

# POLICE REFORM IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN

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For many of the countries of the region, from the Bahamas and Puerto Rico in the north, to Jamaica, Dominican Republic and Haiti in the central Caribbean, down the archipelago of islands to Trinidad and Tobago and on to Guyana on mainland Latin America, the level and "nature" of violent criminality are now serious concerns. Perhaps as worrying, are the growing fear of crime, and the developing reputations of a number of countries as violent places where locals and visitors alike are at great risk of serious criminal victimization (cf. Lee 2001; McElroy 2001; King 2001). For some policy makers, this problem may be further complicated by the movement towards the CARICOM Single Market and Economy in which the free movement of people could facilitate the free movement of criminals within the region.

The responses to these very complex problems have largely been based on the idea that more effective deployment and management of the criminal justice system is the key to crime control. This approach suffers from a number of limitations. It is now well known and generally accepted that an appropriate response to crime has to be comprehensive and multi-dimensional and anchored in a detailed understanding of the crime problem of the particular country. But improving the effectiveness of the criminal justice systems

and particularly the police services are vital components of any effort to improve conflict management, public safety and the quality of justice.

This paper will try to make a case for police reform, sketch the broad outlines of the programmatic options for reform, and finally, discuss some of the process issues, that is, how best to approach the business of getting a programme of change accepted by the police services and ultimately institutionalized. The idea here is not to be too detailed or too definitive, but rather to pitch the discussion at a fairly general level.

## **The Crime Problem and the Case for Police Reform**

Any discussion of police reform ought to begin with the state of crime. The reason for this is that the primary justification for reform is the ineffectiveness and at times inappropriateness of the responses of the police to crime and thus the need to improve the levels of public safety and quality of justice (in some instances improving the quality of justice may be sufficient reason for reform).

The traditional pattern of criminal offending in the Caribbean has been characterized by low rates of violent crime and relatively high rates of property crimes.

Thus generally in most states of the region, the ratio of violent to property crimes, tend to vary between 1:5 and 1:10. This is similar to the pattern in the developed countries and therefore is easily accepted by the local populations, arriving visitors and foreign agencies as "normal." Theft and pecuniary motives are regarded as quite comprehensible and even civilized; high rates of social violence on the other hand, tend to conjure up images of impulsiveness, unpredictability, dangerousness and perhaps (when racialised) even savagery.

Tourist victimization in the countries for which there are readily available data, including Jamaica and Barbados, has largely conformed to this pattern. Unlike some other tourist destinations, even idealized ones such as Hawaii, where tourist victimization rates are higher than the victimization rates for the local population, in the Caribbean (with the possible exception of the USVI), the rates of tourist victimization have been, and still are, fairly low and certainly much lower than the rates for the local populations. For example, in 1999, only 0.01% and 0.07% of all visitors to Jamaica and Barbados respectively were reportedly victimized. The pattern of crimes against tourists tends to be similar to the pattern of crimes against locals. Thus for example, in 1999, while the general rates of victimization of both locals and visitors are lower in Jamaica than Barbados, the rate of

violent victimization is higher in the former, with 43% of all crimes against tourists being violent, while the proportion for Barbados was 25%. In general, the old pattern of criminal offending still remains and is not in general regarded as being particularly threatening.

As hinted at above, this pattern may however be changing for the worse. It has already changed quite sharply in Jamaica where in 1999, violent crimes accounted for 41% of all crimes (*Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica* 1999:23:3). The Bahamas, St Kitts and Nevis, Trinidad and Tobago and even St. Lucia have all at various times experienced serious bouts of violent crime and recent tendencies in Barbados would seem to suggest that it too is not immune to this problem. The instability of the old crime patterns and the hint of change are most evident in the movement of the homicide rates.

Since the mid-1980s, at least four Commonwealth Caribbean countries have experienced periods of very high homicide rates (see Table 1). A rate of 20\100,000 may be regarded as being high by Latin American standards and *very high* by Commonwealth Caribbean standards given that the mean rate for the region is rarely above 10\100,000 and that the region is usually compared with other tourist destinations where the rate is usually much lower than this (that is, 10\100,000).

