

## Children, youth and violence in Brasil

**IRENE RIZZINI**

Centro para la Investigación de la Infancia  
Universidade Santa Ursula, Brasil

### Resumen

La violencia es un fenómeno mundial que debe visualizarse desde una perspectiva socio-cultural. Desde esclavistas hasta héroes, nuestra historia nos ha dejado un legado violento. Además, el atraso económico y sus desproporciones sociales constituyen formas modernas de violencia. En las últimas dos décadas, ésta se ha hecho parte de la vida en Brasil. Unos 30 millones de niños viven en condiciones que los exponen a la violencia y, en ocasiones, a la muerte. Pobreza, drogadicción, abuso sexual, desintegración familiar, impunidad e injusticia oficial y de la clase pudiente se han hecho comunes en la población de bajos recursos. Brasil ocupa el segundo lugar entre los países de la región con mayor número de homicidios, después de Colombia. Investigaciones revelan que un número impresionante de adolescentes se ve involucrado en esta generalización del fenómeno en Brasil. Este artículo analiza tres formas de violencia contra niños y adolescentes: consensual, pública/privada y desatada.

**Palabras claves:** violencia, pobreza, impunidad, adolescencia, justicia extrajudicial.

### Abstract

Violence is a global phenomenon that should be viewed from a cultural and social perspective. The continent's history seems to have left us a legacy of violence, both from slave traders and independence heroes. Additionally, economy backwardness and the consequent social imbalances are modern forms of violence. In the last two decades, violence has become part of Brazil's life. About 30 million children live in conditions that expose them to violence and, ultimately, death. Poverty, drug trafficking, sexual molestation, family disintegration, impunity and abuses by the State and the privileged classes have become commonplace in the low-income population. Brazil is today the second country with the highest number of homicides in the region, after Colombia. Studies have found that alarming numbers of teenagers are involved in that generalization of violence. This

article discusses three forms of the phenomenon in Brazil — consensual, public/private and uncontained violence against children and youth.

**Keywords:** violence, poverty, impunity, adolescence, extra-judicial justice.

## **The culture of violence**

Violence is currently seen as permeating all social classes as a global phenomenon. While old and new forms of violence are revealed and reach us inside our homes, we are faced by a mixture of perplexity, hopelessness not knowing how to understand it and deal with it.

We reject simplistic formulations, such as those which suggest that violence generates violence, or that disadvantaged classes are solely responsible for spreading violence. Violence has to be put into perspective considering both cultural and historical roots. In the case of Latin America, for example, a deep vein of violence is entangled in the history of our continent and resides in our collective unconscious. Our ancestors, the indigenous populations, were decimated by the colonists. Slaves coming from Africa and born on this continent pass on to us, together with their heroism and resistance, memories of the violence committed against them.

The history of our continent is marked by some of the most brutal forms of violations of human rights, ranging from disrespect of local cultures, resource exploitation, and the imposition of foreign values, beliefs and customs to physical brutality and murder. Every child and youth whose potential is wasted in our countries reflects this history of profound inhumanity.

The heroes of our histories did not leave us worthy examples for the formation of nations constructed for the good of all citizens. Meanwhile, we find ourselves suffering economic backwardness, grave social imbalance and a profound disrespect for human life and dignity. Economic backwardness is another form of violence, particularly in a country like Brazil whose economy stands as one of the ten strongest ones in the world.

The enormously unequal distribution of income in the region favors the perpetuation of violence. Also, international political relations hinders us from developing more just social solutions, as they take from our already impoverished economies a substantial part of our productive efforts.

In Brazil, social and economic impoverishment is a growing trend and have created new multitudes of marginalized people, especially in the big cities. During

the past two decades, social and economic inequalities intensified. Violence is increasingly present in the lives of Brazilians, with muggings, kidnappings, torture, drug related crimes and homicides. One of the most serious forms of violence is the practice of extermination, which in the name of defending society, has not spared even children.

