Rio Drug Factions and the Children of the Favelas

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RIO DRUG FACTIONS AND THE CHILDREN OF THE FAVELAS
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BACKGROUND

Rio de Janeiro, among other major cities in Brazil, has been surrounded with slums for over a hundred years. These slums, called favelas by the natives, began springing up in the 1890’s (Gai, 1994). Many of these slums were created to house the people who came to the city in search of a better life. Unable to afford a home, they built shelters on the illegally claimed hillsides of Rio de Janeiro, intending to improve their situation from there (Villalba & Silva, 2006). Instead, the number of favelas has drastically increased over the years. In Rio de Janeiro alone, there are currently over 1800 favelas housing about 2 million people, or one-third of the population of Rio (Frayssinet, 2007a). Though people who dwell in the favelas became a place of culture and laughter. Festivities in the favelas would bring people from all over the city (Neate & Platt, 2006).

Meanwhile, as the government completely ignored the plight of the favelas, drug gangs began to move in and take over. They took control of the favelas, and kept peace within the community; something the government had never done for them. However, over time the rule of the drug factions became much harsher and more violent (Neate & Platt, 2006). In 2006, the murder rate in Rio de Janeiro was 37.7 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, most of the victims being between 15 and 24 years of age and related to the drug trade in the favelas (Michel, 2006; Yer, 2004). Comparatively, the murder rate in 2006 for the whole United States was 8.7 murders per 100,000 people (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2010). The violence brought by the favelas to the drug factions has become a major problem in Rio de Janeiro, especially in the impact it has had on children and teenagers in the favelas.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There are several factors contributing to the high crime rate in the favelas: a lack of government action, corrupt police forces, poverty, and discrimination within the culture. These factors have given the drug factions more power in the favelas and kept favelados from improving their situation on their own:

After many failed efforts to remove the favelas, the government has opted to ignore them instead (Gai, 1994). Because of this stance, many favelados will actually side with the drug dealers. The little help that has been offered by the government has been very ineffective and half-hearted. The government’s lack of support for the police force has been detrimental for the favelados (Arias, 2006). Because of the low pay and lack of negative consequences, police are happy to look the other way in exchange for a small payment from the drug dealers. The inactive government and corrupt police forces have given drug factions power to rule the favelas as they please, using violence if they so wish, or to Neate & Platt, 2006).

On the other hand, favelados also face many barriers in trying to improve their situation on their own. Because of deep roots of discrimination against favelados, it is almost impossible for them to get jobs earning above minimum wages. Even with the “magic bullet” of education, favelados are kept from receiving jobs that pay more than minimum wages. This discourages many children in the favelas from attending school and encourages them to join the drug trade. Unable to afford a life in the city, favelados are forced to raise their children in the violent streets of the favelas and the drug trade (Periman, 2006).

IMPAKT

The role of the drug factions has had a huge impact on the lives of the children in the favelas. These children are not only witnesses to violence and murder but are often caught in the middle of it. Many slowly get pulled into the drug trade while others choose to find help for other options. Many parents are reluctant just to let their children go outside for fear that they will be recruited by drug gangs or get caught in a cross-fire and killed by stray bullets. Often, drug factions will use children as young as 5 or 6 as a messenger (Neate & Platt, 2006). Many children are also used for trafficking drugs because they cannot be arrested unless caught red-handed. If there is any doubt of the child’s loyalty or if the child knows too much, they are killed (Jarmer, 1992). If they are not killed, chances are they will officially join the drug trade and be billed later possibly by their own faction (Neate & Platt, 2006).

Growing up in the midst of so much violence also has many psychological impacts on these children. Many of these children find it difficult to relate to others of the same age and limit their interactions. They become very introverted and timid and often show symptoms of depression. These children can also become very emotionally limited and sometimes aggressive. All of these impacts are defenses created by the children as a result of the violence and restrictions placed on them by fearful partners (Frayssinet, 2007a).

CURRENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

One of the main policies applicable to the children of the favelas is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Brazil on September 24, 1990 (United Nations [UN], 2010). Article six of the CRC recognizes “that every child has the inherent right to life,” a basic right often taken from children in the favelas. Article 33 calls for “all appropriate measures...to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs” and to “prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances” (UN, 1989).

Since then, Brazil has also passed several of their own laws in an attempt to protect their children. In 1993, the government created the National Program for the Full Attention to the Child and the Adolescent. Some of its main focuses are basic education, adolescent education for the job market, and the safety and health of children and adolescents. Later that year, Brazil passed a law organizing social assistance in Brazil. Its purpose is to protect the family (mothers, children, adolescents, and the elderly) and provide support to the needy (Soares, 2009).

There are also several non-governmental organizations (NGO) present in Brazil to assist children in the favelas. Though it is hard for NGO’s to enter the favelas, a few have found a way to make a difference (Neate & Platt, 2006). One of these is Luta Pela Paz, or Fight for Peace. Its main goal is to get kids off the streets and out of the slums by providing them with a place to go and a hobby (Lloyd, 2004). A similar idea is found in Afrotreggae, a NGO started by former drug dealers. Afrotreggae helps kids not only stay out of the drug trade but get out of the drug trade, a very dangerous and difficult task for many children (Neate & Platt, 2006).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to decrease the violence in the favelas and create opportunities for improvement for the children of the favelas, two things need to be done: empowering the residents of the favelas and taking the power from the drug factions.

One of the main factors keeping families from leaving the favelas and being empowered is the cultural discrimination. Because of this discrimination they are forced to take low-wage jobs, regardless of their education, and are unable to protect their children from the violence of the favelas. This discrimination has also encouraged the government and the police from helping the favelados for many years. To encourage non-discrimination the government could enforce equal opportunity employment and reward those who hire favelados. By educating the people of the city and reframing their beliefs, the children of the favelas would no longer need to worry about the injustices of the police and the city. They would be much more motivated to attend school, knowing they would be given a fair opportunity for jobs. Being able to get a good job in the city would open up many options for these children and dissuade them from joining the drug trade. All of these results—better jobs, education, children not joining the drug trade—would empower the citizens of the favelas and provide much better opportunities for their children.

The next step is to take away the power of the drug factions. Currently, drug gangs rule the favelas however they want without any fear of repercussions. In order to stop this trend the government needs to enforce their laws in the favelas as well as in their police forces. Police officers who accept bribes from drug traffickers or kill innocent favelados need to be prosecuted and convicted along with the drug traffickers. To strengthen the police force, the government could provide training to educate them on the situation in the favelas and how to best intervene, especially with the children, who may or may not be involved in the drug trade. By better enforcement of the laws, drug dealers would lose their free reign over the favelas and its children.

REFERENCES

United Nations (1989). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Brazil on September 24, 1990 (United Nations [UN], 2010). Article six of the CRC recognizes “that every child has the inherent right to life,” a basic right often taken from children in the favelas. Article 33 calls for “all appropriate measures...to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs” and to “prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances” (UN, 1989).

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“...but nobody would choose to live in a war zone. And this is, by most definitions, a war zone.”

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IMPACT

CURRENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

RIO DE JANEIRO

United States

RIO DE JANEIRO

RIO DE JANEIRO