**Table 1. Homicide Rates for Ten Caribbean Countries,  
(per 100,000 Population), 1995-1998**

Country	1985	1990	1995	1998
Bahamas	29	53	...	22
Barbados	6	12	5	8
Cayman Islands	10	11	9	10
Dominica	5	4	8	3
Grenada	9	10	8	3
Jamaica	17	21	31	33
St Kitts and Nevis	...	9	31	20
Trinidad and Tobago	10	8	12	10
Guyana	...	26	16	18
Turks and Caicos Is.	...	15	7	4

**Source:** Interpol Reports for the respective years. Countries such as Antigua, which do not submit regular reports to INTERPOL are excluded.

**Note:** The rates for Trinidad are somewhat doubtful but the author was unable to check them against the official data published by the Government of that country.

These data trends suggest a strong relationship between drug trafficking and homicidal violence. The period of rapid acceleration in the murder rate corresponds with the period of greatest expansion (and competitiveness) in the crack cocaine business (see Table 2) and its transshipment via the region, and associated with this, a mushrooming of organized crime and more complex inter-island and international crime networks.

The homicide data suggests that there may be an interesting pattern of violence displacement as the trafficking routes shift across the region (and thus evidence of insufficient regional coordination on law enforcement). The Bahamas was the first major Caribbean site for the transshipment of

hard drugs from Latin America to the big markets in the USA as its close proximity and heavy traffic to and from Miami and other US cities made this process much easier for the traffickers. As is usually the case with drug-rich organized crime, the traffickers attempted, with considerable success, to corrupt the police service and government officials in an effort to convert them into facilitators of the trade. In the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, the murder rate in the Bahamas increased rapidly to a high of 53/100,000, which remains the highest ever rate in the region (see Table1). After 1992, the local environment became more hostile to drug trafficking and thereafter some of this activity seemed to have shifted somewhat to Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and St Kitts. According to recent reports, Guyana is now currently in

**Table 2. Cocaine Seizures in the Selected Countries, 1995-99 (Kilograms)**

Country	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Bahamas	392	115	2,565	3,247	1,860
Belize	845	470	2,691	1,221	37
Cayman Islands	143	2,219	1,054	1,221	6,220
Jamaica	570	254	414	1,143	2,455
St. Kitts/Nevis	6	0	150	1	9
Dominica	7	3	101	29	83
St. Lucia	27	20	8	58	98
Barbados	248	36	88	35	141
Grenada	4	9	213	3	37
Guyana	51	91	66	3,222	38
Trinidad	95	180	31	79	137
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,488</b>	<b>3,388</b>	<b>7,381</b>	<b>10,359</b>	<b>11,114</b>

**Source:** Caribbean Drug Control Coordination Mechanism, 2000.

danger of being visited by this drug-related violence. The pattern of displacement and the trail of violence and corruption are fairly clear. For example, the sharp decline in cannabis production in Jamaica seems to have been accompanied by a sharp increase in Guyana (see Table 3). One should be very careful in the use of data on drug production and interdiction as there may be double counting of volumes transshipped via more than one Caribbean country thereby inflating the regional totals (the same shipment may be moved via Trinidad and Jamaica), controlled shipments added are often added to the totals and they may be subject to political manipulation by various bureaucratic interests. For these reasons different sources

may yield different estimates and even different trend lines. These difficulties make it difficult to determine the meaning of the data. They are the best we have, and until better quality data are available, we use them – but with some skepticism.

