

The Fourth Corner of the Triangle : Gang transnationalism, fragmentation and evolution in Belize City

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The Fourth Corner of the Triangle: Gang transnationalism, fragmentation and evolution in Belize City

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Abstract

Belize is a small country of 350,000 inhabitants that is uniquely both Central American and Caribbean. The country has largely fallen under the radar of gang scholars, despite having one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Similar to neighbouring Northern Triangle countries it has been affected by 'gang transnationalism'. This chapter uses original empirical data to explore how Bloods and Crips from the USA flourished in Belize City in the 1980s, arguing that gang transnationalism makes cultural connections between local settings of urban exclusion, between origin and destination countries. Poor black and brown young men joined gangs contributing to a rise in street violence. Counterintuitively, homicide rates rose most dramatically as violence became *less* organised when Blood and Crip structures fragmented at the turn of the millennium, and the next generation of gangs emerged. The gang identities that followed are a culturally syncretic evolution of the Bloods and Crips, 'Creolising' over time, demonstrating the fluidity of post-transnational gang life.

Introduction

Belize has one of the highest homicide rates in the world, however the gangs at the heart of this violence have rarely been studied. This chapter uses empirical data to explore how Blood and Crip 'gang transnationalism' from the USA flourished in Belize City beginning in the early 1980s. It is

argued that gang transnationalism makes cultural connections between local settings of urban exclusion between origin and destination countries. Terrains of exclusion in Southside Belize City made the foreign gang appealing as an identity package driving poor black and brown youths to join up. The establishment of gang practices then led to a marked rise of street violence. Counterintuitively, homicide rates rose most dramatically as violence became *less* organised when the Blood and Crip structures began to fragment at the turn of the millennium, and new generation of gangs emerged. The new gang identities were a culturally syncretic evolution of the Bloods and Crips, 'Creolising' over time, demonstrating the fluidity of post-transnational gang life.

Belize is a small country of 350,000 people on the Caribbean Sea best known as a tourist idyll. It shares borders with Mexico and Guatemala and is unique being both Central American and Caribbean. Belize is also a young nation, formerly British Honduras only gaining full independence 1981. Below the Haulover Creek that bisects Belize City and its 65,000 inhabitants, Southside is comprised of some reasonably constructed and many dilapidated neighbourhoods located on unforgiving marshlands. Southside, and one notorious downtown street called Majestic Alley, have played host to gang violence since the 1980s. National murder rates reached 45 per 100,000 in 2017 making Belize one of the most violent countries in the world, comparable to its country neighbours (Peirce 2017), and Gayle et al have argued that violence and trauma is higher amongst boys in Belize City than anywhere else in the Caribbean (2010). Murders are driven by gangs in Southside, popularised by Ross Kemp's documentary on gangs in 2008. Belize is a country characterised by elitism and inequality, and residents south of the creek have long been at the bottom of the country's socio-economic strata. 31% of households across Belize are poor and on Southside over half of the heads of household do not have a job (UNICEF Belize 2011: 37). The country has decidedly mixed heritage, with sizeable Mayan, Spanish, Mestizo, and Garifuna (Afro-Indigenous)

populations. The Creole minority of African descent makes up 15% of the national population but accounts for the majority of Southside's residents. It is therefore unsurprising as Gayle says, that the majority of gang members there are black and brown (2016, p. 192). The overwhelming majority of academic attention to gangs in the region is focused on the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Belize is the forgotten fourth corner of the triangle.

Baird (2019) and Gayle (2010; 2016) are the only international scholars to publish on violence in Belize using primary data with gang members themselves, and only Baird has focused on Blood and Crip transnationalism per se. The transnationalism literature tends to refer to US – *mara* deportation experiences to Central America during the 1990s (e.g. Berg and Carranza 2018; Cruz 2014; Zilberg 2011). Gangs are generally seen as socio-cultural forms of street level youth associations lacking any clear transnational criminal structure (Brotherton and Gude 2018; Cerbino and Rodríguez 2008; Roks and Densley 2019). Critically, transnational gangs depend upon vulnerable terrains to insert themselves into. They tend to arise as a diaspora in marginalised contexts organised by transnational gang members or local disaffected youths that aspire to gang membership (Rodgers and Baird 2015). Literature on Blood and Crip transnationalism is particularly sparse. Exceptions in the Americas include Flores, Gemert, Hagedorn, (2009; 2001; 2008; 2014), Roks & Densley in Europe (2017; 2019) and Johns in Australia (2014). In the Belizean case only Miller Matthei & Smith (1998) have considered Bloods and Crips specifically, although this research occurred before the dramatic rise in gang violence.

