

Latin American youth and daily violence in areas of urban relegation

*Irene Rizzini**

*Danielle Strickland***

*Natalia da Silva Limongi****

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Abstract Structural and physical violence play a constant role in young people's lives throughout Latin America, especially for those living in areas of urban relegation. This article discusses the impact of violence on the lives of Mexican and Brazilian youth. By considering historical and structural factors, we question approaches that link poverty to criminality and call for repressive and punitive measures. The research findings allow us to reflect on the value of young people's perspectives in addressing violence and understanding how it affects their present and future lives.

KEYWORDS: urban violence, Latin American youth, structural violence, organized crime, youth participation.

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*Professor in the Department of Social Work at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) and director of the International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI/PUC-Rio), Brasil. orcid.org/0000-0002-1154-7998 Correo: irizzini.pucRio.ciespi6@gmail.com.

**Professor at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN) in Guadalajara, México and coordinator of the Inside-Out International Prison Exchange Program in Mexico. orcid.org/0000-0002-2410-0650 danielastrickland@hotmail.com.

***Professor at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN) in Guadalajara, México and Coordinator of the Inside-Out International Prison Exchange Program in México. orcid.org/0000-0002-2410-0650 Correo: danielastrickland@hotmail.com.

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Jóvenes latinoamericanos y violencia cotidiana en áreas de relegación urbana

Resumen La violencia estructural y física juegan un papel constante en la vida de los jóvenes en toda América Latina, especialmente para aquellos que viven en áreas de relegación urbana. Este artículo analiza el impacto de la violencia en la vida de los jóvenes mexicanos y brasileños. Tomando en cuenta los factores históricos y estructurales, cuestionamos los enfoques que vinculan la pobreza con la criminalidad y exigen medidas represivas y punitivas. Los hallazgos de las investigaciones presentadas aquí nos permiten reflexionar sobre el valor de las perspectivas de los jóvenes para abordar la violencia y entender cómo afecta sus vidas y su futuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: violencia urbana; jóvenes; violencia estructural; crimen organizado; participación juvenil.

Introduction

Young people living in environments of urban poverty represent one of the groups most affected by violence worldwide; both victims and perpetrators of crime tend to fall into this age range (Imbusch, *et al.*, 2011). While many recent studies focus on punitive and repressive measures in response to juvenile delinquency, this article seeks to contribute to contemporary scholarship by bringing the voices of young people who live in areas of urban relegation to the table, thus enhancing our understanding of structural and direct violence and how marginalized youth cope with such challenges.

We begin by considering some of the leading theoretical arguments and existing data regarding the historical context of violence in Latin America and the current ‘culture of violence’. Next, we address the context of violence in the two localities selected as empirical units for this research in the metropolitan areas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Guadalajara, Mexico. The two separate case studies offer insights from the perspectives of youth faced with similar challenges in distinct urban environments. The objective of both studies was to analyze the violence of a specific neighborhood renowned for poverty and crime through the eyes of youth who live there and compare their perceptions to current academic literature on violence and urban relegation. We chose to include both studies in this paper, not necessarily to compare them, but to highlight similar findings that may serve to analyze the problem on a regional scale. Any similarities among the young peoples’ responses give confirmatory weight to the responses. We also consider secondary data on

violence, criminality, and the war on drugs that reveals an important difference between the two countries. The empirical data gathered from the interviews with Mexican and Brazilian youth is organized in four sections that permit direct reflections on the theoretical framework of violence summarized in the following pages: [i] community violence, past and present; [ii] sense of (un)safety; [iii] causes of violence in the neighborhood; [iv] moving forward in a context of urban violence. The final remarks highlight important aspects of this study that should be considered when addressing problems regarding youth and urban violence.

Framing urban violence in Latin America

This study is informed by the theoretical framework of structural violence, underscoring the connections between historical oppression and state and personal violence. To understand violence in Latin America as political and structural is to recognize the interplay of historical and systematic dynamics of oppression including poverty, gender inequality, racism, and coloniality as constitutive elements in the region's history (Dussel, 2000; Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2003; Rotker, 2002). As Farmer explains, in structures characterized by a history of inequality and oppression, "structural violence is violence exerted systematically [...] by everyone who belongs to a certain social order" (2004: 307).

Indeed, violence has played a consistent role in the political history of Latin America (prior to European occupation, during the *Conquista*, and in the course of numerous dictatorships and democracies). Slavery and the suppression of indigenous peoples are frequently identified as having initiated the violent reality of structural racism that continues to plague Latin American democracies today. Scholars such as Lima & Tavares (2012) and Santos (2016), have established the structural continuity between the colonial past and the current contexts of violence, especially those related to the so-called 'war on drugs' in the region.

