



## Full Length Article

# Differentiating the local impact of global drugs and weapons trafficking: How do gangs mediate ‘residual violence’ to sustain Trinidad’s homicide boom?

Adam Baird <sup>a</sup>, Matthew Louis Bishop <sup>b,\*</sup>, Dylan Kerrigan <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, Switzerland

<sup>b</sup> Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, UK

<sup>c</sup> Department of Behavioural Sciences, University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago



## A B S T R A C T

The Southern Caribbean became a key hemispheric drug transshipment point in the late 1990s, to which the alarmingly high level of homicidal violence in Trinidad is often attributed. Existing research, concentrated in criminology and mainstream international relations, as well as the anti-drug policy establishment, tends to accept this correlation, framing the challenge as a typical post-Westphalian security threat. However, conventional accounts struggle to explain why murders have continued to rise even as the relative salience of narcotrafficking has actually declined. By consciously disentangling the main variables, we advance a more nuanced empirical account of how ‘the local’ is both inserted into and mediates the impact of ‘the global’. Relatively little violence can be ascribed to the drug trade directly: cocaine frequently transits through Trinidad peacefully, whereas firearms stubbornly remain within a distinctive geostrategic context we term a ‘weapons sink’. The ensuing murders are driven by the ways in which these ‘residues’ of the trade reconstitute the domestic gangscape. As guns filter inexorably into the community, they reshape the norms and practices underpinning acceptable and anticipated gang behaviour, generating specifically ‘residual’ forms of violence that are not new in genesis, but rather draw on long historical antecedents to exacerbate the homicide panorama. Our analysis emphasises the importance of taking firearms more seriously in understanding the diversity of historically constituted violences in places that appear to resemble—but differ to—the predominant Latin American cases from which the conventional wisdom about supposed ‘drug violence’ is generally distilled.

A prolonged homicide boom in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) over the past two decades is frequently attributed to the Southern Caribbean’s emergence as a major transshipment point for hemispheric cocaine. Structural shifts in drug markets and trafficking routes are posited as driving increasingly globalised, sophisticated, and intensely competitive drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) to settle disputes and resolve market disequilibria brutally (UNODC, 2019a, p. 27). This conventional wisdom is generally distilled from a wider Latin American experience with which the Caribbean is often conflated: in its *Global Study on Homicide*, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) ascribed the puzzling ongoing rise in killings—which contrasts starkly with relative decline in many other regions—primarily to violent competition between DTOs (UNODC, 2019b). On this reading, then, ‘the drug trade’ represents a pronounced security threat to be solved, usually resulting in the militarisation and securitisation of (the poorer parts of) local society (Kerrigan, 2018). This assumption pervades parts of mainstream criminology and International Relations (IR), elements of the anti-drug policy elite with which they often overlap—especially UNODC—and a fearful Trinidadian society.

The first ever *Caribbean Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2012a, pp. 148–9) addressed explicitly the perceived emergency: by the mid-1990s, ‘governments came to see narco-trafficking as the main threat to national and hemispheric security’ and this trade ‘in drugs and the associated ills created such a sense of exposure and heightened vulnerability among the region’s leaders, that they imagined the danger as an existential threat to the entire region’. Those working at the sharp end of policing concurred: ‘with very few exceptions’, noted Agozino et al. (2009, p. 293), ‘the first order of priority for these agents tended to be focused on the drugs trade’. Emphasising the scale of the challenge, IR scholars such as Griffith (1997a, p. 1) consequently described the ‘narcotics dilemma’ as ‘multifaceted’ in that it carries ‘internal and external ramifications, involves state and non-state actors, and affects all areas of social existence’. US prohibitionist preferences further reinforce the idea that ‘drug trafficking is the dominant, antecedent organised crime’ and ‘the biggest security threat’ (Young & Woodiwiss, 2019, p. 85). These concerns are not unfounded: Trinidad and the wider region are important nodes in trafficking networks; murders have risen dramatically over the past twenty-or-so years; and gang violence is

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [adam.baird@un.org](mailto:adam.baird@un.org) (A. Baird), [m.bishop@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.bishop@sheffield.ac.uk) (M.L. Bishop), [dylankerrigan@gmail.com](mailto:dylankerrigan@gmail.com) (D. Kerrigan).

unquestionably more brazen. It is therefore widely accepted that a correlation exists (Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022). As Seepersad (2016, p. 88) has put it, activity patterns and arrest rates ‘are consistent with previous [criminological] research that points to an association between gangs, guns, illegal drugs, and other illegal activities’.

The problem is that this ‘association’ between drugs and the frequently euphemised ‘associated ills’ (Agozino et al. 2009, p. 293) is rarely spelled out, with the salience of trafficking simply inferred from the rising murder rate. Increasing homicides, argue Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti (2014, p.157), ‘exemplify the role of the illicit drug industry in lethal violence’ which is ‘affected by drug trafficking and changing drug markets’. Not only does this argument appear circular, guilt is established by association: variables can be left unproblematised conceptually, and relationships between them are assumed rather than explained. Moreover, in official accounts, the link between drugs and violence is not just taken for granted, but specifically *causal* claims are advanced, even when it is admitted that this cannot be discerned:

Although this link is *hard to measure*, in some countries violence associated with the drug trade accounts for a significant share of homicides; however, a clear *association* between drug trafficking and homicide *cannot be established*, since *there are also countries* with a high level of drug trafficking but a relatively low level of homicide, and vice versa (UNODC, 2019b, p. 98, emphases added).

UNODC notes here—rightly—that the presumed link between drug trafficking and violence cannot be ascertained due to divergent murder patterns. Yet it still asserts that trafficking is to blame for ‘a significant share of homicides’. These contradictory propositions can only be reconciled because the claimed link is itself couched in woolly terms: i.e. ‘violence’ that is, again, ‘associated with the drug trade’. This tendency to make a strong causal claim while being unable to specify clearer relationships is problematic. We do not reject entirely the prevailing consensus: there is an association between the drug trade and rising violence, but it is *partial, indirect, and temporally-specific*. In Trinidad’s case, as in some other Caribbean states (Baird, 2020), transnational narco-trafficking is, today, a relatively non-violent affair, and most homicides *cannot* be attributed directly to it. Rather, the dramatic increase in murders coalesces almost-entirely around peripheral gang-related environments on the streets that are essentially disconnected from trafficking (or drug markets at all), whereas the specific and highly professionalised intermediary processes of cocaine *transshipment* carried out by Trinidadian traffickers occur often-peacefully in coastal or industrial spaces far from those blighted urban margins. There are, of course, occasional exceptions, but ‘associating’ drug markets with that violence is more misleading than it is explanatory in this context.

To satisfactorily explain the endurance of homicidal violence in Trinidad, we need to know *why* it rose so dramatically around 2000, and, crucially, *has been sustained ever since* at such a high level. Existing accounts—whether those examining other contexts or Trinidad itself—struggle to do this. Most murders are perpetrated by urban gangs for whom guns have become ‘the weapon of choice’ (Maguire et al. 2010, p. 384). ‘Death by firearm’, note Adams and Vera Sanchez (2018, p. 244), ‘is associated with the influx of the drug trade, and concomitantly, the gang wars, which have infiltrated many Caribbean nations’ (emphasis added). Our objective is twofold: to transcend this essentially descriptive account by explaining the key ‘associations’, and to explicitly disentangle narco-trafficking from the related, but separate, trade in firearms. We therefore shed light on *why* gangs have continued to perpetrate murders despite *limited* involvement in drug markets, and *how* the availability of weapons *at key moments, in a specific social context*, has continued to drive the high murder rate. In Trinidad, as across the

region (see Baird, 2021), when guns enter marginalised communities, they tend to remain there, drastically changing gang practices and becoming intrinsic to—and stubbornly embedded in—the political economy of the streets. There is substantial evidence of street gangs arming the world over, and very little of them disarming (Brotherton & Gude, 2021). The historical presence of violent gangs meant that, as they connected to firearm inflows during the 1990s and 2000s, well-armed groups became a permanent feature of the gangscape, deploying guns to intensify longstanding violence practices in more murderous ways, a process exacerbated by Trinidad’s distinctive geostrategic location within hemispheric trafficking that effectively renders it a ‘weapons sink’.

Our central intellectual insight, in terms of wider Peace Studies debates, is to question the analytical conflation of firearms and the drug trade, contending that they play a separate, specific role in generating bloodshed. Some critics increasingly recognise this: in research on Jamaica, Young and Woodiwiss (2019, pp. 88–90) call the conventional wisdom ‘a longstanding misreading of the Caribbean reality’ because ‘it is the illicit trade in firearms’ that ‘constitutes the main security threat, not drug trafficking’. Similarly, Agozino et al. (2009, pp. 288–296) note how mainstream criminological accounts ‘frequently threaten to misunderstand the historical process of “pistolization”, with “faulty thinking” pervading a debate that wrongly believes “a robust response to drug trafficking would reduce the problem of guns”’. By conceptualising firearms as ‘residues’ of drug distribution—things that remain *after* trafficking processes are complete or arrive separately to them—we contend that they ‘filter’ into vulnerable sections of local society and promote distinctive forms of ‘residual violence’. Yet although this describes more precisely the structures within which these processes occur, it does not, by itself, explain the genesis of violence—especially its stubborn persistence after the initial rise—since this cannot be reduced to context alone. The contemporary evolution of gangs *within* it represents a crucial, temporally distinct, intervening meso-level variable: their agency, amid exclusionary political-economic structures and widely available weaponry, catalyses an ongoing arms race, reproducing ever-more intense norms and practices of violence, in turn recomposing the gang panorama itself. This is how they *mediate* residual violence.

We first outline the dramatic increase in homicides and scrutinise existing accounts of it. We suggest that they fail to fully disentangle the crucial variables and privilege unconvincing ‘market disequilibria’ explanations while discounting more persuasive sociologically-informed ones that emphasise the ongoing reproduction of historical legacies. Second, we offer an alternative contextual argument: the infusion of firearms into a social order marked by historically-constituted vulnerability at a key conjunctural moment better explains Trinidad’s *initial* homicide boom. We then move on to why this has persisted: in the third section, we outline structurally how the country has become a ‘weapons sink’; in the fourth, we examine how the agency and evolution of gangs within this context is reconstituting residual violence to *sustain* a high murder rate. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our firearm-centric account for existing debates in both academia and policy. The paper draws primarily on data from fieldwork undertaken between 2016 and 2019. This comprised 30 interviews with experts from academia and civil society, development agencies, the police (TTPS) and defence force (TTDF), government and the national security apparatus, and regional bodies such as the Caribbean Community Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (CARICOM-IMPACS) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). We also undertook six focus groups, both with statutory bodies such as the Criminal Gang Intelligence Unit (CGIU), the Citizen Security Programme (CSP) of the Ministry of National Security, as well as with residents living in violence-afflicted

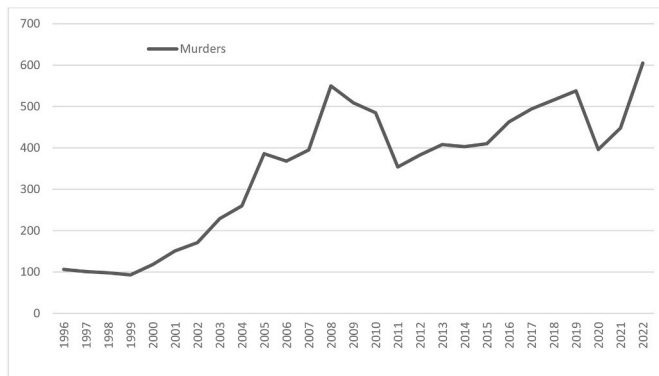


Fig. 1. Murders in Trinidad, 1996–2022 (source: [www.tccrime.com](http://www.tccrime.com)).

communities in East Port of Spain (Beetham, Sea Lots, Laventille, St Barbs). This analysis is supplemented by extensive ethnographic data gained from informal interactions with both policy elites and violence-afflicted communities since the late 2000s right up to the present day (for a more detailed methodological discussion, see Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022).

