



Youth Crime, Digital Poverty, and Substance Abuse: Advocating for evidence-based interventions in Jamaica

Stephen Christopher Johnson



Over the last 30 years, the Jamaican economy has struggled with high levels of debt and limited economic growth. Since 2013, the government has successfully worked to stabilise the economy by heavily reducing the GDP to debt ratio. However, despite this success, sustained economic growth has not yet been achieved. Growth has been hampered in particular by difficulties in diversifying the economy; the Jamaican economy is heavily reliant on agriculture and tourism, both sectors which are highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks.

One pathway for improving Jamaica's economic outlook is the diversification of the economy into the digital sector. However, this is hampered by high levels of digital poverty. Connectivity costs are high, internet connections are unreliable, and the country's existing digital infrastructure is inadequate. According to the UNDP, only 68% of Jamaica's population currently have access to an internet connection. This issue is of particular relevance to young people, many of whom lack access to devices and connectivity required to fully engage with education and schooling.

Whilst private investment could stimulate the economy, investors' confidence is hampered by a persistently high crime rate, particularly among Jamaica's youth. The involvement of young people in criminal activity is a recognised and ongoing problem in Jamaica. A 2021 report

by the Jamaican government indicated that on average, 4 in every 10 people arrested on murder charges in Jamaica are males aged between 15 and 24 years. This report further indicated that young people were also becoming increasingly likely to be the victim of violent crimes, with 16% of murder victims in 2020 falling within the same age range. Alongside violence, Jamaica is additionally grappling with the prevalence of substance use in the community. Research has indicated that approximately 1 in every 5 Jamaicans will use two or more drugs in their lifetime. Relative to their regional neighbours in Latin America, Jamaicans are three times more likely to be engaged in polysubstance use. This issue is particularly prevalent amongst Jamaica's youth, with those aged 18-24 years being five times more likely to report polysubstance use in the past month than those aged 55-65 years.

This is the social and economic context in which Commonwealth Alumnus Stephen Christopher Johnson is working. Stephen completed a PhD in International Relations at the University of Sussex in 2020. Since then, he has specialised in monitoring, evaluation and learning. In this field, Stephen has worked across multiple projects focusing on youth crime and violence, digital poverty, and substance abuse.



Stephen Christopher Johnson was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2016 to complete a PhD in International Development at the University of Sussex. Following his graduation, he returned to Jamaica, where he works as a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) expert. He began his post-scholarship career working with FHI360 International implementing the USAID Youth Crime and Violence Prevention Program in Jamaica, where he was responsible for managing the execution of the MEL framework for Jamaica's Youth Crime and Violence Prevention Program. This programme identified young people at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity and provided early intervention programmes in order to reduce this risk. Stephen has also been involved in the expansion of UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). He worked to add a digital component to the MPI, in order that a lack of access to digital resources could be properly considered and measured as an indicator of poverty. Recently, Stephen has also been involved in the design and implementation of Jamaica's National Drug Survey. The survey is intended to assess the prevalence of substance use for individuals aged between 12 and 65 years, and the results will inform the development of Jamaica's national alcohol and tobacco policy. This project recently won the University of the West Indies Principal's Research Award for Research Project with the Greatest Business/Economic/Development Impact. Currently, Stephen is working as a Research Fellow at the Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies at the University of the West Indies, where he leads studies focusing on public health, digital inclusion, and governance.

Skill development on award – Evidence-based interventions

In 2016, Stephen embarked on his PhD in International Development at the University of Sussex, which is internationally renowned in the field of Development Studies. Their PhD programme covers a wide range of research topics, including environment, resources and mobilisation; gender, sexuality and conflict; human rights and welfare; and humanitarian design and citizen aid. Stephen chose to specialise in international trade.

Whilst the PhD programme provided Stephen with expertise in the field of international trade, he also developed a range of other skills. Specifically, it was at the University of Sussex that he first learned about the UK's approach to the development of evidence-backed interventions:

Stephen identifies learning about evidence-backed interventions as the most significant change that he experienced as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship.

'You take it for granted how evidence is used in the UK. Almost everything is evidence-based. For me, having first-hand experience of this was the greatest takeaway. I worked on my soft skills, and I was able to use that to negotiate when I came back. I learned how to be nuanced, how to use polite euphemism, rather than saying 'that is not working, get rid of it', saying 'the evidence doesn't back that, let's take a different approach'.

You learn to appreciate people's work, show them what is working, and make them understand, or you will contribute, or you can collaborate to take a different path for the benefit of everyone. So far, I see where that is working. That's the biggest takeaway, and something that I can point to, personally for me.'