Just as the increase in violence in the late 1980s to the mid 1990s was associated with the growth in the international drug trade, so too the decline in the homicide rate in a number of countries (since the mid-1990s) may be associated with changes in the trade. Since the mid 1990s there has been a general decline in cannabis production and exports as reflected in the seizures (see Table 3). This was accompanied by a softening of the



**Table 3. Cannabis Seizures in the Selected Countries, 1995-99 (Kilograms)**

Country	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Bahamas	3,536	2,606	3,763	2,598	3,500
Belize	40	202	263	1,557	400
Cayman Islands	2,673	3,188	3,423	4,063	5,100
Jamaica	90,737	31,587	24,729	35,911	22,740
St. Kitts/Nevis	3	5	67	31	16
Dominica	499	136	405	361	106
St. Lucia	102	326	622	352	393
Barbados	856	3,083	1,092	96	745
Grenada	1,769	191	123	127	202
Guyana	10,995	52,377	20,179	8,860	3,954
Trinidad	594	11,408	3,120	1,850	1,558
<b>Total</b>	<b>111,804</b>	<b>105,109</b>	<b>57,786</b>	<b>55,806</b>	<b>38,714</b>

**Source:** Caribbean Drug Control Coordination Mechanism, 2000.

cocaine market in the USA and according to the World Drug Report (2000) a consequent decline in the volume of this drug being transshipped through the region (although Table 3 reports increased seizures). These changes may partly account for the significant decline in the homicide rate in a number of countries in the region (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

Some countries have been able to recover fairly quickly before organized crime is able to plant deep roots and a culture of corruption develops, while in others, the situation remains very complicated even after shifts in the trafficking of hard drugs. For example, while the Bahamas seem to have dislocated the drug trafficking networks which operated in that

country resulting in lower homicide rates, in Jamaica these networks have become deeply embedded and gang violence is a feature of urban life.

In order to control organised crime, our societies are forced to rely heavily on the police forces. Yet, a general corruption of the police forces usually accompanies these shifts in drug trafficking activity. This has been fairly well documented in the case of the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago (see Scott 1987; O'Dowd 1991) and St Kitts (Lee 2000). This corrosive process in turn tends to make these police forces more ineffective in controlling crime. More detailed analyses of the crime patterns in each country are required in order

to estimate what type and proportion of these crimes are amenable to police action and to elaborate more effective and appropriate strategic and tactical responses. Good crime control policies are always informed by good research.

Another effect of the drug corruption and the consequent decline in police effectiveness is a loss of respect for the police among the general population. In the wake of the first wave of cocaine trafficking in the late 1980s, and in the case of a few countries such as Jamaica, a prior wave of ganja trafficking, we are now confronted with the fallout in the police forces and the urgency to reform them. Recent surveys of the attitudes of Caribbean publics to their police services and criminal justice systems more generally, suggests that these populations view their police services as being somewhat problematic and in need of reform. One such survey of ten Caribbean countries by a team of researchers contracted to the IADB, found that while there was considerable variation in the perceptions of the state of the police and criminal justice systems across the region, with respect to issues of promptness of response, fairness and integrity, in general, the performance ratings were fair to poor. As the report notes, "even the top performers received a modest rating" (IADB 2000:2). Barbados and St. Vincent and the Grenadines were the top performers and Jamaica and Guyana the worst. And with regard to the levels of public confidence in the ability and willingness of the police to protect households from crime and uphold the civil rights of the population, Jamaica, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago were rated as poor. Only Barbados and the Bahamas fared fairly well on these measures (IADB 2000:5).

## **Justification for Reform**

As indicated earlier, the case for reform does not rest on the purely moral ground of simply wanting to clean up corruption, but rather to improve public safety. The primary justification is to control the crime problem and to improve the effectiveness of the system within a democratic tradition. I believe the latter point is important, as under great public pressure, in the more problem-prone countries, crime control responses have tended to a drift in an unproductive authoritarian direction. Reform projects allow for considered avoidance of this and for a democratic reshaping of policing.

Reform would also have the effect of improving the status of the police in our societies. An examination of the history of policing and the experiences of other countries would support this claim. Successful reform would also reduce conflicts with and pressures from external law enforcement, state and human rights agencies. The present tensions between Jamaica and Amnesty International is an example of how an outmoded style of policing may generate this kind of problem.

## **Options for Reform**

Despite the differences in crime patterns across the region, the difficulties confronting the various police services and their differences in style, there are some common challenges and thus we may suggest a *general* approach, which may look quite different in the details when applied to each country. I believe the common experience and historical legacy of these police services allows for this.

