

TEENAGERS, VIOLENCE AND CRIME IN BRAZIL

One can not speak of violence in Brazil and its increases since 1980 without mentioning the population that it harms: the young. Reports that have been dedicated to analyzing the victims of homicide in the country since 1980 have reached a dramatic conclusion: the cause of increased violence in the country is due to the rise of homicides among young people. Studies carried out by Instituto Sangari show a dramatic and permanent increase in cases of homicide among people between 12 and 24 years of age. While in 1980 the homicide rate among youths between 15 and 24 years of age was 30.0 per 100,000, in 2007 that number had grown to 50.1.



The rate of homicides among older people, however, remained stable. In the past 20 years homicides among youths have almost doubled, which positions Brazil as 6th in the international ranking of countries with the highest homicide rates among youths in the World Health Organization Statistical Information System (WHOSIS).

Violence is clearly a social tragedy and a great expense for the government. According to the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), the government spends an average of 34 billion US dollars per year on public safety, prisons and treatment of victims of violence. This means that the country spends more per year on the problems arising from and connected with violence than on education (30,4 billion US dollars in 2010). In the past, violence leading to death among young people was related to large, crowded cities, full of slums; today it has become one of the main problems of small towns in the country.

The figures show that large cities like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are improving in controlling violence, but that does not mean that cities are safer, or that young people have a better standard of living.

The number of adolescents who have committed infractions has increased in recent years. Rates of teenagers who infringed the law increased 400% over the past 10 years and currently it is estimated that there are some 60,000 adolescents against whom measures have been taken. Typically these measures are used for young adults because a special law (Statute of the Child and Adolescent – ECA) judges teens

regarding education which means they receive lower sentences because in no case the maximum period of internment can exceed three years.

When comparing figures for adolescents (under Brazilian law adolescents are defined as individuals aged 12 to 18 years) who are victims of homicides and adolescents who have committed infractions, it is clear that there is a relation between both. As for victims, figures indicate that with each passing year the number of homicide cases increased gradually and cases among 12 to 15 year-olds doubled. From 1997 to 2007 there was an increase of 24.4% in the number of homicides of teenagers which is now 24.1 for every 100,000 adolescents. Rates increase progressively for teenagers that committed offences from 13 years of age and upwards and in both cases the peak incidence is concentrated among 16 to 17 years old. However, what most of these teens have in common is that almost 90% are male, come from poor neighborhoods or regions and most were identified as afro-Brazilians. These similarities between criminal adolescents and adolescent victims of violence show that there is clearly a relationship between these two worlds. A qualitative analysis is necessary to try to understand how such violence occurs.

First we have the story of Peter, a 16-year-old resident of the Favela da Maré slum in Rio de Janeiro. He was caught red-handed for the first time when he was 15 years old for car theft. After a few months in a Social Institution, he was released and began committing crimes along with another teenager. During a fight Peter killed his partner and just months later he himself was murdered. His body was found in the trash by his father, who says that Peter was killed by drug dealers in the slums because of their debts to the dealers. He was a drug addict and to maintain his habit he would constantly participate in armed robberies.

In the south of Brazil we have the story of Rogério, only 13 years old, a resident of a suburb in Santa Catarina. He was caught red-handed by the police trying to hold up a woman on the street with a plastic pistol. It was his second arrest for the same offence. Rogério has been addicted to drugs since he was eleven and besides hold-ups he also sold drugs as a way to support his crack addiction. After staying in an Educational Institute he interrupted rehab and went back to the streets where he dealt and consumed crack. He used so much that he became indebted to drug dealers and had to commit robberies and deal drugs. However, he failed to pay his debts and to avoid being murdered he fled his hometown.

Veronica, 16, is also from Santa Catarina and lived in a Social Institute for committing a double murder. She began to sell drugs at age 11. At 13, she was an important drug dealer. At 14 she shot and killed two teenagers. The reason: the two teenagers belonged to a rival slum in their drug trade.

The Northeast, one of the poorest regions of Brazil, was the scene of one of the most beautiful stories of resilience and social involvement, which later became a tragedy. In 2007 a 19-year-old, Alcides, captured people's attention when his story was aired on a television program. The son of a scavenger and a resident of the outskirts of Recife, Alcides became a hero and example of overcoming difficulties. He was admitted to study biomedicine in a public university, despite the characteristics that normally exclude this opportunity: being afro-Brazilian, having lived all his life in poverty and violence, and having gone to a public school. His story drew tears to the eyes of many Brazilians and he became a symbol of hope for millions of poor young Brazilians linked to crime.

Three years later, in February 2010, Alcides' story was back on the radio and television news. This time for being shot to death in front of his house by a 16-year-old because Alcides refused to give information about two people in his community who were to be executed that night.

In Arapiraca, Alagoas, a small Brazilian city, Maria, 23, lived in the outback. This city is second in the ranking of youth homicides. Maria reported on a television channel that her brother, 18, and her nephew, 15, were killed in June 2010. Maria states she would like to leave the poor neighborhood where she has lived all her life because she fears she will suffer the same tragic fate of her relatives.

These stories show that each number, presented above, represents a complex context of social problems that are part of the daily lives of most young Brazilians, whether victims or perpetrators of violence. Many Pedros, Rogerios, Veronicas, Alcides and Marias in Brazil have had their lives disrupted or drastically changed by violence. In general they were all victims in some way. Peter stole in order to support his drug addiction. The environment he lived in gave him no perspectives other than that of poverty, violence and the chance of escaping it all through crime. His partner, also a victim of the same social context, became another of Peter's murder victims and Peter in turn became a victim of dealers in his slum. Rogério's addiction to crack meant several people became victims of theft. He is currently a runaway from his community, trying to avoid

becoming yet another murder victim. Veronica, also a victim of addiction, sought power and money in drug dealing and coldly murdered two other teenagers. Alcides, our hero, an example of resilience and social involvement, was murdered by a teenager who shared the same social and economic background as he did. Finally, Maria, who has had two relatives executed, also fears being a victim of future violence.

This helps us to understand that both adolescents who commit crime and those who are affected by it, are above all, victims of common violence. Being a victim thus includes murdering and/or being murdered, because on both sides, they have missed out on basic rights such as education, health, professional schools, leisure activities or jobs - all of which are needed in order to keep them away from crime. This awakens in society a constant feeling of insecurity and makes one want tougher measures to ultimately separate these young "thugs" from the rest of society. One reflection of this is the fact that Brazilians chose Public Safety, in a public opinion poll released by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE), as their third greatest concern, after health and education respectively.

The rising number of homicides among young people represents not only the steady increase of crime, but also a lack of perspective on these young people. Education, professional training, sports, leisure and cultural events should be considered by the State as an absolute priority for children and adolescents, as a way of helping them avoid crime. Society must assume its role in the constant search for more effective means of ensuring the rights of these young people in order to keep them out of trouble. Investing in life quality for these young people would keep them away from crime. It would also enforce the basic human rights that a democratic system should offer and build a society based on "Order and Progress" as is proclaimed on the Brazilian flag.

Cléssio Moura de Souza, LL.M. is a Brazilian Attorney and Researcher of the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law in Freiburg/Germany.