Gangs in Belize City: Profiles of Reality

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Abstract

Lewis' (1968) subculture of poverty in New York and Puerto Rico reveals defined attributes distinct from mere poverty such as mistrust of traditional state institutions a taste for expensive material items, short economic horizons and a looking inward for support and problem solving. Lewis mentions gang in only in passing as part of his subculture of poverty. This paper asserts that in today's reality the stereotypical profile does not accurately capture self-identified gang member in Belize City. Using one-on-one interviews with self-identified gang members and crime data on Belize City, Belize, this research reveals that these gang members reflect some attributes of the subculture of poverty including social disassociation, insularity, self-reliance, and mistrust of law enforcement. There are notable exceptions such as broad views on education, political awareness, income generating activities and paucity of material possessions. This works suggests that gangs emerge as alternative means of survival defying many of the stereotypes plied in the wider population that the members are merely delinquent young people with no life or qualities worthy of consideration.

Keywords: Gangs, gang member, gang violence, Belize

Introduction

On September 29, 2019, 21-year-old Jebran "Sucu" Wagner was shot dead at a social event on Coney Drive, Belize City. Mr. Wagner lived in Majestic Alley in Belize City with his stepfather who himself was murdered on July 12, 2019 (Amandala October 2, 2019). This is just one in a string of murders, many in execution style, that have spiraled to unimaginable levels in Belize over the last two decades. In 1998, there were 13 reported murders. By 2018, the official total was 143 or an increase of 1,000 percent. It is also no secret that many of these murders and other violent crimes are gang related. As such, "Gangbanging" has joined the local lexicon.   This rise of gang violence has captured public attention and the significance of factors such as poverty, economic disparities, law and disorder and civic alienation are widely debated. My central question is, therefore, who are these individuals who starting at a young age replace the fallen and keep gangs alive? Further, how do they view the world around them?

Using a qualitative data analysis approach, this research seeks to fill the gap by analyzing the place and role of gangs in the subculture of poverty in four areas of Belize City. Subjects will be men and women who are 18 years and older living in this area or incarcerated in the single prison facility in Belize. Using interviews with self-identified gang members and crime data, this work focuses on developing a profile of the gang members. Estimates are that there are between 900 and 1,400 gang members residing in Belize City (Young 2019). Young (2019) finds that gang members reflect many attributes of the subculture of poverty (Lewis

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1968) but with exceptions such as views on formal education, and knowledge of politics. In addition, Young (2019) finds that gang membership reflects many attributes of the subculture of poverty including self-reliance, distrust of formal institutions and low socio-economic status. This suggests that gangs emerge as alternative means of survival, defying many of the stereotypes applied in the wider population that the members are merely delinquent young people with limited humanity or qualities worthy of consideration. While the larger issue of how and why stereotypes take root and survive is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the representation of gangs in popular culture. Stereotypes provide easy way marginalize groups and validate knee-jerk reactions to issues that seem intractable. This research contributes a perspective beyond the incidences of violence and how the gangs are perceived in reality and in the movies. Movies are exemplary but in Belize City, the movie stereotype is almost mirrors \ society views gang members. Further, it provides a better understanding of the individuals detached from societal institutions and expected norms.

Definition of a Gang

The literature is not definitive as to what exactly is a gang. We can safely argue, however, that the ultimate champions of the poor who stood up for the downtrodden against the mean and selfish are captured in, "The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men" (1952) While rooted in 1200 century English literature, it is not representative. Further, many remember Fagin and his gang of street boys in Charles Dicken's "Oliver Twist" (1839) in London, England. Again, this example is not directly relevant for the gangs today. Still, there exists a thread of kinship and survival in an unfriendly world that rings true.

At one extreme, a gang can be a cartel, militia or other structured criminal enterprise. Decentralized local gangs, groups of juveniles or delinquents are at the other end of the spectrum. This diversity in "forms, composition and motivation" is difficult to capture (Williams 2010, 19). Characteristics of violence, criminal activities and the gendering of community instability and insecurity eclipse more internal aspects of comradery, social alienation, financial support and survival instincts that also underpin gang emergence and sustainability. Miller (2002), however, offers a working definition of a gang that capture many elements.

Miller (2002) defines a gang as a "self-formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, a well-developed line of authority, and the organizational features, which act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes. These gangs generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise" (35). Agreement on a single definition of a gang, therefore, has proven quite controversial and challenging. In the context of this work, the proximity of Belize to the U.S. (geographic distance, economic ties, migration) necessitates only a cursory mention of the British and European approach to defining gangs. Densley (2013, 3), points out a "European paradox" of rejecting the American model in the face of reality on the ground. This produces a vague definition of rogue youth coalescing in a rather shapeless group (Aldridge and Medina 2008). Pitts (2011) contends that gangs do exists more in line with the American model having more structure and purpose. This is more in line with the British resistance to attaching real purpose to criminal intent as 'most street gangs are only loosely structured, with transient leadership and membership, easily transcending code of loyalty, and informal rather than formal roles for members" (Klein 2004, 59). Klein's describes his definition as "consensus Euro gang definition" as follows - "durable and street-oriented youth groups whose involvement in illegal activity is part of the group identity" (Klein and Maxson 2006, 4).

Early American urban gang literature focuses mainly on gangs originating in Los Angeles (Bloods and Crips) and Chicago (Black Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords) that exhibit structure, hierarchy and internal discipline for those who violate the gang's code of behavior (Spergel, 1995). Gangs emerging in other communities without a gang culture prior to the 1980's do not duplicate the structures, activates and profiles of the original gangs. Because gangs, gang culture, and gang-related activities are dynamic, affected communities need to recognize the new faces of these groups and avoid popularly held, media-influenced misconceptions (Starbuck, Howell, Lindquist 2001, 2).

Starbuck, Howell, and Lindquist (2001) capture multiple prevalent stereotypes in a single sentence: age, gender, race and location.

From the 1920s through the 1970s, gang members were characterized mainly as young (11–22 years old) Hispanic or African American males who live in lower-class ghetto or barrio sections of the inner city. (4)

Transposing the stereotype onto other cities in the U.S. is problematic enough. It is even more problematic for those trying to address the challenges when stereotypes are transplanted to other countries. It stifles tailored approaches and hardens public sentiment in a narrow law and order situations ignoring socio-economic and institutional weaknesses that underpin gang life. It is still unwise to detach gang activity from culture, structure and individual agency (Vandenbergh 2014) that require the law and order approach in tandem with economic and institutional reform.