Whilst on award, Stephen had seen the power of employing evidence-backed interventions, and he was intrigued by the prospect of employing these skills in the Jamaican context. He was inspired to promote interventions and policy changes that showed sustained impact and value for money, measured against key indicators:

'Rather than just spending money and saying, okay, we're making change, and just writing up a beautiful article about it, or capturing some experiences through feedback, they had a whole comprehensive framework, with specific indicators, and they say over the next ten years, this is what we want to achieve, and I want it to be evidence-based.'

Development of the USAID Youth Crime and Violence Prevention Program

Upon the completion of his PhD, Stephen returned to Jamaica. He arrived in quarantine, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was at this time that Stephen saw an opportunity advertised with FHI360 International. Stephen applied to the project and was immediately accepted.

FHI360 International were working with USAID under the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative on a project focussed on youth crime and violence prevention. A 2010 report shows that the crime rate in Jamaica has historically been amongst the highest in the world, exceeding the rates of criminal violence seen in its Caribbean neighbours. USAID introduced a programme intended to target the root causes of youth crime, intervening before a young person becomes involved in criminal activity. The model has similarities to the Glasgow model, a highly regarded crime-prevention programme that approaches youth criminality as a public health problem. Stephen describes the threefold approach to crime prevention that the USAID model advocates:

'For local institutions, you do capacity building for youth crime and violence prevention by introducing a crime prevention model, like, for example, the Glasgow model that you guys have in the UK. Two, introduce them to [cognitive behavioural therapy]. Three, implement interventions in terms of activities like soft skills training, as well as regular skills training or entrepreneurship.'

The programme was implemented through the application of the Jamaica Risk Assessment Tool. This tool was used to identify the risk of a young person becoming involved in criminal activity.



Stephen at an FHI 360 International Event in February 2023.

Under the Jamaica Risk Assessment Tool, if a person was designated medium or high risk, then they would be connected with a social worker or psychologist and enrolled in certain risk-reduction programmes. The number and nature of the programmes would change depending on the level of risk the person was assessed to be at. The at-risk young person would then be assessed again at six and twelve months, in order to evaluate how their risk levels changed over the medium-to-long term.

289 individuals received vocational training, and an additional 109 young people were enrolled in apprenticeship schemes as part of the Jamaica Risk Assessment Tool. The project also provided psychosocial support: 345 young people received therapy, 50 benefitted from substance misuse counselling, and 654 were provided with life skills training. As a result of these interventions, 57% of young people enrolled in the programme had a measurably reduced risk level. They were observed to have less antisocial tendencies, less impulsive risk taking, better parenting skills, stronger impulse control and anger management, and increased employability. All of these factors contribute towards decreasing the risk of a young person becoming involved in criminal activity.

The Youth Crime and Violence Prevention Project also adopted and adapted Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) from Mexico to Jamaica, bridging cultural and socio-economic differences to address youth violence in communities. The approach was based on the ROLE model, originally developed by the Mexican psychosocial institute ProSociedad. Jamaican practitioners, in partnership with government agencies, integrated the local context into the programme's tools, such as linking activities that connected youth with positive support structures.



The UWI Principal's Research Award, awarded to Stephen and his colleagues in recognition of their work on the Jamaica National Drug Survey.

The pilot, which ran from November 2021 through March 2023, reached 102 at-risk participants in crime 'hotspots' across multiple parishes. Evaluations showed that 63 percent of participants experienced a reduction in aggression, while 36 percent demonstrated less impulsivity. Moreover, half of the youth reported higher levels of prosocial behaviour, indicating improved relationships with peers and family. These results underscore the potential of CBT in curbing violence and highlight the importance of culturally relevant, evidence-based interventions for Jamaican youth:

'USAID planned to use this as a model going forward across the Caribbean. As it relates to CBT, this was the first time it was being introduced by an institution in Jamaica. USAID had a programme in Mexico, and it worked well. But they sent the team on a fact-finding mission. When they came back, they wanted to introduce it, so I had to test the instruments.'

Some of these are established, aggression aid skills, psychological skills, but I had to test them and adapt them to the Caribbean context, because some of the wording was a little bit different.'

Stephen was responsible for developing the CBT monitoring and evaluation framework:

'[I was] leading M&E training, and in terms of how do you measure progress with these instruments, as well as to create an Excel model that anybody, irrespective of their skill set, you could just go and type in the respective score once you administer an instrument, and it automatically calculates the risk level of the individual, so you can see progress on which item and how they are progressing, whether they're regressing or they're progressing over time, once they are exposed to cognitive-based therapy.'