This chapter divided into four sections. A methodological overview is followed by three analytical sections on Gang Transnationalism, Gang Fragmentation, and Gang Evolution in Belize City.

Methodology

The fieldwork was built cumulatively by layering together three to four weeks ethnographic revisits to Belize between 2011 and 2018¹. This is not an unusual approach to fieldwork for post-PhD academics with numerous commitments. However, the author's prior experience of designing the Southside Youth Success Programme in 2011, a gang intervention project run in collaboration with UNDP and a national ministry (Baird 2011), created a bedrock of relationships with individuals across institutions and Southside communities, which were crucial in gaining the access and trust from respondents that are essential to researching sensitive issues around gangs, crime, and violence.

Interviews were conducted with twelve gang members; eight participants in gang intervention programs; a local rapper and dancehall singer; the wife a murdered gang leader; an individual from a powerful drug trafficking family; four focus groups on Southside; and numerous informal conversations with local inhabitants. Beyond the streets, over fifty expert interviews were conducted across national and international institutions (see also Baird 2019b).

The methodology included time spent on the streets with gangs, in youth detention centres, and Belize Central Prison, called 'da pisshouse' by locals. Whilst potentially hazardous, this was mitigated through the use of gatekeepers, including; a local Iman to enter the prison, a well-liked youth worker who helped conduct impromptu interviews on Southside, and a politician conducting ceasefire negotiations with gangs who arranged meetings with them at her office. The author's experience of gang research in the region also provided a foundation of 'ethnographic safety', an

¹ The author acknowledges the important role played by the British Academy, Leverhulme Trust, and Coventry University in funding the research; further thanks UNDP Belize and the University of Belize for sponsoring a Masculinities and Violence conference held in Belmopan, March 2018, to disseminate and discuss the research findings.

intuitive understanding of the rules of the game around street violence which helped mitigate risks (Baird 2009, 2018b, 2019a). However, risks cannot be mitigated entirely; I witnessed an attempted murder / suicide, was questioned about my business on the streets by a boy who I was later told was an informant for the local gang, and was told not to ask questions about drug trafficking in one coastal town as someone was recently disappeared - bar a severed finger with the wedding ring still attached - for doing something similar.

Gang transnationalism as cultural transfer

First Bloods and Crips

In 1961 Hurricane Hattie flattened Belize City prompting a significant exodus north. By the year 2000 approximately 30% of the entire population resided in the US (Vernon 2000). This newfound diaspora stateside provided the populous for later deportations of Blood and Crip gang members back to Belize City and the genesis point of a national gang culture.

Whilst Belize reflects the *mara* deportation experience of gang transnationalism, this process intuitively coalesces along ethnic and language lines. The black and brown Creole and Garifuna migrants that joined gangs in the US understandably gravitated towards the English-speaking African American Bloods and Crips, not the Latino *maras*. Of note, the Bloods and Crips arrived in Belize as early as 1981, arguably making them the first experience of gang transnationalism in the entire region. There are no figures for 1980s deportations but over a decade between 1992-2002 there were 1,122 deportees, many of these coming back to Southside (Warnecke-Berger, 2019).

The first wave of Bloods and Crips encountered a nascent democracy with limited institutional capacity to enforce the Rule of Law. Angel, who was deported from Los Angeles in 1981 was due to serve the remainder of his sentence in Belize, he went on to become the first leader of the Majestic Alley Crips. His narrative reflects the early days of Americanised gang culture on the streets (20/05/2016)²:

I cum home. I have my aunty here in Belize City... in Majestic Alley. Firs' we were selling weed, crack-cocaine hadn't even touched Belize. I started selling and jus doin hustling, whateva, just to mek a buck. Dere weren't gangs den, jus' guys who hang out and try to hustle. Dere weren't really any guns, we use to chase our enemies wid stick and machete, you know. Only lik de big people would have guns. Da cocaine came in lik di 85. Da firs man dat talk big, I shoot in his chest.

