FROM VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENCE:
GANGS AND 'HOMICIDE BOOMS' IN TRINIDAD AND BELIZE[1]

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Abstract

At the end of the 1990s gang driven homicide rates in Belize and Trinidad boomed and today remain amongst the highest in the world. That these homicide booms occurred as drug transhipments increased, makes casual connections between drugs and violence an intuitive and frequent assumption. This article argues that the role that drugs transhipment plays in sparking transitions to violence is often assumed and overstated, and alone is a weak predictor of violence. The comparative research presented finds that historic, chronic vulnerability in the poor neighbourhoods of eastern Port of Spain and southside Belize City played a defining role in the rise of street gangs; whilst increased lethality is directly attributable to inflows of firearms, which had different transhipment routes and political economies to drugs when homicide booms occurred. Ominously, once a violent street culture is established, it is resilient, guns stay, gangs evolve, and homicide levels persist.

Keywords: Gangs, Trinidad, Belize, homicide, drug transhipment, drug trafficking

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Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago has a population of 1.3 million - with 550,000 in the capital Port of Spain - and is located in the south-eastern Caribbean just seven nautical miles east of Venezuela. Belize has just 350,000 people - with 60,000 in Belize City - and is uniquely both Central American and Caribbean, bordering Mexico and Guatemala, with a long eastern coastline on the Caribbean Sea. Neither country, nor the rest of the Caribbean nations, had noticeably high homicide rates prior to the late 1990s, apart from Jamaica and Guyana, which have longer histories of political and social violence. What is striking about the Trinidadian and Belizean cases, is the vertiginous rise in homicide rates from 1999-2005 (see graphs). This occurred shortly after transnational drug trafficking flows began to be re-routed though these countries as Jamaica, the traditional thoroughfare, was squeezed by US enforcement agencies.

Countries in the Caribbean have been both suppliers and transhippers of illegal drugs, since the nigh romantic marijuana years of the 1960s and 70s. A number of these countries later became transhipment points for more nefarious cocaine trafficking from Andean South America, which first appeared as early as the 1980s, gaining traction in the early 1990s with the rise of the notorious Medellín and Cali cartels in Colombia. Trinidad and Belize are now recognised as important transhipment points (Townsend, 2009; Baird, 2019); the former has busy maritime trade links with the USA, Europe and west Africa (Reichel and Randa, 2018), the latter can be reached by speedboat from Colombia's north coast in a few hours, a midway point *en route* to the USA.

'Homicide boom' may sound sensationalist but reflects the dramatic transitions to violence in both countries at the turn of the millennium, since which the rates are regularly above 30 per 100,000 and show no signs of abating. 2018 was the second-bloodiest year in Trinidadian history (OSAC, 2019) and whilst UNODC statistics are only available up to 2017 in Belize, the national crime observatory measured sustained high homicide rates in 2018 and 2019, at 41 and 38 respectively (Belize Crime Observatory, 2020). Statistically, homicide in both countries are accounted for by increasing gang violence that concentrates amongst poor, black and brown, young men using firearms in eastern Port of Spain (PoS) and Southside Belize City. These rates are within touching distance of the highest in

the world, second only to the formidable *Northern Triangle* countries El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, and the politically tumultuous Venezuela (UNODC, 2019). Caribbean gang research has disproportionately focused on Jamaica, is more limited in Trinidad, and extremely rare in Belize.

Belize
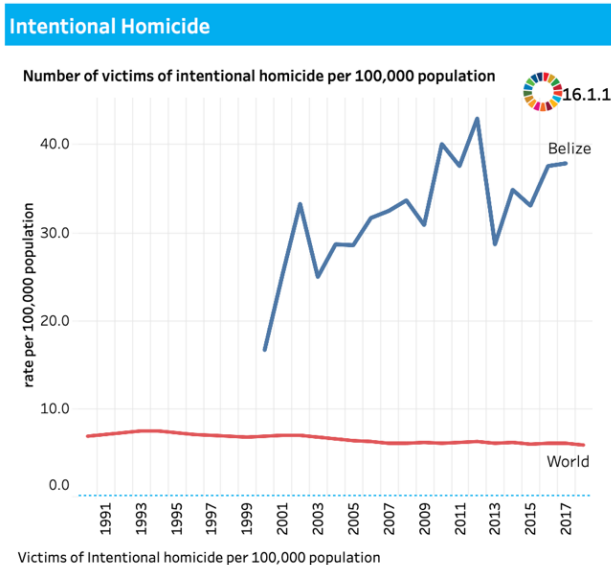
Trinidad
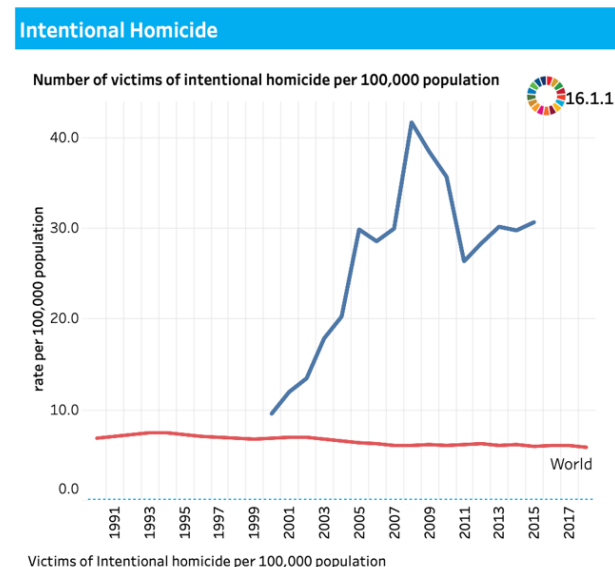
That these homicide booms occurred as drugs transhipment increased makes causal connections between drugs and violence an intuitive and frequent assumption (UNDP, 2012). Amongst the small island states, transhipment has been considered determinant of "Homicide trends in the Caribbean [which] have been influenced by violence associated with drug trafficking flows and concentrated in particular locations" (UNODC, 2019).