Violence and young population In Latin America is cannot be considered a new association. Historical data have shown that the children of the poor have been pictured in an ambiguous way both as victims in need of protection and as a threat to society. To be sure, the images of children in danger and dangerous children are still quite present until these days (Rizzini, 1997) (2).

The problems which affect children and youth have, for good reasons, been the target of growing outrage. It is estimated that approximately 30 million children and adolescents live in conditions which are subhuman and completely inadequate for their full development. The violence which characterizes the lives and deaths of these children is the subject of this paper. I argue that despite the great show of concern that has been made about the growing number of children and youth that have been mercilessly assassinated throughout the country, violence against children have persisted in both subtle and explicit ways. I will be discussing these forms of violence, looking at what I have called: consensual, public/private and uncontained violence.

### **Consensual violence: living conditions of children and youth in Brazil**

I consider the way children live in Brazil, often left to strive by themselves, a severe form of violence. It is a cruel form of violence because it affects almost half of the young population and because it is consensual: people take it as simply being there. It does not shock or bother the mass of people. Yet, the conditions under which these children live and the way they are cared for are directly associated with the problems society will have to face as they grow; children who are off the school, who have to work in order to survive, who spend most of their time on the streets, children who are in conflict with the law, and so on.

It is difficult to evaluate the situation of poverty of Brazil; figures presented by the government and other sources are sometimes incomplete, distorted and often exaggerated. The most recent census data, from 1995, found that 23.6% of the population has a monthly family income of less than one half of the minimum wage (which in 1999 represented about US\$70), and 19% of the

population has a monthly family income between US\$70 and US\$140 (IBGE/UNICEF, 1997).

Brazil is considered a young country with approximately 40% of its population under age 18. Poverty in Brazil falls disproportionately on its children and youth: about half of Brazil's young people live in poverty. According to government figures, 40.4% of children ages 0 to 14 live in families with a monthly per capita income of less than US\$35 (Ribeiro, Sabóia, 1994; IBGE/UNICEF, 1997; Bercovich, Dellasoppa, Arriaga, 1998).

The size of Brazil's child and adolescent population, and the number of poor children and youth, present tremendous challenges for the social services sector, the most important being the public education system. Nearly 50 percent of Brazil's population is under the age of 20. The public education system in Brazil can best be represented as a bottleneck with nearly universal enrollment at the primary level converging to dramatically reduced enrollment at the secondary and tertiary level. The school enrollment rate in Brazil falls sharply from 84.2 percent at ages 10 -14 (the primary level, and the level at which education is compulsory) to 56.8 percent at ages 15 -17 (the secondary level) (Oliveira, 1993). Of those teens ages 15-17 who were in school, only 22.5 percent were enrolled in secondary school, demonstrating the high rates of retention and failure (Rizzini, Barker, 1999).

One of the main reasons for high rates of school drop-out and retention in Brazil, in addition to the lack of adequate education infrastructure, is the need for children and youth to work. Household survey data from 1990 find that 50 percent of youth ages 15-17 and 17.2 percent of 10-14 year-olds were working. In urban and rural areas in Brazil many low income children are frequently compelled to forgo school attendance to support themselves and their families. Data from National Research per Household Sample (IBGE/PNAD, 1995) indicated that 3.6% of children aged 5 to 9 were working, their average weekly working hours being 16.2 (Rizzini, Barker, 1999).

### **Public/private violence: “street children” and “abused” children**

Another kind of violence that could be described as public, overt or exposed is that of the so called street children. During the 1980s, the streets of Brazil became the stage for a drama hitherto little commented upon - the presence of a considerable number of children and youth surviving on the streets.

As the phenomenon of street kids acquired visibility throughout the country, many social researchers became interested in the theme and attempted to differentiate among children observed on the streets. In particular, the researchers differentiated the majority of street children who maintained their ties with their families, from the minority who had very little or no contact at all with their families. Despite of the known fact that most of the kids are in the streets because they have to contribute to the family's income, Brazilian society has very ambivalent attitudes towards them. The children make people feel uncomfortable and frequently scared. Some people try to help them, many are indifferent and others are revolted by their presence and are of the opinion that they ought to be locked up as early as possible in detention centers. Unfortunately, there also those who believe that eliminating these children would help to resolve the problem of criminality and violence.