Yeah, more money, more bigger you get. Den man come to trade gun for crack, gun for weed. So, ah sell weed, but if ah have no army, man tek it away. Ah used to pack a 9mm and a 357, that's a barrel gun, it sound like a bomb explode, so everybody respec' you. *Dat's a Big Man gun y'know!* My friend he started acting real gangster, de way America does it, you know. He's de one dat decide dat Majestic Alley would be blue [Crip], and anyting over swing bridge, dat's Red [Blood], yeah, in 87, 88. We use to fight at da local disco, if you from over the bridge, we pick a fight with you, wid knife and machete. Dey were serious fights, but not really wid guns... We go an kidnap the watchman, and took his 16 [gauge shotgun] and cut di barrel shaft, we call it *sawdaff* [sawn-off], you could stick it in your side, you run up into your enemy and you jus bus it and run off.

Marijuana has been smoked on Southside for generations, long before the Bloods and Crips emerged. 'Base Boys' used to sell it on the streets, and whilst they were 'hustlers' they were not known for violence and had no guns. However, the new colors gangs quickly absorbed the Base Boys as two principle factions developed; the Majestic Alley Crips and the George Street Bloods. Early Bloods and Crips quickly gained influence beyond the Base Boys and numerous young men began to pledge allegiance to them. Carlos (11/05/2016) a former gang member from the late 1980s explained that the new gang leaders were proactive, distributing Blue or Red rags and

² Quotations from interviews have been written phonetically where the interviewees spoke with a pronounced Creole accent. These tended to be young people and gang members, whilst expert interviewees would typically 'lighten their tongue' or 'speak American' for the benefit of foreigners.

bandanas, and handing out money and weapons to 'protect' gang members from the rivals that ironically, they had discursively created on the streets.

Successful gang leaders rapidly embedded on Southside. George 'Junie Balls' McKenzie a Crip from Majestic Alley, and later 'Shiney' from George Street Bloods (Muhammad 2015:169) became folkloric characters known as *Generals* in their communities. The meteoric rise of the Blood and Crip prototypes became the masculine standard bearer for young Creole success on the streets, where the *Generals* and their gunmen - *shottas* - became iconic, hyper-visible, and aspirational figures (Baird 2019).

Whilst this chapter does not go into depth about role of politics in the development of Belizean gangs, clientelist practices facilitated the growth of gang structures in the urban periphery. Bolland and Shoman (1997; 2011) highlight the role of clientelism in the emergence of the two major parties in Belize; the United Democratic Party (UDP) and the People's National Party (PNP). Many locals, experts, and gang members themselves referred to historical and contemporary clientelist relationships across Southside during the fieldwork. Political parties used *Generals* from the two main factions, the George Street Bloods and the Majestic Alley Crips, to provide them with authority and legitimacy on the streets (Bill 15/11/2017; Muhammad, 2015, p. 71). Furthermore, whilst early George Street and Majestic Alley violence clearly existed, the leadership, structure and discipline of these factions largely kept a lid on homicidal gang violence which reached a relatively low 17:100,000 in 2000 (UNODC 2019, https://dataunodc.un.org/GSH_app). This will become relevant later in the chapter when the homicide boom is explained as 'disorganised violence'.

Cultural transfer

'Cultural vulnerability' as outlined and critiqued by Tomlinson suggests that "Cultures in the West, specifically, the United States saw a standardized version of their cultures exported worldwide, the 'weaker' cultures of the developing world that have been most threatened. Thus, the economic vulnerability of these non-western cultures is assumed to be matched by a cultural vulnerability" (2003). Furthermore, Tomlinson (2003), Espange (1985, 2001), and Greenblatt (2009) state that whilst some are more hegemonic than others, cultures do not actually obliterate each other, rather, forms of 'cultural transfer' occur where they morph and change in complex ways. Certainly, the modern identity of Belize has been moulded by colonialism and migration. One local academic lamented "We have been taught to embrace and value the foreign more than our own history. Even Jesus is foreign!" (Raul 15/11/2017). A confluence of historic, cultural and socio-economic circumstances on Southside contributed to a propensity amongst a number of youths to "embrace that [US] ghetto culture... because Creole culture is not held sacred. Young gang members have no recollection of history" (Raul 15/11/2017).

Evoking Espange's notion of 'cultural transfer' (1999), US gangs represented a rebellious black youth identity that transposed fluidly into Belize City's urban margins. This was observed by local scholar Nuri Muhammad who stated that the media images of the *Boys 'n the Hood* gangster from Los Angeles became the cultural signifier for Belizean gang activity: "We were trying to imitate what we saw at the street level. To get their money, have parties, bring all the money out, all the girls out... it would imitate those aspects of the culture, because it was what was in front of us" (2015:16).