Moser and McIlwaine (2006) propose four categories of violence commonly found in urban areas, recognizing that there are intricate connections and overlapping among them: *political violence*, motivated by the desire to obtain political power; *institutional violence*, perpetuated by state institutions such as the police, as well as other groups such as vigilantes and drug cartels; *economic violence*, motivated by interest in material gains; and *social violence*, used to control a social context. One should note that all four forms of urban violence are used to obtain or maintain a certain power. The connections between

these categories permit us to speak of ‘cultures of violence’ that must be addressed by more complex and complete policies, rather than fighting violence with violence.

The cause of violence is never singular, but rather a combination of factors, past and present, in a specific context, many of which are written off as poverty or social injustices, rather than being recognized as forms of structural violence. However, by limiting one’s definition of violence to a somatic conceptualization, one focuses only on the interpersonal relationship, rather than approaching it as a social problem (Galtung, 2015).

The concept of ‘urban relegation’, referring to a collective activity of economic, social and symbolic power relations, helps with visualizing the multiple forms of structural violence that maintain high levels of marginality in neighborhoods like Fonseca (on the outskirts of Rio) and the Cerro del Cuatro (just south of Guadalajara). “To speak of *urban relegation*—rather than ‘territories of poverty’ or ‘low-income community,’ for instance—is to insist that the proper object of inquiry is not the place itself and its residents but the multilevel structural processes whereby persons are selected, thrust and maintained in marginal locations” (Wacquant, 2016: 1078).

Despite the growing recognition of structural violence, it continues to be invisible. While cases of physical violence are documented and commonly used as indicators to design public policy, structural violence is disguised and legitimized as the inevitable inequality of a neoliberal world. In other words, we continue to seek justice through the punishment of those responsible for *committing* crimes, without holding the State responsible for its role in crime by *omitting* so many rights for “juvenile delinquents”.

Inequality in Latin America goes well beyond monetary income and can be seen in questions of how human rights are respected and guaranteed for different social classes. If citizenship is understood as the ‘right to have rights’, the ethics of citizenship is founded in non-violence, justice and protection for all. The violation of these rights has transformed those living in Latin American cities with fragile democracies into ‘citizens of fear’. Urban violence has created an undeclared civil war throughout the region, changing the way in which people interact with urban spaces, other human beings and the government (Rotker, 2002).

Urban violence and the notion of ‘dangerous youth’

It is important to highlight the power of television and social media in promoting ‘cultures of fear’. Constant exposure to images of homicides, armed robberies and accidents makes people believe that they are completely vulnerable to urban violence (Glassner,

2010). Reguillo (2002) argues that the media's focus on urban violence causes fear to evolve from an emotion produced by concrete threats to an omnipresence impossible to contain. This has created an increasing desire among people to "[...] endow their fears with recognizable faces, assisted in this operation by the media [...]" When fear has a face it can be faced, psychoanalysts say" (p. 199). In Latin America, as in other parts of the world, this face tends to be that of a young, poor, nonwhite male. The violence reported by the media "[...] pathologizes the poor as dangerous 'others,' legitimizing zero-tolerance carceral repression in the name of public safety and moral retribution and fueling more rounds of institutional and structural violence [...]" (Karandinos, Hart, Montero & Bourgois, 2015: 69).

The sense of fear generated by the stereotypical face of urban violence can easily evolve into hate. Along with the hatred, one may feel solidarity towards the victims of these supposed aggressors. Reguillo (2002) explains that this third identity of a solidary, law-abiding citizen breaks the simplistic dichotomy of victims and victimizers in the analysis of social violence. The idea of being 'possible victims', dominated by feelings of fear and/or hatred towards the 'other', thus entangles the urban population in the web of social violence and further stigmatizes marginalized youth.

Youth in the midst of urban violence in Mexico and Brazil

Overcrowded, densely poor communities are the back drop for urban violence in Latin America. Neighborhoods of urban relegation often lack basic infrastructure and suffer high levels of communicable diseases. Some have a lively commercial life, some have little or none. Some are close to middleclass communities permitting access to jobs, some are far from such communities. In the most violent neighborhoods, rival gangs or cartels fight it out on a daily basis for control of the drug trade. Vigilante militias add to the violence and police are often feared more than the drug traffickers. Young people have limited access to educational and employment opportunities, making them easy recruits for the organized crime groups.

