2010-04-01

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 1800s (Gay, 1994). Many favelas are located in 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 (Villamil & 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 the city (Frayssinet, 2007a). Though riden with poverty, 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 over the favelas, and left peace within the community; something the government had never done before. However, over time the rate 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, 2008; Yee, 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 the favelas by 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 (Gay, 1994). Because of this stance, many favelados will actually side with the drug factions, unable to afford a life in the city. Meanwhile, as the government completely ignored the plight of the favelas, drug gangs ruled 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 look for other options. Many parents are reluctant just to let their children go outside for fear that they may be况 to 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 (Farmer, 1992). If they are not killed, chances are they will officially join the drug trade and be killed later on 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 also can 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 parents (Frayssinet, 2007a).

IMPACT

The rule 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 look for other options. Many parents are reluctant just to let their children go outside for fear that they may be caught 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 (Farmer, 1992). If they are not killed, chances are they will officially join the drug trade and be killed later on by their own faction (Neate & Platt, 2006).

CURRENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

There are several non-government organizations (NGO) present in Brazil to assist in the illicit production and trafficking of narcotics, and to provide support to the needy (Searls, 2005).

There are also several non-government organizations (NGO) present in Brazil to assist children in the favelas. Thugh it is hard for NGOs 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 AffroReggae, a NGO started by former drug dealers. AffroReggae helps kids only not 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).

REFERENCES


The United States (1995). “...but nobody would choose to live in a war zone. And this is, by most definitions, a war zone.”