents
2011	52 homicides, including 12 police related incidents, 1 security guard incident
2012	44 homicides including 4 police related incidents, 2 security guard incidents

the homicide rate returned to the average and actually began to slowly increase year by year.

After the general election at the end of November 2011 and the installation of a new government, there was a change in the police tactics that had been authorized by the previous government. Word on the street was that the “hunting license” granted to the police had been revoked. It was rumoured that the police were frustrated by the lack of

2011 and 2012 were the first two years where homicides were disaggregated by including individuals killed by security guards. This trend is worrisome in that the proliferation of firearms to private security firms creates another vector for firearms to get into the community. This has become so problematic that the Institute of International Relations and The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago, undertook a regional symposium in 2010 to investigate the proliferation of firearms

through private security companies. The two deaths by armed security guards recorded in 2012 substantiate this proliferation of firearms. Of the 44 homicides reported in 2012, four were police shootings and two were security shootings. When asked, the police stated that all the police and security shootings are pending inquest.

Conclusions

Between 2010 and 2011, the US state of California recorded a 20 per cent decrease in juvenile crime, bringing the underage crime rate to the lowest level since the state started keeping records in 1954. According to a recently released study¹¹, much of that improvement can be credited to the decriminalization of marijuana. The study's authors looked at a host of other factors to explain the drastic drop in juvenile crime. In conclusion they assert that only two major factors explain the trend: the loosening of marijuana laws and improvements in the economic well-being of California's youth.

Crime and violence are development issues. This is the key message of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the World Bank 2007 report "Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean".¹² The report indicated that the high rates of crime and violence in the region have both direct effects on human wellbeing and wider effects on economic growth and social development.

The research upon which this briefing is based shows that vast majority of young people have minimal contact with transnational organised criminal networks. It was often reported that a young man's first criminal justice contact was associated with his cannabis use. Much of this first contact originated at the behest of the school system where zero tolerance for 'drugs' and a policy of involving the police, starts the young person on a path of continued criminal contacts and involvement.

The CARICOM Action Plan for Social Development and Crime Prevention developed jointly by the UNODC and CARICOM is a comprehensive plan of social development as a form of crime prevention.¹³ The Plan may be used as a 'menu of options' when looking for social development solutions to 'crime' problems. Unfortunately the re-scheduling of cannabis and the removal of criminal justice penalties for its possession and use is not on the menu, while this research shows that much can be gained by such step.

Notes

1. Marcus Day D.Sc. Director Caribbean Drug and Alcohol Research Institute
2. Summary of unpublished report prepared for the UNODC in July 2013. TNI decided to publish a summary of the report since its content is relevant for current policy debates. The full report can be found at: http://www.hivgateway.com/files/634afb2d85c80fbec912c5b73582450f/Final_Report_SLU.pdf
3. Instrument for Stability (Ifs), 2009, Eastern Caribbean – Field Mission Report and Proposed Actions. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52010DC0512>
4. Donn, B. (2012). Illicit trade in small arms and light weapons responsible for untold suffering globally: Barbados. *News & Media United Nations Radio*. September 14, From: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2012/09/illicit-trade-in-small-arms-and-light-weapons-responsible-for-untold-suffering-globally-barbados/>
5. Peter, S. (2013). U.S. suspends police assistance for St. Lucia over alleged killings. *Reuters*. August 22; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/22/us-usa-stlucia-police-idUSBRE97L11D20130822>
6. Rogers, C. (1991) Children in Gangs, UNESCO Courier, October.
7. Hofman, C.L., van Duijvenbode, A., ed., (2011). *Communities in Contact: Essays archaeology, ethno history and ethnography of the Amerindian circum-Caribbean*, (p. 179). Sidestone Press.

8. English and Kweyol.
9. Azad, A. (2013) State Department cuts aid to St. Lucia police, *Caribbean Life*, 9 September: http://www.caribbeanlifeneews.com/stories/2013/9/2013_09_06_azad_st_lucia.html; See also http://www.caribbeanlifeneews.com/stories/2013/9/2013_09_06_azad_st_lucia.html
10. <http://www.rslpf.com/>
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12. http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/Cr_and_Vio_Car_E.pdf
13. http://www.caricom.org/jsp/pressreleases/pres365_10.jsp

Briefing Series on Drug Markets and Violence

This briefing series on Drug Markets and Violence will address the complex interaction between the dynamics of an illicit market and the policies that are designed to repress it. The series will focus on local examples where violence is linked to the drugs trade, but not only. It will critically analyze the policy responses and law enforcement practices applied and recommend alternatives prioritising the reduction of violence.



Transnational Institute

Since 1996, the TNI Drugs & Democracy programme has been analysing the trends in the illegal drugs market and in drug policies globally. The programme has gained a reputation worldwide as one of the leading international drug policy research institutes and as a serious critical watchdog of UN drug control institutions, in particular the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

TNI promotes evidence-based policies guided by the principles of harm reduction, human rights for users and producers, as well as the cultural and traditional uses of substances. The project seeks the reform of the current out-dated UN conventions on drugs, which were inconsistent from the start and have been surpassed by new scientific insights and new pragmatic policies that have proven to be successful.

For the past decade, the programme has maintained its main focus on developments in drug policy and its implication for countries in the South. The strategic objective is to contribute to a more integrated and coherent policy where drug control is regarded as a cross-cutting issue within the broader development goals of poverty reduction, public health promotion, human rights protection, peace building and good governance.

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