

# Youth, drug traffic and hyper-masculinity in Rio de Janeiro

*Alba Zaluar*

## Introduction

I began my ethnographic studies of violence in the city of Rio de Janeiro almost by chance when I went to Cidade de Deus, a low-income housing estate project built in the 1960s for those forcibly evicted from the shantytowns. My intention in 1980 was to study voluntary associations, which were typical of the long existing shantytowns, to see what had changed for the dwellers reinstalled in the new housing project. One major change I found was a new kind of organization of which there had been no record in the literature on poverty prior to 1980: drug dealing gangs engaged in incipient turf wars. Since then, I have not been able to stop studying the subject and willy-nilly became an “expert” on it. I undertook two major ethnographic research projects in Cidade de Deus; one by myself and the second with four research assistants, three of them male and one female. All were university students who had grown up and continued to live in Cidade de Deus.<sup>1</sup> The first study focused on the meanings of poverty, neighbourhood associations and local politics; the second focused on youth involved with the gangs or were about to join them. Later in the 1990s, with a different team, we investigated styles of drug dealing and consumption in three other districts of the city. Three years ago, a series of interviews and focus groups with former dealers allowed us to deepen our knowledge of the dynamics of the unlawful trade as well as the ideas and mixed feelings of the main actors. All these studies were based on participant observation and interviewing techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Lins, the author of the novel *Cidade de Deus*, was one of them. The ethnographic material he had gathered was so interesting and rich that I encouraged him to write the novel, since he was a poet when we first met.

Throughout the research, we discussed ways and means to maintain the safety of researchers during fieldwork. Some of my thoughts on the ethnography of danger were written to accompany the ethnographic narratives (Zaluar, 1994 and 2004) and in a long article on this particular topic (Zaluar, 2009). In all of them I assumed that one cannot and need not try to “become a native” or participate in criminal activities to understand the subjective meanings of the agents as well as the social, economic and political dynamics of their criminal activities.

This text will present the main findings about the turf war in the city of Rio de Janeiro regarding its rules and dynamics, as well as the actor’s subjective meanings that were part and parcel of the ethnographic data gathered over these years. It should be noted that my approach has always been to interact with as many actors as possible, to maintain the interactions during a certain period of time and to use multiple sources of data to adjoin the clues, indications and contradictions provided by the various agents interviewed or observed. I therefore followed the precepts developed first by Max Gluckman (1961) and more recently by Buroway (1998, 2000) on the extended case method, adapting it to the violent social contexts in which my fieldwork took place. As developed by Gluckman and his followers, I used the ethnographic data under a perspective that emphasized conflicts and diversity within a social group, situation or network and expanded my analysis with statistical and historical material. The result is thus an historical reconstitution of findings collected over several years, registering conflicts, tendencies and changes through which it became possible to adopt a theoretical perspective that accounts for both objective and subjective dimensions. This is the aim of contemporary sociology that has been influenced by ethnographic methods, especially the extended case method, as suggested by Buroway (*op.cit.*) in his presentation of a reflexive sociology, a dialogue between social scientists and “the people we study”. But, differing from his view of fieldwork, during which there should be a continuous process of understanding social situations and reconstructing theory, in this article I use not only ethnographic data from various studies that were envisaged as a way of deepening knowledge, making predictions or finding anomalies and paradoxes, as well as objective quantitative data from several sources. To maintain a tension between the objective and the subjective dimensions, I also employed statistical data on poverty and homicide rates, which makes this text a mixture of narrative and explanatory

writing or a combination interpretation of and an objective analysis of social processes. Therefore, as will become clear, ethnographic fieldwork is of unquestionable importance when one is wants to understand social actors and explain the sudden and continuous growth of violent expressions in the city. Combined in a complex approach, these two dimensions – subjective and objective - allow the researcher to put Anthropology in historical and political perspective, as suggested by Marcus and Fischer (1986).

## The city

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's capital between 1688 and 1960 — when it gave way to Brasília — has had an amazing increase in crime rates since 1980, despite a decrease in annual population growth from 2% in 1980 to 0.4% in 2000, according to the Brazilian population census. Although there have been some improvements in urban infrastructure in some of the poorest regions of the city, the favela population continued to expand at a rate of 2.4% in 2000, six times higher than the population growth rate in the city as a whole. In 2000, the city had 5,857,904 inhabitants, of which 1,094,922 lived in subnormal or irregular urban agglomerations, an official definition for the popular term favelas, once known in English as shantytowns,<sup>2</sup> where ethnically heterogeneous, but mainly poor people live.