Categorising drugs as a security threat harks back to anachronistic 'war on drugs' policies originating in 1970s USA. This discourse influenced subsequent US foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Central America was conveniently rebranded by populist conservative regimes as the 'war on gangs' (Wolf, 2015; Dudley, 2020). Under US pressure, small island Caribbean states ratified the Vienna Convention on collaborative international laws against drugs in the region (Griffith, 1997), whilst Jamaica was identified a threat to the USA as *the* key transhipment route by security agencies in the US International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. However, situating drugs as a security threat decontextualized the factors that mediate their impact, for example, the religious

and recreational use of marijuana was not considered a social, let alone security problem, in many Caribbean nations beforehand. Young & Woodiwiss (2019) stated outright that US drug policies to the Caribbean small islands states were 'not fit for purpose' given local realities.

There is an excellent body of empirically grounded, contemporary research on gangs in the region showing that drugs, guns and gangs undoubtedly coalesce on the streets (Harriott and Katz, 2015; Rodgers and Baird, 2015; Edmonds, 2016; Deosaran, 2017; Wolf, 2017; Fontes, 2018; Gutierrez Rivera, Strønen and Ystanes, 2018; e.g. Bergmann, 2020; Evans and Jaffe, 2020). Yet, these studies tend not to ask probing questions about the role (or irrelevance) of 'drugs transhipment' in the genesis of gangs that today drive national homicide rates.

Knight (2019) describes a historically rooted susceptibility to violence in the Caribbean which "has become quite vulnerable to threats from illicit trafficking and transnational organised crime and to the concatenated violence that tends to accompany this type of transnational criminal activity. Transnational crimes such as drug trafficking, the trafficking in illegal guns… are usually accompanied domestically by increases in gangs, illicit drug trafficking, robberies, retaliation murders, rapes, and domestic violence. These expressions of violence cannot be treated independently; they are inter-related and mutually reinforcing" (2019, p. 414). Knight is right, yet orthodox in his approach, and the packaging together of transnational organised crime and violence would benefit from 'unpacking' and empirical examination.

If drugs transhipment, or more broadly transnational organised crime, is regionwide, why do certain social terrains spark into violence and not others? Should we conflate drugs transhipment and gun smuggling together when examining the impact on gang violence? If we objectively hold drugs responsible for gang violence are we simply contributing to the dominant 'war on drugs' discourse that has failed so spectacularly in the region? Focusing on the rise of gangs that drove the homicide booms in the early 2000s in eastern PoS and Southside should cast explanatory light on these questions.

This is not a polemic claiming that drugs and gang violence are not interconnected, rather that the role drugs transhipment plays in sparking transitions to violence is frequently misunderstood, assumptive and over-weighted. Drugs transhipment played a secondary, indirect role at best, in the establishment and rise of gang violence in Belize and Trinidad. One of the ambitions of this article is to address the emerging literature from multilateral agencies seeking to understand the implications

of 'fragility' of across context and local histories. In this case 'fragility' – later conceptualised as 'chronic vulnerability' - played a vital role in the homicide booms in Trinidad and Belize compared here. In 2018, the United Nations and World Bank released a joint report *Pathways to Peace* stressing the need to identify the different and intersecting dimensions of risk and fragility (2018). Various OECD *States of Fragility Reports* call for a multidimensional approach to understanding said phenomenon (2020), and the World Bank recently published its *Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020-2025* (2020), emphasising the importance of addressing drivers of fragility at a local contextual level, including historical perspectives, that adapt to distinct circumstances in conflict and violent settings.