While there is not academic discussion in Belizean literature on the definition of gangs, Gayle and Mortis (2010) provide comprehensive research and detailed analysis of Belize City youth. It includes data and analyses of the socio-economic and institutional responses to gang violence. While this study defines violence as "the intentional rendering of physical harm on another human being or on oneself" (50), it offers no definition of gang violence. It does, nevertheless, offer important sociological insight into gang violence in Belize City. The research is distinguished by the focus individuals and how they experience their environment and the formal public institutions in the society.

The Laws of Belize The Laws of Belize provide a legal definition of the basis used in defining and criminalizing identification of, individual association or activities directly or indirectly associated with a gang.

Gangs are widely accepted as driving the crisis of serious crimes in urban areas with tentacles reaching into villages. This section reviews gang definitions in the literature and the legal definition in the Laws of Belize. In 1992, in an attempt to help law enforcement, stem the tide, the legislature enacted the Crime Control and Criminal Justice Act. The Act defines a criminal gang as follows:

"Criminal gang" means an organization or association or combination of persons which is formed for, or which acquires, the purpose of committing or facilitating the commission of any of the offences set out in section 5(2) of this Act; and any such organization or association or combination of persons shall be treated as a gang whether or not it has other objects or purposes.

Based on the legal definition of the "Criminal gang", the individual can be charge and found guilty for various activities associated with the criminal enterprise. Part 1, Section 2 (1) of the Act prescribes the alleged offender as a person who:

(a)   belongs or professes to belong to a criminal gang;

(b)   solicits or invites support for a criminal gang; or

(c)   arranges or assists in the arrangement of, or addresses, any meeting of three or more persons (whether or not it is a meeting to which the public are admitted) knowing that the meeting is:

(i)   support a criminal gang; or

(ii)   to further the activities of a criminal gang.

The literature and the law do offer windows into how the formal definitions of criminal gang and gang activity. The literature points to a divergence in approach of American and European scholars. The law criminalizes gang affiliation without actually defining a gang. These gaps reinforce the importance of getting a better understanding of gangs from the perspective of the self-identified affiliates. Ultimately, while there is no set definition of gangs, in this research gangs a organized groups of individuals surviving outside the law and the societal institutions while being stigmatized and persecuted by the society and institutions.

Gangs in the Movies

It is ironic that the stereotypes of gang members do not reflect their portrayal in the movies as flawed characters with some combination of despicable and redemptive traits. Early Hollywood gangs are more like the "Jets" and the "Sharks" in West Side Story (1961) or like the "T-Birds" in Grease (1978). Gangsters depicted in cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago are award winners with anti-heroes we love to

hate. Celebrated representatives of this genre include The Godfather (1972), Scarface (1983), Goodfellas (1990), and The Irishman (2019). It is worthwhile to reinforce that the rise of gang violence has captured public attention and the links to neighborhood factors such as crime poverty, economic disparities, law and disorder and civic alienation are well established (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997). Other movies, however, try to depict these circumstances with people trapped or trampled by the socio-economic conditions that are ignored and neglected in minority communities. Movies such as Juice (1982), New Jack City (1991), Set it Off (1996), Belly (1998), Paid in Full (2002), Belly 2: Millionaire Boyz Club (2008), and Straight Outta Compton (2015) depict urban gangs with grit but little of the glamor of earlier movies. They are not award winners. Yet, these are the movies telling us about the problems and the people trapped in the cycle of violence and survival. The reality of the last few decades, therefore, is real every day violence does not have the happy ending promised in the movies. We are presented with only the cycle of violence that only dehumanizes the individual. This only further stigmatizes and fuels the gangs.

While anecdotal and general profiles abound, we still have no real picture of how this subset of citizens view the public institutions that frame the society. This research will provide insight into the gang members themselves with a general demographic (ethnicity, age, gender) profile of individual members and how they view and experience the world around them. This analysis will contribute to our knowledge about these citizens, who are cloaked in negative stereotypes and whose criminal activities make headlines. Breaking through stereotypes is difficult. A stereotype is a useful heuristic for society making decisions about gang members while distancing itself from them. Breaking down the stereotype is one way for society to retain its humanity and avoid callous and knee-jerk reactions to the anti-social gang activities that creates instability and leaves a trail of bodies and tears.

Importance of this Research

Gang activities affect the physical and emotional security of citizens, both individually and collectively, as they undermine confidence in the accepted social and economic fabric of the country such as living standards, sustainable economic growth and governance. As a result, gangs force public institutions to grapple with increasing levels of violence, and insecurity in the population. It should also be noted that these contributing factors to violence are not only internally created by the gangs in Belize. There are also an external influence arising from the international narcotics trade and money laundering cartels. These cartels use Belize as a transit point in the flow of drugs to North America (Bhave September 24, 2019).

Given the wide societal effects listed above, this research will be useful in understanding how gang members experience the world. For instance, this research teases out the complexities of self-identifying as a gang member and the subsequent effects that this identity has on the lives and lived experiences of gang members. Specifically, this study is interested in understanding how gang members view the institutions with which they interact. To this end, the study provides not just a life profile of gang members under strain in Belize City, but it also gauges their experiences with educational institutions, law enforcement, the judiciary, elected officials, and religious institutions.

Profiles and Experiences

While crime and socio-economic data influences public opinion, it is important to have better understanding of how alleged gang members view society, institutions and ultimately themselves. Strain theory speaks to the theory that poor internal socio-economic conditions contributes to disillusion and separation from family and the formal societal institutions. The vacuum left by this disengagement is filled with anti-social behavior such as delinquency, unemployment in the formal economy, drug/alcohol use and crime (Agnew 1972). Belize City is the largest urban area in Belize and gangs emerged there in the 1980's (Gayle and Mortis 2010). Using Belize City, therefore, is portal into how strain theory (Agnew 1972) further unpacks the environment of the subculture of poverty presented by Lewis (1968).

In a groundbreaking study, Oscar Lewis (1968) formalizes what he describes as a subculture of poverty. Researching in New York and Puerto Rico, he identifies attributes that make the subculture of poverty distinct from mere poverty. His work specifically mentions gangs only in passing. The literature on gangs, however, clearly takes account of the subculture in the individual, family and community domains. He describes communities cut off from tradition institutions and society where family structures matter and individuals struggle to survive. Subsequent research on gang membership using general strain theory

(Agnew 1972) captures the environment generally described by Lewis (1968) as the subculture of poverty being relative insular and detached from formal state institutions. More specifically, the community experiences strain or alienation from the broader community at the individual and the community levels nurtured by delinquency and absent or detached parents (Agnew 1972). This expands to include a perception of failure at economic success compared to others. Research has also found a positive correlation between the availability of drugs/alcohol and gang membership (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher. 1993; Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson 1999; Thornberry 1998). At the family level, strain emerges from the low socio-economic conditions of the family (Klein 1995). Youth see parents or adults in the household struggling or failing to meet basic needs. At the community level, gang members face barriers to economic opportunities or a lack of opportunities (Howell 1998). In response to strains, the individual turns to crime (Agnew 1992).

