

Music, dancing —and a national policy —are challenging violence in Brazil

For Brazil, perhaps it's the obvious solution: violence has become endemic, but many people find music and dancing more compelling than hostility.

Every hour, 13 Brazilians are murdered. Maria Helena Prado de Mello Jorge, an epidemiologist from the University of São Paulo says that in recent years violence, especially against young people, has reduced the life expectancy of men by four years in the state of São Paulo.

For Antonio Carlos Alkimin of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, violence has wiped out progress made in other areas. A dramatic fall of 30% in infant mortality in Brazil between 1990 and 2000 has not been reflected in any decrease in overall mortality — which actually increased between 1992 and 1999.

The basic causes of violence are arguable, but the narcotics trade, an abundance of weapons in the slums, and lack of hope among young people facing unemployment in the big cities are believed to be major causes. Wania Pasinato Izumino of the Centre for the Study of Violence of the University of São Paulo says that “large segments of the population have been impoverished by disordered economic growth and an unequal distribution of wealth”. According to the Coordinator of the Centre, Nancy Ca’rdia, improved access to rights such as health, education, leisure and cultural activities for the poor in the big cities could be a strong antidote to violence.

Meanwhile communities are beginning to do things for themselves. In 1993 in Viga’rio Geral, a favela (slum) of Rio de Janeiro, 21 people were murdered in a single night. Soon after the slaughter, Afroreggae, a small group of musicians, went to Viga’rio Geral, where they found an emotionally shaken community with no hope for the future. “We began a festival movement, trying to rescue the community’s self-esteem. We set up dance and percussion workshops and we won credibility in the community. Today, we organize cultural and health activities for more than 450 adolescents,” affirms Iere^ Ferreira, a coordinator of the project.

The band now has 11 musicians, most of whom live in the Viga’rio Geral area. Another project in the same favela called “Troupe da Saude” (the health troupe) uses theatre, music and circus. Composed of adolescents, its members go around the streets and on the trains, and in a cheerful and relaxed way, using appropriate language, pass on information about drugs, adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS.

Rodrigo Belchior was born in a favela in the south of Rio de Janeiro. From an early age, he was aware that children were dying in the favela from the “diseases of poverty”. When he was 13 years old, he had to start working to help support the family, and struggled to balance this with his studies. “During all these years, the slum has changed very little. Now we have water and public illumination, but we don’t have basic sanitation. And it is not always peaceful”, he said.

Now, at 26, Rodrigo is a musician, and coordinating the “Villalobinhos” named after Villalobos, the famous Brazilian conductor and composer. Rodrigo’s project offers musical training for 25 young people from favelas for three years, with daily classes on music history and playing instruments such as violin, clarinet, flute and cello.

“Every day we face the drug traffickers” said Rodrigo. “Their action is a type of veiled seduction, offering lucrative work to the adolescents. On the other hand, we seduce them with art. And in the end the one who wins the battle is the one who has the more seductive power. The kids have a choice: the drug trafficking or the music?” Rodrigo says.



Rio children are learning violence early.

Itamar Silva is another determined resident working for improvements for his favela, Santa Marta. Coordinator of the Group Eco, he is negotiating with the local government on a project to urbanize the favela by improving the houses, streets and infrastructure for a total cost of US\$ 6 million. The group’s social projects include a community newspaper, informatics and art courses, and workshops for ecological understanding. Silva believes that these activities have reduced the level of violence in the favela.

Implanted in a slum of Salvador in Bahia, another project, called Pracatum, teaches Brazilian popular music to 178 youths. According to its director, Caius Brandaõ, several of their students have performed at shows in Japan, Europe and Mexico.

And then there’s perhaps the most surprising antidote to violence: ballet. After returning to Rio from Cuba where she worked for the National Ballet, the Brazilian ballerina Thereza Aguilar

decided to copy a successful Cuban project which helped reintegrate orphans into society through art. “After a difficult beginning, today we offer classes of classic ballet for 298 girls and six boys, belonging to eight communities. Among these, nine have Down syndrome and five are deaf” says Thereza. Now, the project exports young talent from the favelas of Rio to ballet companies in Berlin and Cuba. Thereza remembers the hard times, and talks about the happiness it gives her to go into the favelas and hear classical ballet music playing in simple huts.

The Brazilian Ministry of Health is also turning its attention to violence. Recently it presented a new national policy for the reduction of morbidity and mortality caused by violence and accidents. The policy aims to promote safe and healthy behaviour and environments and to improve surveillance. It also aims at systematizing, enlarging and consolidating pre-hospital services. Many of the injured arrive in the emergency wards of the hospitals with wounds caused by high calibre weapons, leaving doctors with few strategies for treatment. According to the Vice-president of the Brazilian Association for Emergency Medicine, Max Leventhal, the situation is dramatic. “We are living through an exponential spiral of urban violence. The weapons have increased in firepower Rio children are learning violence early and the wounded arrive lacerated in the emergency wards; the public hospitals do not always possess the appropriate training for such multiply traumatized victims.”

According to Maria Helena Prado de Mello Jorge, epidemiologist at the University of Saõ Paulo, the national policy has a comprehensive vision, including action in related areas such as justice and education. None of these areas, nor the health sector alone, could eliminate the high crime rate in the country. A multisectoral vision like that of the national project is indispensable. Others point out that the “national policy for the reduction of accidents and violence” is still in its initial phase of implementation. Only if it is fully implemented by the government will it have a significant impact on the reduction of the morbidity and mortality rates.

Claudia Jurberg, *Rio de Janeiro*

Violent numbers in Brazil

- Homicides are now the first cause of death from other than natural causes (36% of such deaths), followed by traffic accidents (26%). In the 1980s, it was the other way round: traffic accidents were the first cause (33%), followed by homicides (17%).
- Men account for 84% of deaths from other than natural causes.
- For every 15 men of 20–29 years old who die by shooting, there is only one woman who dies in this way.
- The homicide rate among youths rose from 30% of deaths in 1990 to 49% in 2000.
- 75% of the deaths caused by accidents and violence occur in urban areas.
- According to the Ministry of Health, about 8% of the expenses for public hospital stays — without taking into account emergency wards — are incurred by accidents and violence.

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