

KEEPING IT BETTER IN THE BAHAMAS A Nation's Socioeconomic Response to Juvenile Crime

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In a nation where more than 85% of its population of 255,000 is of African descent, the recently formed Commonwealth of the Bahamas struggles to establish its cultural identity, political power, and economic strength (McAfee, 1991, pp. 201-205). After more than 300 years of British rule, the country's affluent White power brokers, known as "The Bay Street Boys," relinquished formal political control to the Black Bahamian-led Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) in 1973. Since assuming self-government, the nation seeks to maintain its place as one of the most politically stable, if not most complex, Caribbean nations in the modern world.

Threatening the stability of the Bahamas is the rise in the number of violent crimes committed by its juveniles. With 53% (144,690) of the country's inhabitants younger than age 25 and an unemployment rate of 43% for those between the ages of 15 and 24 (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 55), leaders seek solutions that are consistent with the nation's philosophical commitment to "Bahamianization"—the building of the country via Black ownership of and participation in all levels of its society: economic, political, cultural, and social.



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HISTORICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF CRIME

The Bahamas has an infamous history as a refuge for foreign lawbreakers. Located 50 miles off the coast of Florida and extending toward Cuba in the southwest and Haiti to the southeast, the archipelago of about 700 islands and more than 2,000 cays has been well suited for criminal activity.

With few agricultural ventures proving to be successful (Wrong, 1923, p. 89), the country has often had to exploit its strategic geographic location to bolster its fragile economic stability. In the 1600s, European privateers and pirates used the Bahamas as their base from which to destroy and plunder ships from France and Spain. Pirates sacked gold-laden galleons and brought their booty to their base in the capital city of Nassau. Later, the same area became a station for slave ships on their way to the southern Caribbean and South America (Craton, 1962; Wallace, 1977, p. 4; Watts, 1987, p. 464).

During the 1860s, the Bahamas became a significant port for ships running cotton from the Confederacy, returning with arms and supplies. Nassau experienced a building boom, with the new warehouses, piers, and businesses aimed at exploiting the wealth that smuggling could afford. The end of the American Civil War resulted in an economic depression for the Caribbean nation.

With the introduction of Prohibition in the United States in 1919, the smuggling trade was revived. With no way to effectively defend its coastal borders, thousands of gallons of liquor left the Bahamas for the New Jersey coast and all points south. Once again, the local economy enjoyed the benefits of this illegal activity, with new hotels, harbors, gambling casinos, elite stores, and chic nightclubs bringing in new tourism dollars. The end of Prohibition, along with the devastation of the worldwide Great Depression, again threw the Bahamian economy into a tailspin.

Trading of illicit drugs, primarily cocaine and marijuana, into the U.S. market flourished from the early 1970s through the early 1990s. The Bahamas, located so closely to the U.S. border, was again an ideal base for international drug smugglers. With its

numerous uninhabited islands and cays, millions of international tourists, renowned bank secrecy laws, and uncontrolled airstrips, the country became a key staging point on drug routes from Jamaica and Colombia to the United States.

The financial needs of drug traffickers, tax evaders, and money launderers were met by the offshore banking industry (McAfee, 1991, p. 27). These banks, numbering around 180, were often little more than a nameplate and a post office box for these less than legitimate business ventures (Maingot, 1994, p. 173). One source estimated that the interest earned on drug profits stored in these businesses was \$3 million per hour (Naylor, 1989, p. 58). The conditions for such banking practices were ripened when the U.S. Federal Reserve Board placed restrictions on the export of capital for foreign lending on investment, the pool of Eurodollars expanded, and the Federal Reserves permitted U.S. banks to set up foreign branches with few regulations (Maingot, 1994, p. 173).