There are far more consistent, determining factors than drug transhipment to account for homicide booms: The 'chronic vulnerability' of social terrains plays a defining role in where and why street gangs arise; whilst increased flows of guns and ammunition directly increase the lethal capacity required for 'homicide booms' to occur. Furthermore, gun smuggling does not necessarily share the same political economy as drugs transhipment networks. Gangs are destinations for guns and ammunition, and flows of drugs to the streets are fragile and unpredictable. This is partly because the vast majority of transhipped drugs actually avoid street gangs in Belize and Trinidad, on their way to more lucrative destination markets in the USA and Europe. Teasing out the distinctions within, rather than conflating, the processes and multiple political economies of transnational organised crime will provide a sharper explanation for the homicide booms in Trinidad and Belize.

This article begins by outlining the methodology used; then considers the roles played by chronic vulnerability and social terrain in the establishment of contemporary gangs; then underscores the importance of gang weaponization in rising violence; and, finally, cautions against making facile assumptions about drugs transhipment and homicide rates.

Methodological approach

This article draws from two separate research projects on gang violence in Belize City and PoS. These actually began with conformist hypotheses assuming the connectedness of drug transhipment and violence, which were later explored and problematised. These projects used qualitative, ethnographic tools, a rare approach to understanding 'transnational drug trafficking' more commonly studied from the interconnected disciplines of International Political Economy, Political Science and International Relations. This perspective put forward here is qualitatively grounded and sociological, seeking to

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interrogate the role played by community vulnerability and social terrain. Ethnographic methods were used to construct a layered understanding of violence generation from the local, to scrutinise the mediating factors that generate lethal violence, raising questions about the significance of 'drugs transhipment' in this process. The methodological approach has two defining aspects: First, it was developed *inductively* in response to *deductive* analyses which present transnational drug trafficking in prosaic terms as a cause of homicide. Second, to generate comparative knowledge. Charting 'homicide booms' that occurred at the same time in two different countries in the Caribbean is particularly unusual and is intended to shed light on the intersecting and divergent dimensions of violence, which may have potential ramifications beyond the borders of Trinidad and Belize.

Fine-grain empirical data from each individual project is unpacked in more detail in two dedicated articles (Baird, 2019; Baird, Bishop and Kerrigan, 2021). Briefly here, as sole researcher in Belize City, a body of empirical data was built cumulatively between 2011 and 2018, layering together several monthlong ethnographic revisits. Prior experience in 2011 of designing the Southside Youth Success gang violence reduction programme for the UNDP and the Ministry for Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation (Baird, 2011) established relationships across institutions and affected communities, essential to access and trust building with respondents given the sensitive nature of the research. In addition to interviews[3] with national experts and focus groups, informal conversations were conducted across the Southside district of the city with gang members and locals (on the precarity of gang research see Baird, 2018b). This included a jailed gang leader in Belize Central Prison; the leader of the first *Crips* gang from the early 1980s; and a serendipitous interview with a member of a powerful drug trafficking family who the author had met some years before in Central America.

Fieldwork in PoS took place between 2017 and 2019 conducted by a research team with three academic members, two of whom were based at the University of the West Indies, supported by a non-academic partner at a community organisation, himself a former gang member. A sociological interpretation was used to understand the connectedness between transnational organised crime and street gangs, drawing on community focus groups and interviews, and participant observation - including 'liming' (Nakhid-Chatoor *et al.*, 2018), a culturally appropriate way of hanging out and chatting with locals over a bottle of *Stag* beer or dram of *Angostura* rum. Spoken Word workshops were used as the major innovative method with young people from gang affected neighbourhoods. Similar to slam poetry or rap, these were culturally attuned sessions designed with our local partner,

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[3] All interviewees names are pseudonyms.

framed around a newly developed curriculum to promote discussion around gender – including masculinities – and neighbourhood violence. This component of the project was piloted to have a positive impact upon participants, and was subsequently evaluated and revised, contributing to the development of the program *Abyssinia: A Journey of Change* run by the NGO *The Roots Foundation[4]* later rolled out to hundreds of young people in Trinidad by (Kerrigan, 2019 explores this methodology in more detail). These methods were used to chart the shifting meanings of local violence in vulnerable 'social terrains' across eastern PoS including Laventille, St Barbs, Beetham and Sea Lots (also Baird, Bishop and Kerrigan, 2021).

In both cases, older community members and middle-aged former gang members were key informants precisely because they had lived through of the homicide booms in the early 2000s. This, alongside historical research studies in Trinidad (Oxaal, 1968; Lovelace, 1978; Craig, 1988; Reddock, 1994; Stuempfle, 1995; Brereton, 2010) and Belize (Bolland, 1997; Miller Matthei and Smith, 1998; Shoman, 2011; Warnecke-Berger, 2017) were central to constructing a trans-historical, longitudinal perspective of gang violence, which is exceptionally unusual (Rodgers, 2019 is a rare example of longitudinal gang research).