### 1. Explaining Trinidad's homicide boom

Historically, while violence is well documented (Brereton, 2010), recorded murders were few.<sup>1</sup> Between the 1980s and 1990s, they grew from approximately 50 to 100 per year, or between 7 and 11 per 100,000 people, close to the global average.<sup>2</sup> However, at the turn of the millennium, the number exploded (Hill, 2013, pp. 40–41). As Fig. 1 shows, by the mid-2000s, it reached around 400 per year, or 30–31 per 100,000, on a par with Central America, and, in the marginalised East Port of Spain districts, 249 per 100,000, on a par with Baghdad after the 2003 Iraq invasion (Pawelz, 2018, p. 410). Until now, 2008 was the bloodiest year on record, with 550 deaths, after which they decreased, hovering again at around 400 per year (a reduction from around 41 to 31 per 100,000). This partial abatement resulted from a state of emergency (SoE) in 2011 which limited movement and essentially 'paused' the bloodshed for four months, along with remedial initiatives and social programmes financed by a buoyant energy sector. However, amid falling oil prices and a deep recession from 2014-onwards, murders again increased, with 463 and 494 recorded in 2016 and 2017 respectively, and they reached 538 in 2019, matching the peak of a decade earlier (growing from approximately 35 to 40 per 100,000). Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 had a similar dampening effect to the earlier SoE, with a drop to 356 by year-end (30 per 100,000). However, the upward trend

<sup>1</sup> T&T's population is approximately 1.3–1.4 million, of which around 60,000 live in Tobago. Trinidad is large compared to many Caribbean islands and has four major conurbations: Port of Spain, the capital; Arima to the east; Chaguanas in the central plains; and San Fernando further south. Most homicides occur in the urban margins of these four cities.

<sup>2</sup> In line with our reflection in the conclusion on the 'intellectual imperialism of the big and most heavily researched', the murder rate per 100,000 is arguably a less useful comparative measure of the scale of violence in small countries than in larger ones. Indeed, amongst small populations, per capita measures of all kinds can be misleading, either over- or under-stating the effects of particular phenomena (see Bishop et al., 2023). In Trinidad's case, the absolute increase from 500 to 600 might tell us more—with 100 murders representing a drastic rise in such a small space, especially in terms of the visceral impact on local people—compared to an increase from 37 to 44 per 100,000 which, to experts used to studying larger countries, might be perceived as a relatively insignificant shift. Conversely, some of the very smallest Caribbean territories are arguably over-represented near the top of global rankings because a small increase in what remains a relatively infrequent crime can have a drastic impact on the murder rate in a population of 50,000 or 100,000.

reasserted itself in 2021 with 448 killings (35 per 100,000), and 2022 became the bloodiest on record, with the grim record of 605 homicides reached at new year (46 per 100,000).<sup>3</sup> There was little respite in 2023: modelling undertaken by Seepersad predicted a similarly high body-count by year-end (cited in Bruzual, 2023).

What explains this desperate picture? Many accounts correlate the rising murder rate with the fragmentation of Colombian cartels in the 1990s, the rise of Mexican DTOs, and the re-routing of cocaine via—and destabilisation of—transit regions like Central America and the Caribbean (Miller & Hendricks, 2007; Hobson, 2014; Stambol, 2016). Individual island states saw their coastguards, security services, police forces and judicial systems overwhelmed, intensified by relative US disengagement post-Cold War (see Payne, 2000). By the early 2000s, almost half the cocaine supply destined for North America passed through the region (Munroe, 2004). The archipelago's myriad islands and cays meant contraband could be moved comparatively easily, further facilitated by rapid technological change in communications which augmented the sophistication and networking capacity of globalising criminal groups (see Andreas, 2011). As Griffith (1997, p. 1) suggested, the threat that narco-trafficking implied for sovereignty and good governance rendered it 'a clear and present danger to the Caribbean'.

However, as intuitively credible as this conventional IR account is, it only pinpoints how *the emergence of trafficking coincides with the beginning of the rise in murders*. It does not explain change over time and space: i.e. the subsequent *escalation and sustenance* of homicides at a level historically ten or more times higher than previously, and their relative scale and intensity vis-à-vis other places. Specifically, it offers little explanation for why homicides soared in some places and not others along transshipment routes if drug trafficking is the key independent variable. A criminological insight is sometimes appended to overcome this, connecting disparate patterns of violence along the supply chain to the Caribbean gradually being supplanted by Central America as 'the central drug route', thereby provoking vicious competition amongst DTOs 'fighting for their share of the diminished market' (Lappi-Seppälä & Lehti, 2014, p. 157). This may elucidate particular instances of violence, especially in Central American 'bridge countries' performing analogous overland trafficking functions as greater volumes of cocaine have been routed overland via Mexico (Bunck & Fowler, 2012). But the precise opposite is equally plausible: if Caribbean flows have decreased—something corroborated by UNODC (2012, p. 13), our own findings, and a recent T&T Strategic Services Agency (SSA) report which emphasises how declining narcotics income has 'proven unable to finance criminal groups' (SSA, 2021, p. 33)—then attributing *rising violence* to this *diminishing trade* is intrinsically questionable.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, proponents counter that 'the relation between violence and the drug industry is not linear' and the scale of the latter matters less than the intensity of competition generated by market disequilibria which can also differ greatly along the chain: 'High-volume trafficking and undisturbed markets may well coincide with lower levels of violence' (Lappi-Seppälä & Lehti, 2014, p. 157). Again, this is conceivable in general. Mexican and Colombian traffickers, for example, deploy different violence strategies reflecting the extent of their control and the spatial intensity of state counter-narcotic activity (Durán-Martínez, 2015; Lessing, 2017). In Belize—a contiguous Caribbean country uniquely located on the Central American isthmus—cocaine transshipment is tightly organised, rarely violent, and largely unrelated to the capital's homicide epidemic (Baird, 2022). Criminal competition may even generate isolated episodes of violence in the southern Caribbean, especially in coastal spaces when transshipment disputes do occasionally occur among more disorganised, small-scale protagonists. But it remains a weak overarching explanation for Trinidad's spectacularly bloody

<sup>3</sup> These data come from [www.tccrime.com](http://www.tccrime.com), a reliable civil society website compiled anonymously that gathers statistics from official and media sources.

<sup>4</sup> The SSA is T&T's national intelligence agency.

homicide picture, since this is *not* exemplified by *high-volume* narco-trafficking and *low violence*, but rather the inverse. Orderly trafficking can evidently coexist with peaceful drug markets, but it is intuitively unlikely that their relative *absence* can *produce* colossal levels of violence, particularly in peripheral urban locales disconnected from the specific *maritime* transshipment functions that Trinidadian actors play within the hemispheric trade (and in which the dominant large-scale players are professional and well-organised).

So, not only do we contest ‘market disequilibria’ arguments, we also question their corollary, which, according to Eisner, repudiates historically-rooted accounts (such as ours) that emphasise instead the ‘deeply entrenched culture of violence rooted in colonialism and slavery’ (UNODC, 2019a, p. 41). For him, these cannot explain why homicides have accelerated in the past two decades and not earlier, reinforcing the idea that intensified DTO competition in the late 1990s, immediately prior to the uptick in killings, was key. Again, we do not reject this outright—it makes sense descriptively, plausibly accounts for some past instances of violence, and may be true elsewhere—but it does not travel well to contemporary Trinidad as an all-encompassing explanation since it struggles to show why murders *have continued to increase* even as the relative salience of drug trafficking has declined. This, as we argue below, is because the contemporary period *does* reflect a distinct phase in the evolution of violence inherited from the colonial era (see also Knight, 2019).

Trinidad has, from slavery to the present day, consistently experienced the arbitrary exercise of governing authority and maldistributed access to resources, and it has long had antagonistic street gangs which function as mediating entities between the state and society in the most deprived communities (Brereton, 1979, 2010; Seepersad and Bissessar, 2013; Katz & Maguire, 2015; Stuempfle, 1995; Bishop & Kerrigan, 2023). Gang members unquestionably perpetrate most murders, and they do so primarily in a handful of those excluded urban areas (Pawelz, 2018). But, if they have *always* existed in some form and inflicted violence—of a less lethal kind—in those spaces, then something must have changed since the 1990s for the murder rate to rise so precipitously and, crucially, *persist*. However, since those inaccessible places are not systematically connected to the hemispheric drug trade to which the carnage is usually attributed, then the key change cannot be DTO competition, because so few local gangs are involved in it to any significant degree. As Townsend (2009, p. 20) noted during the first peak in murders, Trinidad’s gangs are very different to Latin American DTOs: ‘ephemeral, smaller, and not as interconnected’ with ‘a very local orientation’.

Beyond the mainstream, more critical research has also recognised how violence varies dramatically in extent and intensity across time and space in illicit markets as a whole (Andreas & Wallman, 2009). Work on Latin America and the Caribbean specifically has attributed its scale to factors other than the drug trade: i.e. the failure of state-sponsored extortion rackets (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009); the extent of criminal competition between trafficking networks to control markets (Durán-Martínez, 2015; Friman, 2009); the spatial distribution of illicit flows and the distinct conflictual pressures at the spaces—production sites vs trafficking nodes—where violent nonstate groups might interact (Idler, 2019, 2020); drug gang structures and their relationship with both the state and the communities in which they are often embedded (Arias, 2017; Arias & Barnes, 2017; Arias & Rodrigues, 2006); and, in Jamaica especially, distinctive clientelist relationships between politicians and the ‘Dons’ [gang bosses] that control poorer urban constituencies and trade votes for resources (such as contracts) and protection for narco-trafficking and other criminal activities (see, inter alia: Stone, 1980, 1986; Sives, 2002, 2010; Jaffe, 2013; Edmonds, 2016; Campbell & Clarke, 2017).