Arguably, the most infamous gangs in the Caribbean are those in Jamaica. These gangs started as de facto extensions of political parties' in the 1940's and have entrenched themselves in mainly political constituencies now called garrison constituencies (Figueroa and Sivas, 2012). These constituencies are in socio-economically deprived urban areas of Kingston, the capital of Jamaica. Violence is used as a means of gaining control over political favors including control of contracts and works (Harriet 2008). Based on this scenario, therefore, gang members are mainly products of the environment they are born into and supported. Another example in the Caribbean of endemic gang violence is in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where random and targeted violence along with kidnappings continue to spiral out of control. In 2022, the U.N. Security Council extended its mandate to remain in Haiti in an attempt to stem the crisis (U.N. 16 July 2022).

There is increasing research on Latin American gangs as violence escalates in that region and the recently democratic states struggle with law and order (e.g., Arias and Goldstein (eds) 2010; Koonings and Kruijt 2006). This research focuses on the emergence and nature of gangs in serious post-civil conflict environments following the growth of democratization in Latin America and the forced repatriation of gang members and violent offenders from the U.S. to the respective countries. They posit that gangs fill a void in the weak state struggling with the transition to democracy. Though, geographically, Belize is a part of Latin America (Central America), the literature rarely mentions Belize or the effects of the use of the country as a narcotics transit site and for money laundering. While this is justifiable on many levels (e.g., Belize was a British not a Spanish colony and official trade is limited), the main reason is that Belize did not experience civil conflict and has remained a stable democracy since independence in 1981. The reasons for the development of gangs lies elsewhere. Nevertheless, we see similar gang activity and linkages to gangs outside of Belize.

Belize continues to struggle economically with the percentage of people living below the poverty leveli increasing from 13.9 percent in 1999 (Index Mundi 2019) to 41 percent at the end of 2018 (The World Bank 2019). Official unemployment rates are higher among youth 14 to 24 years old. Based on interviews for this work, this is the age range during which they report the start of active gang activities. The numbers in the age group increased by 31.5 percent between 2012 and 2019. Labor reports show that the unemployment rate decrease from 35.8 percent to 16.5 percent (nine percent decrease) during the same period. The comparison show that employment did not keep pace with the population increase. Adding to the pool of those potential gang member or affiliates are those repatriated from the United States to Belize. Available data show that approximately 900 gang members and violent offenders have been forcibly repatriated from the United States to Belize from 2008 to 20122.

In addition, the country continues to be a major transit point for drugs to North America. The mix of home grown and imported gang members is potent and is worthy of a deeper understanding of these young people. Instead of looking at youth risk factors for gang membership, this work focuses on understanding the profile of current gang members and how they perceive the world around them.

Methodology

Gang members can be considered a "hard-to-reach" sub-group (Shaghaghi, Bhopal and Sheikh 2011; Atkins and Flint 2001) with challenges around trust and communication. Thirty-four individual face-to-face

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[2] Belize Police Department. 2019. Provided by the Statistics Section.

interview were conducted using a questionnaire with 109 questions. Individual face-to-face interviews contribute to the development of trust and produce referrals (Kirchner 2018). Interviews are voluntary and no specific identifiers such as name, age, Social Security number, or driver's license number are collected. Each interviewee has a unique numerical identifier with the option of adding an alias. Interviewees voluntarily self-identify as a gang member and there are no questions about any criminal activities. Over the last two decades, self-identification or self-nomination has been the preferred method and has proven its validity (Esbensen F. A., LT Winfree, Jr., H. Ne, JT Taylor 2001; Bjerradaard 2002; Web et al 2006). Esbensen et al concludes." The self-nomination technique is a particularly robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from non-gang youth" (124).

Qualitative data provides the researcher with a number of distinct advantages over quantitative data. While quantitative data is purely statistical, qualitative data provides rich and comprehensive details. It captures the participants' point of view reflecting their experiences with and opinions of the world (Denzin, 1989). This approach provides methodological flexibility. (Maxwell, 2012). A major disadvantage, however, is smaller sample size which raises the issue of limited generalizability due to sample size versus the whole population of the research (Harry & Lipsky, 2014; Thompson, 2011).

The opportunities to interview gang members in the community depends heavily on gatekeepers. These individuals are not necessarily active gang members but command some degree of respect and trust. They open the doors and confer legitimacy on the interviewer and the research process. The consent form for those incarcerated specifically states that there is no promise of favor of threat of retribution for participating (or not). The incarcerated are interviewed using the same questionnaire as those gang members in the community. The interviews took place in private in the prison with a guard outside the room but not within earshot. The interviewer's script includes an overview of the project, planned use of data and assurances of the independence of the research from law enforcement or any other state institution. In addition, time for questions and comments was allotted before and after each interview.

Based on the interviews, it is fair to say that subjects are economically and/or educationally challenged. Subjects are not however, from other vulnerable populations such as infants, children, pregnant women, mentally disabled persons, employees, or students. They do include, however, the currently incarcerated who self-identify as gang members. No interview is conducted without signed (or interviewee's mark) consent, which can be withdrawn by the participant at any time. Finally, there are no exclusions based on race, gender, language, academic abilities.

Study Areas

Belize is a relatively poor country. It ranks 31st out of 41 among Latin American and Caribbean economies based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in 2018(The World Bank 2018). Further, 41 percent of the population were living below the poverty line (US$1.90 per day3) on January 1, 2017 (Lano September 27, 2017); 36th highest in the world (Index Mundi 2019). Without doubt, this subculture of poverty nurtured the development of modern gangs in Belize. Seventeen of the thirty-four interviewees are living the largest urban area in the country - Belize City with a population of 61,461 persons. This represents 34 percent of the country's total urban population of 183,182 persons with the remaining 64 percent living in the other six municipalities (Worldometer 2020).

The other study area is the only prison in Belize. Located 18 miles from Belize City, the Kolbe Foundation runs this private prison facility under contract with the government of Belize. In 2018, it housed 1,848 men, women and youth of which fifty-seven percent were on remand (awaiting trial). All 17 interviewees were male over the age of 18 years and were either serving time or on remand for murder or drug trafficking.

What Have we Learned so Far?