Chronic vulnerability and social terrain

The highest homicide rates in the Caribbean are consistently found in the poorest neighbourhoods of cities with significant gang populations, and occasionally in high crime downtown areas. A long list of scholars confirm this (Townsend, 2009; Bennett, 2017; Pawelz, 2018; Arciaga Young, 2019; Kerrigan, 2019; Evans and Jaffe, 2020), and Knight has connected Caribbean-wide, historic vulnerability to modern violence (2019). Here specific 'social terrains' within PoS and Belize City affected by trans-historical, thus accumulated forms of poverty, exclusion and oppression, are propitious sites for transitions to violence. That this is occurs within the urban margins so consistently infers a high propensity, a *vulnerability*, to violent turns. Arguing that particular social terrains are vulnerable to transition to violence is a significant claim which requires substantiation. Inspired by Jenny Pearce's three-dimensional notion of *chronic violence* (2007), developed as a policy concern by the late Tani Adams (2012) – *chronic vulnerability* is conceptualised as socially generated, historic impoverishment and exclusion that: i) concentrates at high levels (intensity), ii) in particular neighbourhoods (location specific), iii) across generations (enduring). Provocatively, this conceptualisation implies that 'chronic violence' is dependent on 'chronic vulnerability'. Of course, violence 'prevention' that focuses on affected populations is not new, however, this approach sets out

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[4] https://rootsfoundationtt.org/what-we-do/abyssinia/ (cited 16/11/2020).

to challenge simplistic yet dominant discourse that suggests drugs are an objective cause of violence. They are not. This supports theories of change that seek to tackle vulnerability as a means to reduce gang violence – a gang-centric interpretation of the United Nations and World Bank approaches to 'fragility' detailed above.

Eastern PoS and Southside Belize City have unique realities yet share a number of similar defining features that reflect chronic vulnerability. The communities where the research took place are both affected by histories of colonialism and slavery (Bolland, 1997; Kerrigan, 2016; Knight, 2019). Connectedness to the dehumanisation of black slaves and the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2000) meant that black populations emerged from slavery and indentureship into peri-urban yards comprised of informal wooden settlements that would become the poorest neighbourhoods of their respective capital cities (Belmopan only became Belize's administrative capital in 1961). Both countries are blighted by the failures of post-colonial development and later neo-liberalization that enhanced class inequality and elitism that is compounded across poor constituencies by high levels corrupt and clientelist governance practices that persist today (Shoman, 2011; Kerrigan, 2019; Baird, 2021).

In PoS one collection of neighbourhoods 'on the hill' known as Laventille, is an historically deprived area. It began as a squatter settlement for those escaping anti-black racism, later stigmatised and criminalised by the state following the end of colonial rule in 1962 (Trotman, 1986; Forde, 2018). Belize, a former British colony like Trinidad, has also been moulded by slavery and migration. Belize City, the largest settlement in the country divided in two by Haulover Creek, was flattened by Hurricane Hattie 1961. Already fragile livelihoods and poorly built housing south of the creek were easily destroyed. Sudden homelessness and destitution led to an exodus northward to the USA, where an estimated 30% of all Belizeans now reside (Vernon, 2000). Southside is not uniform and has substantial well-developed buildings towards the downtown swing-bridge area. However, the majority live in unplanned neighbourhoods such as Bacalan – back-of-land - marshlands behind the city, which resemble the Sea Lots neighbourhoods in portside PoS. Belize City continues to be characterized by failed development and political corruption. One local said that development initiatives were like 'pouring salt in the creek', washing away and coming to nothing (field diary, 2017). Whilst some areas on Southside have developed, the poorest neighbourhoods are still located there (UNICEF Belize, 2011). As one local exclaimed in frustration as we walked through a derelict part of Southside one evening *"No ting has changed here in 20 years. No ting!"* (May 2016).

Patterns of community violence in Trinidad and Belize are consequent of historic brutalisation, exclusion and abandonment. Scholars of coloniality have shown that violence in poor urban neighbourhoods always existed (Singh, 1984; Trotman, 1986; Brereton, 2010). Beckles (2003) observed that the origins of present-day Afro-Caribbean male violence can be traced back to exploitative colonial primitive accumulation where slavery conditioned Afro-Caribbean masculinity to adopt a patriarchal, sexist, and violent value system reflecting the white male planters themselves (also Pemberton and Joseph, 2018).