The social terrain into which gangs insert themselves has deliberately been termed 'vulnerable'. This is not to justify consequent acts of gang violence, rather, this serves in part explanation as to why young men did not join gangs from the wealthier neighbourhoods on Northside. It also points to

the critical role that recipient social terrains play in gang transnationalism. One government worker stated bluntly that on Southside “People feel that destitution is their fate, they don’t have hope, they don’t trust governance, they can’t find the motivation to escape” (Papa 05/11/2016). This was reflected by a Southside youth worker who angrily lamented when asked why young people join gangs that “Dere ain’t nutin’ fa yout to do roun’ here, jus smoke, drink an’ fuck” (10/10/2016). Two young men struggling to get out of Southside poverty said that in their music videos they “show the real gutter on Southside, people livin’ in the street, garbage, homeless people... We just show what’s the general feeling of shit. This is still a beautiful country when you go out of the city, but it’s crazy here, so we show what is real of most people’s everyday life.” (16/11/2016).

Vulnerable terrains are also gendered. Belizean ‘gang transnationalism’ can be understood as a ‘transnational masculinity’ that makes cultural connections between local settings of urban exclusion; i.e. from South Central to Southside (Baird 2019). Multiple and historic marginality in Belize City generated masculine vulnerabilities to the foreign gang as an identity package with the power to reconfigure positions of subordination. The intersection of gender, class, and race allowing *OGs* and *Homeboys* to transpose with cultural fluidity into Belize’s urban margins precisely because their departure and destination social terrains share subordinations. Therefore, understanding the terrains into which Bloods and Crips inserted themselves is pivotal to understanding how gangs relocated from the US. The iconic figure of the disenfranchised young black man striking back at structural violence was a compelling symbol in a post-colonial Belize with a tendency to venerate US culture.

Gang Fragmentation and the disorganisation of violence

JK: It’s not like when [gangs] first came to Belize, in past years you

can be on da same block, now they're beefin'.

Messiah: People still say I'm Red or I'm Blue, but I'm not Red to a point that when I see a nigga that's Blue I'm about to spray that nigga [with bullets]. It is to an extent about territory, but it's not too much about you moving into my territory and taking my money. Some niggas be killin' niggas over a bitch and shit. An' then the two niggas that was fightin' over dis girl just end up havin' a bunch of niggas - that's they're squad - you see what I mean, and when they see them niggaz (punches fist into hand to indicate a fight). And that goes on for years and years and years, until the origin of the beef is even unknown... And the guns that is out there is big guns, nigga.

JK and Messiah, a rapper and dancehall singer respectively, from Southside (08/11/2016)

By the early 1990s gangs were being taken seriously by authorities. In 1991 a Crimes Commission was set up to create legislation responding to growing public concern around the gang phenomenon. Responses included *mano dura* type crackdowns, representing clear dissonance with clientelist forms of gang engagement, and for the first time in the country's history the Belizean Defence Force was deployed to the streets (Miller Matthei and Smith 1998), although present day responses are led by the notorious Gang Suppression Unit.

By the mid-2000s, some two decades after the Bloods and Crips first appeared in Belize, one might assume that the increasing gang organisation and disputes over drug turf would drive the homicide rate. However, unlike the progressive institutionalisation of the Shower Posse in Jamaica, *maras* in Central America, *pandillas* Medellin, or *comandos* in Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo, Belizean gangs actually went through a process of rapid fragmentation at the turn of the millennium. Certainly, the gang suppression strategy of the 1990s had destabilised gangs by dislodging the *Generals*, contributing to the splintering and the George Street - Majestic Alley duopoly in the city. As Jabaar said "Back in de day, dey [police] started killing off de heads [*Generals*] because dey wuz able to be identified. So, widout heads de gang situation basically jus' got outta hand, cuz de killers

are now 17 and 18 years old. New leaders fight for dis position” (11/05/2016). The field dairy entry below highlights gang factions:

With my two gatekeepers, we stopped by Majestic Alley. The wife of a murdered Crip leader said that gang truces don't work because there's always disrespect between gang members on opposite turfs, so it escalates, and all kicks off again. She had a demeanour about her that was overwhelmingly sad, of a woman in mourning. Her husband was murdered in 2007, and they just killed her son. 'They killed my baby' she said, only three months ago as he took over the Majestic Alley gang. She said the police let the rival gang through so they could get rid of him. The rival gang was called 'Jungle'... yet another new gang splinter. The sad thing was that she was taking care of her one-year old granddaughter, right there on the street in a little push-bike for babies. That was her son's daughter. My gatekeeper got nervous as people started asking questions about me, so we wrapped up the conversation and jumped back in the van. My gatekeeper then said that George Street [gang] was splitting apart too' (Field Diary, 16/11/2016).