My understanding of the processes in Jamaica and Trinidad suggest that the content of current reform efforts in the region tend to pull heavily on the ideas that are associated with the New Public Management (NPM). These ideas are usually transmitted by British police advisors and consultants who advocate a programme of change that is similar to the reforms that were implemented in the British police services during the 1980s. This will be discussed below, after a much wider sweep of the options for reform.

The experiences with police reform suggest that we may think of them in the following three ways:

- Sanitizing reform (may be useful where briefly touched by drug corruption and no basic difficulties of style)
- Sanitization and modernization
- Sanitization, modernization and transformation of the style of policing.

Each will be briefly discussed in turn.

### **Sanitizing Reform**

Here the focus is on a clean up of the police force and refurbishing its image. This type of reform is restorative in its intent. Its aim is usually to return the police force to a former "ideal" or preferred state. In the regular police services, where corruption was/is institutionalized, the standard fare of anti-corruption reforms simply serve to disrupt the corrupt networks and after a while the service tends to return to the old patterns of behaviour. This has been the experience in

the Caribbean. Beyond the region, for example, the New York Police Department is noted for its cycle of scandals, clean ups and the regeneration of corruption.

The most noted success case based on this kind of reform is the replacement of the "corrupt and hack-ridden" Bureau of Investigation with the FBI. According to Jerome Skolnick and James Fife (1993), the process involved: the symbolism of changing its name, firing old personnel and replacing them with new, young, well educated agents who were then properly trained in the early stages of the process, avoiding the investigation of corruption prone activity and any association with heavy gun use. The new FBI distanced itself from the political administration and projected an image of professionalism and adopted a merit system that allowed better pay than the civil service, and a good system of internal accountability (see Skolnick and Fife 1993:129-131). Here anti-corruption measures were coupled with a process of professionalization, that is, it was not a purely negative anti-corruption project, and there was a positive vision of what the transformed force would look like.

Sanitizing reforms are usually very limited in their effects, especially where there have been significant changes in the environment in which the police operates, including changes in the patterns of crime and power of drug traffickers and other groups of criminals, new challenges to public order, new expectations on the part of the publics that they serve. Where adjustments to a changed environment are needed, more fundamental change including possible changes in the style of policing are usually required. In these settings, a restorative project is hardly helpful. The modernization/

professionalization perspective offers a more positive adaptation and vision of change.

## **Sanitization and Modernization**

Modernization does not preclude sanitization and vigorous efforts to combat corruption. It may more sharply target incompetence but is unlikely to succeed without colliding with corruption. Modernization is an ongoing process. These efforts usually focus on the application of new technologies to policing, especially information technology and forensic sciences. Of course associated with the application of more advanced technologies and complex methods of criminal investigation are the need for more advanced training and higher educational requirements for police officers or at least investigators. This is the so-called process of professionalization.

As indicated above, more recently, modernization has been deeply influenced by NPM. There are two key aspects to NPM; (a) removing differences between the public and private sectors and (b) shifting the practices in the public organizations away from the traditional rule driven approach of the civil service to getting results (see Leishman, Cope and Starie 1996:11). Practically, what this has meant for police reform is: (i) sharper distinctions between "steering and rowing," policy and practice, managerial and supervisory duties. It is sharply focused on the internal relationships within organizations.

The development of Executive Agencies is an expression of this line of thinking. The application of aspects of the executive agency project to the police is expressed in the demand for greater financial independence, a

renewed attention to planning, target setting, and using these results-oriented instruments to ensure accountability are all aspects of this approach. The attempts at reform in Jamaica over the last five years is a good example of this as evidenced by the *Corporate Strategy* and *Five Year plan* of the JCF. If Jamaica is a good example of the planning processes and the documentation of the intent to implement this type of project, the Bahamas is a good example of actual implementation of a modernization initiative at the end of the century. In the case of the latter, a comprehensive, almost transformative, modernization programme was accompanied by extensive sanitization and the removal of a significant number of corrupt officers.