The interviews with gang members in the first phase of the research precipitated a major change in understanding the "subculture of poverty" described by Lewis (1968) and Young's (2019) description. While Lewis' description of the distrust of and disconnection from the formal institutions by those he engaged

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[3] Poverty headcount ratio at US1.90 a day at Purchasing Power Parity

with in 1968 holds true, this research found a far more complex reality. This section presents a description of the sample population and an outline of some of the salient points revealed in the interviews.

Analysis of the interview data provides a profile of the interviewees. The next sections build the profile using age, affiliation, education, and economic indicators,

Affiliation and Age

Of the 34 interviews with the self-identified gang members, 17 or 50 percent are in the community and the other half are incarcerated. Interviewees indicated their alleged status with an identifiable gang. Thirty-one (91.2 percent) self-identified as a gang member. The remaining three (7.8 percent) interviewees claimed to be no longer affiliated or only casually associated with the gang in their neighborhood. It is interesting to understand two points about gang affiliation. First, the interview of each who claimed not to be affiliated, when considered in its entirety, reveals that each interviewee has intimate knowledge of gang activity, gang members, turf and a high degree of sensitivity to being able to navigate their way within the gang (s). One interviewee in particular was repatriated from the United State because of criminal convictions related to gang activity. Without prompting, he explained his past involvement, and near-death experience as a gang member involved in a shooting event. Currently, his neighborhood knows he is a person not to be trifled with but he claims no direct affiliation with any specific gang. This reflects findings in the U.S. in referring to core and peripheral member. Core members remain active longer while peripheral members experience some dissonance and can drift away drawn by a job or new family (Sprooz, Decker and Webb, 2010). The second point about self-identification is revealed in the sub-group interview in the prison. Two interviewees indicated that some of the interviewees are self-identifying in the prison only as means of protection. While actual gang activities within the prison are outside the scope of this project, it raises some interesting questions for future research. First, how do these gang influences unfold in prison itself and, second, what effect, if any, is there on those freed if found not guilty, have charges dropped or serve sentences?

All 34 interviewees are all over 18 years old - 33 men and 1 female. The average age is 32.4 years; median age is 31 and a range from 20 to 54 years. While we may think of gang members as "boys", these interviewees are really gang "men" (and woman). Supporting the assertion that many are almost literally born into a gang, seven interviewees (23.5 percent) report being active earlier than age 12 years; seventeen interviews joined between 13-16 years old (50 percent); interviewees joined between 17 to 21 years old is only one (2.9 percent) and only one is older than 22 years old (2.9 percent).

Figure 1: Age range of interviewees started involvement in gangs
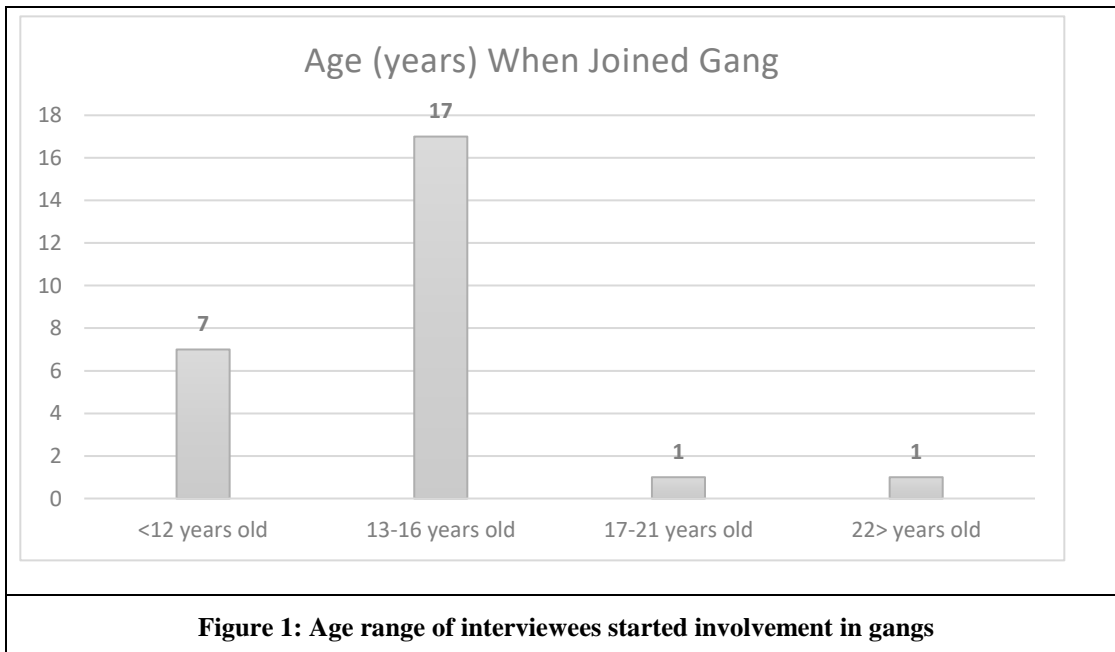
The term "join a gang" is a misnomer. It suggests several things not supported by the interviews. First, joining is a pure and simple choice. Most report that they are essentially born into the gang or at least an environment where gangs are entrenched. They either they have older family members involved (some dead by the time of interview) or the gang offers a way to support their family. Active participation begins in adolescence and is accompanied by many of the challenges of transitioning to adulthood. Based on significant social, cognitive, and biological changes that occur during adolescence, it is a period of elevated psychological and physiological stress (Spear, 2009; Steinberg & Lerner, 2004). This is coupled with increasing sensitivity to peer relationships and status. One interviewee who was active from adolescence and at 25 years old considered himself seasoned and a survivor. At the start of the interview he apologized for delay but he was doing "a cook". In other words, he was cooking a meal along with other gang members. This is key to the relationship and sense of community. At the end of the interview, he states that the questionnaire omits the most important question. Further inquiry reveals that his main concern is what will happen to his grandmother after he is killed. Second, one may assume individuals choose a gang as one would apply and hope to pledge for a fraternity or sorority (Merriam-Webster 20234). This is hardly the case. Most interviewees indicate that membership is built into the environment and a just a matter of course. Third, some individuals are of the view that being a member of a gang is an easy (idle) life as it defies the mainstream nine to five routine with a fixed income. Daily life is a hustle for survival at the most basic level of involving food and shelter insecurities and a chronic sparsity of formal employment. Fourth, unless killed, exiting a gang is not easy. Interviewees report that even if they decided to sever affiliation they would not be any safer in their neighborhood. The affiliation actually provides some safety despite the obvious risk of incarceration or premature death at the hands of a rival gang. This point is exemplified by the drive-by shooting killing Terrence Rhaburn and the injuring of four others at a startup mechanic shop for young men trying to escape gang life. Sergeant Cowo (Amandala, December 24, 2020) of the Belize Police Force give this description:

It is unfortunate that this shooting happened there, because we believe that these persons are trying to make a change and likewise, trying to assist others to come in and make a difference in the community and change that lifestyle (gang-lifestyle) they were living.

