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**The ubiquity of violence in the lives
of young children in low-income
communities in Rio de Janeiro.
What can be done?**

**Research &
Public Policy**



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The International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (CIESPI at PUC-Rio), is dedicated to engaging in research studies on, and social projects for, children, young people and their families and communities. Its purpose is to support the development and implementation of policies and practices for children and young people that contribute to their full development and the promotion and defense of their rights. CIESPI is particularly concerned with children growing up in contexts of vulnerability including poverty.



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INTRODUCTION

This bulletin uses new information on the condition of children 0-8 in low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro to illustrate the constant presence of violence in the lives of such children, the effects of that violence, and some ways to reduce its harm.

Research from across the world demonstrates the devastating impact of violence, noise, tension, and urban overcrowding on the development of young children including impacts on the size and capacity of their growing brains.

- Exposure to biological and psychosocial risks affects the developing brain and compromises the development of children;
- Inequalities in child development begin prenatally and in the first years of life;

- With cumulative exposure to developmental risks, disparities widen and trajectories become more firmly established;
- Reducing inequalities requires early integrated interventions that target the many risks to which children in a particular setting are exposed¹.



The research also shows that:

Young children exposed to societal violence show insecure attachments, increased risk of behavior problems, reduced levels of prosocial behavior, and increased aggressive behavior. The adverse consequences might result from disruptions to family structure and function that compromise the adequacy of maternal childrearing skills, and reduce children's ability to regulate their own emotions².

Other consequences include:

Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of

brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years³. It is barely conceivable that we tolerate such violence as inevitable knowing its dangerous and long lasting effects.

VIOLENCE IN BRAZIL

In Brazil, the long-term secular trend in homicides is complicated. Between 2005 and 2015, the rate of homicides for the entire country increased from 10.6 per 100,000 inhabitants to 28.9, an enormous increase⁴. The rate for the black community increased 18% while that for the non-black community declined 12%. Black youth between the ages of 15 and 29 were most at risk. But here the picture becomes complicated. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the homicide rate decreased 36% in the period and in the state of Sao Paulo it decreased 44%.

In some states in the north of the country the increases were enormous with increases of over 230% in Rio Grande do Norte and about 100% in Amazonas. These figures are difficult to interpret. The increase in the north could be the result of under-reporting in the past and the increase in the drug trade. The decrease in the rate in the south is very welcome news but not easy to explain. In the last several years, however, the absolute number of homicides in São Paulo and in Rio have increased.

We should also note that between 1980 and 2014 the percent of all homicides from gunfire increase from 44% of the total to 72% of the total.

It is generally agreed, that the high rates are the result of a number of factors including drug gang control of many low-income neighborhoods, violent police action in the same communities, the fact that cities like Rio are export ports for drugs from Bolivia and elsewhere to Europe, and

huge income inequalities. The recent upsurge in the number of homicides in Rio is partly the result of inter-gang warfare as rival gangs try to take over each other's territories. It should be noted that, as a result of the Rio experiment in community policing (an experiment that is largely considered a failure), homicide rates in target (UPP) communities dropped significantly while increasing in the periphery of the city to where gang leaders escaped.

The deaths by homicide for young children are comparatively rare. So our quest has been to focus on the impacts of an atmosphere of violence and other harms in low income communities on young populations. We know from international research that street violence, tension, overcrowding, physically unhealthy environments and inter-familial violence have seriously damaging impacts on the developmental processes for very young children and, therefore, an atmosphere of violence is a clear and present danger to those children.



DAILY VIOLENCE IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG CHILDREN⁵

Our recent policy/research studies⁶ in the low-income Rio de Janeiro communities of Rocinha and Parada de Lucas, and other material from that city, demonstrate the ubiquitous of violence. “The military police took shelter in the crèche and left the children in panic” was the title of a story in O Globo on the eve of the opening of the Rio Olympics in 2016⁷. This particular crèche has about 150 young children and when the police arrived, the children were hustled into the dining room to escape the line of shots from the drug traffickers. According to the story, the staff asked the police to leave and not put the lives of the children at risk, but the police ignored them. “The children were forced to be shields,” said the director. In the one place young children should be safe, that basic right was violated.