Yet as Snyder and Durán-Martínez (2009, p. 254) have noted, theory building that explains variations in violence across different markets or time periods remains patchy. In part, and reinforcing our wider argument, this is due to the tendency within the mainstream literature to assume that violence is ‘a natural by-product of drug trafficking’ (Durán-Martínez, 2015, p. 1380). Reducing the former to the latter is therefore instinctively tempting, even though, as we have just shown, it is, at best, questionable. Epistemological differences among critical scholars abound, too. Even when criminologists focus on understudied places like Trinidad, ‘gangs’ often tend to be defined in terms of form—who they are, what they do, and the policy implications for policing or security provision (see Adams et al., 2018; Adams & Vera Sanchez, 2018; Katz et al., 2011)—rather than political-economic or sociological substance: where they came from, what they signify, and how this shapes our understanding of the social panorama that gives rise to them and their mediation of violence within it (see Rodgers, 2017). But it is also because each violent context—despite appearing similar in that they *are* violent—operates according to its own deeply-rooted dynamics, of which drug markets may only be one, and not the most important, factor (their existence offering, again, a seemingly obvious and pervasive, yet potentially superficial, misleading, and reductionist explanation).

Arguments distilled from the existing literature cannot solve our puzzle, even though they describe elements of what is happening. State actors may implicitly tolerate the illicit drug trade, but aside from episodic revelations of corruption (see Griffith, 1997b, for an early account), they are not systematically implicated in it and there is limited criminal competition over control of the country’s consolidated (yet declining) position within hemispheric trafficking networks. The gangs that perpetrate most violence function in analogous ways to those elsewhere, but they are not as deeply involved in the drug trade as many of their Latin American counterparts, and their clientelist relationships with politicians are far less ordered and institutionalised than in Jamaica. Although more critical accounts do not attribute violence to the drug trade in the mechanistic fashion of the mainstream, they still broadly seek to explain it with reference to the functioning of illicit *drug markets*, the actions of *drug traffickers*, and consciously use terms like Durán-Martínez’s (2018, p. 42) ‘systemic *drug violence*’ to describe the phenomenon (emphasis added). But such work cannot fully illuminate Trinidad’s experience. First, it generally focuses on organised Latin American ‘drug gangs’, which *are* heavily involved in drug markets, whether at the cultivation, distribution, or supply ends of the chain. Indeed, the fact that they are often explicitly termed DTOs—with narco-trafficking even being fundamental to their very existence—distinguishes them from their Trinidadian equivalents. Second, it is based on the experience of far bigger continental countries and regions within them hosting large-scale drug production and/or outbound trafficking, alongside often-highly developed domestic drug markets. In Trinidad, though, this is not the case: cocaine transits rapidly, with only accompanying weapons remaining. Third, its gangs—and the murders they perpetrate after acquiring those guns—are essentially disconnected from transshipment, meaning that drug markets, whether domestic or international, cannot constitute the primary structural context in which violence plays out.

## 2. An alternative account: heavy weaponry meets historical vulnerability

In general, ‘drugs’ offer a poor explanation for violence in Trinidad. Aside from cannabis—which has its own distinct political economy (see Klein, 2016)—Caribbean societies are not great consumers of illicit narcotics and drug use is ‘still looked down upon’ by the wider populace.<sup>5</sup> Cocaine consumption is minimal: in 2017, Spain and Britain had

<sup>5</sup> Senior Official (A) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

the highest annual prevalence globally, at 2.7 and 2.67 per cent of the adult population respectively, whereas the equivalent figure for Trinidad (albeit from 2010) is just 0.48 (UNODC, 2019c). The nominal difference here is orders of magnitude: i.e. millions of regular consumers versus a few thousand. Even in the most impoverished places, the crack cocaine market is small, isolated, hyper-local, and already tightly controlled by one gang: ‘territorial battles’ only occur in a handful of these insular urban spaces.<sup>6</sup> In Port of Spain, few transit points between downtown and the ghettoised eastern districts sustain a genuinely competitive drug market over which gangs fight for hegemony.<sup>7</sup> Most drug ‘blocks’ are tiny—literally just one block—and service regular clients from *within* the community in an increasingly narrowly delimited space as population movements across gang borders have become restricted. As a TTPS officer suggested, ‘it is not a wealthy trade to be in, on a drug block’.<sup>8</sup> Surveillance suggests around \$1200 TTD (approximately \$175 USD) is generated per day, based on 30 customers buying four hits of crack at a maximum of \$10 TTD (barely \$2 USD).<sup>9</sup> Most of this income will accrue to leaders, not foot soldiers: ‘after you hustle on the block and you give the boss the money, you get a box of KFC and a hundred bucks’ (\$15 USD).<sup>10</sup> So, although occasional locational battles may influence some limited instances of lethal violence, killings as a whole are not linked to systematic contestation over these modest local drug markets.

Trinidad’s specific appeal to traffickers as a transshipment point is that it performs a distinctive set of logistical tasks linked to its ‘uniquely valuable geostrategic position’.<sup>11</sup> It is just 11 km from Venezuela and outside the hurricane belt, so cocaine can be trafficked year-round. Boats stored in its marinas when tropical storms are active elsewhere consequently enjoy lower insurance premia. It has the Caribbean’s most advanced industrial sector which facilitates redistribution—often back into Latin America for transfer to Europe via West Africa as air routes for ‘mules’ into northern countries have become aggressively monitored.<sup>12</sup> Trafficking captures rents that would not otherwise come *because of* the distinctive services Trinidad offers: ‘this is money that is not meant for here, as there is no local drug market to speak of’.<sup>13</sup> Those rents are necessarily secured by powerful business elites with the requisite industrial, financial and human capital. The lack of product differentiation or monopoly control over final sales implies a criminal accumulation strategy focused resolutely on minimising losses. So, relatively little cocaine makes it ashore, with redistribution increasingly occurring at sea.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as interdiction rates have risen substantially alongside improvements in state interception capacity, traffickers have become even more risk-averse, contributing to the broader decline in transshipment via the Caribbean.<sup>15</sup> If drugs are landed, it is because they constitute quantities requiring swift repackaging for onward distribution, and this happens in industrial or maritime processing facilities distant from inner-city communities. Tight control of this process—and limited domestic demand—ensures little seeps out. Barely any of the limited amount of cocaine consumed locally is furnished by major traffickers anyway: by definition, their drugs are *in transit*, and their role is finance, redistribution and minimising risk; domestic supply is

primarily undertaken by locals with ‘contacts in Venezuela who go in their fishing boats to get a few kilos to build their own little chiefdom’, some of which is then actually ‘hustled’ to tourist islands like Grenada and Barbados to satisfy demand from foreign visitors (see also Kerrigan & Sookoo, 2013).<sup>16</sup>

Reducing the myriad activities of urban gangs, including their violence, to the small local narcoeconomy—thereby denying their long historical significance—would be a profound misreading of their *raison d’être*. Often-violent proto-gangs have existed since the early colonial period (Breerton, 2010; Stuempfle, 1995). Before 2000, most homicides took place with sharp or blunt instruments. Since then, a similar number, 50–100 annually (4–8 per 100,000), have occurred the same way, whereas *the entirety* of the additional increase—hundreds per year (30–47 per 100,000, depending on the year)—is with guns (St Bernard, 2022; Wallace et al., 2022). Moreover, ‘the intensification of transnational organised crime is not as significant a factor as people think’: the former are rare crimes perpetrated atypically by everyday people in time-worn fashion, often to resolve decades-old conflicts; the latter are committed frequently by gang members with access to increasingly powerful weaponry (Maguire et al. 2010, pp. 384–5) but are generally unrelated to drugs.<sup>17</sup> We should, then, perhaps even conceptualise those gun homicides—which now account for 80 per cent or more of all murders (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 41)—as analytically distinct. Gang criminal portfolios comprise a wide range of activities beyond any conceivable interest in drugs: ‘burglaries, robberies, prostitution, fraud and extortion’ as well as licit business operations (Pawelz, 2018, p. 410). Contestation over other resources—notably government contracts and make-work schemes such as the *Unemployment Relief Programme* (URP) or the *Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme* (CEPEP)—is especially important. Bosses cement their authority through the reinforcement of clientelist relationships with politicians and the community, reproducing their historical role as powerful intermediaries in contexts of deprivation. Conflict then *intensifies* when resources dry up.<sup>18</sup> In mid-2019, for example, after a long period of austerity, tensions erupted when an audit into contracts allegedly issued to Dons was announced after a TTPS Special Branch investigation (Bassant, 2019).

This brings us to the crux of our puzzle. First, if some gangs are only tangentially involved in a relatively declining cocaine trade—by providing occasional muscle to traffickers or distributing limited amounts to a handful of small but saturated local markets—then it cannot be the independent variable causing murders to escalate *and* persist. Second, if transshipment is undertaken primarily by sophisticated actors in locations external to the communities where gangs operate, it also cannot directly generate intensified violence within them. Third, if violent gangs have long been endemic, their continued existence alone cannot explain the phenomenon either, since something must have changed to drive today’s pervasive deadly aggression.<sup>19</sup> The original late-1990s explosion in murders certainly correlates with the aforementioned shifts in the hemispheric drug trade, but their *continued proliferation* (and even growth through 2022) can neither be attributed to, nor illuminated by, waning narcotraffic. The crucial variable is actually the related—but separate—trade in weapons. This intersects with and reformulates *pre-existing* patterns of violence to drive the homicide boom. From the perspective of the ‘chronically vulnerable’ (Baird, 2020) urban margins, this represents a *re-articulation* of persistent historical patterns whereby the infusion of powerful weaponry into a context shaped by colonial and post-colonial antecedents causes *extant* violence to move *through* those guns, in turn changing shape and intensifying. According to UNDP (2012a, p. 6), the ‘concentration of

<sup>6</sup> Senior Official (A) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See Adams et al. (2018) for an anonymised description of a turf war between gangs in Port of Spain’s most profitable drug street. It paints an accurate picture of the main transit points between the poor eastern suburbs and the city downtown where such a market does exist, but this is exceptional in a city- and country-wide sense.

<sup>8</sup> Senior Police Officer, November 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Senior Police Officer, November 2017.

<sup>10</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>11</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>12</sup> NDC Official, January 2017.

<sup>13</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>14</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Multiple interviewees made this point.

<sup>16</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Senior Official (A) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Police Officers, Beetham, November 2017.

<sup>19</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

violent crimes in the communities of the urban poor' clearly demonstrates their connection to 'exclusionary processes that have long histories and that have found much contemporary reinforcement'. In its genesis, then, it is not new.

