

The Crisis of Public Safety in Jamaica and the Prospects for Change

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For many of us, the present time—a full decade after the collapse of the Berlin wall and the liberation of South Africa, two decades after the retreat of most of the military dictatorships in Latin America and Africa, some three decades into the new technological revolution and the flourishing of what the United States and the developed countries call their “new economies,” and four decades after the complete collapse of colonialism as a global system—is one for reflection on where we are as peoples and countries and where we ought to go. This is particularly true of developing countries such as Jamaica, where in this new setting disadvantaged groups must focus on the challenges ahead while drawing strength from the achievements of the past.

Against this background, there seems to be a developing consensus among academics, policymakers, and indeed the general public

that Jamaica is in a deep multidimensional crisis. Perhaps most fundamental and far-reaching in its impact is the economic crisis. This is evident in the protracted stagnation in the economy, the massive debt burden, disinvestments, and the highly vulnerable productive base—all symptoms of a somewhat antiquated economy.¹

Although Jamaica has been politically stable since Independence, Jamaican political scientists have argued that like most Commonwealth Caribbean countries (with a few notable exceptions), Jamaica is confronted by a profound political crisis, manifested in low and declining levels of public confidence in the major institutions of the state.² The crisis also finds social expression in the high unemployment rate, which has remained between 16 percent and 26 percent for the past twenty-five years. This, accompanied by high levels of underemployment; an education system

that has failed to meet the needs of the society; and, perhaps most of all, the high rate of violent crimes, may well be characterized as a crisis of public safety.³

It may therefore be reasonably argued that Jamaica is confronted by a general crisis. This crisis is based in part on the failure to transform the economy and in part on the ineffectiveness of institutions of the state and their method of conducting politics (which is characterized by patron-client methods of mobilization). Having neglected to effect these postcolonial transformations, or at least reengineer some key institutions, Jamaica is now confronted by the added difficulties of globalization. These are not limited to economic challenges but are also apparent in the field of crime control, where an antiquated police force is confronted by complex transnational crime networks.

As I have noted elsewhere, Jamaicans tend to project their general insecurities on crime, which is seen not simply as the most acute expression of a general crisis but as a signifier of impending societal collapse.⁴ It is therefore a good window on the current state of the society. In this article, I will try to (a) briefly describe the most worrying aspects of the crime problem, or the crisis of public safety; and (b) sketch the outlines of an explanation of this problem and in particular the structural changes that help to account for it. The article concludes by highlighting the implications of this analysis for an appropriate response to this problem. My intent is to simply provide an overview of the current situation.

The Crisis of Public Safety

There are various troubling aspects to the crime problem in Jamaica: the development of organized crime and its involvement in the drug trade, extortion, and the protection rackets; more sophisticated and complex net-

works engaged in white-collar and corporate crimes; and the interrelations between some of these crime networks and elements in the political parties, business "community," and criminal justice system. But despite these serious problems, the crime problem in Jamaica can essentially be reduced to one of violent crime. In the current context, this remains the primary concern of the majority of Jamaicans. The murder rate in Jamaica has risen from 8.2 per 100,000 in 1970 to 34 per 100,000 in 2000.⁵ Unlike the trend in rape and some of the other violent crimes, the murder rate has not been very volatile but rather (with the exception of the period immediately after the electoral violence of 1980) has steadily increased, peaking at 41 per 100,000 in 1997 and since then declining by some 15 percent.⁶ This trend is consistent with more global patterns, as United Nations reports suggest that for a similar period, homicides increased by some 20 percent globally.⁷ In the case of Jamaica, however, the magnitude of the increase makes the country somewhat of an outlier. Jamaica's exceptionally high murder rate stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the Commonwealth Caribbean, where the murder rate normally ranges between 1 and 10 per 100,000. Generally, the Commonwealth Caribbean has tended to be less violent, and certainly less homicidal, than the United States and its dependencies in the Caribbean, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.⁸

As is the case with many of the more urbanized Caribbean territories such as Trinidad and Tobago, most of the incidents of murder and other forms of violence in Jamaica tend to be concentrated in cities. In the year 2000, some 62 percent of all murders in Jamaica were committed in the capital city of Kingston, which accounts for only 26 percent of the island's population.⁹ Most of these were further concentrated in the most improv-

erished areas of the city where the people, especially the young males, are largely excluded from the labor force.