Despite the diversity of relegated neighborhoods in Latin America, most research on urban violence notes a strong correlation with drugs and guns, both of which have flooded impoverished urban sectors throughout the region. In Mexico, until ex-president Felipe Calderón declared the Mexican 'War on Drugs' in 2006, dispatching soldiers and marines to the streets to battle the cartels, the drug trade had little effect on most Mexicans' daily life. However, by 2011, there were 96 000 soldiers and 16 000 marines fighting

cartels throughout the country, causing them to fragment, recruit more youth and develop more sophisticated defense strategies (Grillo, 2016). During Calderon's administration, the army reported over 2 000 killings of alleged 'delinquents,' and the country experienced alarming increases in kidnappings (83%), murders (34%) and armed robberies (31%) (Azaola, 2012). Of the 335 986 murders registered in Mexico from 2006 to 2018, 81 903 were of people between the ages of 15 and 29 (Franco, 2019).

Despite the obvious failure of military combat against the cartels, at the end of 2017, ex-president Enrique Peña Nieto (2006-2018) proposed a new Homeland Security law to legalize the 'temporary' replacement of police with military forces. Notwithstanding widespread opposition, the legislation was approved by Congress and the Senate in record time, but fortunately declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court the following year. Far from finding a solution, the first quarter of 2019 was the most violent in the history of Mexico (Buenrostro, 2019).

In the case of Brazil, class segregation has contributed to the successful implementation of the drug trade in favelas, leading to powerful ventures of organized crime, and in turn stigmatizing these localities as 'dangerous' (Cano & Borges, 2015). Throughout history, the government has tried to address the resulting violence with suppression and mass incarceration. In December 2008, the first Unit of Police Pacification (UPP) was implemented in Rio de Janeiro. The program of UPPs consists in the occupation of strategic territories of favelas, dominated by narco-related 'organized' crime, previously abandoned by the State. Initially, the strategy received broad support from various segments of society and the media, leading to the installation of 38 Units. However, the positive impact did not last and it is now argued that instead of reducing organized crime, these militaristic operations have intensified the 'culture of fear' and contributed to the criminalization of poverty (Cano & Borges, 2015). The social reforms planned for UPPs in response to these complaints were never implemented.

There is a common perception in Rio de Janeiro that the implementation of the UPPs led to the displacement of gang activity and the growth of urban violence in other areas. The local media have suggested crime migration from the urban favelas occupied by UPPs to outlying areas, such as Niterói, and an increase in local crime reports according to 2015 data from the State Public Security Institute of Rio de Janeiro (ISP) supports this claim.

Youth involved in organized crime are generally victims of structural violence. Throughout Latin America, more than 22 million young people are labeled as 'ninis',

because they neither study nor work (Camarillo, 2013). In 2015, one out of every four youth in Mexico and Brazil entered into this category (The World Bank, 2016). The lack of employment and education opportunities, government and police corruption, and the drug cartels' growing power and territorial control are all structural elements that contribute to urban violence and its normalization. Youth living in impoverished communities are thus more easily absorbed into gangs and cartels, though members of these groups are by no means limited to this profile.

Globally, the most extreme levels of youth violence are found in Mexico, El Salvador and Brazil, with mortality rates for those between the ages of 15 and 19 of 95.6, 55.8 and 54.9 deaths per 100 000 youth, respectively (Waiselfisz, 2015a). While the difference between Mexico with the highest rate compared with El Salvador and Brazil in second and third places is shocking, the recent rise in the deaths of youth by firearms in Brazil is equally significant. From 1980 to 2012, this number skyrocketed from 4 415 to 24 882, an increase of 463.6% (Waiselfisz, 2015b).

The concentration of scholarship on issues of criminality and victimization is crucial; however, it is also important to understand the broader impact of systemic and structural violence in the everyday life of youth living in poverty. The exceptional vulnerability of young people to violence, especially those living in areas of urban relegation, along with the stereotypes associating them with dangerousness, hinders their development and their social integration (Rizzini & Vale, 2019). Listening to their perceptions of violence is an important analytical tool for understanding the contexts in which they live. The testimonies presented below offer an inside perspective on urban violence to help us comprehend this universal problem.

Young people's views on violence in Mexico and Brazil

The two case studies presented here offer insights from the perspectives of youth faced with similar challenges in distinct contexts of urban relegation. The use of youth voices to offer insights into their condition has a long history, but a comparatively recent theoretical argument makes the case well. Researchers such as Jobim e Sousa and Rabello de Castro highlight the value of methodologies where children and youth participate as partners in the research. According to these authors:

To the extent that the child is not only seen as an object to be studied, but as a subject with an understanding that must be recognized and legitimized, the relationship established, in the con-

text of research, begins to be oriented and organized from this point of view. In this perspective, instead of researching the child in order to know them better, the objective is to research with the child the social and cultural experiences that they share with others in their environment, placing them as a partner of the adult-researcher, in the pursuit for a permanent and deeper understanding of human experience (Jobim e Souza and Rabello de Castro, 2008: 53).

