



**A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH TO CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN THE
SMALL ISLAND AND LOW-LYING COASTAL DEVELOPING STATES
OF THE CARIBBEAN**

BY

**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES
CHAIR OF THE CARICOM COUNCIL OF MINISTERS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND LAW
ENFORCEMENT (CONSLE)**

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Madam Chair of the Committee on Hemispheric Security (CHS) of the Organisation of American States (OAS), Your Excellency Jacinth Henry-Martin, Permanent Representative of Saint Kitts and Nevis to the OAS; Your Excellencies; distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

As Chair of the Caribbean Community's Council of Ministers for National Security and Law Enforcement (CONSLE), I thank your Excellencies for affording me the opportunity to address this august gathering on the theme: "A Public Health Approach to Crime and Violence in the Small Island and Low-Lying Coastal Developing States of the Caribbean."

In response to the increasing levels of criminal violence in our region, the Heads of State and Government of the Caribbean Community

(CARICOM) have declared the scourge of crime and violence as a public health issue, and have committed to incorporating evidence-based strategies to fight, and defeat, this growing threat to our Caribbean civilisation, our lives, our living, our production.

CARICOM first issued its declaratory assessment of “crime as a public health emergency” at its initial regional symposium on the subject in April, 2023, at Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. Later that very year, on October 20, 2023, in Barbados, the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) Academy for Law, in conference, produced the related “Needham’s Point Declaration on Criminal Justice Reform” in quest of “Achieving a Modern Criminal Justice System”; and on November 22, 2024, in Guyana, CARICOM’s leaders assembled in a second regional symposium on “Crime and Violence as a Public Health Issue”, producing the potentially transformative “George-Bridge Declaration”. These, and connected, documents are in the public domain for consideration and action.

In the process CARICOM’s leaders have taken this compelling framework of “crime and violence as a public health issue”, and

associated programmatic details, to regional, hemispheric, and global fora for three central purposes: First, to facilitate high-level dialogue and multisectoral collaboration; secondly, to advocate for policy reforms, harmonised strategies, and programmatic convergence; and thirdly, to advance a coordinated, actionable, regional and sub-regional response. Today, CARICOM intends to engage, concretely, the OAS and its agencies.

What precisely does CARICOM mean in its declaration that crime and violence constitute a public health issue? In a nutshell, we aver as a working definition, the following:

“The public health approach to violence and crime is a systemic, multidisciplinary evidence-based framework that seeks to understand, prevent, and mitigate violence and crime by addressing their societal, behavioral and environmental determinants. This approach applies public health principles — such as surveillance, risk and protective factor identification, intervention, monitoring, and evaluation — to reduce the incidence, impact, and

recurrence of violence and crime. This approach involves stakeholders in a bundle of sectors, including law enforcement, health, education, academia, social services, and community entities working collaboratively to design and implement interventions to reduce harm, enhance public safety and build cohesive communities.”

Each of the formulations in this defining frame is pregnant with real meaning. Critically, the public health approach to addressing crime and violence incorporates the vital analytic and corrective nexus to individuals and families, and any associational group infused with criminality and violence. Obviously, at the end of the day, individuals do bear personal responsibility for the perpetration of acts of criminality and violence, including gender-based violence. These acts are preventable at the individual level; and on a societal scale, they can be hugely reduced to tolerable levels consistent with civilised life and living, public order and safety.

CONTEXT

A set of contextual issues exist in our Caribbean for urgent reflection and consequential action, namely:

- (i) Eighty (80) percent of crimes are committed with firearms; our region does not produce guns and bullets. One country in this hemisphere, the USA, is, by far, the main source of the firearms.
- (ii) Illicit trafficking in firearms; border security considerations; associational groups infused with crime; gang activities; transnational crime; legislative framework on firearms offences; bail for violent offenders; sentencing of violent criminals.
- (iii) Significant medical costs associated with gun violence.

- (iv) Loss of productivity; cost to employers and employees; diminished quality of life.
- (v) Diversion of resources from other critical sectors in order to better fight crime and violence.
- (vi) Prolonged violence erodes investor confidence; challenges sustainable tourism, reduces citizen security.
- (vii) Should some acts of criminal violence not be legally classified as acts of terror, and be dealt with as such?

FRAME FOR SOLUTIONS

Against that backdrop, how does the “public health” approach to address crime and violence contribute significantly to a package of solutions? The following salient considerations, among others, thus arise:

(i) Early intervention to reduce risk factors and build resilience

Risk factors here include those derived from: the socio-economic; the community; the environmental, individual and family propensity for crime; reduction of access to firearms.

(ii) Reinforce prevention and reduce harm

This can be done through agencies such as the family, churches, community, schools, the media; the state apparatuses; conflict resolution programmes for adults and the youth; public education and awareness; responsible firearm ownership.

(iii) Mental health support systems to reduce crime, drug abuse, trauma care for survivors of violence and affected family members.

SOME CRITICAL ACTIONABLE RESPONSES

Some critical actionable responses in approaching violence as a public health issue, include:

- (i) Fostering greater cooperation to maintain the Caribbean as a zone of peace.
- (ii) Strengthening border security in order to reduce access to firearms.
- (iii) Promoting multi-agency collaboration nationally, regionally, and globally.

- (iv) Assigning greater resources and intelligence sharing, for example, the tracking of gun-related deaths and injuries, including police-involved shootings.
- (v) Identifying risk and early preventative measures.
- (vi) Developing and implementing community-based strategies.
- (vii) Promoting conflict resolution measures.
- (viii) Strengthening the criminal justice system: The Police, the Prosecution Services, the Law Courts, the Prison Services, and pursuing relevant Legislative Reforms.
- (ix) Deriving and applying evidence-based solutions, for example, regulating the carrying of firearms in public, putting in place appropriate and effective protection orders, and instituting robust firearms licensing.

As a package, conceptually and programmatically, a public health approach to addressing crime and violence represents a paradigm shift in critical respects from certain traditional, narrow, “commandist”, approaches; but it necessarily contains, too, much that has been tried and tested in keeping our countries safe and secure, consonant with civilised life, living, and production. The value of “a public health” approach is that it embraces the necessity and desirability of that which is holistic, integrated, preventative, evidence-based, family-focused, community-connected, and people-centred, especially in the context of the evolving security challenges facing our Caribbean region in a dangerous geographical neighborhood.

I feel sure that the OAS and its relevant agencies, and the related global institutions will work faithfully and concertedly with CARICOM, its many agencies and associated organisations to elaborate further practical measures, lodged within the public health approach, to tackle effectively crime and violence. Hopefully, this collaboration may prompt the requisite mobilisation of resources of

all kinds for this venture of the highest importance. Resources are self-evidently vital!

Thank you!