This scenario is common to Brazil's large cities, because of accelerated and unordered urbanization that began in the early years of the twentieth century: urbanization without sufficient industrialization or economic development to provide employment for all those migrating to cities. Vulnerability to crime, especially for young men - who suffer the highest unemployment rates - is unquestionable, even more so inside favelas where youth unemployment reaches the city's highest rates. Yet, the growth of the informal work sector and irregular dwellings, lasting phenomena in Brazil, cannot account for the amazing growth of homicides that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s.

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2 Shantytown is no longer an appropriate term because there are few shacks in the neighborhoods, which are composed mostly of brick and concrete houses with water, electricity and sewage. The names favela or morro (hill) are still used, mainly because most residents do not have legal title to their property and poverty continues. The official euphemism now used to refer to a favela is *comunidade* or community.

Indeed, new forms of organized crime or criminal business affected informal markets, transforming them into gateways for selling stolen, smuggled or counterfeit goods, but also for trafficking illegal drugs, such as cocaine and marijuana. These new markets had a strong effect on the statistics of “deaths by aggression”<sup>3</sup> in so far as the illegality and the dangers involved in the businesses made the use of guns inevitable. During the 1980s, drug gangs began to dominate some favelas, located predominantly on the morros (hills) of the city at the same time as armed dealers became more than “owners” of the points of sale. By the end of the decade, they were known as “bosses of the hill”<sup>4</sup>. As these armed gangs appeared, death squads or militias were formed in poor areas of the metropolitan region to eliminate those identified as criminals. As a result, homicide rates grew astonishingly for young men between 14 and 29. How do we explain why young men are being killed or killing each other in Brazil’s second largest and richest city? Can poverty and inequality wholly explain this phenomenon?

### **Socio-economic inequality in the city**

There are not many socio-economic differences between favela and “asphalt”<sup>5</sup> residents in the suburbs and other poor districts of the North and West Zones of the city. In fact, there has been a remarkable impoverishment and deterioration of the Rio de Janeiro suburbs since the 1970s, a process exactly the opposite of that one occurring in the North American cities where suburbs correspond to the richer areas. De-industrialization, economic losses in the service sectors and anti-poverty programs hit hardest in the favelas, provoking a noticeable drop in family income and urban degradation in these districts where the lower and middle-classes have always lived. It is now difficult to mark the boundaries between favelas and the adjacent regular districts, although there are islands of affluence in some of them. The opposite is true

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3 This term is the official definition of murder as it appears in the data collected from the National System of Information about Deaths (SIM) of the Ministry of Health, found at [www.ms.gov.br/sim/datasus](http://www.ms.gov.br/sim/datasus).

4 The expression is heard everywhere in the city. I began to hear it at the late 1980’s during my field research in Cidade de Deus.

5 “Asphalt” was formerly used popularly to refer to the neighborhoods with paved streets and urban infrastructure, before the urbanization that took place in many favelas. The name is nowadays used to differentiate between the lack of legal property that still remain inside favelas and the legal entitlement in regular areas as well as better urban services.

in the richest zones of the city near the coast (the southern zone and Barra da Tijuca). There, favelas are close to but separated from other neighbourhoods and constitute islands of poverty within wealthy environments; establishing the dramatic contrasts of inequality. Yet, homicide and other criminality rates are higher in the former areas than in those where the inequality is most flagrant.

Rio de Janeiro is thus a city divided by many factors including income, skin colour, religion, gender, age and risk of victimization, and is also torn by policing and military-type control by traffickers, militias and other forms of private security. State or formal private policing predominates in wealthier areas; unofficial, illegal or informal control in poorer areas. As regards family income, there is a concentration of poverty in certain districts and certain portions of districts, most of them in favelas, where there is low income and educational levels, darker skinned people, more children and adolescents, and more unemployment. This partly explains the much higher risk of dying young from violent causes for males in the poor regions because of the vulnerability of youths to the lure of criminal groups, to be discussed below.