In these areas, there is little respect for the police force, which has (despite the efforts at reform and public relations) developed a reputation for abuse and violation of the rights of the urban poor. This distrust of the police has meant that, in many instances, the people in these areas are left to their own devices and tend to resort to self-help in settling conflicts—which at times only leads to more prolonged and deadly disputes. In these areas, people are forced to live beyond the effective protection of the policing services provided by the state.

By any objective measure (and certainly by measures of individuals' subjective responses and fear of criminal victimization), this situation may be regarded as a crisis of public safety. As I have noted elsewhere, the profound nature of this crisis is expressed not simply in the extraordinarily high murder rate and rate of violent crimes more generally, or the declining level of confidence in the police force and criminal justice system, but in the development of alternate institutions for dealing with the acute problem of social violence, including self-policing and informal "community courts" that exercise a wide range of punishment options.

The reduced confidence in the state, and especially the police, is compounded by recurrent scandals associated with elite deviance and criminality in both the private and public sectors, which invariably go unpunished, consistent with the colonial tradition; police action is downwardly directed and upwardly constrained. Perhaps the worst example of this in recent times was the collapse of the financial sector in the early to mid-1990s, which was due not solely to corruption but was strongly associated with it. The most notorious offenders were able to get away with

fleeing the public and indeed had their banks and insurance companies bailed out by the government after they had systematically channeled huge sums from these corporations into their various private firms. Both the economic and political elites are implicated in this and other types of corruption.

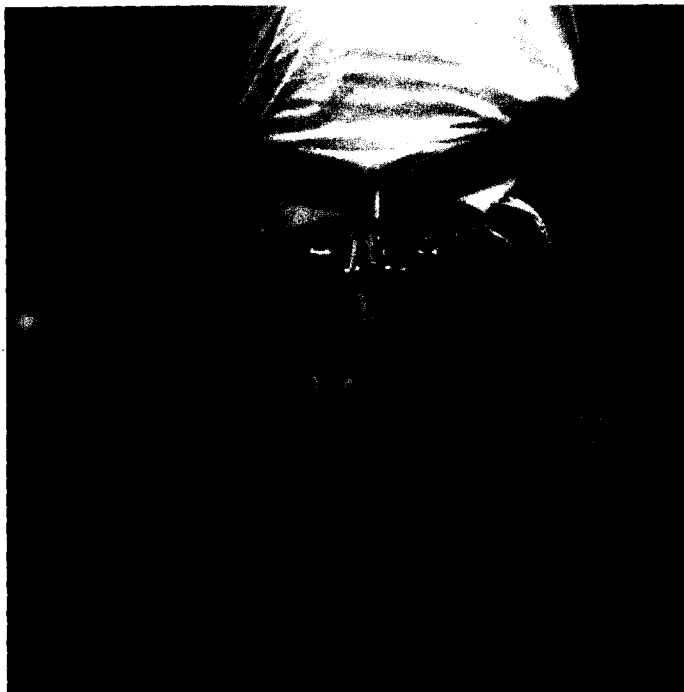
In the case of the political elite, the apparent mushrooming of political corruption is associated with the political project of 1993. The purpose of this project seemed to be to continue the process of decolonization of the society by putting an end to the domination of the economy by the old white elite and using the levers of the state to open up new opportunities in the financial sector for black entrepreneurs. It was expected that this group would exhibit a greater commitment to the development of the country and a new dynamism and innovativeness that would drive the kind of economic transformation that is needed.¹⁰ This project will have to be completed at some point, but the concrete context in which it was attempted was characterized by a triumphal and insufficiently considered liberalization, and the weak regulatory framework was compounded by efforts by sections of the political elite to cash in on this process by converting their political capital to financial capital. The upshot of this process was a significant growth in elite corruption. This perception of endemic elite corruption has led to instances of individual accomplishment, material accumulation, and general social "success" often being attributed to state-aided corruption or drug-related criminality. It is commonly held that regardless of class, at the individual level, there is invariably a disjuncture between values and accepted norms on one hand and behavior on the other.