Raising awareness of MEL frameworks

Stephen was excited by the USAID project. However, he came on board at a difficult time. The project was struggling, having failed to meet various key indicators. Stephen found that a key challenge was that whilst the USAID programme was implementing a monitoring and evaluation framework, there was an attitude of resistance in the community to the application of policies produced by international organisations:

'And the challenge, the good thing about it, is that there was a framework for M&E, but the attitude was of resistance. Because how we are in the Caribbean, when you try to guide people, how they're doing, everybody again, they're very territorial. I've been doing it this way for all these years. Who are you to come and tell me different? All right. Let me be very frank. You think because you studied in the UK, now you come back and you're a foreigner, you think you can tell me what to do? I've been doing it. But clearly, it's not working.'

Being from Jamaica himself, Stephen understood this attitude to monitoring and evaluation programmes. By working with the local community, he was able to influence thinking and encourage people to work towards the implementation of monitoring and evaluation tools:

'I explained to them that, look, M&E is a tool. It's not a weapon. I'm coming from a setting where I've seen evidence work, and I'm not here to dismantle what you're doing. I'm not here to be critical of what you're doing. I'm here to help you to find out what is working, what is not working, and how we can maximise on the weakness and convert the weakness to strength.'

And after a while, the person started to listen, like, I'm not here to rip you apart. And I said, furthermore, if you learn how to do this properly, you will get more money from your funders, because they have to see how, they're accountable to the taxpayers, and they have to explain how they're spending this money, and they have to show change, and then more and more persons start to listen, and they realise that this is a tool.'

Introduction of Case Managers

Having successfully implemented monitoring and evaluation frameworks, Stephen began to investigate the ways in which the programme could be improved. One of Stephen's first evidence-based interventions was the introduction of a case manager:

'I realised that something was missing. I said, okay, in one of your earlier programmes, I noticed when you introduce case manager, the impact was greater. I think you should, in all of your programmes, based on the evidence, introduce a case manager. A case manager is in the form of a social worker or a psychologist.'

When they come on board and they read that risk assessment, they're able to diagnose the issues better that the individual is facing, and have more targeted treatment, rather than you just exposing them to skills training, soft skills training, internship, apprenticeship. Because there are certain persons, they enter into apprenticeship, and they are not ready, or, mentally, they were not prepared. They would have been exposed to trauma.'

By conducting an internal comparison of various youth crime and violence prevention programmes that had successfully used case managers, Stephen gathered the evidence needed to advocate for the introduction of case workers into the Jamaican initiative. Drawing on these findings, the project integrated case workers into its structure. Subsequent key indicators revealed that their involvement led to a measurable improvement in outcomes

for at-risk youth, demonstrating the positive impact of evidence-based adaptations:

'So, you have to have a programme before, where maybe you expose them to some sort of psychological treatment, or the social worker would know to develop a bond, get to know their family, and then afterwards, we start to see attrition rates going down, attendance became higher, participation rate, and afterwards, persons started to say, okay, it's working. And then the confidence develops over time.'

By implementing this change, Stephen was able to demonstrate the practical benefits of MEL frameworks. Over time, this convinced his initially sceptical team of the value of evidence-based interventions:

'As they were now convinced that it's working, so, it was subtle, and then, over time, everybody came on board, and they realised everybody was talking about M&E. Everybody was asking, where's the evidence to make change? That's how it started and developed. We developed a momentum over time.'

Collaboration with the private sector

In order to achieve the project goals, Stephen encouraged collaboration with private sector organisations. These institutions were predominantly non-profit civil society-based organisations working in youth-focused fields:

'They would try to target youth in the area. Let's say there are big conglomerates or they're a company, and they have an area nearby, and most times it would be an inner-city area, so to speak, so they would target youth in there and give them ... help with tuition for school, give them books, after-school homework centre, etc.'



Stephen at the UNDP Jamaica Office presenting on the findings of the MPI modification at a validation workshop with local stakeholders.

Whilst these organisations presented strong opportunities for collaboration, Stephen also saw that the interventions they delivered were not always evidence-led, and they did not necessarily have a specific focus on crime reduction:

‘By introducing youth crime and violence prevention to them, many of them would just be doing what you call philanthropy. There was no targeted aim to reduce crime.’

Stephen saw this mission gap as an opportunity for capacity building. He worked alongside these partner organisations to expand the implementation of the Jamaica Risk Assessment Tool:

‘So, one, we ensure we build capacity, and one, teaching them how to use the Jamaica Risk Assessment Tool, how to do diagnosis, how to design a case study, how to expose youth to CBT, which usually on its own, is very expensive.’

