

## Caribbean Tourism and Crime in the Age of Information

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Crime, specifically crime against tourists, is a primary concern for every traveller and every destination. This essay is an exploration of the relationship between crime, crime reporting and tourism. It is well known that media reporting can dramatically influence public perception of places, especially outside one's own home region. This becomes significant in decision-making when these places are not well understood.

Especially when media reporting concerns crimes in these places, the perception of the place may become very negative. This perception of the place can turn many prospective visitors away.

But it doesn't have to be this way. The perception created is usually not an accurate reflection of the true nature of a place. As well, crime occurrence is usually limited to highly localized areas within the destination that a visitor would likely not venture into. For these reasons, crime reporting in media has an unwarranted and inaccurate negative impact.

It is very possible that countries, tourism authorities, individuals and, importantly, communities can take steps to reduce the risks and the impacts. The ways that tourism authorities and communities use to deal with this difficult interaction will help to foster a better understanding of the true nature of the place. The impact and the outcome can be greatly influenced by decisive and pro-active methods employed - at the local level - to combat the negative impacts. While other components, such as effective - community-based policing, are required, this approach may go a long way towards a resolution.

Here is an example of what usually happens. An attack against tourists took place in Anguilla in 2013. During an otherwise normal evening meal in a restaurant, thieves assaulted tourists and robbed them.

As a response: "On Friday February 8th, 2013, representatives of the Anguilla Tourist Board, the Anguilla Hotel and Tourism Association and the Anguilla Chamber of Commerce and Industry met to continue the discussions initiated at a meeting with His Excellency Governor Alistair Harrison and Commissioner of Police, Mr Rudolph Proctor on the issue of crime and violence arising out of the attacks on tourists at Little Bay and Blanchards Restaurant. Also attending the meeting on Friday was Ms Shellecia Brooks of the Ministry of Tourism." [1]

From this, it does not appear likely that the community was engaged to participate in the resolution of the issue. While the action may have been well intentioned, it does not appear to include the owner of the restaurant, any media involvement or any community representative.

News reports are always going to alert to a prevailing danger in a place:

"Concerning this twin-island state, international news media and the dailies carry headlines such as: "\$12,000 fine for robbing tourist"; "Tourism woes worsen: stakeholders worried after attack on British couple"; "Death stalks Trinidad and Tobago again"; "Trinidad and Tobago: Tourist beware, caution required on beaches"; "Swedish couple hacked to death on Tobago"; "Trinidad declared danger zone by Britain: Tobago even worse," and "Trinidad and Tobago now murder capital of the Caribbean." What impact would such news have on tourists who

may want to visit Trinidad and Tobago? Such headlines and news are indeed frightening." [2]

Events like what happened in Anguilla are not common. Citizens naturally react with revulsion and anger because they don't understand why this is happening in their country when it did not happen in the past. News reporting agencies grab the headline and run with it. A large number of the perpetrators are never caught and when they are, the police and the judiciary are ineffective about prosecuting and sentencing them.

By now, in Western countries, fatigue of hearing about crime related events has given way to a more complacent resignation. Brazen criminals are everywhere, all the time and no place is safe. We are so accustomed to news reporting about crime in our own cities that we are now desensitized. Feeling powerless most people just carry on, daily 'hoping' they will be safe. For the most part, this is the case.

However, the intended impact of news reports when the potential victims are tourists is to instil fear in everyone, tourists and citizens alike. A pervasive undercurrent of fear and tension is never allowed to dissipate. Being rational about media reports of the crime situation takes some work particularly when you have travel plans 'to' the place and your heart is set on having a fun and trouble-free vacation. Most people won't do the extra work and the impression that crime may impact them is what they remember.

So consider this:

Gunda Busch-Harewood, a local tour guide in Trinidad writes: "Crime is a factor here like in every other country in the world – but unfortunately the media scandalizes it and creates a negative image. For the larger part, crime is limited to specific areas of the capital which are easily avoided. If you can survive in any major city in the world you can survive and enjoy Port of Spain – just let your common sense prevail!" [3]

Most of us understand the relationship between crime and our own daily conduct - which is instinctively to avoid it. We take steps to protect ourselves such as not carrying too much cash, avoiding certain areas, not going out alone or at night, locking up, and so on. These are common-sense actions.