Understanding the Problem

As the crime problem in Jamaica may be more narrowly defined in terms of a crisis of public safety, explanations of this problem tend to focus on violent street crimes.

The high concentration of the incidents of violent crime in the Kingston ghetto communities is hardly a chance occurrence. These are the areas where the poor, unskilled, long-term unemployed, and marginalized citizens are concentrated. Many reside in these areas because they are poor, and their children continue to be poor because they reside there. Historically, these were the areas where rural immigrants flocked in search of higher-paying industrial and service jobs, uprooted by the earlier crises in sugar and the continuing historical downturn of agricultural production more generally.

This concentration of urban joblessness, poverty, poor educational opportunities, and general marginalization is not new. It is the outcome of a long process, which has now matured and become more criminogenic. As early as 1893, a "representative" of the *Gleaner*, Jamaica's oldest surviving newspaper, described the western section of the city of Kingston as the "notorious quarter." According to his report, "A good many persons who reside there have no regular occupation, but live from hand to mouth, trusting to Providence for something to turn up."¹¹ Describing a section of this "quarter," then known as Smith's Village, he reported: "In the old days



Detained

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it bore a bad name and was the quarter where the police were most likely to make enquiries when anything untoward happened for which they had not a clue. In fact it was the home of wickedness and vice of the most depraved description."¹² Despite the progress after Independence, more contemporary accounts paint a similar picture of joblessness, destitution, and general exclusion and stigmatization.¹³

The optimism of the early postcolonial years helped to fuel further rural-urban migration, but few succeeded in finding viable jobs and transforming their circumstances. Put euphemistically, opportunities were at best severely constrained. By opportunities, I mean primarily, but not exclusively, economic opportunities. For the people, especially in the post-Independence period (which is when expectations understandably increased), it was a search for opportunities

to acquire all the valued social goods, including the respect and social status that have long been denied them in the color-class hierarchical order of colonial society. These goods were to be acquired legitimately via access to quality education and good jobs—if not by them, then certainly by their children. These were the expectations.

Today, four decades after Independence, although there has been significant improvement in the quality of life of the general population, the city appears to have become more socially bipolar, and in some of these communities of the urban poor, the unemployment rate among young adult males exceeds 70 percent. The experience is not of cyclical bouts of unemployment but rather chronic long-term unemployment and loss of skills and of work discipline. Many are therefore not simply unemployed, but unemployable—excepting in low-paying jobs. The situation here is not completely unlike Julius Wilson's description of the black inner-city ghettos of the northern United States during "deindustrialization" and the reforms of the 1980s.¹⁴

As a response to this situation, an alternate opportunity structure has developed. This involves drug dealing and trafficking as well as other illegal and informal noncriminal activity. Much of this informal economic activity takes place in a gray area where the legal and the illegal, the formal and informal, intersect and overlap. It therefore follows that not just poor people and big ghetto drug dealers are involved in these activities. Money laundering, for example, may involve complex transactions between lawyers, bankers, construction firms, and other players in the formal economy. In the mid-1990s, this informal sector was crudely (under)estimated to make up 25 percent of the national economy.

A drug dealer or informal banker who relied solely on trust would be quickly put out of business. These informal transactions are

only enforceable by violence or a credible threat of its use. A good example of this is informal banking, of which there are some relatively large operations in Kingston. Here loans are made without any written documentation. Only someone who is able to marshal a credible threat of violence is able to succeed at such a business. Examination of the homicide data suggests that a large proportion of the murders committed in Jamaica—and especially in Kingston—are due to breaches of informal and illegal economic transactions of various types. They are conflict related, not traditional victimizing violence.

This demand for services that ensure that informal and illegal transactions are honored and for protection from persons who may violate the trust without which economic activity is unable to take place has led to the rise to prominence of a number of entrepreneurs of violence. The protection rackets have proliferated. Although this may have generated considerable violence in earlier years, reputations have now been established, and the main organized crime networks in this field have been able to offer protection services more on the basis of their reputation and capacity for violence than on actual violence. But their power is more entrenched in these communities where many of these "big dons" (I prefer the Americanism "super dons") and their organizations have exploited the neglect of the state agencies and provided various welfare and other services that were historically provided by the state to the people in these communities. Such services may range from the setting up and staffing of schools, informal policing, the provision of employment on state projects, and periodic treats for children and old people to even informal banking.