Our studies show that the children of the two communities are subject to a circle of violence that intrudes everywhere, on the streets when they walk to crèches or preschools, on public transportation, in the very few open spaces in their communities, and in the educational institutions themselves. As the teachers put it the children show signs of shaking, crying and anxiety. The armed violence of the drug traffickers was the factor most cited by our respondents, many of whom were staff in the child-care centers.

“When it’s like this (when the traffickers and the police are shooting at each other) the crèche won’t open. I have already seen bullets in the playground, a crèche full of bullets. The safest place is the dining room.”

Staff change the hours they are open to make arrival and departure times safe and restrict the use of space to the safest areas.

"I keep the children safe until their parents arrive. The children leave early so they are missing things."

Staff find themselves confronting the police and the traffickers to keep things safer for the children thus putting themselves at risk.

"We have already asked the UPP (the special community police) to be at the doors because the traffickers hang out there when the kids are leaving. They were there for two days and then they said it was too risky for them. By the same token, I have already asked the traffickers to leave the entrance door."

Such pressures cause tensions and disturbances for the staff which are rarely recognized or treated. One director explained that she had already lost staff because of these occurrences.

Trafficker violence and the police response vary from day to day and community to community. In Rocinha, respondents reported an increase in armed violence in the last several years and the impossibility of knowing when armed conflict would occur.

"Before there would be a warning when violence would occur, but now no warning. How do you know if a shooting is about to happen or if it is already over?"

In Parada de Lucas the dominance of the traffickers is marked by the constant presence of barriers of wood and tires that block of entry and exit to the community and which are controlled by the gangs. If the educational centers are not safe for young children, the journey to and from them is even more dangerous from the mixture of criminal violence and the danger of traffic. Rocinha was much worse in this respect than Parada de Lucas.

"Various of our students have already been run over on Gavea Street. There are many motor bikes and many cars. The drivers have no discipline, and students aged six and seven come to school and back home alone."

Not safe in child-care centers, not safe on the journey to and from school, gun fire, the loss of parents to murder, armed traffickers on the streets and the occasional corpse, all add up to an atmosphere of terror. The violence is made banal by its ubiquity but has an immediate impact on the young child in behavior ranging from apathy to extreme hyperactivity.

THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE SAFETY OF YOUNG CHILDREN

The crèches and preschools

Whatever the short coming of the crèches and preschools we visited, they provided engagement with the children, care, love and patience and emotional support. It is the only place children can play and eat outside the home in dangerous neighborhoods. These places are therefore crucial to the well-being of the young children.

While stray shots and traffickers at the door are a serious threat, the space inside the buildings is respected.

Our respondents had clear ideas about what would improve the safety and quality of their organizations. The directors lamented the paucity of appropriately trained staff and of attracting such people to a dangerous environment. They also pointed to the lack of specialist staff such as psychologists and audiologists. They emphasized the training of staff and the provision of special staff such as mediators, psychologists, and hearing specialists.

Public preschools and those that operated in conjunction (em convenio) with the city pointed to the difficulties caused by late payments of grants and the inadequacy of their municipal per-capita payments. The Rio Association of Crèches and Preschools (ACERPÉRJ) for example, was in 2016 seeking a minimum per student payment of RS600 a month. (It is now RS300 a month or about

US\$100.) The institutions struggled to pay ongoing expenses and they struggled even more for capital grants to replace dangerous infrastructure including broken bathrooms and roofs. The directors also pointed to massive overcrowding.

The directors had a laundry list of ideas to make the journey from home to school less dangerous. These included placing transit agents close to the schools to monitor traffic, more traffic calming devices, better monitoring of driving behavior, fewer motor bikes circulating on the streets, and better education of bus drivers and the motor-bike taxi services. (The latter are ubiquitous on the streets of Rocinha and other low-income communities particularly those built on hillsides with few asphalt streets.)

As for the constant threat from drug traffickers, our respondents wanted the police to pay more attention to the children's arrival and departure times by their presence.

Note that these requests are practical and concrete and that in a city that cared about its lower-income residents and the next generation of its citizens, quite capable of realization.

But, as we have noted in a number of our bulletins, implementation of reforms is the great challenge in Brazil at large and in a Rio that is feeling its share of the national economic and fiscal crises. The concluding section discusses this issue.

THE BROADER CHALLENGE OF ACCOMPLISHING CHANGE

In a country reeling from multiple political, financial and social crises and where, because of the nature of coalition government, changes in alliances in Brasilia cause disruptive personnel changes not just in federal government but also in state and municipal government, what hope for change?