Informal real estate markets operate within the increasingly growing favelas, and the regularization of lawful property ownership is a very slow process. Informal construction and irregular acquisition of electricity or water have created many conflicts due to difficulties in limiting individual freedom, concerning the placement of pipes and lines as well as usual domestic activities, in collective crowded spaces. In these situations, the officially defined “subnormal agglomerations”, have become in fact uncontrolled markets for many goods, including real estate. Since there is no legal control over such businesses, and access to justice is enormously difficult for favela residents, the increased population density due to uncontrolled and uncontrollable building make the favelas “sanctuaries”, some inexpugnably, for armed retail drug dealers. In order to protect themselves from traffickers’ violence, some favela residents support militias that wind up exploiting the residents by controlling several informal and illegal services (Zaluar & Conceição, 2007)

Thus, informality has facilitated the violent control of these areas by drug gangs or militias that, in addition to selling illegal drugs (the gangs) or security services (the militias), also trade irregular cable TV, informal

transport, and domestic gas supply. Thus, one million people in the city live in areas that have no regular policing and police enforcement, but are quite well served by some essential urban services such as water and light (Cardoso, 2008). This increases the chances for armed conflicts inside the neighbourhoods and enhances the vulnerability of youths attracted to the armed drug gangs that control the *favelas*.

But there are advantages of living in such areas: no urban taxes are paid and informality makes possible the theft of electricity, water and even cable TV signals, for which few pay, or pay below formal rates to the strongmen who control distribution. The result is that population density is amazingly high in some of these *favelas* and that regular city dwellers—including the poor who don't live in *favelas*—pay higher rates to compensate for the losses suffered by the electricity and water supply companies.

As regards race or skin colour, racial segregation does not explain the greater vulnerability of youths living in *favelas*. Although the proportions of dark skinned and white people in them are exactly the opposite than that of the rest of the city (58.6% of favela residents are blacks and browns<sup>6</sup> and 41.4% are white, compared with 36.5% and 63.5% of those “racial” categories respectively outside the *favelas*), one cannot define this situation as the same kind of segregation found in an Afro-American ghetto in the United States. Yet, socio-economic data are worse in *favelas*: and 50% of the favela population is younger than 25 compared to 37.7% in the rest of the city. In 2000, 10% of favela residents were illiterate, compared to 3% in the rest of the city, mainly because many favela residents are migrants or their children from the poorest regions of Brazil where they received no or little schooling before moving to Rio de Janeiro. In this city, education levels are high compared to the national average of 6 years of schooling, but the proportion of favela residents with less than 8 years of schooling is 82%, almost double that of those in the rest of the city where it is 46%. Only 2% of *favelados*, as compared to 25% of non-*favelados*, have any higher education. Nonetheless, 94% of children in *favelas* attend school, yet they exhibit comparatively poorer performance: 20% of them are more than two years behind in school compared to only

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6 Racial classification in Brazil is different from the United States: it is hierarchical and not dichotomist, defined by different racial marks and not by origin. The shades of brown have a continuum that makes it difficult to separate whites from “morenos” or “pardos”. Racial classification is self ascribed in the census and “negotiated” in birth certificates.

10% of students outside the favelas. Most migrants from the poorest states of Brazil, especially the Northeast, where illiteracy is very high, have flooded into the city since the 1940s and constitute, with their descendants, the majority of favela dwellers. Whereas 67% of the population outside the favelas 15 years or older was born in the city of Rio de Janeiro, 24% in other Brazilian states, and 2.8% in foreign countries, 34% of favela residents come from other Brazilian states (Zaluar et al., 2007).

Finally, income distribution shows that there are some differences between *favelados* in the South Zone and Barra da Tijuca, where most of the rich people live, and *favelados* of other poorer zones, especially the West Zone and the suburbs. There is also a greater contrast between the average income of *favelados* (US\$208) and non-*favelados* (US\$1,180) near the beaches where the wealthy live, than inside the poorer zones where this difference is much smaller: US\$ 175 for *favelados* and US\$ 285 for non-*favelados* (Pero, Cardoso and Elias, 2005).

Estrangement from family and school also have an effect on the vulnerability of youths to the attractions of gangs and, therefore, to the risk of premature death. It is at the verge of adolescence, when they are finishing elementary school or skipping class because of repeated failure, become more vulnerable to the attractions of criminal gangs: easy cash and the power acquired from the barrel of the gun.

Favelas in the central and suburban regions have higher population density and are more affected by de-industrialization, which contributes to youth unemployment. The suburbs have the highest demographic density of 116 people per hectare, which is five times that in more recently populated area, such as the West zone where the density is much lower (23 people per hectare close to the beaches and 26 per hectare inland) and the only region that has grown recently (as much as 10% to 7.61% in five years). The former and older ones lost residents in the same period (a 6.96% drop in the central area, a 2.99% decline in the south zone and -a 1.13% fall in the suburbs). Nevertheless, the latter are not the worst as far as public services are concerned given that only 1% of households do not have some water, sewage and electricity services, even though the supply is very precarious (Cardoso, 2008).