It really saddens the community...criminals are criminals and they might say, 'I forgive you', but I suspect that they have not forgotten what has happened in the past, and the minute they have that time to capitalize, they do. I believe that is what happened on Saturday night... (para. 6)

Finally, the killing of young men (by members of other gangs or law enforcement) that make the headlines overshadows how long many members actually remain active. This includes even being in prison. The median number of years that interviewees were active is 16 with a standard deviation of 7 years but skewing toward longer times (right) of gang affiliation in this sample. The average number of years is 16.4 years. This indicates that, once active, the tendency is to remain active for long periods that continue even in prison. This also reinforces the characterization of gangs as durable groupings (Klein and Maxson, 2006) and the strain of community alienation which underscores the gang bond (Agnew 1972).

Education and Children

There is unanimity among the interviewees on the importance of education. Those with children believe that keeping them in school is a priority. Their own time in and commitment to formal educational institutions, however, varies. Of the 34 interviewees, seven have completed primary school (21 percent), seven have completed high school (21 percent) and two (six percent) have completed junior college (see Figure 2).

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4 A student organization formed chiefly for social purposes and having a name consisting of Greek letters.
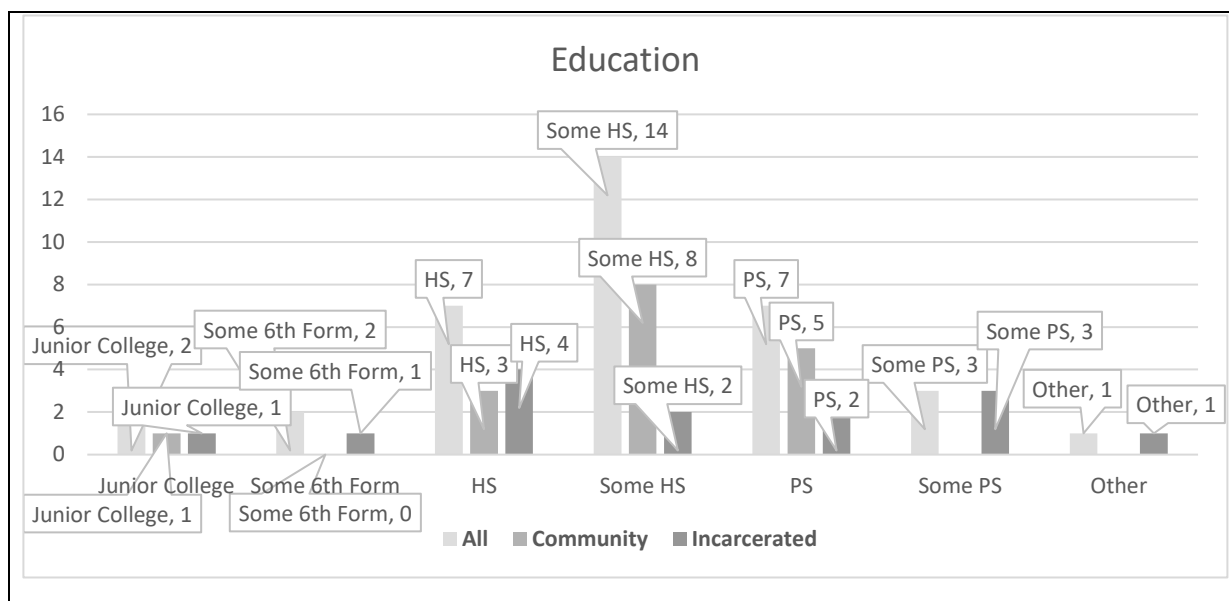
Figure 2: Comparison of education levels of interviewees incarcerated with those in the community

The effects are obvious in that of 8.8 percent of interviewees who dropped out of primary school, 100 percent are in jail. Ultimately, of the 41.2 percent who dropped out of high school, 17.6 percent are in jail. Reasons given for dropping out of or expulsion from school at any level are: (1) need money to support self and family; (2) no money to go further in school; (3) lure of streets and gang life.

The dropout rate in the sample group is significantly higher than in the general school population (see Figure 3). As the sample only had a single female interviewee, only the data on males are included. Still, we should note that the dropout rate among girls is lower than among boys. The average dropout rate in the primary schools from 2006 to 2019 is 0.5 percent versus 8.8 percent for interviewees. The average dropout rate in the high schools for the same period is 10.1 percent versus 41.2 percent for interviewees.

When asked about their general feeling towards education (not any particular institution), interviewee response was overwhelmingly positive with only one person saying they had mixed feelings. The issue is, therefore, not trying to convince the vulnerable populations of the importance of education but questioning what is going on within the schools that they are not performing as protective factors against the attraction of gang membership. While this question is beyond the scope of this research, it is worthy of note that interviewees did report being active gang members while in school.

While there may be a community stereotype about gang members being irresponsible and unsociable, interviews provide some interesting insight into the reality. First, the majority of interviewees became a parent surprisingly late in life. Table 1 shows that more than 50 percent of interviewees reported becoming a parent after the age of 19.

Table 1: Age ranges of interviewees		
< 14 years old	1	2.9
15-18 years old	9	26.5
19-21 years old	6	17.1
>21 years old	18	42.9

Interviewees generally spoke positively about the importance of parenting. Most voluntarily expressed great love for their children and want them to have better lives than they did. This approach seems less insular than that Lewis (1968) describes as his subculture. The interdependency of the gang members themselves does not totally exclude external institutions such as schools from being a part of family life.