The fact is that, these children and youth experience violence in various ways. Often as victims, they especially complain about police physical and sexual abuse. Very often involved in drug trafficking, these children become part of a violence cycle that is extremely difficult to be left without being hurt or dead.

For several years it was thought that these children were abandoned or had no families. Research conducted in different states have shown that more than half belong to families with parents and children and approximately 13% to families headed by single mothers (Rizzini, 1991, 1995). The consensus that is now emerging in Brazil is that the number of children and youth living in the streets is not nearly as large as once estimated, and is the 'tip of the iceberg' of low income children, the majority of whom continue to live with their families but often in difficult situations that compromise their development.

Another kind of violence that has called a lot of attention in the last few years takes place more in the private sphere of the family. Child physical, psychological and sexual abuse, as well as neglect have been closely associated in recent studies to people who are often responsible for the children safety. In most cases abusers are those who are trusted by the children, like parents and close relatives. A recent study carried out in the city of São Paulo, in which the author analyzed 2078 cases reported to the Juvenile Justice showed that 13% were cases of child abuse; 62% of these cases took place in the home: in 59% of them the fathers were the abusers and in 25% it was the stepfather (for both girls - 78% and boys (22%) (Passeti, 1999). Another study carried out in seven municipalities in Rio de Janeiro involving all kinds of violence showed that 96% of the reported cases took place within the family sphere, 2,5% at work place and 1% was institutional violence.

### **Uncontained violence: violent deaths**

Brazil has received with some discomfort the accusation that thousands of children and adolescents are assassinated every year in different parts of the country. We have been the target of harsh criticism from the international community, particularly from organizations dedicated to the defence of human rights.

Several reports produced in the beginning of the 1990s displayed solid evidence that the extermination of children by death squads was a reality in the country. It is believed that many of the authors of these crimes are professionals, frequently connected with police, who are contracted to eliminate these children. The motivation for the murder of children is linked to the belief that such illegal and brutal actions are justified by the need to keep the streets "safe" (Departamento da Polícia Federal, 1991).

Research from São Paulo have pointed out that child homicides are on the rise for very young children. From 1989 to 1985, the killing of children aged 5 to 9 has increased in 43% and from 1990 to 1995, it has gone up in 69%. Homicides involving children 10 to 14 have also increased significantly. From 1980 to 1985, homicides have increased 68%, and from 1990 to 1995, it has increased 128% (Folha de SP, 1998).

Violent deaths have grown rapidly in Brazil in the past few years. For boys aged 10 to 17 it is the first death cause; that includes homicides and violent accidents (Prefeitura do RJ).

### **Increasing Urban Violence (Rizzini, Barker, 1999)**

Within the current issues facing Brazil as a society, and as a social problem facing low income children and youth, there has been growing attention to the issue of violence. While much of this attention has emerged in the last few years as a result of increased violence in urban areas in Brazil, various authors cite the historical context of a "culture of violence" in Brazil, rooted in the country's colonial history of subjugation and slavery and the deep social divisions mentioned previously (Rizzini, 1994). Violence in Brazil is no doubt deeply connected to the enduring class structure. There is a culture of impunity and collusion for extrajudicial uses of violence by the state and by members of the privileged classes, while at the same time there is a widespread practice of imprisoning low income alleged criminals without due process (Bercovich, Dellasoppa, Arriaga, 1998). Partly as a result of its historical class structure and partly as a result of 20 years of authoritarian military rule, Brazil also lacks widespread, credible,

functioning structures for the resolution of conflicts and for criminal justice in general. Popular or extrajudicial justice continues to be commonplace, both among low income populations who exact vengeance or carry out extrajudicial justice in their communities, or through vigilante justice and "extermination" groups who represent the ruling class and use extrajudicial violence against low income individuals.