The broad question of armed violence in low-income communities will require enormous effort on the part of federal, state, and municipal government and new strategies that recognize that without the support of community residents, little will be accomplished.

But what can be done in the meantime? There are no magical answers but CIESPI and its partners have been working on strategies for change. It has always been part of CIESPI's mission to insert its policy and practice research findings into the key decision making processes. In several areas, early childhood and the condition of street children, the CIESPI networks have used a key feature of post-dictatorship Brazil as a tool. The 1989 Constitution and subsequent legislation established Rights Councils in various key areas of public policy to operate at the federal, state and municipal levels. Children's Rights Councils were established in 1990 as part of the

System for the Guarantee of Rights. In theory, these Councils are mandated to set and monitor public policy towards children. In practice, the grey area between the Councils' functions and the regular legislative powers of elected assemblies have never been explicated. And, the efficacy of Councils depends on their current elected composition. They have the advantage, however, of being composed of 50% elected members from concerned organizations and 50% appointed members of key administrative branch secretariats or ministries thus permitting dialogue and collective decision making between civil society and public officials.

On November 11, 2013, the General Assembly of the Municipal Children's Rights Council of Rio de Janeiro approved a detailed and concrete plan for improving the condition of children and youth in Rio (PMPI. Decision No, 1.042/2013). This outcome was the result of se-

veral years of research, analysis, and deliberation by a group convened by CIESPI. At the same meeting as the passage, the Assembly also passed a motion to expedite the implementation of the Plan by establishing a Working Group (GT) to lay out implementation strategy. That early burst of enthusiasm, however, faded in the absence of any energy from municipal government to take the Plan seriously. Then in May 2017, a new group of Councilors determined among themselves to put implementation at the top of their priorities. It is too early to predict the outcome of this new determination but the existence of an official Plan creates a platform for any group of reformers in or outside government to being the process of change. Or as the famous Chicago theorist of community action, Saul Alinsky wrote, "Make the enemy live up to its own book of rules"⁸. Staff change the hours they are open to make arrival and departure times safe and restrict the

use of space to the safest areas. Cramped by the turmoil in Brazil described in the introduction, CIESPI also planned with community and professional colleagues another approach. Of all the problems facing the residents of low-income communities, the long-term impact of harsh conditions on a child's development are hardly known or on the list of concerns. CIESPI and its community partners developed a campaign for children in Rocinha called in English, Rocinha, Tune into Children. The campaign started in October, 2017 and included community meetings, radio spots, a theme jingle, short graphic posters and bulletins on what children needed to thrive aimed at parents and care-givers. A series of follow-up events are planned for broader distribution of the materials, conversations and action. The goal is to increase the number of people aware of the issue and the number prepared to act on improvements. CIESPI staff are also working

with a community activist organization that has taken up the issue of transit safety to add safety in the journey to school to its agenda.

These are small steps given the size of the problem and the political paralysis in contemporary Brazil. But anything that highlights the issues and suggests a way forward is part of the solution.

NOTES

¹Susan P Walker et al., Inequality in early childhood: risk and protective factors for early childhood development. p.2. [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)60555-2/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)60555-2/abstract)

²Ibid, pp 9-10.

³Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/> downloaded, June 1, 2017.

⁴See Juliana Castor and Miguel Caballero, Em 10 anos, 318 mil jovens assassinados, O Globo, June 6, 2017, p. 8. These data were collected by the Brazilian Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA).

⁵There are many kinds of violence that children can suffer but we concentrate here on the external, physical violence that impact young children in our target communities.

⁶ See for example, Cynthia Ozon Boghossian and Malcolm Bush, *Espacos seguros para crianças na primeira infância*, CIESPI, 2017.

⁷ O Globo, July 21, 2016.

⁸ Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, quoted at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/01/23/updating_alinskys_rules_for_radicals_for_the_trump_era_132873.html, downloaded June 6, 2017.





For more information contact the editors:

www.ciespi.org.br

Irene Rizzini

Director, CIESPI and professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, PUC-Rio.
(irizzini.pucRio.ciespi@gmail.com)

Maria Cristina Bó

Executive coordinator, CIESPI.
(mcrisbociespi@gmail.com)

Malcolm Bush

Senior advisor at CIESPI and visiting research scholar at the Center of Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University of Chicago. (mbushciespi@gmail.com)

