

Summary:

What is the profile of a teen who lives (and dies) in the drug trade? Based on interviews with 230 children, teens and young adults involved in armed groups in 34 communities in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the socio-economic, cultural and educational profile of those involved in trafficking was analyzed. At the end of the study, the high turnover in youths employed by trafficking was evident: of the 152 children regularly followed, 22 died, 30 left the drug trade voluntarily, and 46 could not be found. The number of those who died rises, however, to 45 by April 2006 when considering the larger group of 230 youths interviewed.

Deconstructing the myth of easy money, 57% earn between one and three times the minimum wage, set at R\$260.00 (US\$130) per month, do not get any days off, and those who do, are still at the disposal of the drug trade even during their time off. Of the 230 interviewed, 89.57% admitted using some kind of drug, and about 27% started doing so before their 12th birthday and only 5.2% completed middle school. Of the 145 family members killed, 41 were not involved in trafficking. The youths also reported having witnessed 122 deaths and 205 beatings during the first five months of the study.

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What is the profile of a teen who lives (and dies) in the drug trade? The launch of the report, "The Path of Children, Teens and Young Adults in the Drug Trafficking Network in Rio de Janeiro" is an important step towards answering to this difficult question. The study is part of the Rotas de Fuga, or Ways Out program at the Favela Watch (Observatório de Favelas) in Rio de Janeiro.

Based on interviews with 230 children, teens and young adults involved in armed groups in 34 communities in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the socio-economic, cultural and educational profile of those involved in trafficking was analyzed. The interviewees were between 11 and 24 years old, and 57% of them joined when they were between 13 and 15 years old.

During five months, 152 of the 230 youths chosen to participate in the study were regularly followed by a team of ten interviewers. The field work continued until May 2006 when the final research data were collected.

At the end of the study, the high turnover in youths employed by trafficking was evident: of the 152 children regularly followed, 22 died, 30 left the drug trade voluntarily, and 46 could not be found. The number of those who died rises, however, to 45 by April 2006 when considering the larger group of 230 youths interviewed, (which includes children not regularly interviewed during the two year research period). Only 97 youths continued working in trafficking when the study concluded.

According to Jaílson Oliveira, general coordinator of the Favelas Watch, the closed universe of drug trafficking makes this number of interviews significant and the research, even if not statistically significant, contains sufficient information to construct the big picture.

Deconstructing the myth of easy money

The study deconstructed the idea that easy money is the biggest motivation for joining drug trafficking. Despite the majority of youths having affirmed that their life's dream was to earn more money, the facts point to a salary cap: 57% earn between one and three times the minimum wage, set at R\$260.00 (US\$130) per month. Coincidentally, the same percentage of youths interviewed do not get any days off, and those who do, are still at the disposal of the drug trade even during their time off.

In terms of drug trade activities, 33% of described their jobs as that of "vapors" (selling drugs at street outlets). In 2001, a similar study showed that this work earned between 10 and 15 minimum wages. Today, 64.0% of those working as "vapors" reported earning between one and three minimum wages.

The research also showed how precarious their lives are. The high school drop-out rate and the use of drugs, combined with a difficulty in accessing public spaces outside the community make their socio-cultural universe even smaller. Of the 230 interviewed, 89.57% admitted using some kind of drug, and about 27% started doing so before their 12th birthday.

Of all the youths interviewed, 90% said they knew how to read and write, but only 5.2% completed middle school. Most stayed in school until the 5th grade and only 7% were still formally linked to a school.

Interviewers faced difficulties providing data

The interviewers were selected based on their place in the community and their relationship with the social network in local trafficking so that they would have access to information, which does not necessarily imply direct involvement.

During the study, one interviewer abandoned the project because his brother was killed by traffickers, and another subject was arrested and harassed by the police, making him also drop out of the data collection.

Life-Protection Policy Reversed

According to those who answered the questionnaire, confrontations with the police caused 60.4% of the deaths registered during the study. For Fernando Lannes, adjunct coordinator of the Favela Watch, the police culture that targets favela residents mirrors a societal complacency with police brutality. "Society closes its eyes to violent police action in the favelas," Lannes said.

For Fernando Lannes, part of Rio de Janeiro's public security policy must not be merely repressive "eliminating individuals once they have reached extremes." For him, the culture of combating crime is responsible for the extremes in police operations. "The presence of 'Caveirão' (an armored vehicle adapted for police for use, deployed in incursions into the favelas) is the inverse of the policy of protecting life, that the State should adopt" Lannes stated.

Vulnerability to violent action, according to the study, is not exclusive to those whose activities are directly related to illegal drug trafficking. Of the 145 family members killed, 41 were not involved in trafficking. The youths also reported having witnessed 122 deaths and 205 beatings during the first five months of the study.

Lannes believes that the decriminalization of drugs is one possible path so that their use does not continue to be directly related to violence. The common-sense equation divulged around the year 2000 that put trafficking profits as the main financier of firearms and, consequently, responsible for Rio de Janeiro's high homicide rates could be reversed. "A policy that focuses on the issue of firearms control and is removed from the criminalization of drugs would be more effective in combating violence," the adjunct coordinator concluded.