

Abstract

A recurring theme in the literature on common violence is that it stems from the combined impact of divided societies (poverty, ethnic diversity, economic inequality) and weak institutions (non-democratic, authoritarian government). This statistical regularity may hold in the aggregate, but as such it generates some instructive “outliers”. Jamaica, for example, is not especially poor, has a virtually mono-ethnic population, relatively low levels of economic inequality, and has been steadily democratic since independence, but is yet among the most violent countries in the world. Why is this? How does one explain variations over time and place in the levels of violence? Drawing on extensive field research in Kingston’s garrison communities, we argue that Jamaica generally, and Kingston in particular, experiences high levels of common violence because Jamaica is in fact neither “cohesive” nor “democratic”, displaying instead important context-specific sources of social division and institutional weakness. A powerful regional political economy clearly constrains Jamaica’s policy options, but given its nascent democratic institutions, external and domestic development actors alike can best assist efforts to lower common violence by recognizing and rewarding what Jamaican civil society organisations are doing already.