Therefore, poverty cannot explain entirely the greater risk either of dying young or of observing or experiencing violent crimes. It is vital to consider the effects of the presence of well-armed drug dealers in those areas.

## Patterns of violence in Brazil

In Brazil, while deaths by infectious diseases have decreased continuously since the 1980s, violent deaths increased several times, especially in the age brackets of 14-19 and 20-25. In 1980, violent deaths accounted for 50% of youth deaths, growing to 75% in 2003, of which 40% were homicides. Rio de Janeiro's homicide rate tripled from 20.5/100,000 in 1982 to 61.2/100,000 in 1989, when it reached its peak, following the expansion of cocaine trafficking and consumption. In the states of Pernambuco, Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where drug trafficking grew strongly since the late 1970s; homicides represented 50% or more of youth deaths. Official data show that the Brazilian pattern of higher male youth homicide rates is undoubtedly clearer in Rio de Janeiro, in so far as for those from 14 to 30 years old, 94.5% of murder victims were male and only 5.5% female.

In fact, the most amazing feature of the national pattern of the growth of murders is that it affects mainly young men. Whereas the homicide rate in the age bracket between 14 and 25 escalated from 30/100,000 in 1980 to 54.5/100,000 in 2002, the rate for older men remained stable, from 21.3/100,000 to 21.7 during the same period. Nationwide, 90% or more of the cases involved males, while only 10% or fewer involved women. (Waiselfisz, 2004)<sup>7</sup>

Why has lethal violence affected men 10 times more than women, and young people five times more than older people? This is the puzzling issue of Brazilian violence, for which the city of Rio de Janeiro is just one element. Although this criminal pattern is a global phenomenon, it is very different from ethnic or religious conflicts where women, children and old people are killed or sexually assaulted in similar proportions. Sexual crimes have not increased in Brazil or in Rio de Janeiro, where they maintain a rate of 1.5% in the Victimization Survey 2005-2006.

Official crime data for the metropolitan regions of Brazil show that in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, the homicide rate by handguns tripled from 20.5/100,000 in 1982 to 61.2/100,000 in 1989, when it reached its peak. Since then, it has been around 50/100,000, with the lowest rate in 2001 (45.3/100,000), which rose again in 2002, and fell in 2005 to (34.9/100,000).

Yet, of Brazil's 26 state capital's, eight had average homicide rates higher

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<sup>7</sup> Unesco-Brazil now has a yearly publication called *Mapa da Violência* in which official data is presented in tables and graphs. This one appeared in 2004 and was written by J.J.Waiselfisz.

than Rio de Janeiro in 2005: Maceió, Cuiabá, Recife, Curitiba, Belo Horizonte, Natal, Porto Velho and Vitória. The situation has changed recently but Rio de Janeiro does not have Brazil's highest average homicide rate. Nevertheless, it is the champion for youth homicide, which reaches a rate of 289/100.000 for those between 14-19, probably due to the pattern of homicide in the city, where 70%<sup>8</sup> of these deaths involve drug trafficking and other similar conflicts, whereas the killing of related people or those who knew each other intimately is much more rare than in other parts of the country. Indeed, this rapid growth in homicides particularly affects male youths from 15 to 29 years of age, the majority of which were crimes committed in public places among people who neither knew each other intimately nor were relatives, but at most acquaintances. This is the pattern found in conflicts over the division and defence of territories and earnings among armed dealers and robber, as in the violent competition among gangs in the ghettos of Los Angeles, Chicago and New York at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and later, during the heroin, cocaine and crack epidemics in the United States of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s (Sullivan, 1992).

### **Inequality and youth violence in Rio de Janeiro**

Several studies have shown that violent crimes are more common in *favelas* and poor districts, corresponding to differences of inequality in the city, and the lack of social and state control, especially by police in poorer areas<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately it is very difficult to compare official homicide rates in different districts or *favelas* where lack of property rights means people do not use formal addresses. People often give addresses (that may not exist) in adjacent districts to avoid being discriminated as "*favelados*". Moreover, since police repression is stronger against favela residents, bodies are dumped in neighbouring districts, tremendously increasing homicide rates there.

Furthermore, lack of policing, police corruption and violence have led

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8 In 1991, a careful study of police investigations and criminal court procedures in Rio de Janeiro showed that 57% of the homicides committed that year were related to drug dealing. In fact, this is only one of the many indications suggesting that the increase in homicide rates can be linked to a heavier influx of firearms and narcotics into the country, since both phenomena increased simultaneously in the late 1970s.