Under pressure from the U.S. Justice Department, a Royal Investigation Committee was convened to look into illegal activities on the islands. In the end, 51 individuals were indicted, including the assistant police commissioner, the Deputy Prime Minister, and four Cabinet ministers. The Caribbean Community and Common Market protested U.S. attempts to impose its jurisdiction over the Bahamas. Ultimately, the Bahamian government worked in collaboration with U.S. officials to reduce drug trafficking and ease bank secrecy laws, contributing to an antidrug effort that, on a per capita basis, was unequalled anywhere else in the world (Maingot, 1994, p. 174). Accordingly, the U.S. Senate approved the certification of the Bahamas as "fully cooperative" in the campaign against illegal drugs.

The well-publicized actions of the United States, however, proved to be a source of embarrassment and resentment for the newly emerging nation. Due to the international publicity about drug trafficking, governmental corruption, and bureaucratic delays and inefficiencies along with growing drug-related crime and violence rates in Nassau, the banking industry declined significantly (Johnson, 1990, p. 16). Tourist arrivals declined, investors looked for other markets, indebtedness increased, and unemployment rose.

Economists fear that what is now emerging is the real Bahamian economy. That real economy, stripped of its illegal connections, faces severe difficulties (Coone, 1990, p. 16). For young Bahamians seeking stable employment and financial security, the challenge is extremely formidable.

THE SOCIOECONOMICS OF JUVENILE CRIME

Bahamian law enforcement officials maintain that since drug trafficking was introduced by foreigners to the islands in the 1970s, crime rates have risen dramatically. In 1992, 19% of all murders (37), 13% of all robberies (207), and .04% of all rapes (56) involved juveniles—crimes rarely committed by young people until the 1990s. Of the total 1993 admissions to Her Majesty's Prison (2,932), 27% fell between the ages of 16 and 25 (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 35). In some of the poorer urban areas of the Bahamas, newspapers report that gun battles occur frequently and citizens live in fear (Symonette, 1995, p. 1).

Of particular concern is the growth of criminal and violent youth gangs in certain areas of the country. At one time, the word *gang* in the Bahamas referred only to a loose association of youngsters from a particular neighborhood, such as "The Farm Boys" and "The Kemp Road Boys." Although they could be nuisances to the local police, rarely did the youngsters engage in serious or violent criminal acts.

From 1987 onward, the structure and activities of the youth gangs changed dramatically. As in the United States, the gang members became identifiable by their dress, symbols, and elaborate graffiti. A "hard core element between the ages of 17 and 26 who are seasoned criminals" (Thurston, 1995, p. 1, 4) began to emerge. This core group possessed leadership abilities and sought power, prestige, and material gain. Children as young as 9 began to participate in gang activity, but members as old as 30 could be found exploiting Bahamian youth in such organized groups as "The

Syndicate,” “The Rebellion,” “The War Kings,” “Gun Lords,” and “The Border Boys.”

Although the Minister of Youth and Culture, along with interviewed members of the Royal Bahamian Police Force, maintained that the country’s gangs were not organized or affiliated with U.S. gang members, Bahamian youth workers disagree. Professionals who work with gang members state that they began to see evidence of infiltration by American gangs in the mid-1970s, with their young people adopting the graffiti and colors from stateside groups. Because such Bahamian islands as the Bimini Islands are virtually at Miami’s back door, the smuggling of illegal contraband can be completed in a matter of hours. The extensive travel between Florida and the Bahamas makes infiltration of organized American gangs, particularly those that traffic drugs and weapons into the islands, logical. Considering the unfavorable international spotlight focused on the Bahamas in the recent past along with the fact that tourism and tourism-related activities contribute 60% of the gross domestic product and employ more than 50% of the labor force (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 54), it is also logical for nation builders to minimize the impact of gang-related activity to portray their country as stable and safe for tourists and investors.

A SOCIOECONOMIC RESPONSE TO DELINQUENCY

Government and community leaders recognize that the future of the nation depends not only on the perception by tourists and investors that the Bahamas is both safe and stable but on the productivity of its next generation. To that end, officials are actively working to reduce the juvenile crime rate through comprehensive programs of economic and social reform aimed at developing growth opportunities for its young.