Yet its intensity is new, and the 1990s do represent a vital conjunctural moment, but *not* for the reasons commonly identified. The short-lived 1990 *coup d'état* by the Jamaat al Muslimeen is the crucial staging-post. This *domestic* episode *preceded* the collapse of the Colombian cartels—and therefore the emergence of large-scale southern Caribbean narcotrafficking—and catalysed the modern reproduction of earlier historical legacies in the subsequent homicide boom. The Muslimeen were the most powerful non-state group, by far the most heavily armed criminal entity, and effectively the only 'gang'. However, this label is inadequate: this was (and remains) a complex communal organisation, operating out of a heavily fortified Port of Spain compound in a context of pronounced deprivation and injustice. It consequently had deep roots in society, and functioned variously as a last-resort provider of social welfare, a militant Islamic fundamentalist sect, an educational refuge for marginalised young (predominantly black) men, and an insurrectionist paramilitary group seeking to capture the state (see McCoy & Knight, 2017). In fact, the Muslimeen traditionally *impeded* the narcoeconomy: members using or supplying drugs would face 'severe censure'.<sup>20</sup> During the mid-to-late 1980s, as it assertively challenged state authority by refusing to disband and vacate the publicly-owned land that housed its compound, its members waged a vigilante anti-drug campaign which simultaneously inhibited drug markets in excluded communities, recruited members, and fortified their paramilitary clout prior to the coup (Mahabir, 2013).

The Jamaat al Muslimeen's 'gangsterism' came later (Mahabir, 2013). After 1990, as the state reasserted itself, the group's imperious leader, Yasin Abu Bakr, lost influence, and fragmentation saw some splinters seize the opportunity to 'tax'—but not operate—the emergent drug trade (McCoy & Knight, 2017, p. 277). This became possible because some weapons had *already* entered the country in the 1980s after the Grenadian Revolution and were supplemented further post-coup.<sup>21</sup> Availability of guns therefore began to alter the balance of power between nascent criminal groups themselves, and vis-à-vis the state: 'at this point, the problem got out of hand'<sup>22</sup> and 'the gun itself became the commodity'.<sup>23</sup> Heightened flows of weapons did not inevitably beget rising violence: rather, they accumulated in a context that was being reshaped by the reconstitution of the Muslimeen and the creeping emergence of a new gang panorama in which homicidal violence became more feasible, acceptable, and pronounced. The aftermath of the coup—in which at least 24 people died, but Jamaat al Muslimeen members enjoyed an amnesty that endured even after it was struck down by the Privy Council—'empowered that organisation to really flex their muscles as untouchable'.<sup>24</sup> As it continued to splinter throughout the 1990s and beyond, its remnants became less 'an organic, grassroots reaction to the inequity and economic stress of the time' and considerably more criminalised and gang-like (McCoy & Knight, 2017, pp. 276–277).

Trinidad's subsequent incorporation into hemispheric trafficking further augmented flows of guns as they entered the country to secure drug transactions.<sup>25</sup> So, at first glance, the conventional criminological arguments appear to have some merit when applied to these early shifts. Initially, DTOs helped to arm local gangsters—such as the infamous group led by Nankissoon 'Dole Chadee' Boodram—who perpetrated all manner of gruesome acts to secure their position in nascent markets in

the mid-1990s. Others offered logistical services to the burgeoning trade, with firearms accompanying cocaine flows and frequently changing hands for cash or as payment for services rendered.<sup>26</sup> But what matters for our argument is not the extent of early local involvement in narcotrafficking: the Chadee gang were a *rural-coastal* outfit, and, unlike most of today's violent *urban* gangs, they *did* traffic drugs internationally; but they were actually arrested and imprisoned in 1994, then executed in 1999, *before* the subsequent escalation in murders really took hold. Moreover, the pugnacious early generations of local traffickers were rapidly replaced in a market which, as noted, became consolidated by more professionalised and sophisticated international DTOs, and then gradually diminished over time.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, as we discuss further below, the ensuing murders can be attributed not to a declining *international* drug trade which violent Trinidadian actors were vacating, but drastic changes to the *local* gang panorama, something further intensified—as we discuss later—by the return of criminal deportees from northern countries. So, what is crucial is that the increasing 'weaponization' or 'pistolization' of civil society described by Agozino et al. (2009) and Bowling (2010, pp. 60–5) that occurred alongside *the arrival* of the drug trade altered the incentives facing local gangs. The volume of firearms meant that, once they began to acquire and deploy them, others had little choice but to follow suit or render themselves vulnerable. This generated a centripetal pull that drew even more into the country. Although DTOs may have indirectly initiated this arming process—or exacerbated it amid the post-coup recomposition of the gang panorama—it became self-sustaining as the gangs themselves began to accumulate weaponry like never before. Guns arrived to secure drug transactions—which often passed off peacefully in remote coastal, industrial or maritime spaces—but they remained *in* Trinidad while cocaine moved onwards, seeping into communities. These narcotrafficking 'residues' were not the only source, but they were a crucial one, as they helped to spread firearms to a wider populace beyond the most organised non-state groups, thereby intersecting with the local social context and a fragmenting gangscape to engender vulnerabilities which incubated distinctive forms of fatal violence.

The perseverance of an ever-more murderous violence panorama *does* therefore represent a renovation of Trinidad's colonial inheritance, as reflected in the post-colonial political-economic settlement (Youssef & Morgan, 2010). This is typified by dysfunctional state-building, the extractive 'resource curse' (Auty & Gelb, 1986; cf. Perry, 2022), and anomie that has influenced interpersonal relationships and social structures—including gang formation—since long before independence in 1962 (Trotman, 1986). These pathologies afflict most Caribbean societies, where traumatic histories of slavery are reproduced daily through the 'structural violence' (Galtung, 1969) and 'sustained violence' (Nayar, 2019, p. 223) of decaying development models, increasingly criminalised governance, pronounced levels of race/class stratification, political and economic exclusion, reproduction of neo-colonial modes of social organisation, and, on the micro-individual level, under-developed life skills (Kerrigan, 2019; Knight, 2019; Greenidge & Gahman, 2020). Rising homicides thus symbolise '*an extension of an inter-generational acceptance of violence*' that has been widespread since slavery: previously it was undertaken with 'cutlasses, knives and bottles, but was *no less brutal*'.<sup>28</sup> However, it has found novel expression due to fundamental 'technological change' and the attendant shifting of violence norms (Kerrigan, 2019, p. 31). Armed perpetrators can commit ruthlessly vicious acts: 'before, you damaged someone or maimed them, *now you are killing them* ... it is a lot easier to shoot someone than to stab them, and, proximity-wise, you do not even have

<sup>20</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Senior Police Officer, November 2017.

<sup>22</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>24</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Senior Official (A) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Senior Official (A) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>27</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>28</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

to be close or feel the impact'.<sup>29</sup> As Arendt (1970, p. 53) put it in *On Violence*, 'out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience'. Those brandishing them can wield inordinate power, with lethal immediacy—and less personal risk—than would otherwise be feasible, and 'the violence is de-personalised'.<sup>30</sup> Distinctly 'local battles' are intensified because 'guns are filtered into the community' and people 'shoot each other in ways that were not possible previously' to resolve conflict.<sup>31</sup> Even relatively common and prosaic crimes like burglaries now regularly result in serious bloodshed because of the omnipresence of firearms.

In sum, the seeds of Trinidad's idiosyncratic brand of contemporary gang warfare germinated during the 1990s, but had been sown throughout its exclusionary post-colonial development. The coup was primarily a response to the country's worst recession in its post-independence history, which affected an urban periphery that had been systematically impoverished since its settlement after slavery. Murders certainly rose precipitously after the southern Caribbean emerged as a node in drug trafficking through the mid-to-late 1990s, but not primarily because of DTO contestation. They have persisted due to floods of weapons coalescing with a key conjunctural turning point in the evolution of local gangs, in a social context marked by latent violence inherited from the past. As one official noted: 'The gangs are one thing, but they now have arms to kill each other with, which is something else'.<sup>32</sup> The feedback loop between the two has underpinned the bloodshed ever since. So, although the emergence of the drug trade may have had an indirect catalytic effect—with the rise in murders lagging a few years behind before taking off in 1999/2000, the point of no return—it cannot provide an answer to our research puzzle, because, as the relative salience of narcotrafficking has since declined, the fire has continued to rage and burn even hotter.

### 3. Structuring residual violence: the creation of a 'weapons sink'

Guns become lodged inside Trinidad because it is geostrategically located at a confluence of weapons streams. Early on, they were often residually linked to narcotrafficking (Griffith, 1997b). But, they do not only 'follow the drugs', as they also 'come in via other routes and means' (Agozino et al. 2009, p. 294). As Nicholson and Mitchell (2022, p. 193) suggest, 'illegal guns are vastly becoming both the currency and commodity of the drug trade, having evolved into a major independent criminal activity'. Three distinct channels exist: those accompanying narcotics transactions; those trafficked eastwards from South America, especially from Venezuela, usually on the same routes, but as part of separate commercial deals; and those purchased—often quasi-legally—from US merchants and trafficked south through the region.<sup>33</sup> For many islands, the 'US domestic market is now a major source of illicit firearms and ammunition' with trafficking occurring 'via commercial airliners, postal and fast parcel services, and maritime shipping companies' (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 18). Although most other Caribbean territories are implicated in this multidirectional trade (see Bowling, 2010, p. 75), Trinidad is the final island at the bottom of the archipelago and the logical terminus.

Of course, from the perspective of the eastern route from South America, it is also the first transit point northwards (as it is for cocaine transshipment). However, aside from a miniscule trade to tiny cannabis-producing St Vincent, there are no markets for weapons further north: in general, the US gun industry already serves them, and its sheer scale generates enormous countervailing pressure that simultaneously acts as a barrier to weapons travelling north and pushes flows of them south

towards Trinidad. As the SSA (2021, p. 31-2) noted recently, North America is now 'the primary source for firearms and ammunition' which are 'concealed in barrels, furniture, building materials and electronic appliances'. This is 'further exacerbated by the reality in Venezuela' whereby narcotraffickers 'sell firearms to those residing in coastal communities' and some recent Venezuelan migrants play 'a more active role brokering deals for local traffickers'. Once in the territory, guns have nowhere to go, other than into violence-afflicted communities: this inexorable filtering process effectively renders the country a 'weapons sink' that has become progressively fuller. For Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002, p. 26), the 'overproduction by weapons manufacturers in need of an expanding market' has long driven the illegal gun trade throughout the Americas, and they accumulate continually: 'they are not products that are consumed once and disappear; they are, rather, re-cycled among the different circuits of legal and illegal distribution'. Gangs do not—cannot—give them up once in possession, and the ensuing insecurity compels ever-greater accretion. These structural logics are central to understanding the contours of the homicide boom.