Unfortunately, the broader, longer term strategies of fighting crime may not be so easily attainable. As well, the impact of crime is insidious and undermines important goals of Society.

Generally, drug dealers will not victimise the tourist unless they themselves are seeking to become involved somehow, like buying drugs, nightclubbing or walking late at night - things that you'd be unlikely to do in certain parts of your own hometown. So, avoiding trouble is the wise approach to avoiding injury.

Other types of crime - crimes of opportunity - could simply be a brief lapse of judgement or attention with the perpetrator swiftly taking advantage of the vulnerability presented. Again with little consideration as to the impact on the victim.

At the gut level, our reaction to violent crime is visceral, it is not completely rational. As individuals, hearing about crime through news reports gives us the cushion of separation from it. We see this as an occurrence that happened to someone else and not us. The fact

that it 'is' someone else makes us relatively complacent in that we, as individuals, are not required to deal with it.

This is human nature, and despite having reached pinnacles of technology, social evolution is not advancing so quickly. The response is: this is not my problem and doesn't impact me directly. That is, until one might consider visiting this place, now, suddenly, it 'does' impact at an individual, decision-making level.

Potential visitors read reports of crime, as if they accurately represent the true nature of a place without questioning the report, the motive of the reporter, the source of the information, the events that took place, the people involved, and so on. Whether the reader may seek out other information is unknown but also not likely.

Nowadays, it has become common-place to hear and read media reports that are driven to elicit a certain response. Headlines that include hyped-up words like: alarming, deadly, bloody, killer, crime-wave, murder, shock, and so on coupled to a weak reference to a place naturally make the reader feel as though anyone who visits this place after reading the article must be mentally defective.

News writers get away with this for two reasons: 1/ The reader is unlikely to do any further research into the real facts, or when they do, they are not really getting a clear idea of 'where' is or is not dangerous ... and ... 2/ The reader's knowledge of the place is usually poor enough that the weak references to a place or location is all that is needed to embed the impression that the entire country is dangerous. Keep in mind: most crime happens at night, in areas where unemployed youth, drugs and guns come together. This is the pattern all over the world, mostly in ghettos in inner cities. Residents know - and the regular tourist learns quickly - that it is wise to avoid these places at night.

Yet, exceptions do occur. A very small number of crimes happen where the tourists are, or the crimes are directed at them. But this is NOT the impression the writer wants. The writer wants you to believe that the whole place is a den of murderers and thieves and attacks on tourists are rampant. The whole idea is to portray the country as a place that is to be stayed away from. But common sense should tell us that there's something not quite right here.

To compound the problem, these news stories are what the travel advisory services pick up on and use the information to write up cautionary advisories about visiting the country without going into too much detail about the specific areas where the majority of the crime occurrences are taking place.

These "Travel Advisories" are actually doing a disservice because the people who are travelling in or to these countries STILL do not have the proper information to travel safely and intelligently - to OR within the destination.

Although it may not be followed strictly, article 6 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (item 5) states: "recommendations formulated should be strictly proportionate to the gravity of the situations encountered and confined to the geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen; such advisories should be qualified or cancelled as soon as a return to normality permits." [4]

Definitions such as "geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen" needs to be looked at closely, with sensitivity to local issues. This underpins one of the pillars of Sustainable

Tourism. (Pillar 4, " ... emphasises the need to ensure that local communities are consulted, engaged and empowered to influence decisions on tourism development and operations that may affect their livelihood and society.") [5]

Nonetheless, crime is indeed a very difficult problem for the small economies of developing countries to deal with. However, the point here is that crimes against tourists are relatively rare. And, the bulk of the crimes are non-violent petty theft.