The structural fragmentation of gangs galvanised a 'disorganised violence' of the streets, to the extent that the very notion of 'turf' has become blurred. One civil servant working in a youth programme said that young people on Southside are increasingly confused about gang territories (Shirley 18/05/2016), and Vartas the leader of the PIV gang (*People in Violence* AKA *Peace in the Village*) confirmed this saying remarkably, that he wasn't even sure who the leader of the neighbouring George Street gang was (18/05/2016). A senior police officer on Southside (15/11/2016) said:

George Street has at least eight subsidiaries to it, and each have their own leader. They fight under George Street still, but not everything they do is under control of the leader of George Street. The inter-gang rivalries are the most difficult to police, you never know who is who, and because of the small geographical area in which they operate it is difficult to police them. Most of the gangs begin to fragment after the main leader die.

Author: George Street was Pinky then Shiney [Generals, both murdered]?

Police officer: So, after Shiney dead, there is a fight over who will be the next leader. Others [names three] are proclaiming to be leaders of George Street... After Pinky died, George Street disputes started and some went with Shiney and some with X [another gang leader]

Author: What's the violence about?

Police officer: Most of them don't know what they are fighting for. It's just that they grow up in an area, and they know that this area have an issue with that area. We have also found that much of the violence is driven by hate and anger. They hate this man because of this or that. And we find that they get upset very easily. They think that the easiest way to resolve a conflict is with the use of a gun.

Author: So how organised are gangs?

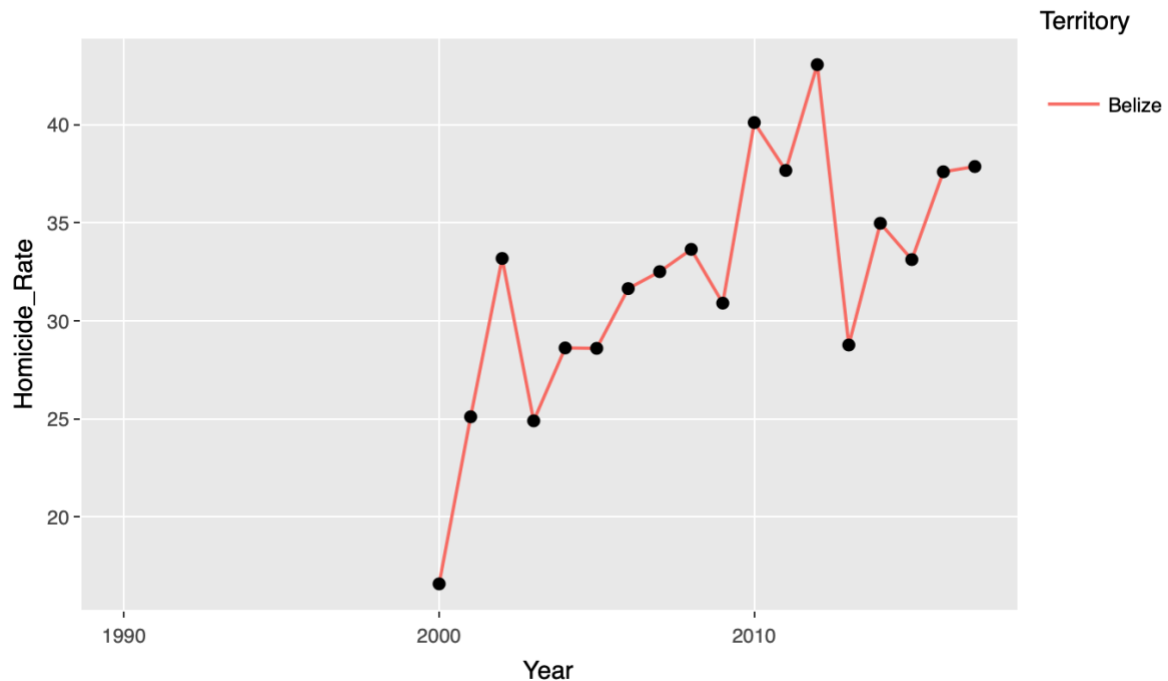
Police officer: Structurally, I don't think that they're properly organised, but they are to the extent that they can become effective [lethal violence]. Weapons come in from Guatemala, the same routes as marijuana. Gang members [aren't rich] like Jamaica! Belizean gangs are poor. The money that they make from the sale of drugs, it's like day-to-day.