Trinidad is particularly well suited—geographically and topographically—to transshipment (see Fig. 2). With a landmass of 5131 km<sup>2</sup>, it is substantially larger than neighbouring islands, and much of the territory is under-populated. The north coast is densely forested, with many remote beaches accessible only by boat or on foot through the jungle. One of the two closest points to Venezuela—the tiny offshore Bocas Islands in the north-west—accommodate well-concealed holiday properties owned by economic elites, which have occasionally been the site of seizures. In 2005, nearly 1750 kg of cocaine was intercepted on Monos, with a street value of over \$700 million TTD (\$114 million USD at the time). This episode actually concentrated increasingly risk-averse criminal minds: 'it represents a huge loss to any trafficker, so why bother bringing 10 kg onshore, when you can keep 50 kg on the water?'<sup>34</sup> The other is the sparsely populated southwestern peninsula: from San Fernando, it is 75 km to the small fishing communities around Fullarton (Cedros and Icacos). This relatively isolated area consists of around 200 km of essentially wild coastline running from Moruga in the east (beyond Siparia) to the industrial facility and port at Point Fortin further north. The region has centuries-long social, cultural and familial ties with Venezuela, and is the epicentre of much contraband trade (Freeman, 2019).

Narcotraffickers' major point of vulnerability is transiting from the South American mainland when they can be intercepted by pirates or the authorities. Weapons are therefore 'the industry's insurance: they come to Trinidad to secure the drug transactions that take place, but they do not follow the drugs; they are a by-product of the trade'.<sup>35</sup> After transshipment is complete, traffickers have little use for guns that were protecting their cargo.<sup>36</sup> Their worth transforms instantly: it is too dangerous to risk returning with them aboard often-small fishing vessels; they have trivial pecuniary value in a crisis-ridden Venezuela where they are abundant and can be easily acquired; yet they represent valuable assets in Trinidad where there is strong demand.<sup>37</sup> This has been intensified by rapid, large-scale migration: a raid in Point Fortin in mid-2019 saw authorities arrest *El Culón*, the leader of a major Venezuelan gang, *Evander*, which had begun operating *within* the country (see also SSA, 2021). The wider hemisphere has also long been a source of arms: from the amnesties that followed the end of Cold War (and various civil wars) in Central America to the demobilisation of paramilitaries and guerrillas in Colombia today, as well the burgeoning US trade—in which US corporate interests are well served by export opportunities and official discourses that posit narcotics, not guns, as the primary security challenge (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002; Young & Woodiwiss,

<sup>29</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Senior Official in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Senior Official (B) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>33</sup> CARICOM-IMPACS Official, January 2017.

<sup>34</sup> NDC Official, January 2017.

<sup>35</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>36</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Many interviewees made this point.



Fig. 2. Map of Trinidad (source: Small Arms Survey, cartography by MAPgrafix).

2019)—supply is sustained.<sup>38</sup>

So, although often trafficked along the same routes, they represent separate trades: ‘arms and ammunition are *only* seen with drugs when they are used for protection’.<sup>39</sup> As one exasperated police officer noted, dedicated ‘gun runners’ import weapons which vastly outweigh the small domestic drug trade: ‘let’s be real—how much drugs you hadda bring in now to have all dem firearms?’<sup>40</sup> The logic is self-reinforcing: on the supply side, there is downward price pressure, but demand remains buoyant as gangs keep growing their arsenals. Paradoxically, successful interdiction intensifies this: as coastguard activity increases, traffickers become ‘desperate’ for weaponry, which, again, needs to be moved on after transshipment, further promoting growth in supply, reductions in

cost, and rising demand.<sup>41</sup> State actors have also proven unable to decisively confront powerful vested criminal interests: the benefits of illicit revenue for a small rentier economy, especially when conducted quietly in the shadows by commercially and logistically sophisticated elites, are evident. The enclave energy sector crowds out other licit activity (Auty & Furlonge, 2019; Dukharan, 2019). Cocaine transshipment and money laundering consequently represent a valuable—albeit declining—secondary source of rent and foreign currency accumulation. But what prevents blind eyes from being fully turned is ‘not so much drugs’, but the residual violence that means ‘people are getting killed’.<sup>42</sup> Military-style assault weapons such as MAC-11 machine guns, AR10 and M15 rifles, as well as AK-47s are now accessible alongside pistols, costing just TTD \$35,000 (USD \$5,000) (Dowlat, 2018). The country is a junction for trafficked drugs, people, wildlife and other contraband

<sup>38</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>39</sup> NDC Official, January 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Police Officers, Beetham, November 2017.

<sup>41</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>42</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.



transiting its maritime space, but it is a cul-de-sac for guns. Hence, it is a 'weapons sink'.

The *only* way they can leave the streets is via interception, which the authorities have achieved with increasing—albeit, again, paradoxical—success. In the early 2010s, around 400 firearms were seized annually, including 425 during the 2011 SoE (UNODC, 2015, p. 9). Although murders ceased temporarily, seizures did not increase substantially, despite this being a primary aim of the emergency period, with over 7,000 arrests under novel anti-gang legislation and TTPS-TTDF joint patrols in locked-down communities (aggravating other insecurities, like child malnutrition and domestic violence).<sup>43</sup> Few were ultimately prosecuted, and the SoE made it *more* difficult to find guns: they remained hidden in the homes of aspirant youths seeking gang membership or older citizens intimidated into passive cooperation, rather than being transported by gangsters and potentially intercepted.<sup>44</sup> By the decade's end, though, seizures had more than doubled, with 1,054, 988 and 888 confiscated in 2017, 2018 and 2019 respectively, by far the largest hauls recorded, due to more intensive stop-and-search activity.<sup>45</sup> Seizures declined to around 600 annually during the pandemic years, yet this figure still illustrates the terrifying extent of the problem.<sup>46</sup> Reliable data on illegal weapons is obviously limited (see Wells et al., 2010). But, in 2019, the SSA estimated 8,154 illegal guns to be in circulation, so seizures represent, at best, barely ten percent of a growing total that many consider a distinctly conservative estimate anyway (Hassanali, 2019). The real figure is potentially multiples of this: a parliamentary debate in November 2019 suggested there are 43,000 civilian firearms overall, 8550 licensed, and 32,450 held illegally (Taitt, 2019). This higher figure comes from what was, at the time, the only existing review of the various available estimates (Alpers et al., 2022). The illegal market is now believed to be worth \$100m TTD (\$15m USD) annually, equating to thousands of new weapons (Nicholson & Mitchell, 2022, p. 198).

It is difficult to demonstrate with hard, quantitative data, either the total number of weapons or the specific points at which flows of a given size entered the country. The Caribbean is plagued by generalised data unavailability (see Bishop, 2013), such that researchers frequently have to undertake primary research just to generate the baseline data that readily exists elsewhere prior to developing project concept notes (Bishop et al., 2023). This is magnified drastically when it comes to the hidden economy. Indeed, it was only in 2023 that the first comprehensive study of firearms in the region was published jointly by The Small Arms Survey and CARICOM-IMPACS, and, in the foreword, the latter's Director, Lt Col Michael Jones, noted how, due to massive extant data gaps, 'dynamics of firearm-related crimes in the Caribbean—whether specific or nuanced—were therefore often lost' (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 6). The report suggested that approximately double the number of legal and illegal firearms exist in Trinidad than previously thought: 10,500 licensed owners with 19,434 registered guns, and somewhere between 63,577 and 84,769 circulating illicitly. These latter figures, striking as they are for a country of 1.3-1.4 million, can only ever be estimates, and the study reiterated the severe methodological difficulties that confront even the most well-designed and well-funded research on the subject: i. e. painstakingly collating data from different studies that extrapolate carefully from door-to-door household surveys asking a range of direct and indirect proxy questions, then using multipliers calibrated across Caribbean comparator cases. However, the authors are, in our view, correct to argue that the number of illegal weapons circulating is far higher than the 8,154 suggested by the SSA in 2019, whether or not it is at the upper end of their 84,769 estimate: if the average price of a black-market gun is \$1,500 USD, then 'roughly 10,000 illegal guns are

being traded in Trinidad and Tobago annually, which suggests a much higher overall total' (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 56–59).

To a degree, it does not actually matter what the exact total is for the purposes of our argument. The key point is that we can assert, with a reasonable degree of confidence—by cross-referencing the qualitative expert testimony of our respondents with both the published estimates that do exist and sensible inferences from both recent seizures and the number of gun homicides—that the broad story that we paint is plausible. Indeed, while those murders do not represent definitive proof that there are more guns, they are unquestionably indicative of a sizeable influx, especially as killings continue to grow alongside seizures (implying more weapons entering the territory to satisfy accelerating demand). It would, therefore, be considerably more *implausible* to argue, for example, that these murders imply a smaller number of firearms circulating more quickly, and there is also no evidence—either published or in our interviews and informal interactions with experts—that this might be the case. So, we can realistically infer that the massive spike in killings, which is driven (and sustained) almost exclusively by *gun* homicides perpetrated by *gangs* (UNDP, 2012b, p. 53), results from both an initial uptick in firearms trafficking—seeds sown in the aftermath of Grenada, germinating in the 1990 coup, then beginning to flower after the initial emergence of narco-trafficking alongside the deportations and fragmentation of the Muslimeen—that has become self-perpetuating today. The reason it took two decades after Grenada for the violence to really take hold was because the crucial re-composition of the domestic gang panorama—which we discuss in the following section—had not yet taken place. In sum, we would argue that not only is this qualitative account conceivable, but it is more persuasive than any quantitative equivalent could be in this distinctive context.<sup>47</sup>

Interdictions are a boon for dealers: disparities in arsenals create sudden imbalances of power between gangs, which they must rectify swiftly, with the market tending rapidly towards equilibrium.<sup>48</sup> The TTPS announces seizures with great fanfare to a fearful public, but this also provides a market signal to vendors of unmet demand. Moreover, it advertises a competitor's weakening to rival gangs, increasing demand by both. The arms market functions extremely efficiently: interceptions, ease of access and perceptions of weakness collectively incentivise gangs to accumulate greater numbers of more powerful weapons. Saturation never occurs: 'the oversupply of the means of violence' generates 'dormant resources continually waiting to be exploited'.<sup>49</sup> More guns beget more guns beget more violence, as those with assets seek opportunities to deploy and profit from them. The strong feedback loop between demand and supply perpetuates a continual street-level arms race driven by the enduring Hobbesian perception that a gang's security requires ongoing accumulation. One respondent ventriloquised this straightforwardly: 'the more I have, the stronger I am, and I need to

<sup>47</sup> There are evident methodological challenges in demonstrating precise flows of illicit weapons, at particular moments, into a small Caribbean country on which quantitative data (of all kinds) is limited. As Fabre et al. (2023: 81) suggest, inspecting anything other than a small number of cargo containers is 'financially and logistically unfeasible—and firearms traffickers know it'. Trinidad's borders are exceptionally porous: many weapons do not even enter via official ports, and those that do are rarely caught by antiquated (or even obsolete) scanners, so tracking them is largely impossible. We therefore inevitably have to use proxy measures like the number, nature and intensity of gun homicides, or firearms seizures, but no matter how sophisticated these might be, supplying more quantitative data on a hidden industry does not, of itself, provide greater rigour, and may even be illusory or misleading. We therefore have to append—and, in our view, privilege—a qualitative account: i.e. testimony from embedded experts, including former gang members, who truly understand the context, which in turn helps us construct a plausible explanation of what is going on.