The corruption, violence, and disorder associated with these processes and the devel-

opment of crime-supportive networks in many of the ghetto communities have contributed to the further stigmatization of these inner-city communities and their residents as being prone to expressive violence and various forms of criminality.

Although these processes and types of conflicts primarily account for the dramatic increases in the homicide rate, there are of course other sources of conflict over less tangible but no less important issues, such as respect and "turf," which tend to involve mainly youth gangs. These conflicts may at times escalate to intercommunity "wars" and, depending on the political geography of the area, may develop political undertones, thereby determining how such conflicts are defined by the people. During times of "war," the protagonists may simply be seen as community defenders or protectors whose activities are not regarded as ordinary criminality. Indeed, some of the more conflict-ridden communities make a distinction between "fighters" and criminals. Such communities tend to protect their fighters, some of whom may engage in ordinary crimes in other settings. The inner-city communities make these distinctions, but to the general public, these gunmen and fighters—and in some cases entire communities—are associated with violence or implicated in violent intergroup relationships. In this regard, the urban poor are contrasted in popular consciousness with the virtuous, hard-working, rural poor. This stigmatization of the urban poor marks a further retrogression from what was described earlier as constrained opportunity to what may now be properly described as blocked opportunity.

The stigmatization of the communities has many consequences for their residents. It means that they are subject to overpolicing and a fair degree of harassment based on a lower threshold of criminal guilt being ap-

plied to them relative to other citizens. They are thus more likely to be unjustly arrested or detained. The stigmatization of these areas makes it difficult for persons who live in them to acquire jobs in an already tight labor market. Repeated involuntary contact with the police and time spent in jails makes formal job access even more improbable. This would seem to be true for even well-educated young males. Earlier, access to the elite high schools would have meant access to wider social networks, which are useful for job access and social mobility and acceptance into the middle strata. This has changed. With the recent education reforms, more students are required to attend school in their neighborhood, thereby limiting their social networks. There is little status reward for completing secondary education at these schools, and, as Patricia Anderson has noted in this journal, for young males the economic returns on education have been declining. This is what is concretely meant by "blocked opportunity." In these circumstances, it is remarkable that people still value education and remain committed to work even while their economic lives are based on "hustling."

These processes are replicated internationally in the Caribbean diaspora—in England and in the United States. The blocked opportunities in Jamaica tend to push many young persons from the inner-city communities of Kingston and Montego Bay to search for opportunities abroad. As they usually migrate illegally, and as their only social contacts in some of these countries may be operatives in the American and English shadow economies, similar processes and the accompanying stigmatization are repeated in these contexts. But this time, the stigma is not an internal area or "class" stigma but rather a national stigma (as Jamaicans) with a racial subtext.

Prospects for the Future

Historically, the Jamaican state has tended to respond to this violence and criminality with ineffective repressive measures, including police violence, and with insufficient regard for justice and the rights of the people. This is, however, often coupled with the distribution of state largesse using patron-client methods that only serve to strengthen the power of the dons and reinforce the existing violence-prone relationships at the community level (and of course corrupt the political process). An analytic description of this dynamic is beyond the scope of this short article. The simple point that I wish to make here is that the responses of the state have been part of the problem.

The problem is acute, and the downturn in the rate of serious crimes in the past three years and the benefits from the peace process may easily be reversed. Without changes in the relationships between the formerly "warring" groups, the dismantling of the so-called garrison communities,¹⁵ more effective control of governmental corruption, and the creation of increased opportunities for the inner-city poor and fair access to these opportunities, it is very easy to return to the old ways—especially under the stresses of an election campaign.

Despite its prevalence in Kingston, violence may still be effectively controlled and reversed. It is largely conflict based and is still largely an adaptation to the harsh conditions of inner-city life. We may distinguish between behavior that is situationally adaptive and behavior that is cultural, and even between cultural phenomena that are situationally adaptive and those that are ingrained and so internalized that they are unconsciously transmitted. Although there is some conscious modeling of the dons, especially those who are given to a measure of social banditry, by and large the available evidence

suggests that the resort to violence as a means of settling disputes is rational and situationally adaptive. Strong impressionistic evidence, as well as the limited available research data, suggests that most persons in the inner-city communities subscribe to the common values of the society as expressed in the strong commitment to education and to meaningful work and regard the violation of societal norms as wrong.