Violence later began to intensify in early 20th Century PoS as rural 'stickfighters' increasingly urbanised (Lovelace, 1978) and territorial Calypso steelpan bands began 'battles' during Carnival celebrations (Oxaal, 1968). It has been argued fighting between neighbourhood steelpan bands acted as a genesis point for gang structures (Neil, 1987), whilst others trace gang-like street organisations back to the 1970s (Seepersad 2013; Stuemplfe 1995). Violent local men in rudimentary street groups took on the moniker *Bad John* (Kerrigan, 2019), which evolved over the years into *Bad Man* and most recently *Zesser*.

Literature that discusses historical violence in Belize is extremely rare. One exception is Warnecke-Berger (2017) who identifies a trend in violence dating back to the 1950s when the homicide rate fluctuated around the 20 per 120,000 figure. Belize was very much a frontier nation during that period, with challenges to the rule of law and subjugation to an extractive colonial project. However, until the 1980s Southside did not have gangs to speak of, rather *Base Boys*, who would sell locally grown *Belizean Breeze* marijuana on street corners or 'bases' (Muhammad, 2015). *Base Boys*, like *Bad Johns* in Trinidad, were historically evolved, ever-present figures within marginalised communities, replaced by *Generals*, who in turn were replaced by *Shottas* of future gang generations.

Precarity and men's community violence have historical trajectories in eastern PoS and on Southside Belize City. These were the specific, vulnerable social terrains in which subsequent homicide booms occurred. Although vulnerability and men's violence are old, the homicide booms at the end of the 1990s represented a radical step change which requires explanation.

Contemporary gangs

Inception

As Lancaster astutely observed in Central America, *Life is Hard* in the urban margins (1992). The habitual struggle to make ends meet in Belize and Trinidad is often called *hustle*, or perhaps more

representatively a young Southsider said, *we grindin'* (interview, November 2016). This street-level term spans informal activities from the legal, and the legally opaque, to those more obviously connected to the opportunity structures of crime. Chronic vulnerability created fertile terrain for the sowing of modern gang identities in eastern PoS and Southside. As Gayle stated frankly, we should be wholly unsurprised present-day gang membership in Belize is dominated by poor young Creole men from Southside (2016, p. 192).

Gangs are 'organic', predominantly made up of young men operating in the communities they are from. They are complex and defy easy definition. Illicit street economies tend to coalesce around gangs (Bedoya, 2010; Cruz, 2014; Feltran, 2020), that can act as drug retailers, 'protection' service providers or arbiters of local disputes, to name but a few activities, whilst organising social and cultural activities such as street parties, football or basketball tournaments. Lines blur, and some locals perceive gangs as local Mayors or Sheriffs. In Sea Lots in PoS one young man called gang members 'Community Leaders' (Baird, Bishop and Kerrigan, 2021). As Pearlman noted some years ago in Rio's favelas, gang activities range from community predation to the socially constructive (Pearlman, 2010). Neither are gangs static; research shows that they can evolve into institutional structures in some places, yet splinter and disorganise in others. In a rare example, Brotherton and Gude have studied Ecuadorian experiences where the criminal and violent elements of gang activity were paired back by constructive state engagement, rendering the Latin Kings and Queens gangs as positive social structures for young people (2018, 2020). However, in Belize and Trinidad, the rapid numerical expansion of armed gang members pushed the homicide rate and was a socially corrosive experience. As one young man from eastern PoS summed up *'[before there was] jus' one Bad Man. Now is plenty Bad Man in one community!'* (focus group, March 2018).

In Trinidad in 1990 there was an Islamic coup attempt, the only in history in the western hemisphere. After the attempt failed many of the men involved and automatic weapons used found their way back into eastern PoS. Most of them were disaffected young black and brown men from urban margins who essentially 'went home' when the coup faltered. The 1980s and 1990s also saw changes in legislation in the USA which led to the deportation of many migrants from Latin America and Caribbean when they came into conflict with the law. Numerous incarcerated Trinidadians who had experience with armed crime were deported back to the capital. These were not middle-class professional Trinidadians, rather predominantly poor economic migrant men who subsequently returned to the poorer parts of PoS (expert interview A, 2018). By the early 2000s, the steelpan band battles and *Bad Johns* had been supplanted armed gangs that had "seen the power" of automatic

weapons first-hand during the coup (expert interview, 2018). Two dominant factions emerged: First, *The Muslims*, a group of gangs loosely affiliated through the ideology of the 1990 coup, followed swiftly by *Rasta City*, a group of gangs defined in oppositional terms to *The Muslims,* who themselves subsequently rebranded as *Muslim City*.

Belizean Creoles, and to a lesser extent Garifuna (Afro-indigenous) migrants joined African American majority *Bloods* and *Crips* (red and blue *colors* gangs) in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and beyond. Those who were incarcerated were deported for the first time as early as 1981, becoming pioneers of gang transnationalism as *Bloods* and *Crips* took root on Southside (Muhammad, 2015; Baird, 2019). There are no reliable figures for 1980s deportations, but some 1,122 individuals - almost all men – were sent back to Belize between 1992-2002 (Warnecke-Berger, 2019). *Angel* became the first leader of the Majestic Alley Crips in Belize City. He was deported in 1981 for his part in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles, the very year of Belizean independence. He was due to serve out his sentence in Belize Central Prison, but when he landed, he simply walked off the plane and took a bus to his auntie's house on Majestic Alley, Belize City, where he started the country's first *Crips* gang, unsurprisingly called the *Majestic Alley Crips* (Angel, May 2016).