<sup>48</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>49</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Police Officers, Beetham, November 2017.

<sup>45</sup> IATF Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Senior Official (B) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

show heavy firepower'.<sup>50</sup> This demonstrates the brute force at the gang's disposal, encourages vulnerable young people to affiliate (Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022), and induces others to align or acquiesce out of fear.

The turnover of guns is significantly higher now than that of narcotics.<sup>51</sup> Their routine use by both the police and gangs is, though, 'a clear departure' in historical terms: for most of the post-independence era they were 'almost never made visible to the public' (St Bernard, 2022, p. 56). They consequently play a distinct role in *sustaining* the high murder rate. The country's unique geostrategic position within hemispheric trafficking renders it a 'weapons sink' and this in turn generates a specifically 'residual' form of violence: it is the *residues* (or 'by-products') of the drug trade—the guns that are left behind to be redistributed, the absence of an export market and constant domestic demand induced for them, and the proliferation of firearms from other sources—that 'have created *new forms of violence*'.<sup>52</sup> The vast majority of murders are perpetrated by gangs in poor communities far from the leafy suburbs, high-rise condominiums and industrial or maritime spaces where the transactional business of international drug transshipment occurs. Criminologists increasingly recognise the story we have painted here: a UNDP Citizen Security survey—which fed into the 2012 *Caribbean Human Development Report*—described how 'there is a disturbing upward trend, to the point where firearms have become almost exclusively the weapon of choice in murders'. As such, this 'prevalence and availability of firearms, coupled with the increasing violence of gangs in Trinidad is cause for serious concern' (UNDP, 2012b, p. 119).<sup>53</sup> But this is not simply a descriptively empirical or policy issue, it carries analytical implications for comprehending the genesis of the homicide boom, too.

#### 4. Intervening variable: the changing composition and spatial organisation of gangs

Throughout the colonial era, governing forces had to contend for legitimacy with proscribed sources of power and insubordinate cultural expression. In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, the 'barrack yards' were hotbeds of anti-establishment carnival masquerade activity and assertive social antagonism (Brereton, 1979, p. 167). Modern forms of gangsterism are usually ascribed to the post-war emergence of steelpan bands in East Port of Spain and their evocation in calypsos as 'vagabonds'. As the scene gained influence, and sponsorship flowed to band leaders, younger members agitated for a greater share of the spoils.<sup>54</sup> After independence, ostensible gang activity was widespread, but mainly comprised sporadic petty crime undertaken by small, disorganised groups (Stuempfle, 1995). This changed dramatically after

1990. The devastating recession that followed the 1986 oil shock lasted five years, decimating foreign exchange reserves and reducing real GDP by a third (Ramsaran, 1999). The structural violence and developmental neglect experienced by (predominantly) Afro-Trinidadians in districts like Laventille since they were settled after slavery when their ancestors fled the plantations only intensified (see Kerrigan, 2018b), in turn incubating the Jamaat al Muslimeen's influence.<sup>55</sup> The gradual collapse of the sugar industry also had a similar effect on (predominantly) Indo-Trinidadians in terms of rural precarity, often near to the south-western coastal locales where drugs and weapons could be landed. Some early trafficking fortunes were made here, the most infamous being that of the Chadee gang.

However, it was only *after* this period—the mid-to-late 1990s—that the murder rate *began* to increase (see Fig. 1). In 1999, when Chadee and his acolytes were executed, fewer than 100 killings (7 per 100,000) were recorded, consistent with preceding years. The rate then rose rapidly in the early 2000s, soon hitting the first discernible peak of 400 (31 per 100,000). But it still took a decade from the initial spike—and two from the coup—before the second peak of 500–600 (31–47 per 100,000) was reached, a horrifying level to which country became grimly accustomed as it consolidated throughout the 2010s and beyond. So, what changed? As noted above, a key explanation is that the US ramped up deportations of Caribbean felons—especially after 9/11 and the Patriot Act (see Griffin, 2002)—equipped with advanced criminal skills for which relatively antiquated police services were unprepared. This 'deportation model' of gang formation has been corroborated elsewhere, notably on the Central American *maras* (Zilberg, 2011; Rodgers & Baird, 2015). Crucially, it further demarcated narco-trafficking and localised violence: 'it was in the interest of those transshipping drugs for very little attention to be brought to them' and these 'big heads were not really interested in street-level gang warfare'.<sup>56</sup> The demise of the Chadee gang had been instructive, encouraging the tendency towards professionalised transnational organised criminal control.

Yet domestic gang feuds also intensified, since the deportees had 'shared prison space with Venezuelans and Colombians' and would have previously been involved in 'smuggling, violent crime, street level hustling, guns and burglaries'. On arrival, they had 'direct contacts to drug and gun suppliers in Venezuela, and the option to pay on consignment: once you develop that pipeline then you have a steady income' to facilitate localised gang activity.<sup>57</sup> The sending of hardened criminals, with international networks and a disposition towards violence to small islands with under-resourced policing and judicial systems, remains extremely controversial (Blake, 2015, p. 691). Few had familial connections in Trinidad, having spent most of their lives in North America. Over 4,000 deportees arrived in the country by the mid-2010s, bringing novel forms of criminality and increased violence, exacerbated by the difficulty of integrating into conventional society due to stigma and lack of opportunity (Dowlatabadi, 2015). Although some have questioned the extent of its catalysing effect (see Morris-Francis, 2018), this phenomenon unquestionably influenced longer-term patterns of gang formation

<sup>50</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>51</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>52</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>53</sup> The 2012 Caribbean HDR is now over a decade old, but it is significant for several reasons. It remains one of only two Caribbean HDRs, and the second (UNDP, 2016) focused primarily on human resilience, not insecurity or violence. It is therefore intrinsically important as a historical artefact. UN agencies normally conflate the Caribbean with Latin America: the most recent 'regional' HDR (UNDP, 2021) does this, with T&T only meriting 23 mentions in a 305-page report). This reinforces our wider argument—expanded on in the conclusion—that not only are the distinctive violences of the Caribbean under-researched (especially so the T&T case) and conflated problematically with those of Latin American countries, extant analysis is dominated by security-focused agencies like UNODC rather than development-focused ones like UNDP. This explains the predominance of arguments that foreground drug trafficking, not weapons, and also feeds into wider frustrations in international development about the dominant securitised framings of drug policy (see Schleifer et al., 2015). Given that our argument departs from the notion that most analysis of the Trinidadian experience reproduces these tendencies, the 2012 Caribbean HDR matters as one of the first dissenting official accounts.

<sup>54</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Approximately five per cent of the population are Muslim and most are Indo-Trinidadian, descending from a minority within the predominantly Hindu indentured labourers who arrived after slavery in the mid-1800s. However, the Muslimeen and the modern gangs that have since evolved from it are predominantly—but far from exclusively, given the country's kaleidoscopic ethnic makeup—composed of disaffected Afro-Trinidadians.

<sup>56</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>57</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

and, to a degree, the propensity of those gangs to rapidly assimilate and routinely deploy firearms.<sup>58</sup>

For example, one Don, Mark Guerra, who had returned from New York in 1993, established a power base in Laventille. Although a member of the Muslimeen, he was not involved in the coup, and secured URP contracts that came on stream as the economy recovered, which he distributed to favoured Muslims. This gave him a powerful hold over the youth, because without demonstrating allegiance to the sect, they could not access work.<sup>59</sup> Various Dons came to exercise control over their communities via similar clientelist relationships, to the extent that, in the early 2000s, the government held serious discussions regarding truces to stem rising violence. These bosses—who were deliberately referred to non-pejoratively as ‘community leaders’ by politicians (Townsend, 2009, p. 18)—traded relative stability amid profound social deprivation for resources to distribute and political protection to shore up their authority. This implicit accord, where they act as ‘arbiters of violence’ (Adams et al. 2018, p. 4) rather than necessarily perpetrators of it, echoed the uneasy compromise elsewhere in the region, especially Jamaica—albeit considerably less institutionalised and without overt party-political alignment (see Arias, 2017; Edmonds, 2016; Jaffe, 2013; Stone, 1980, 1986). Yet during this period, gang fragmentation continued: murderous contestation over senior positions intensified, with extensive leadership turnover. In the aftermath of Guerra’s death, ‘all the lieutenants became generals of their own little armies and they started in-fighting’.<sup>60</sup>

Organisational instability subsequently escalated alongside the intensification of splinter group identities. Although less hierarchical than in Bakr’s heyday, those traditionally affiliated with the Jamaat al Muslimeen identify explicitly as ‘Muslims’. Consequently, all non-Muslim gangs have, since around 2010, adopted the ‘Rasta City’ label, effectively consolidating two broad ‘umbrellas’ (Pawelz, 2018, p. 417). Religious Islam is tangential to many Muslims’ everyday identity, and the small, territorially based gangs outside the major conurbations often have looser links to either group.<sup>61</sup> However disconnected they may be in practice, though, all fundamentally line up on either side, in part because this facilitates access to weapons (Adams et al. 2018, p. 9). In prision, they are kept apart, further propagating identity formation.<sup>62</sup> The ‘Rastas’ are also non-ideological, and not really *Rastafarians*. Rather, they comprise affiliated gangs inspired by reconstituted Jamaican cultural symbols. Crucially, ‘they define themselves *against* the Muslims: if you are not Muslim then you are, by definition, Rasta City’.<sup>63</sup> This process has not generated a unified duopoly analogous to Central American *maras*. But it has clarified lines of accountability in inter- and intra-gang battles. Up to 2017, the CGIU believed there were 211 gangs, with around 2500 members.<sup>64</sup> These remain fluid, but most identify with one umbrella, and often function as ‘clips’ (smaller units) under the

<sup>58</sup> How did gang members adopt and learn to deploy guns so rapidly? Prior to the 1990s, it was often only ‘shottas’ [shooters] and bosses that carried firearms, but paramilitary training in the Jamaat al Muslimeen had already provided many with the requisite skills for the post-coup gangscape that emerged out of its splintering. In line with our wider argument, we contend that, alongside subsequent patterns of gang formation, deportation, syncretic cultural change within gangs relating to norms around gun use, their increasingly widespread availability, and perhaps the mimicking of behaviour by American gangs on television, all contributed to the rapid assimilation and normalisation of weapons. The pace of these shifts mean that, today, most gang members have likely used a gun by adolescence (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 40).

<sup>59</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>60</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>61</sup> IATF Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>62</sup> TTDF Officers, January 2017.

<sup>63</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>64</sup> NB: The CGIU was merged in late 2017 with the Organised Crime Narcotics and Firearm Bureau (OCNFB) to form the Organised Crime and Intelligence Unit (OCIU).

influence of a Don. Roughly 1 in every 555 people is thus an active member, and they routinely use guns.<sup>65</sup> Previously, when they were more disjointed, discerning the relative extent of their armaments was tricky. But, today, all participants know who the key players are, how much firepower they have, and their implied strength. As in any arms race, shifts in the balance of power necessitate rapid balancing responses from weaker actors, which can invite terrifying acts of bravado.

