

Police Violence in Jamaica and Grassroots Resistance

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If the Jamaican poor feel like they are being hunted by the police, they are not exaggerating.

The Jamaican police are very brutal in their [policing of the African working-class in Jamaica](#). However, oppressive conditions tend to give birth to resistance.

Jamaica's working-class reggae artistes have used their music to share the people's experience with police violence. The singer Barrington Levy accurately captures the behaviour of the cops in the song [Murderer](#). Levy reveals a common experience in working-class communities:

Dem come inna my area want to kill off the youth
Nuh dress up inna jacket and dem dress up inna tie
Come a courthouse want to tell pure lies
Dem a murderer, aah

The singer is blasting the widespread practice of police extrajudicial killings. He is also criticizing the air of respectability that the cops project in wearing suits and ties to the courthouse, while shamelessly telling lies about their coldblooded killing of the poor.



Armed police question men on the street in the market area near Tivoli. | Photo: Reuters

Jamaicans are currently observing the 6th anniversary of the [tragic Tivoli Gardens Massacre](#), which was an act of class warfare on Tivoli Gardens, a working-class community. On May 24, 2010, at least 74 civilians were killed in the *Tivoli Gardens Massacre* by a combined force of about 800 soldiers and 370 police officers. They were on a mission to capture the reputed gang leader Christopher "Dudus" Coke who was barricaded in the community under the protection of his armed confederates. Coke was being sought for extradition to the United States for drugs trafficking and gunrunning.

The residents of Tivoli Gardens have accused the cops of the *Mobile Reserve* of carrying out extrajudicial killings and other acts of brutality. Based on the investigative work of the *Office of the Public Defender*, [extrajudicial executions by the cops](#) might have claimed the lives of 44 victims of the *Tivoli Gardens Massacre*. The recently released [Report West Kingston Commission of Enquiry 2016](#) that documents the circumstances that led to the bloodbath also lends credibility to the community's claim.

The report states that the behaviour of “some members of the security forces was disproportionate, unjustified and unjustifiable,” and recommends a parliamentary apology to the “people of West Kingston and Jamaica as a whole for the excesses of the security forces.” Furthermore, the report supports the payment of reparations and provision of trauma-related counselling to the people.

Levy’s framing of his dislike for the police might appear over-the-top: “‘Cause dem a murderer, dem a vampire /They always suck out your blood.” The people of Tivoli Gardens probably felt like the prey of a bunch of bloodthirsty vampires during the atrocity.

If the Jamaican poor feel like they are being hunted by the police, they are not exaggerating. The human rights group Amnesty International states that Jamaica has one of the world’s [highest rates of fatal shootings](#) by the police. According to the document [Human Rights Watch World Report 1989](#), between 1979 and 1989 the police killed a yearly average of 208.3 Jamaicans, which was quite startling when compared with the annual figure of 700 people murdered by the cops in the United States. During that period, America’s population was 100 times larger than Jamaica’s.

Jamaica now has a population of 2.8 million people. In 2015, 106 civilians were killed by the police, according to [data from the Independent Commission of Investigations](#). In contrast, the United States with the [highest rate of lethal police shootings among global North countries](#) kills less per capita of its people than Jamaica. According to the police accountability website [Killed By Police](#), in 2015, [police officers killed 1208 civilians](#) across the United States, which had a population of [321.8 million people in 2015](#). It should be noted that America’s population is now 115 times larger than Jamaica’s.

Interestingly, the reformist democratic socialist regime of the late Michael Manley escalated the murderous tendencies of the police on working-class communities. In April 1974, the government passed the [human-rights compromising Suppression of Crime Act and the Gun Court Act](#) that gave legal cover to the culture of impunity enjoyed by the police. This culture of police violence against civilians has also been [supported by other administrations](#).

The shooting deaths are simply the most dramatic representation of police violence. However, physical assaults, arbitrary detention and arrests, torture, humiliation, sexual assaults, extortion, robbery, intimidation of witnesses and fabrication of evidence are acts of violence that are carried out against the people.

At the present time, the non-profit organization called [Jamaicans For Justice](#) is the island’s principal police accountability organization. It describes itself as a “non-profit, non-partisan, non-violent citizens’ rights action organisation that advocates for good governance and improvements in state accountability and transparency.”

The working-class communities that bear the weight of police violence need to [collectively and systematically organize](#) in order to combat police violence. The following actions are among those needed to smash police violence.

Create community-based organizations: Organizations are [indispensable to organizing resistance to oppression](#) and police violence in particular. Each working-class community needs a fighting, militant and locally controlled group to plan, direct and execute the activities that are needed to fight police brutality.

Class solidarity is weakened by the divided loyalty of the Jamaican working-class between the two bourgeois-led mass parties. It would be politically prudent for the community-based organizations to create a federation, while retaining local autonomy. The call for cooperation would be done on the basis of their common experience of police violence and living conditions. A federation would develop a common strategy, share resources and coordinate the national fight against the police who operate like an occupying army in poor neighbourhoods.

Create alternative community security structures: The police exist to serve and protect the wealth and power of the elite. A central goal of the local committees should be to educate the people on the need to abolish the police force.

In many working-class communities in the Kingston Metropolitan Region, there is already an alternative structure (the defence crew) that has taken over a number of policing functions. According to the report [Youth Violence and Organized Crime in Jamaica: Causes and Counter-Measures](#), a defence crew is used as a means of collective self-protection against attacks from rival communities or groups. Defence crews are also used to exact “swift punishment of those who are found guilty of rape or robbery inside the community.”

Defence crews are embraced by communities as an armed and legitimate means of collective self-defence. Defence crews are not criminal entities or gangs. The function of the defence crew could be expanded to include protection against extrajudicial killings and other acts of police violence. The members of defence crews would need to undergo political education in order to transform them into partisans of liberation.

These working-class communities could create their own democratically-controlled judicial structures with a formalized, transparent and fair process. They would use them to deal with the violation of community norms. It is important for the process to be informed by the principles of [restorative justice and transformative justice](#). The communities would not give up their freedom to impose punitive sanctions against people who have caused harm to others.

Provide practical forms of solidarity: This militant movement against police violence would need to create legal advice hotlines, provide know your rights workshops, undertake mass public education on the repressive function of policing, build class solidarity, create a roster of lawyers to act as first respondents when people are detained or arrested, assist victims of police violence to sue the government, and create support programmes for defence crew members who become political prisoners. These concrete activities might help in encouraging mass resistance to police violence.

In sum, Walter Rodney raised an important issue in [The Groundings with My Brothers](#): “We were told that violence in itself is evil, and that, whatever the cause, it is unjustified morally. By what standard of morality can the violence used by a slave to break his chains be considered the same as the violence of a slave master?” The organized response to police violence would be an essential part of the class struggle and [self-organization](#) of the Jamaican working-class.

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