Taking care to NOT attract attention is often the best safeguard. Be careful about displaying that you are carrying money, or electronic devices, and so on. Simply, don't wear jewellery, don't even bring any. Something else to keep in mind, in many tourist areas: it is also wise to be careful about the other tourists, some of whom may be travelling expressly to take advantage of unaware fellow tourists. But, one still needs to be aware of local threats such as, for example, car rental scams.

Tourism is often the most important source of income for Caribbean countries. Opportunities to develop and promote destinations are often lost or compromised by the perception that the crime situation is dangerous - so - what can we do?

The discussion about potential damage of violent crime against tourists is almost as old as tourism itself. In reality, although violent crime against tourists is rare, when it happens, it attracts instant attention. News reporting agencies are well equipped to capitalize on shock value - it sells because the appetite for it is bottomless. In another era, this news was simply a morbid form of infotainment - fodder for conversation. In the social media era, it is all of this and, because it can be around the world in virtual instants, highly destructive too.

Local consumption of crime reporting garners more than its fair share of attention due to proximity but also due to the vested interests of the viewer. When the news is about your own community and people, the pain is very present and very real. When the news is sent around the world to prospective visitors, there really is no way to unsend it.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter if the victim is a tourist or a citizen, someone has been harmed. But, without belittling the harm to residents, impact of the news - when it IS a tourist - is greatly disproportionate to the actual event. This is the news that gets absorbed in the feeder markets. The internet's lightning speed also allows visitors to redirect travel plans, en masse, leaving destinations shaking their collective heads, wondering what the hell happened. The destination's multi-million dollar management plan in the dumpster after a single, spurious event causes mass panic and abandonment of travel plans.

The longer term damage is incalculable.

"Many of these countries have less than 100,000 citizens, meaning a single murder can push the rate up a point or more. Rates that would reflect deep social problem in larger countries could be the work of a single serial offender in the Caribbean." [6]

These two streams are related in many ways. In the social context, tourism and crime fighting have an important common denominator: both require participation of stakeholders at the grass-roots level and this usually involves the same people - the community. To "[t]ruly put customers and communities as the vectors of decision-making and engage them more intelligently and collaboratively." [7] For authorities to put an effective plan in place, it should, indeed must, include citizen and community collaboration.

"A community involved in the planning and implementation of tourism has a more positive attitude, is more supportive, and has better chance of making a profit than a population passively ruled — or overrun — by tourism. One core element of sustainable tourism development is community development: the process and capacity to make decisions that consider the long-term economy, ecology, and equity of communities." [8]

Despite the crime problem and despite the built-in resentment on the part on many citizens of the Caribbean, tourism must take root as an important contributor to economic development. It is the 'only' viable option in many countries with little other than human resources and an amenable tourist environment.

"But why tourism? It is often said that the Caribbean did not choose tourism, tourism chose the Caribbean. In fact, the Caribbean made the choice after decades of a kicking and screaming resistance. It came after recognizing that travel and tourism was suddenly the largest and fastest growing sector of the global economy." [9] OR "Tourism's new way forward?: Wanted: new ideas to give new dynamism to the Caribbean's most important industry — tourism." [10]

Importantly, tourism and crime fighting are closely linked in another way in that improvement in one will contribute to improvement in the other.

Being proactive and honest removes obstacles to paving the way forward by fostering a spirit of trust and mutual inclusion in this new partnership. Painstaking as it is, talking out the problem will bring a more complete and longer lasting solution.

This is largely a question of leadership. Officials and groups in positions of power, albeit well intentioned, must not "dictate" how the tourism plan is to be developed. Officials going it alone by adopting the "we know what's best" attitude are forgetting who they are working for.

These officials are also likely alienating an extremely valuable (and low-cost) knowledge base right within their own constituency. Ivory tower vantage points can't deliver timely observations earned in the sweat and the dust on the ground where it mostly matters. There is less need to hire expensive consultants - the constituency is ready, able and more than willing to help because they know the benefits don't need to be a number in order to multiply. More visitors will bring more workers into the tourism industry and remove at least some of the need for young people to be tempted into an illicit lifestyle.