9 A good report of this is in Zaluar (2000 and 2001), and also in Alvito (1996) and Lins (1997).

to an “endless war”, as the city inhabitants call it, which leaves residents of poor areas caught between two armed conflicts: the war among members of different “commands” (as the gangs are known); and the war between “bandits” and the police, who do not always act to repress crime and maintain the law. In our ethnographic research since 1980, we have heard how easy it is to get guns in dangerous favelas, i.e. the ones dominated by traffickers that exist mainly in the central and suburban areas, where blacks and browns have lived longer in the city - for over a century.

These favelas are also the neighbourhoods most attacked by police gunfire (Zaluar *et al.* 2007), especially by the Military Police, which is responsible for policing streets but which is more scarce or even absent in those districts where the poor live. At the same time, the police act more violently in those areas controlled by dealers, which are “invaded” from time to time in armed clashes, mainly in the central and suburban areas. In these regions, policemen use guns much more than in the other areas of the city and use more excessive force on residents, according to the latter.

In Rio de Janeiro, guns are more easily obtained due to the sea port and several airports in the city, as well as the most important military armouries. Many thefts have taken place and continue to occur in the armouries that do not have suitable control. This has facilitated the arming of drug dealers. (Zaluar, 2004; Dowdney, 2004 and 2008). Not surprisingly, the central and suburban areas are those closer to the port and the bigger airports, as well as Guanabara Bay.

In turn, the higher circulation of guns stimulates an ethos of hyper masculinity (Connel, 1995) or a warrior ethos (Elias, 1993) that leads youths to fire at each other and increase the rate of deaths by aggression or homicides, which is greater in these two regions (Szwarcwald & Leal, 1997). Guns have become an everyday way of maintaining command over a territory, settling debts, avoiding competition, and scaring possible witnesses.

This is a global pattern and the international literature shows that gun possession is explained by the socio-cultural context of small groups to which youths belong. Studies carried out in the United States point out that the peer group is the major predictor of youth delinquency, especially that involving more serious violent crimes and gun possession. In this study, those who carry guns constituted 20% of the sample of black adolescents between 12 and 15. These youths mentioned 19 times more than those who do not carry guns

that they also have friends who carry gun (Myers *et.al.*, 1997). Thus, family may have a direct or indirect bearing on this behaviour, but the social network in which these youths interact with other youths of the same age or older is more important. Other studies find that, gun carrying and school failure are the most important indicators for explaining violent actions perpetrated by youths (Ellikson *et.all*, 1997; Resnick *et all.*, 2004). The aim of these studies was to understand why youths who otherwise would not carry guns do so to avoid being victimized by armed peers and gain respect and status.

Thus, higher homicide rates can be explained by the higher gun concentration in these areas, creating what one criminologist called an “*ecology of danger*” (Fagan, 2005), after interviewing 400 youths in the most dangerous districts of New York and discovering that violence grew between 1985 and 1995 because of contagious ideas and practices shared among neighbours and peers.

### **Violence linked to drug dealing**

Drug dealing has created war-like conditions since the early 1980s in many Brazilian municipalities, but with regional differences between cities and neighbourhoods. In Rio de Janeiro, even if not completely coordinated by a mafia-like hierarchy, the drug trade has an efficient horizontal organization. If there is a lack of drugs or firearms in a *favela*, the organization makes it possible to immediately obtain more supplies from allied gangs in other favelas. These “Commandos”, as they are known, coordinate the mechanisms of a geographically and hierarchically defined set-up, which includes central points of coordination, most of them inside prisons, and widespread points of sale, as well as networks established on the basis of horizontal reciprocity. Nevertheless, unlike the Italian-American mafias, their organizations have never had the stable ties of loyalty that exist among people related by ritual kinship or blood. If there is some loyalty within the “numbers rackets”, another type of illegal organization in Brazil, this has never been the case among drug dealers, making it much more difficult to maintain any link of personal loyalty, whether vertically or horizontally<sup>10</sup>.