In Trinidad and Belize, retreating coup members, criminal deportees and transnational gang culture from the USA encountered existing *Base Boys* and *Bad Man* connected to petty street crime and violence. These orders were quickly supplanted by *Muslim City* and *Rasta City* factions in PoS, and in Belize City by *Generals* 'Junie Balls' from the *Majestic Alley Crips* and 'Shiney' from the *George Street Bloods* (Muhammad, 2015, p. 169).

Social terrain was key in this process. Disenfranchised, poor, young, black and brown people were receptive interlocutors for imported *gangsta* culture or the power of the new automatic weapon wielding gangs. This has been framed in both countries and elsewhere in the region as 'masculine vulnerability', deliberately placing emphasis on the way gender intersects with excluded social terrains to make the gang stand out as a 'capital' laden site of success and possibility (Baird, 2012, 2019). As one lady on Southside remarked, *"boys look up to and idolise"* gangs (interview, May 2016).

There is a 'logic' to the way young men from vulnerable communities embrace emerging gang culture (Baird, 2018a). The 'cultural transfer' (Espagne, 1999) of rebellious black and brown *gangsta* identities from the USA, idolised on television and through rap and hip-hop music was a tonic for

"hostile and unfair" living conditions (Muhammad, 2015, p. 17), and young men and boys quickly "pledged allegiance" to the *Bloods* or *Crips* (youth worker interview, May 2016). Gang transnationalism was not pivotal in the Trinidadian case, yet the rebellious *Muslim* protagonists of the coup were a powerful masculine imaginary, contextually specific yet highly comparable to the transnational *gangsta* in Belize. *Muslim* versus the *Rasta* gangs, who emerged in response, are distinctly Trinidadian - *Trini* in local lexicon - and not a US cultural import, nonetheless the binary rivalry and federal organisation of these groups reflects the *Bloods* and *Crips* in Belize. Rivalry, competition and collective cultural identities enabled through federal organisation drove gang numbers skywards, whilst chronic vulnerability created fertile terrains that provided the human capital for gangs to establish and proliferate.

Weaponisation

Bad Johns, *Bad Man, Base Boys*, or steelpan band clashes existed in these cities prior to the *Bloods* and *Crips*, and *Muslim City* or *Rasta City*, but what made these latter gangs so much more homicidal than their predecessors? The short answer is firepower. Clearly gang numbers increased, however, more significantly the *capacity* for lethal violence multiplied. It is intuitive to think that drug transhipment carried guns along with it but, in reality, their trafficking routes are far from the same, and we should not assume that they share the same political economy, proliferation and socialisation processes.

Firearms first flowed into Trinidad from Grenada following the 1983 invasion by the USA, an event that provided both weapons and political stimulus for the 1990s Islamic coup attempt. There has traditionally been a trickle of guns from the USA smuggled in on yachts and small vessels, whilst recently guns have increasingly arrived from Venezuela to the west, where political turmoil has reconfigured trade in comic-tragic fashion where local fishermen are known to swap *'Kalashnikovs for toilet paper'* across a largely ungoverned maritime border (expert interview, 2016). There may be overlap with gun and drug smuggling networks and eventually the two coalesce around gangs on the streets, however, gun smuggling and drugs transhipment do not necessarily follow the same international networks. In Belize the vast majority of guns come through 'family connections' across the western border with a post-conflict, weapons-liquid, Guatemala, a completely different route from drug transhipment which comes across the Caribbean Sea to be transported overland to Mexico (according to various interviewees, May 2016; March 2017).

The *Bloods* and *Crips gangsta* culture was far more firearms-centric than the *Base Boy* predecessors. Likewise, the birth of *The Muslims* in PoS was a post-coup, weaponised delivery. This weaponised culture acted a centripetal draw on further guns from Guatemala into Belize, and Venezuela and the USA into Trinidad. Being located next to weapons rich countries, particularly those that are poor or unstable, facilitated firearms inflows.

Mothers who would previously break up fist fights on the streets outside their homes now stayed indoors, as weaponization meant power, allowing gangs extend their influence beyond street hustling, to diverse illegal economies. This process marked the end of *Base Boys* and *Bad Johns* as gangs created a new social order. They expanded into extortion in PoS, and in both cities co-opted municipal government contracts and acted as go-betweens for the clientelist practices of political parties (expert interview B, 2018). This manoeuvring allowed them reinforce their local hegemonic masculine status as self-styled 'community leaders' (Baird, Bishop and Kerrigan, 2021).