In short, gang violence has risen whilst gang institutionalisation has gone backwards over the last two decades. Despite spanning some four decades, gangs in Belize are currently very much at the margins of organised crime and transnational drug trafficking networks. Although gangs sold crack-cocaine in the late 1980s, Shorty, a jailed gang leader, said nowadays cocaine only ended up on Southside when someone found a bale jettisoned by traffickers washed up at the beach, and that a gang member probably averaged US\$15 income on a good day (19/11/2016). This was corroborated during an interview with a member of a significant drug trafficking family from the coast who said their clandestine networks deliberately avoided street gangs (interview, 22/05/2016). This is not to say that gangs do not sell drugs on the streets, but that they are not international traffickers, and that turf wars over drugs are considerably less than in other gang affected cities in the region.

Whilst gangs themselves are not embedded in organised crime and transnational drug trafficking largely passes them by, they have become increasingly well-armed with weapons filtering across the border through Belizeans with family members in Guatemala. During the fieldwork it became clear that murders between gang members were predominantly small-scale *beefs*. Belize City is a small town and rapidly splintering gangs

have meant that there are numerous micro-level beefs that drive the homicide rate.

Time Series Chart



Source: https://dataunodc.un.org/GSH_app, cited 07/10/2019

Murder rates rose from 9 per 100,000 in 1995, to 17 in 2000, to 30 in 2006, and 45 in 2017 (Peirce 2017; UNODC 2019). In the Belize District (Belize City and environs) the homicide rate in 2018 was 78 (Belize Crime Observatory 2019). By 2008 there were over 30 gangs in Belize City with 500 youth members, and in 2015 gang membership had tripled to 1,500 as gang territories packed closer together (Haylock, 2013, p. 46; Peirce, 2017, p. 21). One gang member said that in his neighbourhood alone there were four gangs; Peace in the Village, Bacalan (Back-of-land) Crips, the Complex City Crips, and the Third World Bloods, estimating that half of all young males in the area were in gangs (Smalls 12/05/2016). Even gangs in tiny territories suffer from internecine conflict. Shorty, a jailed gang member said "Now Vartas and Driver [both from PIV] hate each other, like I said, it's a dog-eat-dog world" (19/11/2016). As one civil servant stated, violence has become so splintered and anomic that he refers to it as "interpersonal

violence at a gang level” (9/11/2017). A 2019 report by the IDB lists this myriad of new gangs:

TABLE 8. ACTIVE GANGS IN BELIZE CITY BY AGE AND MEMBERSHIP

Gang Name	Age			Membership	
	Youngest	Oldest	Average	Low	High
Peace in the Valley Bloods	12	40	26	100	200
South Side Gang (Crips)	12	40	26	90	100
Gaza New Generation Bloods	11	19	15	70	90
Ghost Town/Banak Crips	11	45	28	60	70
George Street Bloods	18	45	31.5	40	50
Majestic Ally Crip	12	45	28.5	25	50
Jane Usher Bloods	12	40	26	35	45
Supal Street Bloods	12	40	26	30	40
Jungle Bloods	12	40	26	20	40
West-Molan (Taylors Alley) Bloods	12	35	23.5	30	40
Louise Bevans Crips	14	35	24.5	30	40
Antelope Street Bloods	14	40	27	20	35
Victoria Street Bloods	12	40	26	18	35
Jump Street Crips	14	40	27	15	35
Lacroix Blvd Bloods	12	39	25.5	20	35
Back-a-Town Bloods	14	45	29.5	20	30
Back-a-Lands Crips	14	45	29.5	20	30
Kelly Street Crips	12	40	26	20	30
Kraal Road Crips	13	40	26.5	20	30
Police Street Crips	14	38	26	30	30
Conch Shell Bloods	14	35	24.5	25	30
Gill Street Bloods	13	35	24	20	30
Plum Tree Bloods	14	35	24.5	20	25
Amara Street Bloods	14	35	24.5	20	25
Kings Park Crips	18	40	29	15	20
Rocky Road Crips	17	35	26	15	20
103 New Road Bloods	12	30	21	15	20
Riverside Boys	12	20	16	15	20
Jerusalem Crips	12	45	28.5	10	15
Afghanistan Bloods	14	35	24.5	10	15
102 (Parham) Crips	18	35	26.5	10	15
Belama (Riverside Bloods)	15	35	25	10	15
Simon Lamb Street Crips	20	35	27.5	10	15
Neals Penn Road (Gaza) Bloods	15	35	25	10	15
Sunset Crips	14	35	24.5	10	15
Horse and Carriage Blood	12	35	23.5	10	15
Average	13.6	37.4	Total	938	1,365