As part of a research project on violence in the inner-city communities, the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies organized a large number of graduate students to give something back to the primary research site by organizing remedial classes for young people so that they could complete their high school education. Not only have these classes blossomed, and a mini Saturday-night Open University emerged, but also some of the neighborhood "protectors"—"fighters" and indeed some of the ordinary criminals—requested that a special literacy class be organized for them. Contrary to popular perceptions, the majority of persons in these areas still strongly hold to the values and norms of the society, and the middle-aged and older folk are as conventional as their middle-class age sets. This conclusion is supported by a small survey of three of these communities that was conducted by a colleague at the University of the West Indies and myself. These value commitments are, however, often not consistent with behavior. This pattern of inconsistency is not peculiar to the urban poor. Individuals in all social classes will violate various laws and engage in "soft" forms of corruption—occasionally and even systematically—while maintaining a self-image of commitment to law and order. It does not mean that they do not really have these values or even normative commitments, but rather that they are confronted with the conflicts derived from this inconsistency and

may resolve them in different ways, for example, by justifying these types of behavior as a response to systems that do not work. Among the socially marginalized, these tensions may eventually be resolved by a full-blown subcultural rejection of societal norms and of what some term "middle-class hypocrisy," that is, the duality of preaching law and order while behaving in a contrary manner, or regarding some types of illegality as tolerable but stigmatizing others that are more associated with the poor. This process of critically engaging the traditional middle-class values and norms is clearly in motion. What is remarkable, however, is that this duality still remains and that the problem appears to be largely behavioral and not culturally embedded (this is not to suggest that social organization and culture are unimportant). If I am correct about this, then a reversal of the high levels of violence may still be possible without resort to heavy-handed authoritarian-type state-administered coercion and violence.

A second reason for some optimism is that other countries that have been in more difficult situations have been able to successfully control and reverse their rates of violence. There are some such success cases in the Caribbean. For example, the Bahamas were able to contain their drug-related violence by removing a corrupt and facilitating government and by removing some of the more corrupt senior officers in their police force. Similarly, Trinidad and Tobago have had some success in controlling their homicide rate and are presently making efforts to sanitize and modernize their police service. These are modest and somewhat limited efforts, but there are now some positive Caribbean experiences on how to deal with these problems. The difficulty is that these experiences have not been sufficiently distilled and used to consolidate the process in the countries that have

had some recent successes and to inform policy in the other more problematic territories.

But perhaps the most interesting and instructive development from a Jamaican perspective is the continued decline in violent crime in Jamaica since 1997. This decline began in the western section of the capital city of Kingston. This is significant, as since the 1970s this area has been particularly prone to violence. Between 1997 and 2000, the number of homicides in this area has declined from 192 incidents to 61, that is, by approximately two-thirds. Thus although in 1997 Western Kingston accounted for some 19 percent of all homicides committed in that year, in 2000 it accounted for only 7 percent.¹⁶ The results are not as dramatic in other areas of the city, but since 1998, the decline has been consistent.

Although the police have made commendable efforts to improve their approach to crime control, this outcome has largely been the result of nonpolicing initiatives on the part of the citizens and their leaders. A "peace process" was initiated by the leaders of the area, including the dons, with the active support of some of their political representatives and party officials. This effort was massaged by the use of state contracts (to the dons) as a reward for accepting the peace project. It yielded immediate results: In the peace areas, the rate of violent crime plummeted.

This kind of initiative is not new to this area. There have been similar efforts in the past, which did not last, as they simply involved the smoking of "peace pipes" and the holding of festive activities (which had the questionable purpose of prompting interaction between the hostile communities). In the past, however, no efforts were made to elaborate procedures for dealing with new disputes between groups, there were no measures for the enforcement of the peace process (peace was an event), and these initiatives were



Behind the Wire

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viewed with suspicion by the political leadership, the security forces, and indeed sections of the general public. Today some of these problems have been solved, but not without new complications. In many areas of Kingston, mechanisms have to be elaborated for the handling of conflicts between groups and communities. With a few exceptions, these mechanisms rest firmly in the hands of the dons and gangsters in these areas. Some of the peace violations therefore tend to be settled with undue violence and are not always fairly handled. In some instances, the power of the dons is being further entrenched as they take on new roles such as policing their communities. The seeds are therefore present for future conflicts, including conflicts with the state security forces.