Citizens who feel excluded from contributing tend not to buy in, but these people are often the same people at the front-line of contact. These people work in the public services: airports, schools, hospitals and law enforcement. They work in the hotels and restaurants and many own businesses serving the public. They all have a vested interest in providing excellent service, given the chance.

These people are also in the know; they know because they hear and see, first-hand, what is going on. They are the information base, solid ground on which any good plan will form. But ... these people are naturally skeptical of action plans that they are not part of. And yet, they are the first to feel the impact of any action taken whether from a customer - or from their leaders.

There is a problem though: this message may not be what the authority wants to hear. It is, therefore, essential to merge dissenting viewpoints in as these are most likely going to be the loudest opposition going forward. The goal is helping one and all to carry the right - inclusive - message forward.

Local tourism organizations need to appeal to more rational methods of reporting the crime situation. In the rush to get the jump, reporting possibly inaccurate and incomplete information often needlessly tramples victims, communities and businesses. Taking a proactive approach to stick-handle the minefield, like they did in promoting Mexico in the face of the barrage of negative crime news may prove to be a worthwhile use of limited funds. (mexicotruth.com)

Destination managers must be endowed with the means to respond quickly and effectively to balance the impact of negative media attention. So, a plan to deal with the impact of crime must also include good promotion with sufficient resources or contingency funds to ratchet up support, not by suppressing the news but by providing balance, when needed.

A good plan must include the young people who want desperately to move up in the world. Young people see their personal needs as exclusively important and are often more willing to take the quicker path to 'wealth' than a longer term opportunity. Many young people pursuing 'The Dream' are not intimidated by the possibility of a jail term when the stakes are high - they perceive the chance as remote and it is a risk they are willing to take. Parental - or societal - guidance will definitely help to stem the tide of young people opting for the unknown and dangerous underworld lifestyle but this is not enough to completely correct the problem.

"According to the CARICOM Commission on Youth Development (2010, p. 71) more than 70 percent of all murders, 60 percent of all rapes, and 65 percent of all crimes are committed by those under the age of 30. Youth are far more likely to be involved in gangs, have higher unemployment rates, and are more likely to be victims of violent crime." [11]

Keep in mind, although misdirected, these are highly motivated and intelligent young people - imagine what 'could' be done with this energy and resolve. Social responsibility is learned behaviour.

Tourism and crime fighting have other common attributes as well - they carry no political colours and they are not blinded by ego. In order to really make a difference requires all stakeholders - leaders, citizens groups, business interests - to be willing to negotiate long established positions. Entrenched interests hold powers that have been hard won. Habit and familiarity are safe harbours that are difficult to dislodge.

Leaders motivated to move this agenda forward require taking a risk that earned power might be neutralized. But, as Jean Claude Juncker (at the time, Prime Minister of Luxembourg commenting on the Lisbon Treaty, now head of the EU) has said: "We all know what to do, we just don't know how to get re-elected after we've done it." In the interest of bettering the community, respect may be more valuable than power. Betterment for one is betterment for everyone.

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- [1] Anguilla Hotel and Tourism Association, Press Release
- [2] Crime and Violence: The Tourism Product Rotting Away in Trinidad & Tobago by Johnny Coomansingh
- [3] Gunda Busch-Harewood, Director of Island Experiences, Port of Spain, Trinidad.
- [4] Global Code of Ethics for Tourism
- [5] Sustainable Tourism for Development Guidebook, Enhancing capacities for Sustainable Tourism for development in developing countries, UNWTO, 2013, page 9
- [6] Trans-National Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment, UNODC, 2012
- [7] World Tourism Forum, Lucerne, 2013, 1st Think Tank
- [8] Global Tourism: Achieving Sustainable Goals, US-AID and GWU, 2011
- [9] Quote from: What Tourism means to the Caribbean by Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, Caribbean Journal, 2013. Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace is the former Tourism Minister of the Bahamas and Secretary General of the Caribbean Tourism Organization.)
- [10] Jamaica Observer, 2010
- [11] Crime, criminal activity and tourism performance: issues from the Caribbean, Nikolaos Karagiannis and Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi, 2012