Of the 71,700 households surveyed by the Bahamian Department of Statistics in 1992, the household median income was \$20,507 (Department of Statistics, 1993, p. xvi), which is one of the

highest for Caribbean countries. Social workers note, however, that it is common for several generations to live in one household to make ends meet, resulting in a deceptively high statistic for family incomes.

Constricted employment opportunities facing Bahamian youth are due to a number of factors. With employment so heavily dependent on tourism, such global occurrences as the U.S. recession or the Gulf War have quick and damaging effects on the local economy (Worrell, 1987, pp. 163-179). Dramatic shifts stemming from the cruise line industries have also negatively affected employment rates. Tourists who increasingly remain on docked full-service cruise ships rather than come on the islands to eat at local restaurants, spend their nights in one of the island's many luxury hotels, or use local taxis to shop and explore the islands further reduce tourism-generated income. Not only do such downturns result in a decrease of jobs for young people, but it also increases the unemployment rates for those adults on whom they still rely for their financial and emotional support.

When Black Bahamians gained formal political control of the government in 1973, many moved into those prominent positions within government, finance, and business previously closed to them by the White ruling class. This movement created a burgeoning and relatively young Black middle class, particularly in New Providence and Grand Bahama Island. The findings of the Consultative Committee on National Youth Development (1995) acknowledge that the sectors in which most of its young people desire employment—government, tourism management, and finance—“have become saturated and cannot absorb the thousands of young people leaving school” (p. 46). The committee, composed of religious, economic, political, and social leaders, sees the greatest employment needs for the nation residing in the areas of agriculture, fisheries, and arts and crafts. The buildup of these minimally capital-intensive businesses would reduce the country's dependence on the fluctuating tourism industry while providing income for young people. Historically, however, these low-paying sectors have been shunned by Bahamians, leaving an occupational niche that has recently been filled by newly arrived illegal Haitian refu-

gees (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 15).

Despite a potential for prosperity, many of the economies of the Caribbean as they are currently structured cannot support their own populations (McAfee, 1991, p. 5). The current economic climate has created feelings of resentment and hopelessness among the country's young. A common complaint often expressed in interviews with young people is that although governmental offices may indeed be filled with Black Bahamians, the economy is still heavily owned and dominated by a small number of White elites (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 24). One young government worker with an American college degree stated in an interview that he was attempting to save enough money to develop his own import business because the White-owned banks refused to give him a business loan. An even larger issue for him and other small investors, he stated, was getting the required permits from the Department of Licensing in the Port Area. These institutions, he believed, were controlled by an invisible but powerful White ruling class who were resistant to Black Bahamian entrepreneurs (Francis, 1989, pp. 79-88).

This sentiment is echoed daily in letters to the local newspaper. In one letter, a college-educated young man who could not find a position in the government or private sectors was denied a bank loan to start his own lawn-care business. He was enraged by a newly developed program that would provide business loans to ex-convicts recently released from prison "instead of making it easy for these young people so that they do not end up in prison in the first place" (Letters to the Editor, 1995, p. 2). As a discouraged college-educated young man who fears he might have to leave his country to find employment, he also worries about how current economic trends will affect those even less educated than himself:

If that happens to me, what do you think about the poor high school graduate and even those from ITC [Industrial Training College]? Seems to me, since they won't help us now, we may as well go commit a crime or two so we could qualify for those loans being offered to prisoners by Development Bank, don't you think? (Letters to the Editor, 1995, p. 2)

To address such realities, government and community leaders developed the National Youth Development Program. This program includes vocational skills training, apprenticeships, job-readiness skills, and small business development in the areas of agriculture, fisheries, arts and crafts, and the service sector. Building up these sectors of the economy will not only provide new jobs but will make the Bahamas less dependent on outside suppliers, thus reducing the country's high cost of living. Although the Bahamas enjoys a comparatively high per capital income growth performance, it has a low multiplier effect because the economy imports most of its consumer goods and then pays for them with tourist dollars (Stone, 1986, p. 85). The establishment of stable employment opportunities that pay a living wage, it is thought, will instill hope in the minds of the country's youth and decrease their need to resort to illegal means for income.