New generations of gang members in PoS and Southside were obliged to adopt firearms or lose control of illegal markets to competitors, leading to an acceleration of lethal violence described as an 'intensified ghettoization process' since the late 1990s (expert interview C, 2018). A police officer, who worked in eastern PoS, said that there was very little gang violence prior to this, but since then, eastern PoS has become awash with 'very powerful, powerful weapons [that] change everything' (interview, January 2017). In Belize, the introduction of guns was also transformative. A former *Crip* from the 1990s explained that fights at the local disco across swing-bridge with *Blood* rivals used to be with fists, sticks and machetes. In reference to the abovementioned 'centripetal pull' that the emerging gang culture had on guns, this quickly scaled-up to a shotgun stolen from a security guard, then 9mm pistols and a 357-barrel gun sourced from Guatemala (interviews, May 2016; March 2017). The result was a dramatic rise in deaths related *beefs* – street level disputes, spats, and tit-for-tat killings - between gang rivals. Guns made *beefs* more lethal. Currently, over 80% of homicides in Trinidad and Belize involve firearms (UNODC, 2019).

Weapons entering into communities tend to stay there for decades, and one gun can be passed around in PoS accumulating many murders (Sanatan, 2018). Interestingly, gangs themselves are not static, rather rapidly evolving, fragmenting, and 'culturally syncretic', that is, absorbing local norms and practices (Baird, 2021). Yet despite this fluidity, certain dynamics remain remarkably consistent – poor young black and brown men using guns continue to be the drivers of national homicide rates in Trinidad and Belize.

Gangs in eastern PoS and Southside expanded federally under *Muslim, Rasta, Blood* or *Crip* leadership, and strong gang leaders have been known to keep a lid on violence. However, rapid expansion in both cities also weakened these affiliations leading to fragmentation, infighting, and increased territorial disputes. *Muslim* City and *Rasta City* still exist in PoS, although individual gang distinctions are less clear cut than they once were. In recent years, in Belize City, *Blood* and *Crip* identities have faded to the background after the first *Generals* were killed by the police or rivals, and the federations splintered. One police officer flagged up *beefs* between ever smaller and more numerous gangs as the reason for sustained homicide rates (interview, November 2016). On Southside in 2008 there were over 30 gangs with 500 youth members, by 2015 gang membership had tripled to 1,500 as gang territories packed closer together (Haylock, 2013, p. 46; Peirce, 2017, p. 21). The mother of a gang leader in Majestic Alley spoke of increasingly cramped gang territories and that her son had been shot dead the week before for encroaching on a rival's turf (interview, March 2017). One gang member said that around his neighbourhood alone there were four gangs; Peace in the Village (AKA People in Violence), Bacalan Crips, Complex City Crips, and the Third World Bloods, estimating that half of young men in the area were in gangs (interview, May 2016). A 2019 IDB report lists a bewildering assortment of new gangs (Arciaga Young, 2019). Unsurprisingly, a local politician on Southside actually longed for the 'old days' when the *Generals* were in charge (interview, 2017).

In Trinidad, new incarnations of *Muslims* and *Rastas* are often called *Zessers* known for their violence; whereas in Belize they go by *Boss Man, Shottas* and *Strike Man*. Whilst a *Zesser* and a *Strike Man* are products of two distinct contexts, they resemble each other, versions of the aforementioned local hegemonic male icon. The homicide booms that occurred in PoS and on Southside were clearly driven by the increased firearms use of rapidly expanding, fragmenting, and competing gangs, that has created a durable, if unpredictable and often chaotic gang culture in each city. Chronic vulnerability in both settings underpinned these transitions to violence.

Drug transhipment and local gang violence
Drugs sales are a common component of street gang activity across the globe (Decker and Pyrooz, 2015b; Hanzen and Rodgers, 2015). Street gangs tend to operate locally, although some can participate in nationwide and even international trafficking. The distinction between 'gang' and 'organised crime' is a common tension in the criminological literature given the real world overlap that occurs between the two (Decker and Pyrooz, 2015a). Research on *commandos* in Rio de Janeiro

(Arias and Barnes, 2016) and *pandillas* in Medellín flag the centrality of local drugs sales (Duran-Martinez, 2015) as the 'goose that lays the golden eggs' of the gang economy and a mainstay of territorial disputes (Baird, 2018a). Yet for gangs in other cities such as the *PCC* in Sao Paulo or the *maras* in San Salvador, economic activities are more diverse, drugs being just one facet (Bergmann, 2020; Feltran, 2020).