Development of Organisational Performance Index tool

As attitudes towards monitoring and evaluation frameworks softened, Stephen sought to apply evidence-based interventions in additional areas. He turned his attention to the front-line organisations who were delivering the interventions on behalf of USAID. Stephen saw a need for a method of benchmarking these organisations, in order to better assess the effectiveness of their interventions. With this goal in mind, he adopted and adapted the Organisational Performance Index (OPI). By applying this tool, organisations were able to identify the strengths of their outputs, whilst also identifying any training and development needs:

‘I also had to modify that tool as well, administer it to the organisation, make a diagnosis to see what are the weak areas, because some were strong in terms of, they were already doing crime or violence. Some were not. Some needed M&E training to build their capacity. It was a diagnostic tool. You diagnose what the issue in an organisation was, and then you draft up a training plan and you carry out your training.’

Stephen was also commissioned by USAID in 2024 to assess the tool and identify the optimal mix and timing of interventions to reduce youth involvement in crime and violence. To investigate this, Stephen and his team took a qualitative approach, and conducted interviews with 44 key stakeholders representing a variety of perspectives. The stakeholders involved included government officials, community support officers working with at risk youth, community development committees, and academics, amongst others. The findings of the assessment were then validated in a workshop held with 11 at-risk youth drawn from four Jamaican parishes.

Stephen’s review found that the risk factors associated with youth criminal activity vary by age. For example, risk factors arising in middle childhood (age 4-10 years) include difficulties in adjusting to schooling, and association with older delinquent peers. In adolescence (11-18 years), new risk factors emerge, such as substance abuse and academic failure. In young adulthood (19-25 years), unemployment becomes a significant factor contributing to the risk of a young person becoming engaged in violent crime.

Stephen is proud of his work with FHI360 on behalf of USAID, and he identifies this project as the most significant change that he brought to his local community as a result of his Commonwealth Scholarship:

‘In terms of the biggest change for me, I think my community, let me start there first. It would be working on the youth crime and violence project. I actually was able to measure and state specifically the type of change that was made in terms of differentiating youths’ lives. These are maybe potentially persons who would have been involved in gangs, who I know are now on a sustainable path where they are now gainfully employed, still employed, and making a difference in their lives.

And, in terms of the community change, I think I mentioned it earlier, seeing a change in attitude. I wouldn’t say on a national scale, but within the development or civil society sectors, there is a change in attitude towards using evidence or making evidence-based decisions, I would say, at the community level.’

Expansion of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

Currently, Stephen is working on a new project under the United Nations Development Programme. This project focuses on a tool called the Multidimensional Poverty Index.

Designed by the UNDP in collaboration with Oxford University, the Multidimensional Poverty Index is an international framework that can be used to measure acute multidimensional poverty. It complements traditional monetary measures of poverty by additionally assessing overlapping deprivations in health, education and living standards. This is done by examining a variety of indicators. For example, the MPI assesses poverty based on the materials used to build a person’s home and their sources of energy, such as whether they cook with coal or own an electric stove. By looking at indicators such as these, the MPI aims to establish a framework for assessing levels of poverty.

Stephen became interested in the MPI when he saw a grant being circulated which invited researchers to consider adapting the MPI for their specific national context. Stephen considered this question, and proposed that in Jamaica, the MPI would be strengthened by the additional of a digital component. He argued that in today's society, a person without a device enabling them to access the internet could be considered impoverished:

'If it is that you do not own a piece of technology that will allow you to access the Internet, or you don't know how to access the Internet, then eventually, you are going to be excluded from the society that is evolving fast, and then you're going to be not just digitally poor, you're going to be poor, because there are so many opportunities on the Internet.'

Stephen won the UNDP grant funding and is the Principal Investigator on the project. He is currently working to collate evidence demonstrating the relationship between poverty and the ownership of an internet-capable device:

'In including a digital indicator and collecting, I was able to collect data that goes all the way back to 2013 and to show how the adoption of technology, because we had some household survey from the Planning Institute of Jamaica that shows you whether or not a household has access to Internet, how frequently they use the Internet, whether or not somebody in the household can use the Internet, and how many of them have access to an Internet-capable device. And I was able to track that over nine years and show the progress and how it impacts on poverty and how we are progressing as a society.'

In the future, Stephen hopes that this measure of digital poverty will be integrated into the Jamaican government's approach to poverty reduction and social security:

'This can be used to inform which households would need help with getting access to technology, because, again, a household that is left behind are those that don't have access to any sort of technology or the know-how. They're going to be left behind, particularly in the rural areas, which are the hardest to access.'

