

■ BRAZIL

Urban violence, public safety policies and responses from civil society



In 2000, 45,233 Brazilians were murdered, a national rate of 27 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, which places Brazil among the most violent countries in the world. For young people in impoverished urban areas, the rate is 230 killings per 100,000 inhabitants, which almost amounts to genocide. Civil society has been responding more and more to this violence with demonstrations, projects, programmes and local initiatives as ways to tackle the problem and promote human security.

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Alarming indices of lethal violence

Brazil is not at war, but the indicators of violent death in the main urban centres are similar to those in countries that are involved in armed conflict. In 2000, 45,233 citizens were murdered. This national rate of 27 killings per 100,000 inhabitants² places Brazil among the most violent countries in the world, bearing in mind that rates in European countries and the United States are below 10 homicides per 100,000 people. In Brazil, when we study specific poor urban areas and focus on youth, we find rates of 230 killings per 100,000 inhabitants. According to some experts, what is taking place is the genocide of young people, black youths in particular. This is the result of a rapid increase in criminality and an unlimited access to firearms. Comparative analyses with countries that are at war or in situations of intense conflict conclude that over the same time periods there were more firearm-related deaths in the city of Rio de Janeiro than in the armed conflicts in Angola (1998-2000), Sierra Leone (1991-1999), Yugoslavia (1998-2000), Afghanistan (1991-1999) or Israel (1991-1999).³

The unequal distribution of death

The murders are mainly concentrated among young people between 15 and 24 years old. This is a nationwide trend, and it applies in states with higher murder rates, like Rio de Janeiro and Pernambuco, as well as in states with lower rates like Minas Gerais (Chart 1). More than 90% of violent deaths occur among males, so the distribution of lethal violence

by sex in Brazil is in line with world trends.⁴ Chart 2 shows that violent deaths in Brazil are dramatically higher among young blacks, a trend that reflects the unequal distribution of wealth and social resources (education, health, sanitation) between blacks and whites. In fact, as well as exposing the racial dynamics of Brazilian society, the indicators of homicide by age and colour show the social class of the victims: they are mostly poor, and most of the crimes occur in *favelas* (shanty towns) and in peri-urban areas.

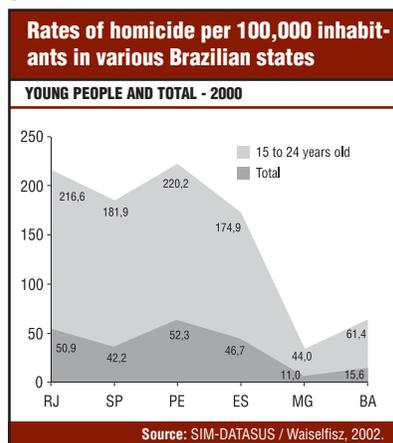
In these areas, a high proportion of illegal drug violence has its genesis in the network of trafficking and consumption. The rapid increase in violent deaths in *favelas* and poor neighbourhoods can be explained by a combination of factors: the appearance of cocaine in urban centres like Rio and São Paulo in the 1980s and its high profitability, the increasingly vio-

lent and repressive behaviour of the police, the fights between rival gangs for control of the key distribution and sales points, and the use of military firearms. A contributing factor was the absence of public institutions (schools, health centres or police patrols) in these areas, which made it easier for groups of armed drug traffickers to establish themselves and extend their territorial control. Given these conditions, drug trafficking has an extremely powerful attraction for children and adolescents who find few opportunities for employment or for generating income, and whose prospects for the future are fragile. The quick profits and the "glamorous" lifestyle provided by the power and visible presence of firearms make many young people see drug trafficking as an attractive way out of their predicament, however lethally dangerous it may be. This feeds a culture dominated by despotism, machismo, arms and violence, which contaminates a high proportion of the young people in these areas, even those who are not directly involved in drug trafficking or crime.

