



# Incarceration and Crime in the Caribbean– Part I of III: Realities of Crime

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*Noted 19th century Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, author of **Crime and Punishment**, **The Brothers Karamazov**, **House of the Dead** and other books, once made the following prescient observation: “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”*

Whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not, the civilization of the contemporary Caribbean is being influenced by much more than its music, arts, inventions and other creative enterprises of its human capital; it is also being nuanced

by punishment and crime. The matter of prison and prison reform took a renewed place of prominence on the criminal justice and security landscapes last year, and likely will continue to do so this year and beyond.

This renewed interest was prompted by a combination of dramatic prison riots and prison breaks, along with exposés about ghastly prison conditions, involving especially Jamaica, St. Lucia, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana.

For instance, in February 2010 inmates at Jamaica's Horizon Adult Remand Centre rioted over the horrendous conditions they had to endure. Forty of the facility's 600 inmates, and nine of the correctional officers were injured in the mêlée. Later in the year—in August 2010—St. Lucia witnessed a dramatic escape from the Bordelais prison in Dennery, in the eastern part of the island.

The escapees—one St. Lucian and two Venezuelans—had been imprisoned following convictions on a variety of weapons, drug trafficking, and other charges. It is noteworthy that they escaped with the aid of corrupt prison officers. Interestingly, a few weeks later, there was another prison break from that same prison.

This renewed attention to prisons, and call for prison reform in the Caribbean compels attention to two key questions. First, why is reform necessary in most places in the region? Second, what does reform entail in practical terms?

As regards the first question, I contend that the need for prison reform is driven by three realities. The first is the spiral in crime. The second is the nature of the punishment meted out in some places. The final reality is the existence of overcrowded and unsecure prison facilities in most jurisdictions.

Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean, the 2007 study by the World Bank and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime still captures some of the Caribbean's contemporary criminal justice realities. Still largely true, for instance, is the following: "Murder rates in the Caribbean—at 30 per 100,000 population annually—are higher than for any other region of the world and have risen in recent years for many of the region's countries.

"Assault rates, at least based on assaults reported to police, are also significantly above average. *These reported rates are highly sensitive to the level of trust in the local police in general and the willingness to report domestic violence, in particular.*"

I highlight the last sentence for several reasons. For one thing, although the numbers are high, there is good reason to believe that they represent only part of the criminal enterprise—that which is reported by victims of crime or people close to them. But then there is the reality that in several parts of the Caribbean—and this is not unique to the Caribbean—the low confidence of citizens in the effectiveness or sometimes just the

minimal functionality of law enforcement agencies leads them to not report crimes.

In too many jurisdictions, the experience of many citizens is such that they have seen little or no tangible evidence of justice. They rightly expect to see arrests that lead to arraignments, which lead to convictions, that lead to incarceration or steep fines, which lead to a reduction in crime. In sum, they perceive an absence of both personal and societal justice, and this undermines their confidence in the criminal justice architecture—not just in the police, but also in the courts and other elements of that architecture.

The lightning rod for media, policy, and scholarly attention to the crime every place is the number of murders. The figures for the following six countries for the last six years are very revealing.

<b>Country</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>Total</b>
Belize	81	92	95	103	97	132	600
Guyana	142	163	115	158	117	139	834
Jamaica	1674	1340	1583	1618	1680	1428	9,323
Trinidad & Tobago	386	371	392	544	509	483	2,685
USVI	41	42	44	46	56	66	295
St. Lucia	35	44	36	39	39	48	241

While the overall portrait above is disconcerting, especially in cases where the murders have climbed for several years, in Jamaica and the United States Virgin Islands, there also have been down-turns. These should not be ignored or undervalued. For example, while there have been dramatic increases in Belize—from 97 in 2009 to 132 in 2010—and in Guyana—from 117 in 2009 to 139 in 2010—Jamaica witnessed almost a 15 percent decrease for the same period: from 1680 in 2009 to 1428 in 2010.

Indeed, Jamaica witnessed some milestones last year when it recorded less than 80 murders in any single month since July 2002; murders for the month of September 2010 numbered 72, which was 42 percent lower than for the same period in 2009. Moreover, September reflected a three-month reduction in reported homicides, although the monthly totals did increase later. But beyond murders, there was a

reduction in the numbers of reported shootings, rapes, carnal abuse, and robbery.

These milestones came in the aftermath of the violent confrontations between Jamaica's security forces and the defenders of garrison leader Christopher "Dudus" Coke earlier in the year. I attribute those milestones to at least four factors. First, the combined army-police engagement amounted to a shock therapy that sent powerful "line in the sand" messages to criminal elements in Tivoli Gardens and other garrisons.

Second, the messages were appropriately received in places outside the garrisons, in the general citizenry, providing cause for pause generally to all individuals with criminal intent.

Third, while the loss of 73 lives in the whole episode was regrettable, and there were "SNAFUS" in the battle between the security forces and the Tivoli Gardens protectors, the army-police engagement reflected tactical efficiencies and was accompanied by frequent and articulate communication from Commissioner Owen Ellington, and then Chief of Staff Brigadier Stewart Saunders.

As well, the Dudus Affair, including the violence and the obvious political subterfuge, so outraged the entire Jamaica that it precipitated powerful civil outcries against crime in all quarters, including by the army and police, contributing an important psychological "no tolerance for crime" climate. The challenge for Jamaica now is to maintain the gains made so far.

A turnaround also is manifest in Trinidad and Tobago. Not only did the reported homicides drop from 509 in 2009 to 483 in 2010, there also was a nine percent decrease in serious crimes overall. Yet, it has not been just the high—and in some cases increasing—homicide numbers that have been generating concern. Also worrisome has been the daring and outrageous nature of some of the criminal acts.

For example, who would have thought that St. Lucia would be the location of an attempted assassination of a member of the judiciary? The intended victim was Jamaican-born Magistrate, Ann Marie Smith, known to be tough on drug dealers. The incident occurred in the capital, Castries, in broad daylight one morning in April 2010 as Smith was readying to head to work with her five-year-old daughter.

Two masked gunmen men emerged from hiding in the bushes near her house and opened fire. St. Lucia also was the place where a murder was committed right in the constituency office of Prime Minister Stephenson King, and while he was in the office meeting constituents. This happened in September 2010.

During the incident the Prime Minister himself had to be hidden under a desk by his lone security detail, the other member of his detail having gone for lunch. In a statement on the incident later Prime Minister King declared prophetically that "None of

us is safe!”

Again, who would have thought that pristine St. Lucia, the land that gave birth to two Nobel Laureates—Arthur Lewis for Economics and Derek Walcott for Literature—would be the scene of a retaliatory home invasion that would result in the murder of an eight-year old child asleep in her bed and the maiming of her sister, leading to the amputation of one of her arms? This occurred in October 2010 in La Clery, also a part of the Prime Minister’s constituency.

These are but a few of the dastardly criminal acts committed in the Caribbean last year. They are an intimate part of the region’s portrait of crime and they impact the region’s civilizational dynamics in ways I’ll explain later. Other notable acts were committed in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Guyana, and Barbados.

In Barbados the most horrendous instance involved a robbery-arson incident in Bridgetown in September 2010 that led to the death of six females, including a toddler.

Yet, as was observed earlier, the reality of crime is but one of three factors that explain the renewed interest in prison reform and that highlights troubling elements of civilization in the Caribbean. Another factor, the nature of some of the punishment meted out to criminals, will be the subject of Part II of this series.

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