Source: Conscious Youth Development Programme.

Gangs are now broadly acknowledged to be disorganised with fast-flowing ephemeral membership, a far cry from the early days of the *Generals*, when

civil servant Shirley said tellingly “gangs used to be more social, now dey jus’ crazy” (Shirley, 18/05/2016).

Gang Evolution

Messiah and JK were two young men from Southside. They were aspiring musicians, but still flitted in and out of gangs and hustled on the corner. JK had recently been involved in a shoot-out, but he said that the police let him off the hook because they knew he was trying to get out of gang-life and into music. For a poor Southsider, JK had the latest smart phone which raised questions. Only after the voice recorded interview had finished did he admit that a wealthy older lady had ‘given’ it to him, euphemistically referring to sex work. That morning I asked Messiah if he could fix a meeting with some Southside gang members and he later left me a WhatsApp message (15/11/2016) saying (verbatim):

Yo! We’re right over here chillin’ nigga. Let me see if I could fuckin’ get them niggaz [gang members] together probably for Thursday [for an interview]. I’ll see, I’m not sure I could do it. We’ll see wud’up, and if everyting come tru I’m gonna holla at’you, and then we’ll scoop you up and then, you just put gas in the car, and I’ll take you over there.

Though it is hard to translate forms of speech to the page, Messiah, a born and bred Southsider, used a strong US gangsta lexicon and accent undoubtedly key to his rapper persona and in much of his public life. It was striking the way he absorbed US gangsta identity so readily, whilst JK had done the same, but had taken on a ‘dancehall’ Jamaican persona. This cultural transfer of highly regarded gangsta and dancehall identities was a way of resisting the pernicious effects of multiple marginality and the threat of emasculation, through the emphatic assertion of an Americanised or Jamaican black masculinity.

This is dissimilar to Johns depiction of the ‘blackness’ of pacific islander gangs in Australia as a rebellion against white male hegemony (Johns

2014: 301). Rather in Belize, the male Creole population curiously represents society's extremes; the nation's political and business elites are Creole men. Ergo, the assertion of gang masculinity was an accessible way for these youths to establish a identity and self-esteem in response to structural constraints on Southside (for an extended debate on gangs and male inclusion in Belize see Gayle et. al 2016, and Baird 2019).

However, gang transnationalism in Belize did not represent the wholesale transfer of a cultural template. It has been a process of local adaptation. This is an empirical inflection Nayak's (2003) reasoning that flows of global culture produce hybrid youth identities. Gang members in Belize do not simply imitate foreign gang culture, rather they absorb and interpret it to negotiate the harsh realities of everyday life.

Given the complexity of overlapping cultures in Belize, which Beske states is hybridised, Creolised and Mestizosied (2016: 64), when Blood and Crip gang culture arrived it immediately began a dialectic process of cultural negotiation, whereby gang identities became creolized. Syncretic gang identities have been detailed in other contexts in the evolution of cultural-linguistic differentiation between English and Spanish speaking Latina gangs in California by Mendoza-Denton (2008), and Brotherton and Barrios have charted the profound change of Latin King and Queen gangs from violent gang to social movement in New York city (2004). Messiah and JK above, are expressions of this type of malleability and cultural hybridity on the streets. Muhammed (2015: 16-17) states:

Gangs are both foreign and local in origin at the same time. Foreign in the sense that media images of the gangster in the 1980s and 1990s were the black youth of Los Angeles... Whilst these images were foreign in style, there were socio-economic and historical conditions for our own crop of gang activity. In Belize today we see more than the imitation of a foreign culture, we see the creations of [gang members] with their own set of values and definitions of what society is about and what means they will use to survive in a social environment they view as increasingly hostile and unfair. They lost hope and as a result became rebellious to the status quo.