Figure 4: Reported number of children by interviewees
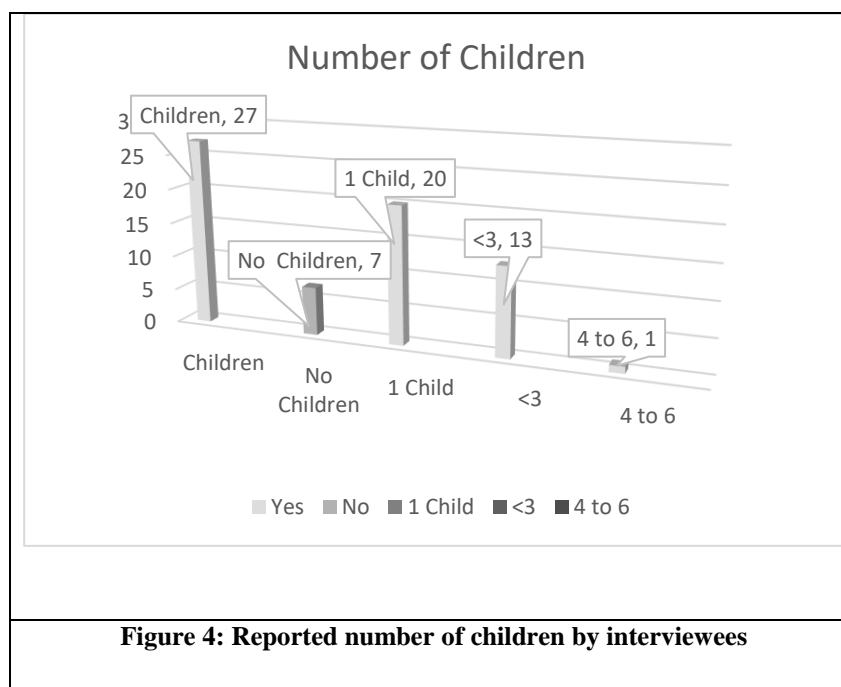
This reported commitment to children, however, begs the question of why the dropout rate is much higher among gang members as opposed to the general population. Besides the socio-economic factors, it might point to gaps (resources, curriculum and discipline) in the educational institutions. Two interviewees illustrate the strain on the schools and the tension with a no tolerance policy on gangs. A high school expelled the first interviewee because suspected gang members were waiting for him after school. In the second case, the school expelled the interviewee for having a bullet shell in his possession on school property. In both cases, the school felt that the then students were a threat to the general student body and the institution.

Possessions

Lewis (1968) identifies the propensity of those persons in the subculture of poverty to aspire for and own material things beyond their income. Lewis (1968) observes that there is a tendency, also, in the subculture of poverty to acquire relatively expensive items. The purchases seem frivolous in the context of the income. Agnew (1972) also discusses that the desire for possessions drives criminal behavior Today, we are aware of this tendency with emphasis on sneakers and jewelry. Those with more economic power also levy this charge at those less fortunate in Belize. They attribute it to misplaced priorities and, as with all stereotypes, there is probably some truth to it. The poor are not supposed to aspire to have nice things. Gang members, as part of this socio-economic group, are painted with the same brush. Interviews reveal a more nuance picture in some aspects and the complete contradiction of perceptions in others. Examples of this are shown in Table 2. There are low levels of access to motorized mobility with only 11.8 percent of the interviewees being able to access a vehicle. In the case of housing, 41.2 percent are renting; 34.3 percent are living with family or friends; 3.4 percent are homeless and only 14.7 percent own their home. Finally, while 82.4 percent have cellphones, the cellphone subscription saturation of the working age population (ages 15 to 65) is approaching 100 percent (The World Bank, 2021; The World Bank, 2021a). The caveat to 82.5 percent of interviewees having a cellphone is that half the interviewees are incarcerated. Of the other half in the

community, 100 percent have a cellphone in Belize City while The World Bank (2021b) reports internet saturation level of 47 percent in 2019.

| Table 2: Access to Motorized Mobility, Housing, and Personal Items (Possessions)	
	% Yes
Transportation	
Bicycle	26.5
Motorcycle	20.6
Car/Truck	11.8
None	50
Housing	
Own home	14.7
Rent	41.2
Live with family	23.5
Live with friend(s)	11.8
None/homeless	3.4
Personal Items	
TV	76.5
Video Games (s)	35.3
Cellphone	82.4
Computer/tablet	38.2
Jewelry (e.g. chain, ring)	58.8
None	5.9
Bank/credit union account	44.2

Law Enforcement

In 1881, Belize was a British colony, British Honduras, with a population estimated at 27,542 in 1881(Hoffman 2014) and no formal local law enforcement. The formal system of policing came into being in Belize in 1886. Leadership and expertise were brought in mainly from Barbados, another British colony in the Caribbean. By 1889, there were 175 officers and other ranks with stations in Belize City, Orange Walk Town and Corozal Town (The Belize Police Department, n.d.1). INTERPOL reports the strength of the department as 1,300 men and women (INTERPOL 2012) with a networked presence in all six districts. With a population of an estimated 396,476 people (Worldometer 2020), there are 345 members per hundred thousand people. Today the Department is multifaceted organization including a Special Patrol Unit, National Traffic Branch, Community Policing, Anti-drug Unit, Criminal Intelligence Unit, Police Training Academy, National Prosecution Branch and detective Branch (Belize Police Department, n.d.2).

In response to the rise in gang related violence, the Gang Suppression Unit (GSU) was formed in April of 2010. After a series which widely reported interactions with suspected gang members resulting in death and charges of general heavy-handed uses of force, the Prime Minister, Hon. Dean Barrow, announced a review of the GSU's activities saying;

"I would not have thought of that to be the expressed remit of the GSU, but I was given an explanation. More generally, I saw where there were other incidents reported that seem to involve misbehavior, irregularities, to put it mildly. I think we bury our heads in the sand if we don't accept that there is a culture of mistrust with respect to the citizens and the police…" (para. 8)

The "culture of mistrust" referred to by then Prime Minister Barrow is complicated. Many of the interviewees express an understanding and appreciation for the police force as an institution necessary for the society. At the community and individual level, however, this view is negatively affected by other factors

that make law enforcement difficult and one dimensional in combating the crime that emanates from gang activity. First, in small societies the degrees of separation are few. Many interviewees are friends with or related to members of the police force. Figure 5 presents the number of law enforcement officers known by the interviewees. Only two interviewees (5.8 percent) confirmed knowing two or less law enforcement officers while eight (23.5 percent) reported knowing 20 or more. How the interviewees know so many law enforcement officers' stems from family relationships, school friends, neighborhood friends and repeat interactions.