This perspective is strengthened by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which provides that youth should be involved in decisions affecting their lives, which includes research into their lives.

In Brazil, we interviewed young people from the favela Vila Ipiranga in Fonseca. The favela is located towards the center of the municipality of Niterói and has a population of approximately 4 000 residents. In 2009, the neighborhood received federal funding through the Accelerated Development Program (PAC), benefiting residents with paved roads, public works, childcare services, recreation facilities and a community center. The participation of one of the authors in this initiative facilitated the interviews with young people from this area.

In Mexico, the study focused on the neighborhood of Francisco I. Madero on the Cerro del Cuatro in Tlaquepaque, bordering the southeast side of Guadalajara. Historically, this neighborhood has been a squatter community for indigenous migrants and other impoverished families. In recent years, the municipal government has offered campaigns to help residents with the regularization of property titles and the installation of cobblestone roads. For a population of approximately 16 000 residents (IIEG, 2011), the neighborhood has a public kindergarten, elementary school and a center for social assistance (DIF). Aside from a health center module used for seasonal vaccination campaigns, there are no public health services, nor are there any parks, community centers, libraries, middle or high schools in the neighborhood. Another author of this paper participates in a nonprofit that seeks to implement life projects with youth from El Cerro, providing access to interviews with current and previous program participants.

The table below presents a general profile of the studies' participants. In Fonseca, initially it was difficult to find youth willing to participate, likely due to fear of exposing themselves in a context crossed by multiple forms of violence. However, one young woman helped recruit friends in the neighborhood who agreed to be interviewed. This in part explains the elevated number of females in this group of participants, but it is also important to note that young males, especially non-white residents of the city's poor

neighborhoods, are the main victims of homicides in Brazil (Waiselfisz, 2015b). Thus, young men have even more reason to be cautious about exposing themselves. Likely for the same reason, four young men from El Cerro also refused to be interviewed.

Despite having to use snowball sampling and the resulting gender bias in the Brazilian study, the methodology allowed a detailed understanding of the young people’s lives to emerge, an understanding which makes the results most useful. While the combined data from the two studies is limited to 24 interviews with youth, each one provides a rich compilation of primary data from the true experts on the topic at hand: young people who have spent their entire lives in urban neighborhoods renowned for poverty and violence. The in-depth interviews permitted a profound understanding of the young people’s views of the world. They reflect on the immediacy of their daily lives, which they as the subjects know better than anyone else. Such qualitative knowing is essential for any later quantitative analyses.

Prior to the interviews, each participant received a detailed description of the research project and signed a formal consent form. All interviews were recorded and the research was subject to appropriate ethics committee approvals. The researchers used a guideline of general discussion topics in the interviews which included how the young people perceived the presence of violence in their daily lives, causes of violence, cases that

TABLE 1. Participant profiles

	Fonseca (Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)	El Cerro del Cuatro (Tlaquepaque, Jalisco, México)
Gender	12 females, 2 males	4 females, 6 males
Age range	18-26	15-26
Employment	3 call center operators 1 assistant beautician and cook 10 unemployed	7 informal street vendors (artisan products and potato chips) 1 security guard 1 assistant auto mechanic 1 unemployed
Education	2 attend college 5 high school graduates 6 attend high school 1 dropout (7th grade)	1 college graduate 1 attends college 3 attend high school 1 attends middle school 4 dropouts (1 after finishing elementary school and 3 after finishing middle school)

have prohibited them from attending school or work, and personal plans for the future. Transcription of the 24 interviews resulted in the following four general areas of interest related to the theoretical discussion on violence presented above: how violence has changed in their neighborhoods over the years; their sense of (un)safety; causes of violence in each neighborhood; and how participants view their future. The remainder of the article will describe and discuss the young people's reflections. At the end of each quote is an initial representing the name of the informant, sex, age and the neighborhood.

Community violence, past and present

Regarding the urban violence that pervades everyday life in each neighborhood, several participants mentioned incidents that prevented them from attending school or work, whether due to gang fights, shootings or police raids.

Once it happened when I had an exam. I had to tell [my professor] everything, and I was ashamed, you know. I had to tell him that I couldn't leave my house. Then they showed the story on [the news], and that was my evidence to say that it was true. I even managed to take the exam the following day, but it was a drag having to tell everything that happened (G., female, 21, Fonseca).

When I was younger, if I left the Cerro and spent my money I knew [gang A] might not let me back in [the neighborhood] ... Sometimes I wasn't able to buy lunch ... Sometimes I wouldn't go to school because of this (O., male, 15, El Cerro).