Blood and Crip identities adopted on the streets in the 1980s have gone through culturally syncretic process. Although present day gangs still bear remnants of US gangsta culture seen in the ongoing use of red or blue 'rags' and imported Dickies trousers, the influence of the Bloods and Crips as an organisational structure has been eroded over the last two decades. As Vartas, the leader of PIV said, "Bloods and Crips don' matter no more" (18/05/2016).

Belizean gang identities not only conflate with local culture, they continue to draw upon foreign influences. Now street culture looks less to US *gangsta* iconography and more to Jamaican *rude boy* identities and music. As JK said, "LA go first, den it change to da new modern set up. You know da youths they change a lot, dey wearin' different clothes, you know da Jamaica mix. So dey still wear some American clothes, but dey have a Jamaican mix, Jamaican stylin', you know" (08/11/2016). Gang names are now copied from Kingston:

Tiger: People look up to George Street as de main gang, 'coz dey get de name Gaza from de gang in Jamaica.

Author: So, George Street just took the name Gaza from Jamaica?

Tiger: Gaza! Dey jus' tek da name from Jamaica. Dey just call the gang Gaza. So, everybody look up to Gaza as de main gang, dey got the most gang members, dey're de biggest gang down dere, dey got more weapons (Tiger 11/11/2016).

It is interesting to note Southside gangs are not only territorially fluid and in constant flux, they are also culturally morphic. Despite this fluidity however, original Blood and Crip structures in Belize City established a lasting set of social practices perceivable in contemporary gangs; the aesthetics of language, the pose, the cars, or gold chains, and the symbolic *shotta* notoriety and fear, sexual access to women, street parties, drinking and drug-taking, and of course, propensity to use violence. This has been observed in previous gang research as a form of street 'capital', performed to a ghetto audience to acquire meaning (Baird 2018a; Fraser 2013; Sandberg 2008). These displays are a version of hegemonic masculine localism, a set of socially and culturally adaptable and relational notions,

practices and displays, performed under specific social and economic conditions. It has been argued that despite the fluidity of contemporary gangs in Belize City, there is continuity to the hegemonic masculine language of their social practices, including violence (Baird 2019). Here, the iconic male *Generals* have been replicated intergenerationally by *Big Men*, *Boss Men*, *Shottas*, *Killer Men* and *Strike Men* who picked up the mantle as the new gangsta personas driving the localised hegemonic masculine ideal. Or as Muhammed said in more prosaic terms, on the streets of Southside 'a cyclical drama is being played out' (Muhammad 2015:139).

Conclusions

This chapter has charted the rise of gang culture in Belize in recent history. Importantly, the arrival of the Bloods and Crips in the 1980s as a form of gang transnationalism is also a form of cultural transfer and transnational masculinity that connects local settings of exclusion in different global settings. Social terrains are crucial for gang transnationalism to flourish, and vulnerability in these terrains should be understood as both an ethnic and gendered phenomenon, where the Afro-American gangsta identity appealed to disenfranchised Creole male youths as a way of re-codifying multiple subordinations. Unfortunately, these conditions of vulnerability show little sign of abating. When walking around conversing with a local youth worker he said:

Dese guys [gangs] are nothing to play wid, but notin' has changed in two and a half decades. If you go to dese areas like George Street, de only ting dat has changed is dat de structures have gone from board to cement. No industries have been set up, or no real change has taken place to mek an impact on de community (07/11/2016)

Whilst the arrival of the Bloods and Crips in Belize City led to a rise in violence, epidemic levels of homicide were only reached when gangs fragmented at the turn of the millennium. Hence, counterintuitively, gang violence peaked through disorganisation, as opposed to gangs becoming more institutionalised. Clearly, this capacity for disorganised violence was enhanced by the flow of weapons into gangs across the Guatemalan border.

This chapter has also highlighted that gang transnationalism should not be understood as a template being imposed in a foreign setting, rather that host communities adapt foreign gang identities locally, and on Southside gang culture has proved culturally syncretic over time evolving its own Belizean identity that continually draws upon local and foreign influences that reflect its subordinations along racial and class lines. Nonetheless, despite the constant evolution of gangs on Southside their violence is stubbornly consistent, driving homicidal violence in the country to this day.

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