The difficulties with modernization programmes are that they tend to be insufficiently innovative in their application to our environments, are very costly and do not usually yield the expected results in terms of crime control and an improved quality of justice. Indeed aspects of NPM may be misapplied to the police leading to greater injustice. For example, the use of clear-up rates as a performance measure may lead to an increase in the number of unjustifiable arrests (as this is one way to improve clear-up rates)<sup>2</sup>. Most importantly, because these reforms are so inward looking, the key relationships, the need (in many cases) to remodel the relationships between the police and citizens, and police and government are left untouched by this type of reform.

## **Sanitization, Modernization and the Transformation of the Style of Policing**

In some Caribbean countries, an essential difficulty or obstacle to improved police



effectiveness is the nature of the relationships between police and citizen. More than most other occupations, policing is dependent on the citizenry – as sources of information and as witnesses. For this relationship to work well, the citizens must have a high degree of confidence and trust in their police services. This is a fundamental issue that ought to be resolved if reform is to have any significant positive impact on crime rates. I would argue that in some cases, a democratic transformation of policing style is needed.

In the Caribbean context, the democratization of policing style entails correcting for the problems in this relationship between police and citizen, namely, the systematic abuse of police powers and use of force violations, unequal status-related treatment of citizens, and more positively, greater involvement of citizens in crime related problems-solving, priority setting and so forth. These problems reflect the alienation that large sections of the populations feel towards their police services and criminal justice systems. Alienation is a product of inauthenticity or problematic relationships to institutions that are regarded as having been freely created or adopted by us. Certainly in the case of Jamaica, this applies to a large measure of our laws and the law enforcement (and I believe Jamaica is not alone in this regard). The idea of a democratic refashioning of the police services would entail, freely recreating these institutions as our own to serve our own interests and people, that is, carrying through the long neglected post-colonial project of authenticating them. These are not technical or competence related issues (which are usually addressed by modernization programmes); they are essentially value related issues, which are crucial to the quality of justice and to crime control outcomes. In his address the meeting

of the IGTF and CARICOM Ministers of National Security in 1998, David Bayley made the point that the demand for police accountability (a key principle of democratic policing) is rising throughout the World, and that this demand tends to take two forms:

- Demonstration that the police as an institution are achieving their objectives;
- Demonstration that the misbehavior of individual police officers is being investigated and punished rigorously.

Democratization entails improved accountability with regard to both, but if modernization programmes tend to focus on the first, programmes for democratizing policing are aimed at reducing the need for the second.

This issue illustrates the difficulty with crude policy transfers and canned reform projects that are taken from the experiences of the developed countries. These reform projects typically assume that the relationship between police and citizens is not problematic and that remodeling it is not essential to improved effectiveness in crime control and that all that needs to be fixed are the internal relationships within the police services, the inefficiencies and poor policing techniques (and perhaps more aggressively punish police misconduct). For this reason, their prescriptions usually centre on training as a panacea for all problems – many of which are usually mistakenly regarded as resulting from low levels of competence.

The democratization of policing in the Caribbean context should have as its major thrust, making the police more service-

oriented and more accountable to the public and in so doing, develop a more consensus-building style of policing. This idea should not be reduced to Community based policing (CBP), but an authentic CPB may facilitate a more democratic style of policing.

As much as they would represent considerable progress, these kinds of reforms by themselves would not result in dramatic changes in the rates of violent crime. They simply help to create the conditions for improved effectiveness. To capitalize on this, actual problem-solving innovations are further required. It is difficult to find a police service that embodies these changes and the content of this more democratic style of policing needs to be more clearly specified, but as noted above, the complex of ideas associated with community based policing provide an approximate "model" that may be used to help to shape this transformation. We may now turn to the process issues.

