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## The crime concern in The Bahamas

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With 50 people having already been murdered in the small island chain of The Bahamas for the year, it is no surprise that crime was the number one concern of Bahamians in the recent AmericasBarometer survey.

The Inter-American Development Bank-financed study was carried out between June 17 and October 7, 2014. The survey is part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Each year it publishes dozens of academic studies and policy-relevant papers. The 2014 survey was conducted by Vanderbilt University with field work by Public Domain, a local market research and public opinion firm.

Respondents were asked what the country's most serious problem is. The results show that 39.4 percent said crime, 10.6 percent said unemployment, 8.9 percent said bad government, eight percent said corruption, 5.3 percent said migration, 4.9 percent said the economy, 3.4 percent said violence, three percent said politicians and the remaining respondents listed issues ranging from poverty to gangs.

The Royal Bahamas Police Force announced at the beginning of this year that crime was down 18 percent across the country in 2014. This declaration, however, was met by skepticism in some quarters. Murder, the one crime category that is most verifiable by the citizenry, did not follow the downward trend police proclaimed, increasing by three percent.

Last year, 123 people were murdered. In 2013, 119 people were murdered. Our murder counts hover around the 2011 all-time high (127). It must be noted, however, that the majority of these killings happen in New Providence. Grand Bahama and the Family Islands are more peaceful places.

When asked about crime last week, Minister of State for National Security Keith Bell said the issue is often sensationalized.

"The major concern of course remains New Providence and to a much lesser extent Grand Bahama," he said.

"But for the most part, our Family Islands are peaceful, and I think that is part of the message that we need to get out. We're having a challenge in New Providence and to a lesser extent Grand Bahama but... The Bahamas is still pretty much crime-free."

Bell said the only categories of crime that have increased this year are murders and shootings.

"As it stands right now, and I just want to put this in proper perspective, our crime rate is going down, the overall crime rate is going down," he said.

"...Overall crimes against the property is significantly down. The overall crime rate is significantly down. Crimes against the person is down. The challenge that we have in the country are the shootings and homicides."

The Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) will run into the same problem at the next general election that the Free National Movement (FNM) had in 2012. It's hard to explain to voters why high murder rates are not something to worry about. And we hope the PLP doesn't say The Bahamas is nearly "crime-free", as Bell did. That is simply untrue.

The PLP's problem will be compounded by the fact that it ran an aggressive campaign in 2012 against the FNM's failures on crime. And now, based on current trends, by the end of this PLP term more people would have been murdered than during any five-year term in our history. What will the current governing party say when it is time to defend the PLP's record?

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Across two different administrations, there has been no answer to the violent crime problem. Bahamians think it is our most serious issue. We hope our policymakers double down and search for new ideas. What was promised has not worked so far.