Here it is important to recognize the structural violence underlying these testimonies, as both participants had to travel by bus to attend school in another neighborhood. Part of the effect on the young people is the fear and shame of having to explain to others how the violence impacts their everyday lives. Participants from Fonseca indicated that while the neighborhood has always been violent, in recent years, the violence has intensified. As one participant explained, "The violence here has gotten much worse. Before, it was bad, but not like it is today. Now you're on the street and there's a shooting out of the blue, any time of the day, and there's nowhere to run" (J., female, 22, Fonseca).

Seven of the 14 participants from Fonseca related this increase to the arrival of new criminals in the favela after the installation of UPPs in Rio. As one participant explained, "Since this operation started in Rio, let's say from the UPPs, it got bad here. It wasn't like this ... you could even walk down the street, but not anymore. Once this started, the thugs from over there came here" (A., female, 21, Fonseca). Here we see a clear example

of how the State's efforts to reduce violence with violence (and increase the power of the government), has backfired and how it will continue to do so unless there is a systemic and comprehensive approach to violence reduction.

Participants also argued that the arrival of new dealers to the favela caused a change in community relationships, claiming that those who recently arrived do not have the same level of respect for the neighborhood as those who were born and raised there.

The business has changed. The old dealers were mostly from the community, and today, since they're outsiders, they end up causing more violence, you know? Some have respect, others don't care. Those who have it are from there, those who don't showed up wanting to rule everything, disrespecting the people who've lived there for years, you know? (T, female, 19, Fonseca).

Similarly, the majority of participants from El Cerro mentioned the recent arrival of the cartel to replace local gangs as the main factor affecting violence in their neighborhood, reflecting the same incapacity of the State to control organized crime as in Brazil. These comments also indicate the changing nature of gang structure and how this evolution has made the problem worse. In the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, more and more neighborhoods are falling under the control of the cartel, referred to as the 'Plaza'.

To minimize the presence of police and insure the smooth operations of their business, the cartel generally does not permit large groups of youth to gather in the streets. As one participant explained, "There was a time when it was just gangs...and now you could say that it's local trafficking. Before it was just gangs, brawls and that sort of thing and now things have changed and more violence has come from all the different types of drugs that are on the streets" (G, male, 25, El Cerro).

However, several other participants claimed the domination of the new traffickers has led to a reduction in violence on the Cerro. "At the same time it helped that the Plaza took over and basically got rid of [gang A]. They put an end to them... things are calmer. The Plaza just put things in order on the Cerro... they control it" (L., male, 17, El Cerro). In the words of another participant, "The rumor that you hear is that the Plaza came in, so they're controlling all of this. If there's a robbery or something, they're in charge...supposedly robbing is allowed, but only if they're affiliated with the Plaza and paying them" (L., female, 26, El Cerro).

While everyone mentioned the Plaza as key players in the theme of neighborhood violence, opinions varied regarding how they have affected the level of violence on the

Cerro. Of the 10 participants, five said it had decreased, three said it was the same as before, and two said it had increased. One participant who said things had improved went on to explain, “It’s constant. Let’s say every four days there’s a fight. Twice they’ve broken the windows of our home, and since we sleep in the room facing the street, once [my brother] got hit” (J., male, 16, El Cerro). Another argued that now there is less violence saying,

Before you couldn’t enter the Cerro without paying. They’d kick you out with gun shots or however, but they’d kick you out. Back then, the hood was dangerous, and almost no one went out on the streets, because you’d hear gunshots all the time...you lived with this fear. But things have changed a lot, because now that [gang A] isn’t around, everything relaxed. Now you see kids playing out in the streets like it’s no big deal (O., male, 16, El Cerro).

The opposing views found in these interviews regarding changes in the level of violence since the Plaza took control of the Cerro reflect a complex evolution. While they report fewer brawls in the streets between gangs, the prevalence of drugs and the violence related to addictions have increased. There also appears to be less concern about break-ins and robberies, which may be related to a young man who was recently murdered, dismembered and left in a bag on the outskirts of El Cerro with a sign reading ‘*RATERO*’ (thief), after supposedly breaking into one of the cartel’s houses. Thus, it is difficult to say whether there is more or less direct violence nowadays, due to its manifestation in different forms.

As these young people teach us, living in urban relegation is not an easy task. In these neighborhoods, in addition to suffering from poverty and the lack of public services, residents face issues related to various forms of direct violence, often tied to trafficking of drugs and weapons. In agreement with Moser and McIlwaine (2006), there is a clear relationship between the violence described in the interviews and the desire to obtain or maintain territorial power.

For young people surrounded by violence, this context may bring experiences that cause permanent physical and psychological scars, like those reported here:

I have a brother-in-law and while he was single, he was always hanging in the street and he’d get beat up all the time, they were always looking for him... and they killed one of his friends because of him. They were beating him up and his friend came to help him, and when the friend got there,

[my brother-in-law] ran and they killed his friend, not long ago... they killed him with punches, hitting him with rocks (L., female, 26, El Cerro).