The government is seeking consultants to help in the securing of venture capital to finance these programs. There are deep concerns about contracting with non-Bahamians, particularly those from or educated in the United States. Bahamians believe it is the importing of American cultural values that has significantly contributed to the rising juvenile crime rate:

The United States of America is a "post-modern" culture that is driven largely by market values of huge profit-hungry corporations which promote a way of life that elevates acquiring pleasure, prosperity, and power by any means necessary. This culture, promoted by the omnipresent media, engulfs most Bahamians—yet its impact on the disadvantaged in our society is particularly strong and contributes significantly to forms of violence in everyday life. In our opinion, the impact of this market-driven value system is most devastating on the young people of our nation. (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 126)

Building, instead, on the African philosophy expressed by Kenneth Kaunda (1966) that embraces the building of a mutual community over materialism and individualism, former prime minister Lynden Pindling (1970) articulated the foundation of the Bahamianization philosophy:

Our heritage in the Bahamas has not been one that was dedicated to the upliftment of Man. Indeed, it has been just the contrary; it has been dedicated to the dehumanization and exploitation of Man. We are the result of one of the most cruel examples of dehumanization in the history of the World: it is scarcely three centuries since we were *de jure* recognized as human beings, and the fight for *de facto* recognition still goes on. We have been taught to despise ourselves and our own.

These deep wounds have left tremendous scars which we must eradicate by every means at our command—political, economic, and social—so that, in our time, we can help the World to realize the true worth of Man as a Human Being developing a new and full sense of self-Reliance.

All economic and social policies are to be Bahamianized to adhere to the communal goals of the nation, still in her infancy, at this time of economic crisis. It is feared that seeking foreign capital or expertise will prove to be an import that the Bahamas can hardly afford, because it so often results in developments that are antithetical to the needs and goals of the Black Bahamian (McAfee, 1991, p. 174). Community leaders hold that, if juvenile crime is to be reduced and the country is to gain stability and growth, “the traditional Bahamian communal spirit of mutual respect, trust, and cooperation” must always guide its actions. As the committee wisely noted,

Stricter laws, more efficient law enforcement, more courts, larger prisons, will not deal with the root causes. These measures, while necessary, if used discriminately, only attempt to deal with the consequences and results of crime and violence. It is, therefore, important that we undertake fundamental social and economic reforms. (Consultative Committee on National Youth Development, 1995, p. 37)

CONCLUSION

Leaders recognize the enormity of the task before them. With a large percentage of the population younger than 25, the demands on the government and private sector for services and economic assis-

tance are growing at a time when the country's ability to meet those needs appears to be constricting. Only careful planning and execution of a comprehensive program of national development designed to meet the needs of its most vulnerable population, its youth, will ensure that they meet their stated goals.

Most pressing is the objective of the Bahamian people to empower its next generation to become contributing members of a strong and economically viable nation. For the Bahamas to prosper, it must develop the resources required to meet the needs of its people. Therefore, priority must be given to those industries that meet community needs, using indigenous materials and human capital in that promise (Thomas, 1988, p. 15). A national program to sensitize citizens to the importance of "buying Bahamian" is also underway to counteract the artificial desire created by the foreign media for higher status, imported name-brand products.

The nation's leaders are clearly committed to a developmental program designed to benefit all of its people rather than only an elite group. The obstacles facing them are formidable. In spite of its history of prosperity for Whites, the Bahamas is often viewed as the prototype of a foreign-controlled, neocolonial, White-dominated economy that maintains a stranglehold on the islands' Black inhabitants (Stone, 1986, p. 101). Despite all obstacles, Black leaders are determined that the Bahamas regain its reputation as a safe and enjoyable tourism destination and actively seeks to convince legitimate businesses that the country is an ideal place for capital investment (Gayle, 1995, pp. 135-149). Concurrently, methods of ensuring that the profits from such ventures are invested into programs of economic development that benefit all Bahamians are being examined. In doing so, their national goals can be translated into socio-economic growth and stability for their country and their future, its youth.

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