The priority of public security

The low socio-economic profile of the victims of violence, and their scant capacity to exert political pressure, help to explain the fact that Brazilian national and local government and civil society were slow to wake up to the problem of public safety and the need for modernisation, control and democratisation in the police.⁵ It was not until the 1990s that systematic efforts began with a view to establishing public safety policies with a contemporary perspective identified with human rights and police efficacy. Until then, most of the regional governments had relegated the problem to the corporative spheres of the police themselves. During the 1980s and well into the 1990s, indifference and silence about the scale of lethal violence also predominated among intellectuals, universities, the media, and even among NGOs.

CHART 1



Note: RJ: Rio de Janeiro; SP: São Paulo; PE: Pernambuco; ES: Espírito Santo; MG: Minas Gerais; BA: Bahia.

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2 Information System on Mortality (SIM), DATASUS, Ministry of Health.

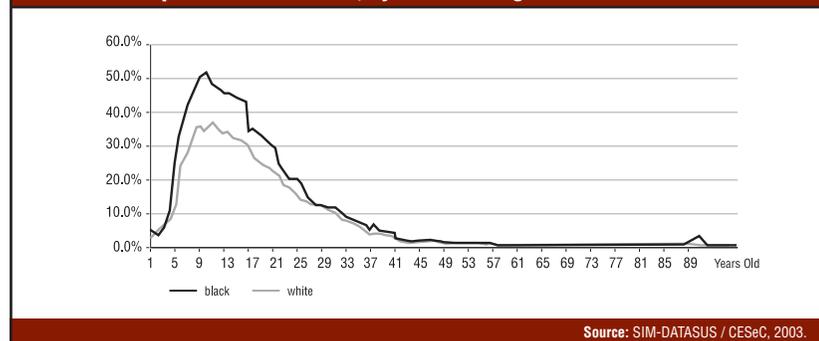
3 Dowdney, Luke. *Crianças do tráfico: um estudo de caso de crianças em violência armada organizada no Rio de Janeiro*. Rio de Janeiro: 7 letras, 2000.

4 This does not mean that the problem of lethal violence against women should be minimised; it is one of the tips of the iceberg of the lack of safety issue. It is linked to domestic violence within the family and couples, and is connected in different ways to the more general problem of violence. See Musumeci, Leonarda. "Homicídios no Rio de Janeiro: tragédia em busca de políticas". *Boletim Segurança e Cidadania*. Centro de Estudos de Segurança e Cidadania (CESeC), July 2002.

5 In Brazil, the police come under the jurisdiction of the states of the Federation, and obvious preventive police functions in public places and in investigations are divided between two different institutions: the Military Police, who are in daily contact with the general public, and the Civil Police. The former in particular still have a bad name acquired during the two decades of military dictatorship (1964-1985).

CHART 2

Homicide compared to total deaths, by colour and age - 1997 to 2000



As a result of the lack of investment or rational public policies, the majority of the police forces in the country degenerated and became violent and inefficient. Through mechanisms that operated on various levels, organised crime involved in arms and drugs corrupted large sectors of the police forces, from the lowest ranks all the way up to the top.⁶ In some states, police violence became a major problem and directly affected the poor people of the *favelas* and the outlying marginal neighbourhoods, who were trapped between the violence of the armed gangs of drug traffickers and the violence and corruption of the police. In Rio de Janeiro, the police are responsible for more than 10% of killings, which totalled 900 in 2002 and 1,195 in 2003. Most of these occur in “confrontations” in the *favelas* (between 1993 and 1996, police action in 523 armed confrontations in *favelas* caused 512 fatalities), and the bulk of the victims are young people, mainly black. A study of these deaths revealed that most of the victims’ bodies showed signs of summary execution; they had at least one bullet wound in the back or in the head.⁷