I've seen how they come to beat up [my cousin]. I feel bad seeing how they hit him and I want to help him, but I don't want to get into problems. I think twice about it and better keep walking like nothing happened (I., male, 15, El Cerro).

Once a taxi driver was taking an old lady, and [the dealers] threw the driver out of the car because they thought he was a cop, and started beating him. A lot! I don't even know what else happened because I went running to my aunt's house, because I couldn't stand to see anymore (E., female, 19, Fonseca).

I'd always see them carrying people down in body bags, you know? And I was thinking about it. Man, for a child that's traumatic, no? I still feel traumatized today. But I think seeing it every day, you end up getting used to it, which is bad (G., female, 21, Fonseca).

Sense of (un)safety

Nine of the ten participants from El Cerro claimed to feel safe in their neighborhood, revealing an alarming normalization of urban violence. As one participant explained,

I feel safe because I was born here and since I was little I earned respect through getting beat up... but you live with this fear that you'll be hit by a stray bullet or when there's a brawl that you'll be hit by a rock or something like that, but you face that fear and your life is more calm (O., male, 16, El Cerro).

Most of the males recognized that they feel safe only because of their age and sex and said things are different for women. "I've seen a lot of girls who run because they don't feel safe there" (I., male, 15, El Cerro). All four females said they did not like to spend time outside of their homes in the neighborhood or arrive after dark, to avoid feeling unsafe.

On the other hand, all 14 participants from Fonseca said they feel unsafe in their neighborhood. "I don't think I'm safe...because at any time someone can break into your home, or a stray bullet, because it has happened that a bullet hit my house, and someone could die like that. I think that if I lived somewhere else I'd have a little more security" (C., female, 19, Fonseca).

The differences in the sense of safety found in the two studies could be related to gender and the fact that 12 of the 14 Brazilian participants were women. However, it could also be related to the sense of security the Plaza seeks to promote to avoid unwan-

ted attention from the police or the media. It is interesting to consider these perceptions in comparison to the theoretical discussion of fear and stigma where the young, poor, non-white male is the most feared member of society (Reguillo, 2002; Karandinos, *et al.*, 2015). While there is an exceptionally high concentration of these individuals in Fonseca and El Cerro, they are not seen as “dangerous ‘others’” by the males we interviewed, because they have the same physical traits. Following this line of theory, it is more likely for these young men to be feared outside of their neighborhood in areas with more racial diversity.

However, in both cases we can consider the organized crime groups that have recently arrived to be the “dangerous others.” The growing power of the Plaza and the fear it evokes in the neighborhoods of urban relegation throughout the Guadalajara metropolitan area that it now controls, has limited some forms of direct violence such as brawls between smaller gangs to control certain territories; however, homicide rates have increased. Instead of valuing physical abilities to win a “clean fist fight,” the Plaza esteems the “courage” and “intelligence” to successfully kill someone, no matter how it’s accomplished (Marcial & Vizcarra, 2017). There appeared to be no such sense of even partial safety in Fonseca, demonstrated by the fact that the Brazilian respondents were scared to leave their homes. Again, we should stress that this was not because they feared other youths from their neighborhood; their feelings of unsafety were related to the drug trade controlled by dealers who recently moved in.

Causes of community violence

The fear felt by participants living in both communities comes from the daily dynamics of neighborhood drug traffickers, but also from those who should be promoting a sense of security for the residents, the police. The interviews revealed how residents often find themselves caught in a dramatically difficult position with untrustworthy police on one side and the oppression of drug trafficking on the other. A recent survey with 2 400 participants between the ages of 12 and 65 from six of the most marginalized neighborhoods in the metropolitan area of Guadalajara revealed that 83.3% have little to no confidence in the police and 86.8% reported that there is no security in their neighborhoods (Jalisco Cómo Vamos, 2017).

All participants from El Cerro mentioned the corruption and inefficiency of the police in their neighborhood as a contributing factor towards the violence. “The police patrol the areas where there are no gangs, and where they need to take care of things they

never go” (V., female, 16, El Cerro). Another participant argued, “I say the Plaza pays off the authorities, because in the next block over... the police show up at [this dealer’s] house a lot, just to talk... but they leave right away” (C., male, 15, El Cerro). Many also mentioned the corruption in security operations. As one young man explained,

[The cops] come up here, a ton of them, like once a month... if it’s just one car it gets rocks thrown at it, or water, but they come up with two trucks of soldiers. I think they just come up to do their business and stop the buses to scare the people, so they don’t see what they’re really doing (M., male, 16, El Cerro).