Drug Commandos have transient skirmishes to dispute territory within

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<sup>10</sup> This finally occurred in the Italian mafia when some business minded mafiosi became richer through drug dealing, thus menacing the powerful chiefs, causing a splinter. (Luppo, 2002)

the favelas where their markets are located. As a result of the ensuing military-type control, in most areas inside *favelas* or near them, the drug lords or “*donos*” [owners] restrict the movements of residents and government agents, therefore limiting access to public services such as schools, health agencies and sports compounds. Residents of one favela cannot enter the territory of an “enemy” favela, even when delivering goods, visiting friends and relatives, or when on dates. If they do, they are killed, especially if they are young men. Many adolescents have been killed simply because they have passed from one sector to another commanded by feuding drug gangs, even if just to go to work or to a dance. Violent traffickers do not allow their turf to be “emasculated” and strictly control the sexuality of young women, killing the ones that do not abide by their rules.

This is what *favelados* of some districts call “the endless war”, which consists of opposing members of enemy drug gangs or policemen confronting traffickers. During these violent clashes, not only gang members, but also youths who live in the invaded or threatened favelas are coerced into helping the local defenders fight their “common enemies”. Adolescents working for traffickers, who are called “soldiers” or “falcons”, then form a “*bonde*”<sup>11</sup> that will confront the other “*bonde*”. Some of them have in fact received military training during their mandatory enlistment in the official Brazilian Armed Forces.

When “soldiers” are called up by top drug dealers, the call is aimed particularly at youths who were able to get around current regulations under which the Brazilian Armed Forces avoids recruiting youths from the shantytowns. In other words, they are those who have undergone military service, which is mandatory for all males. Even when they are not part of the drug gangs, these youths are “invited” to assemble and disassemble the army-issue automatic weapons stolen from military arsenals. They are called on to teach new soldiers involved in drug trafficking how to confront the enemies when the police or a rival gang invades the shantytown. They must accept the “invitation”, not so much because they are pressured, but because they feel obliged to collaborate with the gang that controls the neighbourhood where they live. In any case, they know that refusal has a moral and physical cost: they will lose their recognition or consideration from the “boss of the hill”

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<sup>11</sup> Gang members use *bonde*, or tramcar, to refer to a group of heavily armed “soldiers” that go together to battle the enemy.

and other peers; they can be expelled from the favela; or even executed. At times they are even invited to join the “*bonde*” about to invade enemy neighbourhoods (Zaluar, 2001).

Violence linked to drug dealing is thus concentrated in particular neighborhoods, and does not divide the entire Brazilian population into two opposing groups. In civil wars, soldiers are part of proper military or paramilitary armies and leave their neighbourhoods and do not generally participate in everyday activities within their neighbourhoods (Wessells, 1998). Consequently, there is less militarization of children and adolescents in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro where they are not taken away from their families, schools and localities to join military forces that go far away. In turf wars over drug dealing, “soldiers” do not lose contact with their families, schools and vicinities.

### **Hyper masculinity and turf war**

Due to the violent exchanges of turf wars, adolescents are not only casualties of a continuing armed conflict, but also of a prevailing sense of status or self-esteem predicated on demonstrations of virility and “manliness” (Alvito, 1996; Lins, 1997), not in the sense of a mannerly gentleman, but in one’s capacity and willingness to destroy the enemy (Monteiro, 2003; Zaluar, 2004; Cecchetto, 2004).

Some adolescents not involved in trafficking identify themselves with the drug commands of the *favelas* where they live as if they were fans of a sports team. This means acquiring the warrior ethos or hyper masculinity that exults with the physical destruction of rivals, who are referred to as the “*alemães*”<sup>12</sup> or Germans. The end result may be participation in actions in which they need actual guns for survival, that is, practices and ideas developed in trafficking networks that become contagious in larger social contexts. Favela boys grow up seeing the guns as symbols of power and as lethal instruments for punishing foes. Favela boys learn to hate policemen and fear being pointed out as informers, which would provoke a loss of respect and death threats. They also learn the values that sustain the pride and virility of a “*Sujeito Homem*” (Alvito, 1996;

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<sup>12</sup> “*Alemães*”, Germans in Portuguese, is a reference to American films on the Second World War when Germans were the enemies.

Lins, 1997; Zaluar, 2004), a man who does not accept an insult and who reacts with a deadly disposition towards his opponents.

Yet, it is a known fact that not all adolescents follow a criminal career. In Cidade de Deus, the research team has calculated that around 1% of the population are somehow connected to the drug crews<sup>13</sup>. The symbol of this involvement is gun possession in keeping with the dynamics of small and local peer networks. Youths who otherwise would not carry firearms display them to gain “consideration” from their peers and avoid being victimized by those who already have them. Using weapons is, of course, a learned behaviour and not a natural inclination of poor youths towards violence and murder. This behaviour is learned more easily where there is a high concentration of handguns, a social context that criminologist Jeffrey Fagan has called the “ecology of danger” for its contagious ideas and postures.