Some states, and more recently some municipalities, invited investigators and organisations from civil society to participate in the formulation and implementation of public policies. Besides this, during the 2002 presidential elections, the Workers’ Party advocated the preparation of a National Security Programme, which came into being after an extensive nationwide consultation process in which more than a hundred specialists took part. For the first time, the country has a programme that is based on a systematic diagnosis and a strategic vision of the problem of violence. It combines social and preventive policies with police and repressive policies, and with control and modernisation of the police. It is too early to say whether the programme will be implemented or not. This will depend to a large extent on the capacity of society as a whole to pressure federal and local government to recognise the urgency of the problem of violence and the priority

of public safety, issues which are hidden behind a veil of silence due to the difficulties that the main victims have in putting their complaints into words.

The Disarmament Statute

In 2003, an important step was taken towards reducing deaths by firearms thanks to the mobilisation of Brazilian civil society. Under the leadership of NGOs (mainly Viva Rio, in Rio de Janeiro, and the Sou da Paz Institute in São Paulo), which organised large public demonstrations, co-ordination with legislators committed to these policies, and support from a large part of the press, the National Congress passed the Disarmament Statute. This sets out a series of measures to control the sale and possession of firearms, and prohibits the bearing of arms to all except the police, members of the armed forces and municipal guards in cities with more than 250,000 inhabitants. The statute also provides for a national plebiscite in 2005 so that the population as a whole can decide whether the sale of firearms should be prohibited throughout the whole country.

New mediators: young people in *favelas* and peri-urban neighbourhoods

Recently, in the context of responses to violence from civil society, a widespread movement has begun to emerge among young people in *favelas* and marginal outlying neighbourhoods. This consists of projects, programmes, or local initiatives based on cultural and artistic activities, which in many cases are undertaken and co-ordinated by the young people themselves. Some examples of these initiatives are the *Olo dum* group in Salvador; and the *Afro Reggae*, *Nós do Morro* and *Companhia Étnica de Dança* groups in Rio de Janeiro, as well as hundreds of local groups that have mobilised around the hip hop culture on the outskirts of São Paulo, in the shanty towns of Porto Alegre, and in neighbourhoods in Recife, Brasília and São Luís.

These groups are competing with the drug traffickers for influence over young people, and they are using different but equally effective seduction techniques. They are committed to a culture of peace, but a culture that is also in tune with the

spirit of the times (the groups value Internet, computers, fashionable sports clothes and shoes, travel, and regional and international exchange, as well as culture and the arts). In general, these groups have four main characteristics: a) they foster the generation of income and employment in the short term; b) they have a strong component of self-esteem, which includes training artists and leaders whose fame and success may serve as an example and attract other young people in the area; c) they have a strong component of territorial affirmation, and very often the words of their songs, the names of the groups and their leaders, and the t-shirts and other clothes that they wear reaffirm the names of their communities (*Vigário Geral*, *Cidade de Deus*, *Capão Redondo*, *Candeal*) as a sign of commitment to change in the community; d) there is a strong component of denouncing racism and affirming their black identity in the lyrics of their songs, in their look (afro hair styles and clothes), and in the names of their projects (*Música Preta Brasileira*, *Afro Reggae*, *Companhia Étnica*, etc.).

These projects and initiatives, which are heterogeneous and not co-ordinated with each other, are steadily growing in different cities around the country, and are becoming important⁸ not only as centres for constructing a culture which is an alternative to drug trafficking, but also as mediators between youth and local government, the press, and very often international actors like foundations and co-operation agencies. These “new mediators” are bringing new elements into the field of NGOs, the Left, and traditional social, trade union and associative movements, such as an interest in the market and in joint ventures with a commitment to the community; the affirmation of territorial and racial identity combined with social identity; an emphasis on the subjective, individual background; on success and fame combined with the world of culture and the arts. These new elements should not be scorned by those who are seeking to support the solutions which Brazilian society is going to produce in this decade in order to confront the violence and construct paths towards safety, justice and citizenship. ■

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