Despite similar problems in Fonseca, the young people interviewed professed affection for their neighborhood and described an informal network of protection and solidarity among the residents, making their routine struggle more manageable. As one participant put it, “Look, despite being violent, regardless of everything that happens there, I live well, you know? Because of the people there, my friends, because whether there’s violence or not, I try to live” (C., female, 21, Fonseca). Another participant said, “Sometimes I like it here, sometimes I don’t. I like it because it’s where I was born, I have to recognize that, like, it’s the place where I grew up, where I have people I can count on. But if I could, I would change a lot here” (G., male, 18, Fonseca).

Both neighborhoods are notorious for the lack of protection and effective security in public spaces, causing participants to express defensiveness along with desperation. One resident of the Cerro argued, “just like anywhere else, there’s bad night life... the bus won’t come up here, the taxis don’t want to come up because the thugs won’t let them through, because they rob them... but it’s not just here on the Cerro, it’s on a state level” (G., male, 25, El Cerro).

Perceptions of insecurity by local residents also affect their daily lives and the use of public spaces. In Fonseca, much of the infrastructure from PAC in 2009 is now part of the traffickers’ territory and thus inaccessible for community residents. As one participant explained, “Some people won’t go to the library because they think it’s dangerous because it’s close to where the guys hang out, you know? I wouldn’t let my daughter go down the hill to a library where the thugs are on the same street” (A., female, 21, Fonseca).

The common fear caused by the lack of successful community policing and perceived corruption of local cops will not be solved by military initiatives like UPPs or the National Guard proposed by Mexico’s current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador

(2018-2024). Of equal concern, the interviews did not reveal any plan or program that sought to involve neighbors in efforts to improve their safety. Violence and impunity appear to be the accepted norm in both localities.

While shortcomings in security forces are common in both countries, there is an undeniable difference between wealthier neighborhoods and these. This exemplifies Rotker's claim that not all citizens have the same "right to have rights". In this case, we see that the right to public safety is greater for upper and middleclass neighborhoods, while areas such as Fonseca and El Cerro consider the local police to be accomplices to the traffickers responsible for the violence in their neighborhoods, rather than public servants responsible for ensuring safety.

Moving forward in a context of urban violence

As for the future prospects of these young people, all twenty-four said they believe they can achieve their goals with personal effort and willpower, despite the structural and physical violence surrounding them, in countries where most young people do not reach high school (Andrade, 2013; INEGI, 2015). When asked about obstacles to achieving their goals, the main concern in both groups was that of economic limitations, as the statement below portrays:

I think the financial situation could hold me back, but still, with effort, it's possible. Transportation is difficult, because I have to take a bus and the subway to get to college and the fares just keep going up... Even though I have [a government scholarship], other things are very expensive, too. If I didn't have help from my parents, it would be very difficult (G., female, 21, Fonseca).

Another similarity in the studies found the main motivational factor for these young people was their families.

My father learned to read and write alone, so he always emphasized this, since I was young. I learned to read when I was six, and he always encouraged me giving me books, studying with me. With encouragement... I started to like it. I was the first in my family to go to college. Now my mom is studying pedagogy and my sister wants to start next year, too (A., female, 21, Fonseca).

I think more about my family, and if I get into drugs my family is going to be disappointed in me. I'm the only one of my 12 siblings to finish middle school... and I'm carrying this leadership,

you could say. If I finished middle school, why not go ahead and finish high school and get a good job and support my family? (O., male, 16, El Cerro)

Whether it was having a role model or being one, across the board the family was what kept these young people out of gangs and in school or work. As Abramovay (2002) explains, the family home is one of the most influential socialization spaces for youth, affecting the construction and interpretation of their identities through the ‘re-contextualization’ of social and political references.

Young people in the two studies echoed three main ideas to reduce violence in their neighborhoods. The first factor, highlighted by five young people in Fonseca and six in El Cerro, is increased police presence and addressing police corruption in the neighborhoods. “More patrolling. In all my 16 years, I’ve never seen a police car here. They come in down below, but that’s why everyone feels like they can do whatever they want up here, because no one comes up” (O., male, 16, El Cerro).

Another proposal to reduce violence, cited by seven of the Brazilian participants, is providing more opportunities for young people as an alternative to joining gangs. In the words of one young man, “The solution is employment opportunities, you know? Something attractive to them like sports, leisure, something that grabs their attention. Young men like these things” (E., male, 26, Fonseca). While they may not recognize the lack of services in their neighborhoods as structural violence, they are aware of the deficiencies. For the young people, the absence of opportunity is a pressing practical issue. From a theoretical perspective, it robs them and their community of the opportunity to develop social capital. As Bourdieu puts it, social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1986: 248). He goes on to point out that the absence of social capital is part of the mechanism that preserves and extends social inequality.