Dangerous favelas are those where firearms are easily acquired and exhibited<sup>14</sup>. In them, youths also believe that by joining a gang the powerful “*donos*” (bosses) will provide them military, legal, political and personal protection, thus preparing them for the local war. In these favelas, youths learn to be ruthless and to kill other youths from “enemy” commands without qualms. For good reason, they also trust that their crimes will be exempt from penalty although they often end up as homicide victims.

This reveals the construction of an aggressive and destructive virility that permeates the locality where boys grow up. In the streets where they play, they absorb the codes by which they become impervious to the suffering of others, that is, they master cruelty and the disposition to kill. This is not a natural, eternal, or consensual situation and is not the only one found in poor neighborhoods. There are many styles of masculinity among migrants from other states, among young people of the second generation, among young whites, blacks and mulattos from the city. The destructive social configuration has been called the warrior ethos (Elias & Dunning, 1993) or hyper masculinity, in which conspicuous consumption defines the newly

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13 In 1991, my research assistant Paulo Lins estimated the number of youths doing drugs in Cidade de Deus and we calculated the percentage, considering the population living there that year. A study done at FIOCRUZ ([www.fiocruz.gov.br](http://www.fiocruz.gov.br)), calculated that 15% of adolescents in another favela were so involved.

14 Since 1980, when I started my first research in Cidade de Deus, I heard how easy it was to get handguns and how corrupt policemen sold heavy guns, sometimes smuggled, sometimes stolen from police and army deposits, to traffickers.

successful masculine identities. Its main features are helping friends, neighbours and relatives, impressing everyone with a display of jewellery and expensive clothes and giving parties and distributing drinks in public places. But this exacerbated masculinity - or the spectacular display of male protest in this localized but endless armed conflict, in which youths have guns and lots of money in their pockets - becomes a threat to their neighbourhoods and themselves.

This trend has grown since the 1970s and is replicated by youngsters whose parents are either too busy or too careless to pay attention to them, whose relatives and neighbours do not dare confront the rules of the “context” and remain silent about the abuse, and whose schoolteachers are unable to deal with their learning problems. These are the children who turn into conformists or are “tele-lead”, as local poor workers say, to express the idea that they obey the ruthless rules of the criminal gangs without hesitation or thought. Their main source of pride or illusion is being part of an armed crew that commit muggings and makes war against others, thus becoming notorious for their deeds.

Meanwhile, they are still part of their families, neighbourhoods and schools, although they may leave them and return regularly. The war is local.

### **Forms of private security and militias**

Data from the victimization survey show that 25% of interviewees admitted that they make use of private forms of security, varying from drug dealers, neighbours, vigilantes - paid or unpaid - as well as employees of security firms using uniformed or informal plainclothes employees (Zaluar et al, 2007). Since policemen have the “right” to have a second job, most security firms in the wealthier areas of the city and militias in the poorer areas, are managed by off-duty policemen. The difference between them is how they relate to the residents in richer and poorer areas. In the poor neighbourhoods, members of private militia easily become tyrants who impose their extralegal or illegal decisions on unarmed neighbours simply because residents lack access to the legal system.

Difficulties in providing security have created new problems for the police forces. Neighbourhood associations have been weakened vis-à-vis the armed power of traffickers, and neighbours are too frightened to exercise

informal control over young people. Without collaboration from residents, policemen intervene in localities under the cross fire of enemy dealers. This vicious circle reinforces the predisposition to act as if policemen were also in at war with them, i.e. using military force against them and hunting criminals among residents, not always knowing how to differentiate foe from friend, the criminal from the innocent. Adherence to legal rules by the police is compromised because dealers can have a highly corrupting influence. Thus, images of violent and crooked policemen dominate the imaginary of young people who live in favelas: more than 70% of young men and 92% of women between the ages of 15 and 19 believe that the military police is violent and corrupt.

### **How to leave criminal gangs and drug trafficking?**

Former dealers interviewed in 2007 told us not only that the possibility of dropping out of crime is always in the minds of prisoners, but also that there are multiple of reasons for this, much more than previously registered. The reasons usually given, according to other studies, are conversion to a religious faith, especially Neo Pentecostal, or falling in love with a woman who truly loved them in turn (Pereira, 2008). Since love and religious fervour is not available to everyone at any time, most former dealers mentioned a variety of less dramatic and emotional factors, in fact more pragmatic reasons, such as “drug trafficking has changed and is now much more violent”, “I don’t want to go back to prison”, “I am not young any more” (Pereira, *op.cit.*).

