Agenda

1. Concentrations of violence
2. Causes of violence
3. Research evidence on what works
4. Conclusions
Concentrations of violence

- Violence is concentrated in people, places, times, modes, and motivations.
- Understanding these concentrations is vital to unpacking the problem.
- Concentrations provide clues about potential solutions.
Some gangs are more violent than others

In one Trinidadian community with 10 gangs:

- Of the 53 murders carried out by gangs in the area, 45 of them were carried out by only 5 of the gangs (85%)

- Of the 33 gang members murdered in the area, 20 of them belonged to just 3 gangs (61%).
Some communities are more violent than others

In Trinidad and Tobago, 7 of the nation’s 71 police station districts had 60% of the homicides.
Some “micro-places” are more violent than others

• We examined 4 hot spots in Trinidad containing at least five separate homicide incidents in a 2-year period.

• These were small hot spots - ellipses that were no more than 600 feet long.

• Every hot spot had its own “ecology of violence,” very different from the others.

• Here is where the “root cause” explanations for violence really don’t work.
Causes of violence

• The solutions to violence must match the causes.
• Solutions based on untested assumptions about causes are likely to fail.
• There has been very little systematic research on the causes of gang violence in the Caribbean.
• Gut-feelings and untested assumptions are widespread and form the basis for policy.
Distal versus proximate causes

- Distal causes are explanatory factors that are distant from a violent event. These are often referred to as “root causes.”
- Proximate causes are explanatory factors that are much closer in time and space to a violent event.
What criminology teaches us

• Distal causes may influence levels of violence, and altering these factors may be desirable, but it is not the only solution.
• Changing distal causes takes major investment and substantial time.
• Addressing proximate causes can generate substantial violence reduction benefits.
What factors lead gang members in Trinidad to kill people?

- Perceived disrespect
- Territory
- Disputes over money, girls, etc...
- Retaliation
- Internal power struggles
- Ratting – talking to police

These are proximate causes around which we can design prevention programs.
Research evidence on what works to reduce gang violence
1. Gang Truces

• Trinidad has been using them for more than 50 years.
• The research from the U.S. suggests that they don’t work; they may even increase violence.
• Most gang scholars agree that gang members use them to manipulate the government, businesses, the media, or the public.
• The typical pattern is a short-term decrease in violence followed by a long-term increase.
Morvant gangs before truce
Morvant gang network (after truce)
The effect of the truce on violent crime in Morvant
2. Comprehensive gang programs

These are complex, community-wide programs that typically have five components:

- Community mobilization
- Opportunities provision
- Social intervention
- Suppression
- Organizational change and development
Evidence on comprehensive gang programs

- The evidence from evaluations of these programs is inconclusive
- Due to program complexity, implementation and coordination problems are widespread
- Implementation problems represent a substantial barrier to exporting these programs to the Caribbean.
- One pattern worth noticing is the extent to which the Caribbean region embraces “suppression” to the exclusion of the other approaches.
3. Community-led violence reduction

• These programs are led by community organizations and focus on “interrupting” violence using a public health approach.

• Chicago’s Ceasefire was the first and most well-known program and it is actively being marketed around the world by its developers, including the Caribbean.

• These programs typically involve very little interaction with police or other criminal justice officials.

• The street workers they employ to reduce violence are typically ex-offenders with street credibility.

• The underlying theory is that violence spreads like a disease and interrupting the spread can reduce overall street violence.
Evidence on community-led violence reduction

- Chicago’s Ceasefire reduced violence in some districts and not others
- Newark’s Ceasefire had no effect on violence
- Baltimore’s Ceasefire reduced violence in some districts and not others – but there were serious implementation problems.
- Pittsburg’s Ceasefire increased violence.
4. Suppression

- Police play a vital role in preventing gang violence, but how they conduct themselves matters significantly.
- Suppression efforts that are perceived as heavy-handed or illegitimate can increase gang cohesion and violence.
- Though many police in the Caribbean believe summary executions on the streets are the answer, this strategy will make the problem even worse.
- Well-calibrated and fair suppression efforts should form just one part of an overall strategy for preventing and reducing gang violence.
5. Problem-oriented policing and focused deterrence strategies

• Problem-oriented policing involves studying a problem in detail and designing multi-faceted solutions.

• Focused deterrence involves finding ways to deter those offenders most likely to commit violence – focusing primarily on proximate causes.

• Putting these two strategies together has resulted in dramatic reductions in violence in Boston and several other American cities.
Conclusions

1. A crucial first step is studying the gang violence problem in detail and identifying concentrations and proximate causes.
Conclusions

2. Gang truces may not be the magical solution people imagine them to be - and they may make the problem worse. If a truce must occur, find ways to keep it out of the spotlight and to enforce its terms. Gangs use truces to achieve their own ends.
Conclusions

3. Comprehensive community programs are probably too complex to implement in a coordinated way in some Caribbean nations. But a useful step is for every nation to consider whether most of the elements of these programs are in place, not just suppression. Coordination between the elements can follow later.
Conclusions

4. Community violence reduction programs are not a good solution for many Caribbean nations. It may be useful to implement pieces of these programs (like streetworkers to mediate violence), but only if tightly regulated and carefully implemented. These programs run the risk of increasing violence in the Caribbean without appropriate controls.
Conclusions

5. Police MUST be a part of the solution to gang violence, but it will be vital to overcome the deeply held cultural belief among many police that killing gang members is a way to solve the problem.
6. Problem-oriented policing and focused deterrence strategies are a good option and give police a viable alternative to heavy-handed suppression tactics. But it will be challenging to overcome the belief among police that this kind of work is more than just a “social work” approach.
Conclusions

Gang violence can be prevented and reduced with the proper mix of strategies.

Enough is known about what works to reduce gang violence that it is now time to begin a comprehensive program of testing and experimentation in the Caribbean.