A third idea, mentioned by five Mexican participants, places more responsibility on parents and neighbors to prevent young people from joining gangs or becoming involved in organized crime. Four participants argued that parents should be more conscious of what their children are doing. As one put it, “It’s more about family; [young people] take their friends as family because of the problems at home” (V., female, 16, El Cerro). This highlights the difference noted above regarding the sense of community in each case. Fonseca residents appear to have a stronger sense of belonging to their neighborhood

and mention a social network with other residents. The testimonies from El Cerro, on the other hand, tend to be more individually focused, placing more hope on the family than the community to keep youth out of gangs and the drug trade.¹

However, structural violence limits the time families can spend together, as many are forced to work two jobs, have long daily commutes and often require multiple family members to cover household expenses. The theory of social disorganization highlights the relevance of the high rate of single mothers in an area, since it reduces the ability of a community to supervise its youth population. In other words, the ratio of young people that should be cared for per adult in areas of urban relegation is much higher than in communities with more resources (Escobar, 2012: 28). Limited parental supervision is just one more reason the problems with local police and the lack of programs for youth in these neighborhoods need to be addressed in order to reduce violence.

Conclusions

In any given context of urban violence, there is an intricate network of factors that involve diverse micro and macro-social aspects, and varied perspectives of subjectivity by those involved emphasize different aspects of the violence. In this paper, we have addressed the issue of violence from the perspectives of young residents of specific neighborhoods on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro and Guadalajara, revealing many similarities, despite the distance of 8 000 kilometers that separates them.

None of the strategies to tackle the problem of urban violence in these metropolitan areas have been able to reduce the fear that dominates both contexts. The implementation of UPPs in Rio may have caused a redistribution of violence in the state, moving the problem temporarily out of the city's favelas where it was previously concentrated to other impoverished localities. Likewise, efforts in Mexico to take out cartel leaders have caused the number of cartels to multiply as lower level leaders break off and form new cartels. There are now three times as many cartel operations in Mexico than there were prior to the presidency of Felipe Calderon, and young people from marginalized communities are their main recruits (Grillo, 2016).

In areas of urban relegation, we can see various factors and situations that drive vio-

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¹ This was also seen in a follow-up study on youth, violence and fear in the same area. Some residents of El Cerro even said it was best not to talk to the neighbors for fear they might be involved with the Plaza (Strickland, 2019).

lence, including gangs, drug trafficking, poverty, police corruption, and the lack of public services and opportunities. But young people are not just vulnerable subjects for organized crime, due to the absence of educational and employment opportunities; they are individuals endowed with dreams, desires and expectations, seeking to accomplish their goals, in spite of the violence and inequality. They constantly build strategies of resistance against the violence that surrounds them in order to access experiences beyond the limits of their neighborhoods. However, when they cannot attend school or work due to violence, it is clear that they face more obstacles than others to achieve their goals.

By recognizing the interplay of historical relations of oppression and the formation of social structures characterized by inequality and systematic violence against particular segments of society, we can better understand local and individual dynamics that perpetuate violence. Add to this the identification of a culture of violence and historical processes of stigmatization and criminalization of the impoverished youth, and we are able to identify some of the reasons why traditional social policies have been unable to reduce violence in Latin America.

The interviews from these studies reveal a gap between policy and actions to address the needs and demands of youth in their respective communities. When asked how to address the problems of violence in their neighborhoods, all too often youth responded that the only option is ‘not to get involved.’ While this hopelessness should be taken seriously, it is not an invitation to resign from this increasingly important struggle. In order for more youth ‘not to get involved,’ they need better educational and employment opportunities. Strategic responses to the structural violence underlying the urban violence analyzed in this paper should not only be designed *for* young people, but *with* them, involving them in the formulation of policies and actions. This is why the participatory method implemented in the empirical studies presented here plays both an efficient and symbolic role in including young people’s experiences and perceptions about violence.

The research presented here invites us to consider how people resist and protect themselves from violent situations that arise where they live. Youth can either seek out non-violent contexts through school and formal employment, or react to violence with more violence. As Zubillaga, Llorens and Soto found through a recent study in Caracas, “The youth, aware that one way to prevent attacks is by showing their own recklessness in order to discourage others’ aggression, generates more aggression and violence” (2014:174). How then can we encourage more young people to resist violence by taking the first option?

Listening to young people about issues that affect them so deeply is fundamental in the analysis of the contexts in which they live. This listening is also relevant to inform public policies and other strategies to address their needs and effectively protect and guarantee their rights. Young people understand best their existence in their communities and hence are important guides to how efforts to improve their lives should be implemented ◊

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