Changing Pervasive Culture of Violence Critical to any

Crime Reduction Strategy

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The hope was to end 2014 under a thousand homicides but instead at the close of play in 2014, one thousand and five homicides had been committed. Nonetheless, there is some sense of relief that homicides and other serious crimes are trending down. Crime trends can be bewildering but it is the responsibility of criminologists, law enforcement personnel and the larger society to continuously struggle with theoretical explanations as to why crime is trending up or trending down.

The murder rate peaked in 2009 at over one thousand six hundred. Since 2010, the murder rate has been trending down but Jamaica is still embarrassingly in the top ten countries of the world where homicides are exceedingly high. This was not always the case. Even after the tribal bloodletting of 1976 and 1980, the murder rate was not that staggering. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have struggled to push murder below one thousand.

For Jamaica the twenty-first century began with a murder rate spiraling out of control. In 2004, there were 1,469 murders, in 2005 1,674, in 2008 1,618 and in 2009 1,682. The downward trend began in 2010 and has continued to 2014 when there were 1,005 murders.
How does one explain the rapid rise in the murder rate and the subsequent
decline to one thousand and five in 2014? Macro data analysis can provide us
with annual trends but the data must be dis-aggregated if we are to come up with
scientific explanations. The Ministry of National Security has a research
component. The Jamaican Constabulary Force maintains excellent statistical data
and the criminologists at the University of the West Indies and elsewhere are
forever grappling with the data. But crime analysis should be the responsibility of
the entire society and that data should be a part of the public discourse.

The Government, the Opposition and the Social Partnership have set goals
to reduce the murder rate in two years time to 25 per 100,000 and that will mean
a further reduction of approximately three hundred murders. In a recent article
written by Livern Barrett on January 8, 2015, the new Police Commissioner, Dr.
Carl Williams refrained from committing JCF to a specific number.

Crime fighting certainly entails the police coming up with strategies to
reduce crime. But crime fighting has to become the responsibility of the entire
Jamaica. Since independence in 1962, Jamaican society has undergone profound
changes. A larger percentage of the population now lives in urban areas and the
culture has become far more materially acquisitive. Unfortunately over the last
forty years the economy has not grown in any linear fashion and there are sizeable segments of the workforce excluded from legitimate gainful employment. Unemployment is particularly acute among young people.

A study by the Jamaica Injury Surveillance System in 2004 of nine hospitals found that 17 percent of patients admitted were for fights with acquaintances and non-acquaintances. The gunshots and the murder rate are propelled by a sub-culture of violence that is manifested in those admitted to our hospitals. Any strategy tackling head-on Jamaica’s high murder rate must seek to roll back the pervasive culture of violence.

This will entail a recognition of the problem and a complete mobilization of the society that can be led by the leaders in the Social Partnership. Schools, churches, civic associations, sporting entities and media houses would have to be engaged in a defanging of the culture of violence. Such an initiative will have to span decades.

There was a time in the 1970s and 1980s when the violence was being driven by tribal political violence. That tribal partisanship has ebbed somewhat. There was clear evidence in the 2011 election that people on the ground were now clear of the idiocy of political violence. Nonetheless, the absence of violence
at election time has not led to a retreat of the culture of violence as many communities now suffer from an acute form of social disorganization. Re-assembling urban communities where “lumpen are rampant” is a monumental task even moreso when the resources are not abundantly available.

Nonetheless, in an age of advanced information technology, knowledge is a critical resource and there is no paucity of knowledge in Jamaica. Societies that have managed to avoid the pitfalls of large scale violence such as in Japan, Singapore and the Scandinavian countries, have put together iron clad safety-nets and/or sustained a high level of social organization reinforced by intact families.

The paradox of Jamaica is that there is this visceral identification to territory. But on the part of young males, those outside of traditional boundaries are the enemy. Building a sense of community that transcends narrow borders is essential to the reconstruction of inner-city communities.

In recent decades, youth clubs and other civic organizations have withered on the vine. Young people are always eager to find outlets to express their creativity in the form of sports, music and the cultural arts. The challenge is to build those entities from the ground up, community by community.
The downward trend in crime has occurred despite the economic hardships. Logically, if we can return to a state of robust economic growth in the future, the downward trend should be readily accelerated and Jamaica can climb out of the ranks of countries with an obscene murder rate.

The murder rate contraction is to some extent related to the conviction of high profiled “dons”. The conviction of “Zeeks”, “Dudus”, “Vybz Kartel”, et al, has demonstrated that dons are not untouchable and can be brought to justice. The judicial system and prison sentences can serve as a deterrent but the efficacy of the judicial system must be manifested on an ongoing basis.

Irrespective of the social structure, law enforcement plays a large role in order maintenance. And countries where law enforcement is riddled with corruption, the fight against crime easily becomes a lost cause. JCF Commissioners have made progress in ridding the police force of corrupt elements. JCF has also become mindful of modern policing and the important asset of data collection and personnel deployment. The new Commissioner, Dr. Carl Williams, has adopted new protocols in the use of firearms which thus far has reduced the incidents of extra-judicial killings. That will set the stage for better
cooperation between police and community. Community policing must be built on community trust.

Jamaica can learn from countries that have adhered to a low threshold of violence. It should not be the sole burden of the police to reduce crime. The Minister of National Security, the Police Commissioner and criminal justice researchers should lead the country in a crusade to further bring down the murder rate. But invariably that entails in depth analysis of the crime problem and identifying coercive and non-coercive measures that will contribute to making communities more wholesome and more robust.