



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

## Life and death in the Caribbean

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I just returned from Trinidad and Tobago, and survived to tell about my academic expedition to the tiny nation that has the unflattering distinction of ranking fifth worldwide in homicide. Also home safe are the three dozen [doctoral students](#) and the few faculty colleagues who traveled with me. Still, one female student did endure a rather scary episode on our last day away, when an aggressive stranger cornered her in a locked room. But this close encounter of the frightening kind occurred in our upscale hotel, not in some crime-ridden section of this Caribbean republic.

I write about my journey not to turn this crime blog into a travel log, but to carry further my last column concerning deterrence specifically, the question of whether the death penalty makes would-be killers think twice, assuming, of course, that they even think once. When it comes to thinking, however, it is wishful thinking for Trinis to expect that a proposed resumption of hanging will bring peace to their troubled country.

"Were we to reinstitute hangings," acting Prime Minister Jack Warner said last summer, "it will have a dent on crime. I am convinced." □ Despite the strength of his conviction, this widely-held perspective ignores both scientific research and basic logic concerning how drug dealers, gang-bangers and other predators balance risks and rewards.

At this juncture, the vast majority of homicides in Trinidad and Tobago are gang-related. One high ranking police administrator claimed that as many as 85% of homicides involved gang conflict, although estimate may be a bit overstated. Whatever the actual share, gang violence remains a major social problem in this part of the world.

Accompanied by a small group of students, I spent time at ground zero of the gang war-zone in the impoverished ward of Laventille, where rivals regularly battle over turf and drugs. Gang leaders (who asked to remain nameless) told us about crimes they committed and hits that they ordered. A veteran of the gang wars showed off his many bullet wounds that testified to his violent lifestyle. At age 34, he had exceeded street life expectancy. Others like him often don't reach their 30s, unless they are among the lucky few who manage to escape the neighborhood or the less fortunate many who change residence to some prison address.

When I asked Trini politicians for a reason why the death penalty should be resuscitated, I was told that criminals fear death. □ The young and no-so-young gang members we met are indeed careful not to venture just a few blocks away into a rival gang's territory, especially after dark. They may fear death, or at least attempt to avoid it, but it is not the threat of state-sponsored hanging that governs their day-to-day decision-making.

Deterrence is based not so much on the severity of punishment, but on the perceived likelihood that it will be administered. The street-level death penalty is real and immediate. It is of far more concern to gang members than whatever the criminal justice system might do if ever captured, convicted and sentenced to death. Those living on the violent streets of Laventille face the threat of death everyday in their neighborhood; the justice system and the ritual of hanging are the least of their worries.

Last May's general election brought a change of leadership in Trinidad and Tobago. Undoubtedly, ruling party leaders are anxious, if not desperate, to find a solution to the .soaring murder toll that surpassed 500 last year and is on a similar track thus far this year. This disturbing trend jeopardizes only the safety and well-being of he citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, but its fragile reputation as a welcoming destination for business and tourism.

The new government may actually get lucky being in the right place at the right time should the recent surge in murders subside (as most crime spikes naturally do) while the hangings are resumed. Although I pray for their sake that homicides actually do decline in number, my fear is that we would then hear a loud but misguided chorus of I told you so's.

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This is one of a series on various aspects of the death penalty. Links to previous columns:

- [Death penalty - Still racist after all these years](#)
- [Death penalty kills the budget](#)
- [Death penalty no deterrent for cop killers](#)

And more to come ...