Dons were traditionally circumspect about deploying indiscriminate violence: it undermined the stable functioning of clientelist relationships and flows of rent. However, after failed mediation attempts in the 2000s, many older leaders fell, and in a newly gruesome way: ‘riddled with machine gun bullets’.<sup>66</sup> This entrenched vicious norms around acceptable violence that structure expectations of how dominant actors and aspirant hegemony should behave (Baird, 2018, 2021; Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022; Kerrigan, 2018a). So, not only do murders now inevitably invite reprisals, they represent a frequent and frequently excessive response to seemingly minor infractions such as a perceived lack of respect, serving little logical business purpose (Adams et al., 2018; Hill, 2013). Gangsters are also now considerably more youthful and hot-headed: ‘males are both the main victims and the main perpetrators of crime ... and violence is starting at younger ages than in the past’ (UNDP, 2016, p. 9). Previously, bosses were middle-aged: Guerra was 47 when he died; Chadee was in his late 40s; other prominent Dons, such as Kerwin ‘Fresh’ Phillip (a US deportee shot 20 times in 2007) and Merlin ‘Cudjoe’ Allamby (2009) were 34 and 40 respectively; and, more recently, Selwyn ‘Robocop’ Alexis (2016) was 52 and Vaughn ‘Sandman’ Mieres (2019) was 45. But these are contemporary outliers: their counterparts are usually much younger, depending on a gang’s location, size and integration with the two umbrellas.<sup>67</sup> One Rasta City Don, Akini ‘Dole’ Adams was just 28 when killed by police in Sea Lots in 2019. Beyond this age, bosses struggle to lead as frustrated juniors try to supplant them with extreme violence facilitated by easy access to firearms.<sup>68</sup> This process is intensifying: the SSA (2021, pp. 32-3) has identified, post-pandemic, a ‘noticeable shift in leadership’ due to elimination or prolonged incarceration such that ‘younger, more violent leaders are emerging and existing gangs are disaggregating with an accompanying level of animosity towards each other’.

The political economy of marginalised communities renders ascent through gangs a primary method of social advancement. It is, for many young men, the sole way to access comparative wealth or masculine capital (Baird, 2018; Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022; Kerrigan, 2019). Their capacity to exercise gun-based violence affords protection while attracting women who seek resources and (relative) safety.<sup>69</sup> Yet to retain power within these structures, they are increasingly compelled to exercise it, which has fundamentally disrupted the social fabric. The CGIU paints a dismal picture: gangsters may have multiple children, with multiple partners—sometimes surreptitiously—by their mid-twenties. This is accentuated by the practice of ‘parrying’ (see Kerrigan, 2019), where individual women are expected to be sexually available to the group. The physical and social space in which this occurs is progressively constrained due to shrinking territory (see below) and the intensification of the bi-polar war between the Muslims and Rasta City. Many children grow up without knowing who their fathers are, whether they are alive or deceased, and are at risk of inadvertently incestual relationships. They frequently lack significant support structures, in turn leaving them highly fatalistic and easily absorbed into gangs and blood feuds.<sup>70</sup> In their work on London, Densley and Stevens (2015) describe this phenomenon as an ‘extended present’ bereft of

<sup>65</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>66</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>67</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>68</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>69</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Senior Police Officer, November 2017.

meaningful future opportunity. Gangs offer relative stability, familial bonds and empowerment to young people who have hitherto had none: ‘when a kid commits a crime for the first time, he feels like a god; he finally has some power over his life’.<sup>71</sup> The sociology of the juvenation process is particularly troubling: ‘It is not simply the case that these kids are prepared to die; they actually *do not expect to live*. They are acutely aware of their short lifespan; a trade-off that they are prepared to make for the short-term glamour and fame of being a gangster’.<sup>72</sup>

The experience of ghettoised communities renders this a perfectly rational expectation: ‘some of them have already told their parents what kind of casket to get, they know they are not going to last long’.<sup>73</sup> It reflects, in turn, the distinct genesis of Trinidad’s homicide boom: ‘the life cycle *has changed*: anybody who was born after 1990 knows *only* violence; the little boys know nothing about a less-violent society; *they know gun*’.<sup>74</sup> Cooler heads have largely perished. If at least 80 per cent of murders are gang-related, then this implies a turnover of 15–20 per cent of the existing cohort annually, and the majority *in under a decade*. This can only accelerate juvenation and its accompanying bloodshed.<sup>75</sup> Various interviewees remarked on the difficulty of reasoning with younger gangsters: ‘lieutenants were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—if a boy at fourteen sees killing or knows how to kill people that is not somebody you could negotiate with’.<sup>76</sup> One TTPS officer stated that ‘there used to be a lot more respect, and the attitude towards police officers was calmer, now talking to them it is just raw aggression’.<sup>77</sup> Because they are inured to ubiquitous violence, desensitised to danger, and aware of the enormous—but ephemeral—lethal power they hold with a gun, they can be ‘serious killers’.<sup>78</sup> Mercy equals weakness under these incentive structures, so homicides become ever-more brutal, constituting a valuable performative currency. Murders are even *pre-emptive*, driven by the ramping up of Rasta City vs Muslim rhetoric.<sup>79</sup> We are thus witnessing ‘changing youth culture, in which *gun* violence [i.e. not just any kind, but a specifically residual variant] represents an increasingly normalised way of resolving conflict’.<sup>80</sup>

Policing remains fraught, tense, and full of latent antipathy (Watson, 2019; Watson et al., 2021; Bishop & Kerrigan, 2023). This partly reflects the low esteem in which the TTPS—like its regional counterparts—is held (see Kochel, 2012; Meikle & Jaffe, 2015). It receives constant criticism for a homicide detection rate under 20 per cent, and even fewer prosecutions due to witness intimidation and faltering criminal justice. Yet from 1994 to 2022, T&T recorded almost 9000 murders, equating to more than 0.5 per cent of the entire population: no police force, especially an under-resourced one previously investigating two or three per month, would have coped with the scale and speed of an increase in firearm- and gang-based killings that are inherently more difficult to solve than conventional ones (St Bernard, 2022; Wallace et al., 2022).<sup>81</sup> Moreover, law enforcement remains unavoidably close to society, with sometimes-symbiotic—and historically constituted—gang-police relations. Trotman (1986, p. 4) suggested of 19th Century criminality that ‘crime is the mirror in which are reflected the problems of the plantation-influenced economy and society in post-emancipation Trinidad’ and this has shaped enduring geosocial conditions that actors, including law enforcement, must navigate.

A ‘police gangster’ may be aligned to, or operating within, a Don’s

sphere of influence, and often defers to that authority. In East Port of Spain, the TTPS rarely resolve conflicts: ‘they send yuh back to the community leader’.<sup>82</sup> This conscious strategy implicitly recognises—but also reinforces and reproduces—a prevailing balance of power whereby gangs derive legitimacy from their supposed capacity to maintain order (Pawelz, 2018, p. 420). Arias & Rodrigues (2006, p. 53) term this (in Brazil) a ‘myth of personal security’ whereby residents ‘who conform to local norms’ feel safe ‘in otherwise-violent neighborhoods’. An officer may have grown up in the area alongside gang members—and may still live there, or have relatives who do—and will channel information on manoeuvres, ignore criminality, or even rent weapons. A Don may have supported an officer’s family or education when young—filling a ‘void’ vacated by public authority (Pawelz, 2018, p. 420)—and even planted them in the TTPS. The culture of the community itself maintains affiliation: the police cannot remain safely if they wantonly arrest people, and locals exert pressure on them to fulfil entrenched expectations in the interests of stability.<sup>83</sup> Underpinning this is the pervasive fear of individual police (and prison) officers: Trinidad is small, and gangsters know where they live.

Since the advent of heavy weaponry, gangs have sought to advertise their power by committing performatively spectacular violence that would be publicised in the media or via the dense gossip channels that exemplify island life (Goldstein, 2004; Baird, 2018). ‘When you kill somebody with fifty bullets’, one expert noted, ‘after one or two they dead, so the only reason you kept pumping these other bullets is for me to read in the newspapers’.<sup>84</sup> However, social media has offered an entirely new way of achieving this, further perpetuating the arms race. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and WhatsApp are replete with often-disturbing content that displays arsenals and moneyed debauchery, boasts about episodes of muscle-flexing, and goads others through skits and songs. Storrod and Densley (2017, p. 677) argue that the ‘expressive purpose’ of these new communications strategies deliberately ‘shed light on the instrumental business of gangs’. In the Latin American context, Durán-Martínez (2018) describes this ‘visibility’ of violence as something that generates fear and acquiescence amongst local people. But it also attracts potential recruits by glamourising an affirmative site of masculinity (Baird, 2018; Baird, Bishop, & Kerrigan, 2022); taunts opposing gangs and the police; and contributes to collective identity formation via the generation of folklore and legend (see also Pawelz & Elvers, 2018). Such exposition has simultaneously increased the scope of publicity and compressed the time it takes to achieve, intensified by Trinidad being a ‘copycat society’.<sup>85</sup> Molly Ahye, a famous scholar-dancer, once described it as a ‘peacock’ or ‘see-me’ society, where carnival spectacle is both comment on, and reproductive of, the social order (Ali, 2015). Rasta City iconography—like similar phenomena elsewhere (Baird, 2021)—thus represents a figurative renovation of perceived Jamaican culture that is reflected literally in ever-more brutal deaths (Kerrigan, 2018a).

Trinidad’s geography places gangs in very close proximity, intensifying the scale and visibility of violence. In East Port of Spain, Rasta City is headquartered in Beetham Gardens, the Muslims are based uphill in Laventille. Yet there is also significant balkanisation. In the main central city, Chaguanas, both operate in the troubled district of Enterprise, and smaller affiliated gangs exist in spaces very close to each other elsewhere. As such, violence is ‘highly likely’ and they deploy ‘excessive shows of force to advertise their firepower and also as a periodic reminder to others of their presence’.<sup>86</sup> This has a defensive logic, too, in pre-emptively deterring potential rivals. The singing of songs on social media about bosses—such as alleged leader of Rasta City in Beetham,

<sup>71</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>72</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Senior Official (B) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Police Officers, Beetham, November 2017.

<sup>78</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>79</sup> CSP Official, November 2017.

<sup>80</sup> CARICOM-IMPACS Official, January 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Senior Official (B) in Ministry of National Security, January 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Focus Group, Sea Lots, November 2017.

<sup>83</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Gender Advocacy Expert, January 2017.

<sup>85</sup> IATF Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>86</sup> CGIU Focus Group, January 2017.