Figure 5: Numbers of law enforcement (LE) known by interviewees.
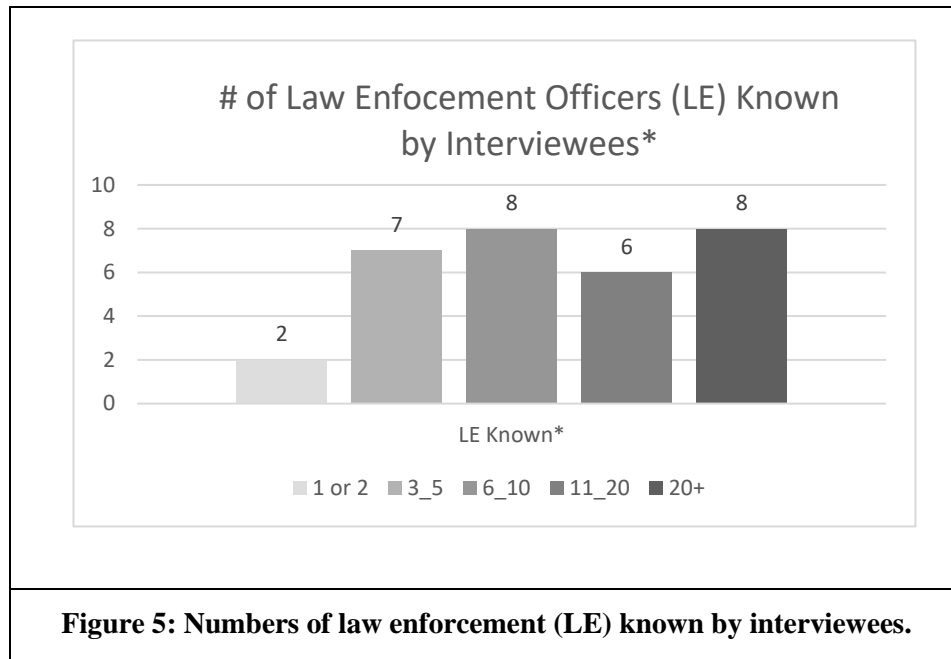
Repeated interactions with law enforcement is key to the ongoing relationships and perceptions of the interviewees. Interviewees report frequent and sometimes daily interaction with law enforcement in the form of random 'pat downs.' These pat downs involve the officers lightly and quickly frisking the person. The primary goal is to identify weapons, cash and/or drugs and can be done at any time or place. Some interviewees report that on seeing the officer (s) they immediately prepare for a pat down. In the eyes of the interviewees the probable cause for pat downs is either how they are dressed, location or assumption by police that they are in a gang. Arguably, most searches are illegal.

Not all officers have the same relationship. Interviewees report that some officers side with specific gangs based on their personal relationship (family relationships, school friends, neighborhood friends) with members. This inequity of treatment is unpalatable. Law enforcement is viewed as biased and punitive to those not in favor with specific officers. Besides the intrusive pat downs, the nature of the relationship does affect interviewees in other ways. First, how much leniency is allowed if anything is found during pat down. Second, there is the flow of information about law enforcement movements to gangs and information to law enforcement about crimes under investigation from gang members. The importance of this will be discussed in the next section on the judiciary. Third, many interviewees name law enforcement officers as sources of weapons. It was suggested that weapons seized from one gang are sold to another. Views are shown in the Figure 6 where half the interviewees feel negatively about law enforcement and the other half is split evenly between having a mixed and a positive view. The split of these last two views (mixed and positive) is probably linked to the depth of connections to law enforcement resulting in varied treatment of interviewees.

Interviewee's View of *Law Enforcement

Figure 6: Interviewee's views of law enforcement
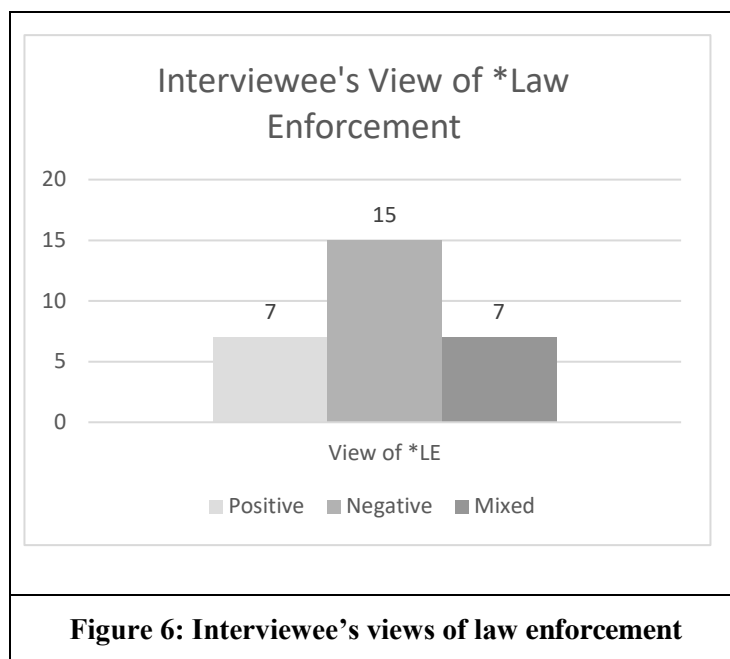
As with acquiring weapons on the street, interviewees do not regard the relationships with law enforcement as a challenge to accessing weapons. Two interviewees also report acquiring weapons from contacts in either Guatemala or Mexico. Ultimately, the question of assessing (i.e., very hard to very easy) the difficulty of acquiring weapons is received with derision and looks of amusement at the ease at which it is accomplished. Each interviewees response is "very easy". In fact, the regulation of weapons domestically and the illegal cross border trade is a thorny issue. Addressing these issues is not within the scope of this research but is worthy of exploration. Gun violence involving unlicensed weapons continues to be a major challenge for Belize.

The Judiciary

Not unlike the judiciaries in many developing countries, this branch of government is under-resourced and lacks staff at all levels of the institutions (Webber, 2007). Despite appeals by consecutive chief justices, funding has been at about one percent of the national budget in the last 20 years. Under-resourcing affects the quality of decisions and the speed of hearing or disposing of cases.

Investment in the judiciary- infrastructure and human resources - is a key priority for an impartial legal system. The ability of a citizen to their "day in court" when conflict erupt or a crime is committed is very important. It is also essential to support and protect the judiciary as the most impartial branch of government and to reinforce the role of reiterating that public and private legal professionals as are first officers of the court. The applicable equitable maxim is "Justice must not only be done, but seen to be done" (Datar April 17, 2020).

While the most serious crimes get daily media attention, the charge and conviction rates in the Supreme Court get plenty of attention also. The level of public confidence in the judiciary and law enforcement is underpinned by the data on the courts. The numbers of serious crimes (murder, rape, robbery, burglary, theft, and unlawful sex) reported in Belize decreased but the numbers of arrest rates decrease even more. From 2000 to 2018, the number of arrests made based on serious crimes reported decreases form 38.1 percent to 11.9 percent. It is not clear whether there are actually less serious crimes committed or that the reporting of actual crimes has decreased. What does stand out, however, is that the numbers of murders reported increases from 47 in 2000 to 143 in 2018. Table 3 presents the snapshot of the most complete available data from 2009 to 2013. It presents the percentages decrease in the numbers arrested for serious

crimes, the percentages of arrests for murders and murder convictions. Please note that Belize City with twenty percent of the population (Worldometer 2020) accounts for between 50 and 70 percent of the serious crimes during the reporting period.