In the last decade, Brazil has seen homicides and other forms of violence increase substantially. Brazil currently has the second highest homicide region in the world after Colombia, with homicides increasing from a rate of 11.2 per 100,000 in 1980 to 23.8 per 100,000 in 1995 (Bercovich, Dellasoppa, Arriaga, 1998). Research also confirms that these homicides are not randomly distributed among the population but are concentrated by geographic area, gender, age and social class. Low income, young men ages 15-24 are the most common victims of homicides in Brazil. From 1980-91, the death rate for all age ranges declined in Brazil, with the exception of adolescent males 15-19 and young men ages 20-34, for whom death rates increased during the period (Yunes, Rajs, 1994).

Currently there are about 13,500 deaths from external causes, including accidents and suicides, per year in Brazil among adolescent males ages 15-19; of these, about one fourth (3200) are homicides by firearm (Szwarcwald & Leal, 1998). These deaths are concentrated in low income urban areas in the Southeast regions of the country (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo states) with Rio de Janeiro responsible for 30 percent of all deaths by firearms among the age range 15-24 (while it represents only about 5 percent of the total population of Brazil.) In Rio de Janeiro in 1995, there were an alarming 183.6 deaths per 10,000 population among adolescent males ages 15-19. While some of these young men are involved in comandos (armed, drug trafficking groups) or other forms of violence, and are killed by other young men, it would be grossly unfair to portray this situation as simply being intra-group violence. Many of these young men are victims of violence by police, vigilante groups or hired security personnel. Between 1988 and 1990, Brazil's Federal Police confirmed that 4,611 youth and children were murdered, mainly at the hands of police and vigilante groups (CEAP, 1993).

Statistics on other forms of violence are generally lacking in Brazil, but a few studies have found high rates of victimization of various forms of violence by adolescents. A survey with 1034 adolescents (average age 15.6) in low income areas in Rio de Janeiro, found that 63 percent said they had been victims of assault or robbery, 30 percent had been involved in street fights, and 3 percent had been imprisoned by police without clear cause (Ruzany et al, 1996). Additional data from Rio de Janeiro finds that the number of children and youth who are

victims of homicide is increasing. In the first semester of 1998, 247 children and youth were killed. From 1991 to 1998, 2996 youth ages 15-17 were killed by firearms, a rate that makes juvenile homicide higher in Rio de Janeiro than in New York City and Colombia, the country with the highest murder rate in the world.

Few researchers or policymakers have considered how a culture of violence in Brazil shapes the way that children and youth view their world. Brazil currently has a generation of low income, urban-based children who have witnessed violence in alarming numbers, and middle class children whose families construct protective barriers around them in response to violence (which middle class families tend to blame on low income youth). What does this imply for the future of children and youth in Brazil?

### Notes:

(1) Irene Rizzini is a Professor and a researcher at the Universidade Santa Ursula and Director of The Center for Research on Childhood; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Professor Rizzini serves as Vice-President of the Advisory Board of Childwatch International Research Network. She is the author of several books, among which are: *The art of governing children: the history of social policies, legislation and child welfare in Brazil*; *Desinherited from society: street children in Latin America*; *The lost century: the historical roots of public policies on children in Brazil*; *Images of the child in Brazil: 19th and 20th centuries*.

(2) This ambivalent view of the child - at once in danger and dangerous - becomes the dominant theme in the Brazilian discourse at the turn of the century. The child, born of poverty, is identified as an important element in social change according to the political project of the time, which will justify and legitimize a series of repressive measures adopted under the guise of welfare assistance to the poor. From the juridical standpoint a specific category was created -that of the minor- which divides children into two categories and which becomes synonymous with poor and potentially dangerous; abandoned or "*in danger of being so*;" corrupted or "*in danger of being so*"... (Rizzini, 1997).



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