Ancel 'Prezident' Villafana, who is believed to have unified the non-Muslim gangs—in videos laden with money, jewellery and weapons, functions variously as a form of tribute by subordinates burnishing their credentials, and a way of informing outsiders about the present condition of, and hierarchy within, a given gang. The distinctive cultural artefacts of Trinidad's gangs—what [Martín García \(2006\)](#) calls 'narcoballads'—and the way their 'Rasta' and 'Muslim' identities take inspiration from outside, reflect profoundly creolised ways of assuming and reorienting modes of meaning. New technology has also facilitated crime: end-to-end encryption inhibits law enforcement in tracking communications, and mapping technology allows gangs to monitor targets and carry out executions.

As social media has expanded the virtual territory of gangs, the physical space in which they function—especially as experienced by everyday people—has shrunk to a claustrophobic extent: 'everything is about the borderlines; it is very territorial'.<sup>87</sup> This in turn breeds a *particular kind of violence*. Trinidad's marginalised communities have long-suffered ghettoisation, but citizens are now confined to ever-smaller parts of those spaces, unable to move freely outside. This has reshaped the geography of many areas: people are surrounded by one of the two gangs, and even elements of both. Each fragment still has its own leadership, but they ultimately answer to one or two overarching bosses, such as the aforementioned Prezident. The problem for many civilians is that location-based discrimination by employers makes it difficult to find work outside and state absence means limited—even non-existent—public services inside. Without work, people cannot leave. If they do, because of their perceived alignment to one gang, they expose themselves to violence from the other (see also [Adams et al., 2018](#), pp. 10–11). They are thus stuck living in ever-shrinking space marked by acutely clear geographical and psychological borders, compelled to align—even implicitly—with the gang for resources. [Maarit Forde \(2018, p. 438\)](#) describes this as a 'spatial economy of segregation and confinement' that inherently prevents the urban poor from enjoying full citizenship of society as a whole 'while perpetuating racial and class hierarchies'.

## 5. Conclusion

Trinidad's enduring homicide boom is driven by its emergence as a weapons sink: inflows of firearms coalesced with the advent of a modern gangscape to generate increasing brutality, in turn reformulating pre-existing violence norms, and perpetuating the cycle by structurally reinforcing and reproducing these tendencies. We therefore contest existing mainstream explanations: although they correlate the onset of bloodshed with Trinidad's initial incorporation into hemispheric narco-trafficking networks, they struggle to explain why homicides have intensified as the relative salience of transshipment has declined, and why they occur in spaces, carried out by actors, largely disconnected from it. We also offer a distinctive firearm-centric account of these processes which departs from more critical work that often engages with similar themes of gang formation and clientelism, but still tends to privilege illicit *drug markets* and underplays the catalysing role of weapons in generating murders on a scale that would otherwise be (and once was) inconceivable. By demonstrating empirically that guns flooded into Trinidad at a key conjunctural moment, interpolating with pivotal *local* changes in gang composition, we contend that it is the residual violence effected by them that sustains an elevated murder rate. These technologies permit the murderous reproduction of novel forms of historical violence, by gangs that are also a contemporary variant of a historical mode of social organisation, in spaces which have always been marginalised through exclusionary colonial and post-colonial social ordering.

Several interrelated implications emerge from this analysis. For

debates in Peace Studies around the drivers of community violence, disentangling the oft-conflated 'association' between guns, gangs and drugs implies that variations along the chain (and over time) mean societies are *inserted differentially* into the hemispheric political economy of narco-trafficking. Accordingly, it is not just that the relative intensity of DTO competition may or may not explain market disequilibria and therefore violence, nor that it *does not* in Trinidad today. Rather, drug trafficking might not matter *at all*—or at least not be the key independent variable at a given moment—and therefore homicides, or their absence, cannot be presupposed from its temporal or spatial existence. The chain encompasses myriad activities between coca cultivation in the Andes and North American consumption, governed by innumerable forces, intersecting (or not) with a range of illicit (and licit) markets and social contexts. The distinct roles that communities play, their unique geostrategic location, the way weapons accumulate, patterns of control and organisation, and the crucial moments at which they were incorporated, all exist in a complex process of interlocution with an inherited state-society order. This produces violence distinct in form and extent when it plays out on the ground (see also [Antillano et al., 2020](#); [Arias, 2017](#)).

Relatedly, simply because DTO competition or illicit drug markets may explain violence in Latin American countries occupying similar overland trafficking routes, with comparable patterns of gang formation and conjunctural shifts in violence (see [Rodgers, 2006](#)), there is *no a priori* reason why this should be assumed of Trinidad or the Caribbean, islands separated by a vast sea. Regardless of whether *our account* sheds any light on other places, those that offer supposedly pervasive explanations—and sustain consensus—do not illuminate Trinidad's experience. The literature thus potentially exhibits an unstated, and problematic, gigantism (see [Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015](#); [Bishop, Corbett, & Veenendaal, 2020](#)). Elucidating the divergent experience of a seemingly peripheral small island state may appear to add relatively little to those wider debates. Yet we would invert this: there is no justifiable epistemological reason—other than the intellectual imperialism of the big and most heavily-researched—why dominant ideas distilled from hegemonic cases like Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and the Central American states should be considered paradigmatic exemplars by which others might be judged. Put simply, Latin America is *not* the Caribbean. By implicitly provincialising it and explicitly centring Trinidad in our analysis, we may not provide (and consciously reject) an all-encompassing theory of disparate violence that travels widely, but in doing so we are able to call into question whether those that purport to do so truly deserve their claims to broad explanatory power. We therefore also reiterate the need for finely-grained empirical analysis itself, which, in turn, matters theoretically: apparently analogous contexts operate to different logics, producing highly distinctive *violences*. We have an emaciated language to describe these non-war violences: our 'residual violence' concept cannot describe them all, but it highlights the need for others to capture the deeper significance of ostensibly similar—but distinct—processes elsewhere.<sup>88</sup>

Following this, context matters: both history and geopolitics decisively shape the structures in which contemporary forms of violence—and the norms underpinning them—are reproduced. This poses an evident challenge to the problematic rationalism of mainstream behaviouralist criminological market disequilibrium theories. Ironically, it even potentially provides a *better* understanding of agency: gangs are not just illegitimate groups of 'bad people' who function in the same way everywhere; they are a profound reflection of a particular context, and their behaviour further reshapes its contours and patterns of violence within it. Far more research is required to help us better grasp the social order that gives rise to what are extremely heterogeneous entities once we scratch beneath the surface ([Pawelz, 2018](#)). One troubling

<sup>87</sup> CSP Focus Group, November 2017.

<sup>88</sup> We would particularly like to thank Jenny Pearce for shaping our thinking on this point.

implication is the extent to which a high murder rate can develop its own logics and become stubbornly embedded once the initial trigger has subsided. However, context does not fully determine agency: during the Covid-19 pandemic, both the Muslims and Rasta City announced a precarious truce, contrasting, amid the lockdowns, their own perceived legitimacy as community institutions with that of state bodies, especially the police. But as competition over even-scarcer resources has since resumed, they have again fragmented with greater violence ensuing (SSA, 2021). Nonetheless, key conjunctural moments may induce positive, rather than negative, shifts: although gang socialisation is variable and volatile, intensified violence can be ameliorated (see Rodgers, 2017).

This only reinforces the need for deeper contextual engagement that reveals the micro-level functioning of the social order and significance of these distinctive entities, as well as more work on the conditions under which truces—for example—might be engendered and institutionalised (see Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016). One line of enquiry that we have not pursued explicitly here, but which is latent in our account, pertains to how violence is driven or suppressed by the extent to which gangs are organised (Durán-Martínez, 2018). Our objective was to counter what we saw as problematic arguments that foreground drug trafficking by explaining how patterns of gang formation in Trinidad intersected with a series of crucial local historical processes and increasing inflows of weapons. A different, but complementary, story could perhaps be told about the detailed organisational structures of the gangs themselves, although this would require further research and a different methodology that relies on gaining unimpeded access to gang leaders themselves.

We also offer a distinctive firearm-centric perspective on violence, adding original work on the subject in a region with a paucity of it. As Wallace (2022, pp. 2–4) argues, ‘there must be a renewed emphasis on improving gun violence research, especially in jurisdictions that are under-researched, under-resourced and lacking capacity’ because such scholarship finds itself ‘on the periphery and on the margins of knowledge production’. The Caribbean was, in fact, once described as ‘the periphery’s periphery’ (Payne & Sutton, 1984, p. viii). The relative lack of work on gun violence that centres not just the region itself (vis-à-vis the far bigger drug-producing and trafficking countries noted above), but Trinidad (vis-à-vis more heavily researched cases like Jamaica) and, crucially, the urban peripheries of that scholarly periphery where firearm killings actually predominate, represents a cavernous research gap. Existing criminological work has described what characterises gun violence in this space: gangs ‘rain fire’ on opponents; community centres are riddled with bullet holes; streets are deserted; people avoid ‘stray bullets’ by living at the rear of homes (see Adams et al., 2018, p. 12). Such detail is vital, but we require more analysis that uncovers the deeper political economy of *why* guns are there; *how* they have reformulated pre-existing modes of violence; and *what* they signify for the reproduction of the broader violence panorama. In partially filling these gaps, we add to those important—but rare—critical accounts that do increasingly emphasise analytically the constitutive effects of the ‘pistolization’ of society (Agozino et al., 2009; Young & Woodiwiss, 2019). There has *always* been a persistent threat from gangs in Trinidad, but it is only comparatively recently that it provoked mass homicide. So, something must have changed: the technology of violence, the weaponisation process it has unleashed, and the norms it reformulates, must be placed at the centre of analysis.

Finally, if drug trafficking is still misguidedly viewed as the ‘antecedent’ problem (Young & Woodiwiss, 2019), any policy diagnosis that flows from this will fail to assuage the homicide boom. The TTPS attribute just ten percent of murders to drug-related conflict (St Bernard, 2022), and many working in the country’s security services (our respondents) recognise the picture we have painted on their behalf. Yet much of the public debate in Trinidad and, crucially, that animating the global policy elite, still echoes the concerns of the scholarly mainstream. The contradictory UNODC (2019b, p. 98) quote in our introduction is instructive: it cast doubt on the link between narco-trafficking and

murders while asserting its unequivocal strength. Evidently, for bodies that are ontologically rooted in the preferences and prejudices of drug prohibition, following the evidence would bring them into conflict with powerful vested interests that have much at stake in positing the trade in cocaine—rather than its counterpart in weapons—as the primary concern. Yet it is inescapable that ‘fewer guns’ equal ‘less crime’ (Schneider, 2021). In conducting this research, it was striking just how often Trinidadian experts demurred from the official line. It is clear to them what is driving the bloodshed, and it is not a technical issue amenable to harsher militarised interventions.<sup>89</sup> These solutions—such as the 2011 SoE—nearly always target poor communities already traumatised by the absence of effective state provision of services and the dominance of gangsters. The existence of those actors is a secondary symptom of deeper governance and development failures, not the first-order problem that it initially appears, and which drives a problematic policy consensus.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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