To respond to these developments, innovations and adaptations are required of the state criminal justice agencies. These must be based on a recognition of the power of the

communities to deal with the problems of violence and criminality and an effort to bring them within the sphere of the law, transforming the state agencies to make them more service oriented and accessible to the public. After all, these developments are all local initiatives. Real change and a sustained reversal of the rate of violent crime requires changes in national policy and a truly national effort. For example, as treating the former community "fighters" as ordinary criminals only widens the chasm between the police and the citizens in these areas, perhaps it may be worthwhile considering them a special category of (political) offenders and granting them amnesty. This would

also help to deepen the peace process by giving these community fighters a greater stake in it and facilitate more effective law enforcement by separating them from the ordinary criminals. At the moment, some of these persons feel very vulnerable to arrest for past crimes and may work to undermine the process.

There may be many problems with this proposal that would need to be sorted out, but I believe it should be seriously considered. Despite arguments to the contrary, it is not too late for democratic problem-solving or to effect the kinds of transformations that are necessary to reduce the level of violent conflicts and injustice in the society. These measures may help to consolidate the "peace" and to significantly reduce the extraordinarily high homicide rate, but they would not solve Jamaica's crime problem or bring Jamaica in line with the more peaceful and crime-free Caribbean countries. The latter is a much

longer term project that would require more profound social, economic, and political transformations.

Notes

1. For a discussion of this aspect, see Claremont Kirton, and Michael Witter, "The Informal Economy of Jamaica," in Stanley Latta and Marie Freckleton, eds., *Caribbean Economic Development: The First Generation* (Kingston: Ian Randle Press, 1993).

2. See Brian Meeks, *From Black Power to Abu Bakr* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1996), for an example of this line of argument. This discussion has been taking place for some time, and an alternate viewpoint may be found in Carl Stone, "Does Jamaica Have a Political Crisis?" *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (1988).

3. Data taken from Planning Institute of Jamaica, *Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica*, for the respective years.

4. See Anthony Harriott, "The Fear of Crime in a Reputedly Violent Environment," paper presented at the International Conference on Crime and Criminal Justice in the Caribbean, Bridgetown, Barbados, 1999.

5. Computed from data provided by the Statistics Unit of the Jamaica Constabulary Force.

6. Ibid.

7. See Robert Weiss, "Introduction to Criminal Justice and Globalization in the New Millennium," *Social Justice*, Vol. 27, no. 2 (2000).

8. See *The Annual Report on International Crime Statistics*, Interpol, 1998.

9. Planning Institute of Jamaica, *Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica*.

10. For a good discussion of this, see Donald Robotham, "Blackening the Jamaican Nation: The Travails of a Black Bourgeoisie in a Globalized World," *Identities*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2000).

11. See Brian Moore and Michele Johnson, eds., "Squalid Kingston 1890-1920: How the Poor Lived, Moved and Had Their Being," Department of History, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, 2001, p. 31.

12. Ibid, p. 29.

13. See Anthony Harriott, *Police and Crime Control in Jamaica: Reforming Ex-Colonial Constabularies* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2000); Horace Levy, Barry Chevannes, et al., "They Cry Respect: Urban Violence and Poverty in Jamaica," Centre for Population, Community and Social Change, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, 1996.

14. See William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

15. "Garrisoning" is a process of monopolizing political power and establishing one-party-dominant communities and constituencies. A garrison community is one in which this process has reached a high level of maturity. For a discussion of this process, see Mark Figueroa, "Garrison Communities in Jamaica 1962-1992: Their Growth and Impact on Political Culture," paper presented to the Symposium on Democracy and Democratization in Jamaica: Fifty Years of Adult Suffrage, December 6-7, 1994, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

16. Computed from data provided by the Statistics Unit of the Jamaica Constabulary Force.