## Process Issues

Reform is not an event. It is usually a long and difficult process and to succeed at it one should have a clear sense of process, or at least be able to identify the key process issues. As is well known, successful change processes usually progress over three distinct stages. First the institution has to be prepared for the process, that is, it must achieve a state of readiness for the reforms. This state involves the development of positive beliefs, attitudes and intentions towards the proposed programme of change. The second stage/phase involves the adoption of the programme of change, that is, beginning to exhibit new patterns of behaviour, even if on a trial basis. The third and final stage involves the institutionalization of the reforms and is reflected in the degree of commitment to the

new. There are of course various institutionalizing strategies, but from the Jamaican experience, I would highlight the need to adjust the reward system away from the reinforcement of the old to the consolidation of the new. For example, systematic complaints against an officer could be negatively factored into any later decisions regarding his/her promotion, while rights-regarding behaviour, contributions to new tactical innovations in crime prevention and control could be rewarded. A second strategy is to demonstrate the superiority of the new via small wins in model zones or specially designated experimental police divisions.

Change is usually viewed as threatening and therefore the best reform project may fail if the process issues are not properly considered. For example, readiness ought to involve not just the police services but also all the key players who influence public policy in this field and who have a major stake in the outcomes. There are at least three sets of important players: the parliament and political parties, the police, and the NGOs and organized publics. In the Caribbean experience, consensus among the political elite is vital. No political party wishes to alienate the police. Thus in a context of political competitiveness between the parties, those officers who oppose reform may thus seek to maximize the political price that any reformist administration may have to pay for reform and in so doing, help to frustrate the process. Consensus building helps to avoid this problem, legitimates the reform process and strengthens the authority of the reformers who lead the process.

Reform efforts tend to stand a good chance of succeeding and becoming institutionalized where:

- It produces a relative advantage (reduced crime rates, improved working conditions and so forth).
- The costs are lower than that of the existing arrangements or the new systems are more efficient.
- It may be implemented on a trial basis.

Successful reform ought to yield the following outcomes:

- Reducing corruption generated tensions with our international allies
- Displacing drug trafficking to more vulnerable countries
- Improved public safety and reduced fear of criminal victimization
- Improvement to the level of public support for the police
- Improvement in the status ranking of the police officer

## Conclusion

Objectively as well as subjectively (if we are to go by the data from the surveys of public opinion cited earlier) police reform is an important and urgent issue in a number of territories. Already in some cases, sections of the public are developing the view that reform is pointless and that some police services need to be completely disbanded and new services organized. In the American experience, following the prohibition and politically related corruption of the 1930s in the Chicago police department, a blue ribbon citizens

commission which was established to make recommendations on how to fix the problem, called for a total disbandment and firing of all 4,000 officers and to "concentrate upon a fresh start, unimpaired by even a trace of the old tradition" (Skolnick and Fife 1993:129).

This is certainly an unenviable position to be in, since deterioration should be arrested long before this point. But a country and police department could be in a worse situation, since after a lengthy period of decay, even an attempt at sweeping transformation may be problematic. In Haiti, for example, given the terrible state that the police service was in, transformation not reform was the only acceptable way to proceed. And even then, change came so late that policing came to be equated with the old style of policing and modes of conduct. Thus the new Haitian police is modeling the behaviour of the old disbanded police. The difficulty here is in even being able to imagine a new and more democratic mode of policing.

In most cases in the Commonwealth Caribbean, it is still appropriate to attempt to reform the police. In some cases, certainly in the case of Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, a core of competent officers who are supportive of reform, may be found. With support, effective leadership and clear signals that there is a determination to see through the necessary changes, these officers could quickly develop into a critical mass for change. Where this critical mass is not so evident, it could be developed as part of the process. Reform may not be without its political risks, but it is not an impossible task. There are good possibilities for success if there is careful research and planning, innovativeness, tact, good leadership, and quick learning from the inevitable mistakes that will be made along the way.

## *End Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Although the report of the Caribbean drug control Coordination Mechanism for 2000 states that there “was a sharp rise in cocaine transshipments through the region (see page 3), the data presented in the report (see Annex 1) suggests that since 1997, there has been a general decline.

<sup>2</sup> Another way is to falsify the data and in so doing subvert the methods of accountability associated with NPM.



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