Experiences of Violence

Introduction

As referenced in Chapter 2, Jamaica suffers from high levels of violent crime; in 2013 it had the sixth highest murder rate in the world (UNODC, 2014). Whilst the death toll has risen significantly since 1980 when cocaine was first trafficked to Jamaica, it has been a country beset with violence and brutality, since the Spanish first arrived in the 15th century. This is the cultural environment in which the respondents grew up and, consequently, to some extent became accustomed to before moving to the UK. This chapter examines their individual experiences of violence, both in Jamaica and in the UK. It details their narratives in relation to being victims, perpetrators and sometimes both.

Experiences of violence in Jamaica

The prevalence of both legal and illegal firearms in Jamaica is far more commonplace than in the UK. Jamaicans’ experiences of being victims or witnesses of shootings or owners of guns is quite different to most UK citizens. Whilst in the UK there are legally held firearms, they are not commonplace within the general population and particularly not in the inner cities. In Jamaica, legal ownership of a gun is exceptional. Lemard and Hemenway (2006) note that drugs, gangs and political killings are no longer the main motivating factors for murder in Jamaica. From their analysis of police reports for homicides between 1998 and 2002, they believe that disputes and revenge are the most common reason for killing. West (2010) also notes that according to police reports killings are more likely to result from disputes rather than be
drug or burglary related. So whilst the initial rise in murders in the 1980s and onwards was drug related, by the beginning of the 21st century the motivations for such killings have changed. Steadman gave his analysis of the reasons for violence:

You have different kinds of violence. You have violence where people defend themselves. You have violence when people are just taking precautions, go over the head with it, and you have violence when people just think it’s a fun violent. You have arguments that start when people step on a man’s shoes and he stab him or punch him. A man see him talking to his woman and he get jealous and want to kill the man. You have that kind of violence. You have the family violence, a man threaten your family and you sort it out. I see it in all kind of way, every kind of way and in this country too.

Devon gave an account that provided great insight into exactly how easy it can be to get embroiled in violent and potentially fatal situations, particularly in Jamaica. He was with friends when – without warning – one of them committed an act of extreme violence to a person in another group, with a lengthy spiralling and traumatic culmination of events that took place over several years. It was the beginning of a feud that started in Kingston:

This guy, Courtney, was our friend – me and my brother. We had a row with this other guy one night. Later a car pull up beside us. We didn’t know that Courtney had a gun and he shoot one of them. Courtney was dead soon after that….sometimes people do things when they need to defend themselves. You can live on an estate and try not to get involved in stuff, but people get you involved. We don’t have a choice …. The first time they tried to shoot me, one night I saw a man standing in the shadows watching me. He started shooting I just run for me life. I was 26 years old. The second time they try to kill me – I dated a girl I knew. I told her to meet me. I went to meet her and she was there, but she didn’t speak to me. She just keep on walking. She didn’t look at me, or reply when I call her. Then I see this man with a gun. He went to shoot me. Again, I just run for me life. He fire at me. I jump over a fence into a yard of dogs. During the day I avoid that yard, ‘cos it full of horrible dogs. But this time I just jump straight into it to get away. Someone tell me her family set me up. They don’t like me. The person said she didn’t know about it. But I don’t believe that. Why don’t she look or speak to me if she didn’t know what was about to happen? A guy sent me a message to me the next day. He say “You lucky this time.”