Implementing Jamaica's National Drug Survey

Alongside his work with USAID and UNDP, Stephen has also been heavily involved in the design and implementation of Jamaica's National Drug Survey. This survey was commissioned by the National Council on Drug Abuse, and was intended to assess the prevalence of substance use for individuals aged between 12 and 65 years. The survey was intended to assess a range of research questions, including investigating whether or not the age of first drug use has changed; investigating changes in the rate of drug use; and studying the emergence of new drugs.



A poster presentation featuring Stephen's work on cannabis use in Jamaica.

The findings of this survey were published in 2024, and they were indicative of high-risk patterns of alcohol, cannabis and tobacco use across several Jamaican parishes. Whilst the study did not show an overall increase in substance abuse across the population, it did show an increased intensity of usage amongst those who were already engaged in substance abuse. The national prevalence of alcohol use was found to be 46%, with significantly higher usage in Trelawney, St. Ann and Kingston. Furthermore, the survey indicated that of the respondents who had used cannabis in the last year, 66% were deemed to be at high risk of dependency. The prevalence of substance abuse is particularly high in Jamaica; relative to their regional neighbours in Latin America, research has shown that Jamaicans are three times more likely to be engaged in polysubstance use.

These figures point to a need for improved substance abuse treatment and prevention strategies. This is of particular importance given the well-understood cyclical relationship between substance abuse and poverty. In Jamaica, previous research has indicated that the prevalence of substance use in the homeless population is as high as 75%. In turn, poverty often poses a barrier to those seeking access to appropriate healthcare interventions in relation to their substance use. Whilst for those with adequate financial resources, it is possible to access rehabilitation resources, these services are often inaccessible to people living in poverty.

The data from the National Drug Survey contributed towards addressing the problem of substance use in Jamaica. The survey enabled the Ministry of Health to tailor treatment and prevention strategies, in order to ensure that efforts were focussed on the most affected areas. The results of this survey will also be a key factor in the development of Jamaica's alcohol and tobacco policy. They will inform the national alcohol policy and will be employed in the development of evidence-based prevention, treatment and harm-reduction programmes. The success of this research project has recently been recognised by the University of the West Indies; the project won the Principal's Research Award for Research Project with the Greatest Business/Economic/Development Impact.

Academic career

In addition to his work on the development of evidence-based policy recommendations, Stephen has also maintained a career in academia, and he has published extensively. He is a Research Fellow at the Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies at the University of the West Indies, where he teaches qualitative and quantitative research methods. He is the course coordinator for the institutes' monitoring and evaluation course, and he chairs the Leadership in Youth Development Research cluster. This research cluster fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and drives initiatives focussed on youth development.

In his capacity as an academic, Stephen has also maintained contact with his supervisor at the University of Sussex. Maintaining this network has been beneficial, as his supervisor has been a source of support for both Stephen and Stephen's students:

'I was able to maybe reach out and find examiners for my students through my university network from Sussex, as well as reaching out to my supervisor for certain resources, to point me into certain directions. So that network is still there.'

With his supervisor's support, Stephen is currently in the process of publishing a book. His supervisor has helped him in this endeavour by connecting him with publishers. Whilst this project is in its early stages, Stephen's work has so far been positively received by publishers, and he is optimistic for the future of the project.

Future plans

Alongside his aspirations to publish a book, Stephen is also looking forward to other upcoming opportunities. Beyond academia, Stephen is looking to take on additional leadership opportunities:

'The aim is to take on more leadership roles within the university and outside of the university, where I have more direct influence over change. Then I can manifest my beliefs, so to speak, to bring it across.'

In all his future endeavours, Stephen will continue to advocate for the use of evidence in the implementation of policy, in order to ensure that interventions have the best possible chance of producing meaningful change in his community.

More about Stephen Christopher Johnson:

Find out more about the USAID Youth Crime and Violence Prevention Program:

<https://linclocal.org/portfolios/final-performance-evaluation-of-the-local-partner-development-activity/>

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/stephen-johnson-phd-01589a36_im-excited-to-share-the-youth-risk-intervention-activity-7253110071251853313-5H8v/

Learn about the Multidimensional Poverty Index:

<https://ophi.org.uk/global-mpi>

Read about the results of the National Drug Prevalence Survey:

<https://www.moh.gov.jm/high-risk-patterns-of-substance-use-detected-among-jamaicans/#:~:text=Monday%2C%20November%2011%2C%202024%3A,the%20Hon.>

See Stephen's published work:

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=dezuSFcAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao>

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the UK

Woburn House
20-24 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HF
Email: evaluation@cscuk.org.uk
Website: cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk/csc-evaluation/