When they talk about the past, they do not seem to miss it or wish to go back to the same path. Although some liked to boast of their fearless actions confronting enemies, displaying prowess and pride, most referred to this time as a very difficult one because suspicion, self interest and the yearning for money made real friendship impossible. The images they report are of a time in which they were surrounded by enemies and had to watch their backs constantly, something I also registered when interviewing young boys on the verge of becoming traffickers (Zaluar, 1994 and 2004).

None of the interviewees became rich. Instead, they told how they had “lost” the money gained in the illegal trade to corrupt policemen, lawyers, disloyal women who only wanted their money, loans to family members, relatives or friends, parties and feasts in which they indulged their followers and

neighbours. It had cost a lot of money to maintain their power and freedom to do drugs. Traffickers in action also pointed out that “money that comes easily goes away quickly” (Zaluar, *op.cit*), even without knowing that things get worse with women and lawyers when they were arrested and prosecuted.

Yet, when they are finally out of prison, it is almost impossible to get formal legal jobs because of a Brazilian law that makes it necessary to provide a document – “*atestado de bons antecedentes*” - to any employer ascertaining that the applicant has never been arrested. Those who have no profession or family support to initiate a small business or independent work have no choice but to go back to informal and illegal activities. Five of those we interviewed were later killed after rejoining drug gangs.

The high rate of recidivism in the Brazilian penal system may thus be partly explained by this institutional norm that impedes former prisoners from finding jobs, even if they do not want to go back to crime and want to work.

## **What is to be done?**

In order to impede youngsters from becoming members of criminal gangs, in Brazil as elsewhere, it is crucial to have social projects and state policies integrated at all government levels (municipal, state, and federal) as well as public safety agencies that can control violence. Thus, coordinated education, healthcare, economic development and justice projects are needed to face the challenges presented by the new forms of criminality that mainly affect young men. This coordination is also very important to make the many social projects managed by NGOs -- many with lots of good ideas -- more effective at the macro level.

Data on the correlation between schooling and homicides indicate that educational quality is vital to assuring that poor youngsters finish elementary school and go to high school. Even if Brazilian poor youths do not become soldiers in a conventional war, better schools are essential to keeping these youngsters from dropping out and joining criminal gangs. The aim is to diminish the contingent of stray youths who neither work nor study, and who may fall into gangs to feel protected and powerful because they carry guns and have money to spend lavishly in conspicuous consumption before their peers.

At the local level, neighbourhood cultural and sport projects that connect adults and youths are important for families that can and should be engaged

in them. Traditional forms of community association in Rio de Janeiro, such as Schools of Samba, Carnival Blocs and soccer teams, have long fulfilled this function of integrating generations in order to socialize the young. They can and should be supported as much as new projects that develop globalized identities and juvenile styles, such as *hip-hop* or *reggae*. Since trauma resulting from violence is collective (Reichenberg & Friedman, 1996), such actions will be more successful with groups of youngsters and adults than programs focusing only on individuals (Wessels, 1998).

In order to diminish violent encounters between criminal gangs and their customary use of guns, public policies should aim at reducing access to guns, which youngsters use to kill each other, and which facilitate their own deaths. It is essential to stop the flow of weapons that come from military arsenals, gun collectors and international arms dealers. This is a responsibility of the federal police and should be accompanied by adoption of police and law enforcement techniques that respect the civil rights of all citizens, regardless of their economic status, skin colour, gender or religion.

Many actions can be envisaged to disarm these youths. For example, the use of *gun-oriented* patrols, aimed at seizing firearms is one possible program to take from youths the instruments of death and the disposition to kill for money and personal pride. Providing youths with other symbols of status and respect is another related alternative. For these methods to work, the existing police approaches and investigation practices must change drastically. New investigative techniques and prevention strategies that involve neighbourhoods, including those in favelas, may have more solid and long term effects than others. Relations between the police and community residents must be improved and a radical police reform is necessary to change the image of police as being abusively violent, corrupt and the main enemy of poor favela resident.

Finally, it is essential to establish tertiary prevention that makes it possible for ex-prisoners to find jobs, that is, a way to earn a living without returning to crime. This should start in prison by offering them not only work programs, which are already available, but changing the norms about the documents necessary to get a job. After “paying their debts to society” ex-prisoners feel they should have another chance.

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