In Managua Rodgers found gang based drug markets to be fragile and subject to boom and bust (Rodgers, 2018), and we should not assume drugs are consistent nor central in gang life in transhipment countries. Drugs existed on the streets long before the homicide booms in both PoS and Southside, being sold without any violence of note. Even the crack epidemic that arrived in Belize City in the 1980s ushering in a host of social problems, came and went before the homicide boom in the late 1990s (expert interview, November 2017). Drugs are not objectively violent yet can contribute to the competitive illicit street economies that gangs regulate with force. A shift in the *capacity* for violence, where adding firearms represents a dramatic technological step-up, means the regulation of drugs or any other illicit activity for that matter, become far more lethal.

On Southside, drugs are not central to the gang economy. Drug transhipment through Belize tends to involve current and former village fishermen and tightknit drug trafficking 'families' along the Caribbean coastline from San Pedro in the north to Punta Gorda in the south. A member of one of these families stated that trafficking routes are connected to influential spheres in the police, business and politics (anonymous, 2017). Drugs rarely take the maritime route into Belize City where the vast majority of street gangs are located. 'Wet-drop' cocaine bales are collected off-shore, passing unperceived through popular tourist resorts on their way up to Mexico (interview with magistrate in coastal town, 2016). This is a distinctly low-key, highly organised process connecting fishing 'families' to overland trafficking networks for shipment to Mexico, and accounts for the vast majority of drug transhipment in Belize. These clandestine networks deliberately avoid street gangs, generating no discernible violence.

In one popular tourist town on the coast, a community police officer stated that all 'local' drugs sales came from washed-up bales on the beach that had either been lost or jettisoned by traffickers fearing arrest. Significantly, the town was not targeted by these traffickers for sales. Arguably more drugs filter through to the streets of PoS, but it is not a priority destination for drugs transhipment, and the vast majority of drugs never make it 'onshore' on their way to the USA or Europe (expert interview, 2016). Shorty, a gang leader on remand for illegal firearms possession, confirmed that cocaine only

ended up on Southside when someone found a 'wet-drop' bale lost by traffickers, demonstrating that the routes, organisation and political economy of transhipment actively excludes gangs (interview, November 2016). He went on to say that most local gang members were lucky to make US$15 a day and never see profits from transhipment.

That fact that Shorty, a gang leader, was in prison for illegal firearms possession but did not sell trafficked cocaine on the streets, is empirical evidence of why we should not conflate the political economies of drugs transhipment and gun smuggling. The majority of drugs remain inside transhipment networks, which whilst not perfectly hermetic, tend to exclude gangs, passing overland through Belize or across the Trinidadian seas, literally, like ships in the night.

This implies that violence is terrain dependant, not drugs dependant. Any drugs that do find their way to gangs on the streets aggravate what is an already violent political economy. In the same interview Shorty said:

> *If you [find] a wet drop you take it to da man [sell it back into the clandestine trafficking networks], but if you get it wrong they'll com' an' kill you for it. So, you have to be smart, you can make money. But da first ting you do if you get some is keep yo' mouth shut. Da first ting I do with dope is buy a lot of guns. When I get dope, I've got five people, even some women, but five guns is five Shottas.*

Shorty was showing off and later admitted he was talking hypothetically. He had actually never come across a 'bale' of cocaine on Southside. Considering the data inductively, the connection between transhipment and gang-led homicide booms feels tangential at best.

In eastern PoS and Southside Belize City drugs transhipment and street gangs largely operate in separate spheres, the overlap being far less significant than orthodoxy suggests, given the overwhelming majority of transhipment circumvents the streets. The connection between drugs transhipment gang violence is indirect, or an aggravating factor, and should not be presented as the cause of the homicide booms in either country in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Conclusions

Drugs and gangs are of course interrelated, but the role drugs transhipment plays in sparking transitions to violence is frequently assumed and overstated. In Trinidad and Belize, drugs transhipment played an indirect or insignificant, rather than causal role, in the way violence epidemics began. As such, it is a weak predictor of violence. There are far more consistent predictors for homicide booms as comparative examination has shown, which are potentially transferrable to other

chronically vulnerable urban contexts that may be at risk of experiencing their own homicide booms. Ominously, once a violent street culture is established it is resilient, guns stay, gangs evolve, and homicide levels persist.

Referring back to the literature in the introduction from multilateral agencies about 'fragility'; chronic vulnerability in social terrains plays a defining role in the rise of street gangs, whilst increased lethality is directly attributable to inflows of firearms. Gun smuggling and drug transhipment should not be conflated into a transnational organised crime 'package' - their component parts should be scrutinised closely. Counterintuitively, drug transhipment networks are often at pains to avoid street gangs. In Belize and Trinidad, the connection between transhipment and the gang led homicide booms that began in the late 1990s feels tangential at best, and teasing out the distinctions and complex political economies of transnational organised crime will inform sharper policy responses to both transnational organised crime and local gang violence.

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