	Reports of Serious Crimes*	% Arrested for Serious Crimes	Murder Reports	% Murder Arrests	% Murder Convictions
Table 3. Murder, Rape, Robbery, Burglary, Theft, and Unlawful sex					
2009	3333	28.98	97	71.1	7.2
2010	2665	23.17	126	50	9.5
2011	2766	24.05	124	37.9	19.1
2012	2772	24.1	145	42.1	4.9
2013	2395	20.83	99	45.5	8.9

The decrease in the numbers of serious crimes may indicate a lack of confidence in law enforcement (see Figure 6). This could be bolstered by the very low arrest and conviction rates for murder where the number reports rise significantly over time. Even with the low arrest rate, the conviction rates may point to other factors including poor evidence collection, lack of witness and weak prosecution cases. The low conviction rates do not bode well for confidence in law enforcement and the judiciary.

For most who run afoul of the law, the magistrate courts are their experience with the judiciary in both criminal and civil matters. The magistrate courts are on the front line as the point of first contact dealing with first steps in the criminal process – laying of charges, bail hearing and remanding. All the interviewees appeared either in the supreme court or a magistrate courts in a criminal matter. This research, however, being confined to criminal matters given the scope of the subject matter, the interviewees provides their views about the judiciary with no differentiation between magistrate and supreme courts. Only fifteen percent of the interviewees have a positive view of the judiciary. One interviewee articulated that the judges favor the prosecution. Of the 17 incarcerated interviewees, only one was not serving time for either murder or manslaughter or on remand on murder or manslaughter charges. Ten of the 17 (59 percent) of these interviewees are on remand with the longest on remand for 7 years. All in this group express negative views of the judicial system for obvious reasons.

The important role of the judiciary playing in a country cannot be over stated. The inevitability of criminal activity and civil conflict demands that the judiciary be the source of substantive and procedural due process in the quest for justice. The judiciary along with law enforcement are the buffers again vigilante justice embodied by gang drive by shooting and execution styled murders. The security, prosperity and general well-being of communities and the nation depend on this branch of government.

Conclusions

As gang related violence continues to be a prominent feature on the landscape of Belizean society, condemnation and calls for solutions have not stemmed the tide. The restrictions on movement, association and congregation during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022) induced a down tick in gang activity. For example 2020 saw a decline in the murder rate in the Belize District declined from 61.24 per 1000,000 people in 2019 to 46.21 per hundred thousand in 2020 (Belize Crime Observatory 2020). This in no way indicates that the core issue have been resolved and efforts to stem gangs and their activities remains a prioeirty.

Comparing the gangs from the movies where the 'bad guys' either have good hearts or are redeemed in some fashion at the end, one can see that there is little resemblance to the generic societal view of today's gangs as violent, heartless monsters worthy of noting but a public hanging. Both law enforcement and incarceration approaches have been in vain. The gang's reputation for violence and anti-social activities,

however, demands a closer look as more than socio-economic threats to be managed like some sort of toxic waste dumps. This approach has not proven fruitful and, as people die, the ranks of the gangs are replenished. The stereotype, while conjuring an easy target for callous law enforcement and public anger, does not engender the attitudinal and structural changes needed to stem the flow of blood now and develop a well-functioning citizenry.

While there are attempts, a comprehensive and long-term intervention continue to elude public and private efforts. Arguably, part of the problem is a miss-understanding of who are involved in gangs and a tendency to unhelpful stereotypes. My central question is, therefore, who are these individuals who keep gangs alive starting at a young age and replacing the fallen? Further, how do they view the world around them? Addressing these aspects contributes to a more realistic profile of those declared outlaws by statute and engage in antisocial activities. Gang members indicate awareness of how the institutions function (or not). This is particularly true of law enforcement and the judiciary. These institutions, while deemed necessary for society, are seen as unjust and a part of the problem. There is no single better example of this that the unanimity in responses that law enforcement offices are sources of weapons.

The Laws of Belize create the outlaws by signs of gang membership and affiliation. It has done little to suppress gang affiliation or criminal activities. Anecdotally, the signs are everywhere in numerous forms including graffiti, tattoos, hand signs and language (gang code words). There was one major case of four young men for being members of a gag, On October 6, 2022, the four pled guilty to being gang members after videos surfaced of them posing with weapons and flashing identifiable gang signs (Love FM, October 6, 2022). Whether this suggests a renewed focus on this aspect of gang suppression remains to be seen.

While interviewees understand the importance of law enforcement in a society, their experiences taint their views of the officers and the institution. Law enforcement is experienced as corrupt, predatory and a source of weapons. The bias and corruption resulting from their experience contributes to them resorting to other avenues for survival. Varying levels of formal education ranging from dropping out of elementary school to completing junior college, suggest that just staying school is in itself not enough. Dropping out of elementary school was closely identified with affiliation and gang related activities. On the other hand, those who remained in school report also being gang members simultaneously. One interviewee volunteered that he graduated from high school in May and was remanded on murder charges in November of the same year.

The interviewees also revealed that there is very little material wealth being accumulated. Not only do few alleged gang members have much beyond a cell phone, but few had bank or credit union account let along money saved. They talk about sharing cash inflows with other members and supporting the families of those incarcerated. Whether unfairly due to under-resourcing, the judiciary is not well respected. The conviction rates are low by any measure. Further, with half the incarcerated or remand, delays in trials for the most serious offences is unjust and frustrates a public burdened with fear of the gangs.

When being paid to kill and being involved in some other criminal enterprise are viewed as a viable alternative means of survival, what does that say about the society? This is outside the scope here but does speak to obstacles that shallow societal stereotypes perpetuate in finding meaningful approaches to reduce anti-social behaviors in the target population.

In the instructional environment including education, formal employment, law enforcement, political parties and the judiciary, interviewees display cognizance of their reputations, criminal and anti-social activities. On one hand, there is a recognition of the importance of the formal societal institutions but interviewees also recognize that they are failing them and society. Their gang affiliated activities, therefore, are but an alternative means of survival.

All these observations culminate to offer a paradigm shift in how gangs can be viewed. To put it another way, the interviews reveal how the gang member see themselves in the midst of the perceived institutional failures and hostile public attitudes. The in-person interviews provide a better understanding of who these citizens are and, possibly, another window into how to address the problems that feed and sustain gangs.

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