

UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO  
**Núcleo de Estudos da Violência**

Av. Prof. Lúcio Martins Rodrigues, travessa 4, bloco 2  
Tel. (55 11) 3091.4951/ Fax (55 11) 3091.4950  
[nev@usp.br](mailto:nev@usp.br)

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**PRECOCIOUS DELINQUENCY: YOUNG PEOPLE AND GANGS IN SÃO PAULO (BRAZIL)**

**SÉRGIO ADORNO**  
Departamento de Sociologia - FFLCH/USP  
Núcleo de Estudos da Violência - USP  
e-mail [sadorno@usp.br](mailto:sadorno@usp.br)

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## **Precocious delinquency: young people and gangs in São Paulo (Brazil)<sup>1</sup>.**

SÉRGIO ADORNO has been an associate professor at the University of Sao Paulo's (USP) Department of Sociology since 1986. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on Sociological Theory and Political Sociology. He is the adjunct director of the Center for Study of Violence (NEV/USP) and the executive secretary of the National Association for Research on Social Sciences (ANPOCS).

e-mail: [sadorno@usp.br](mailto:sadorno@usp.br).

Co-authors:

ELIANA B.T. BORDINI.

STATISTICIAN AND SEADE FOUNDATION ANALYST. SHE IS CURRENTLY A TECHNICAL ADVISER AT THE SAO PAULO STATE PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU.

RENATO SÉRGIO DE LIMA.

Sociologist and Seade Foundation analyst.

### **Abstract**

This paper is based on a collective research project on juvenile delinquency in São Paulo (Brazil) from 1988 to 1996. Its four main objectives were: a) measure the scale of juvenile participation in the growth of violent urban crime; b) identify the social profile of young offenders; c) analyze the evolution of the patterns of crimes committed by young offenders; and d) examine the judicial sentences imposed by juvenile courts.

The official sources used in our research were penal processes, containing information on the relationship between young offenders and details on gangs.

In this paper, we will try to present some juvenile delinquency characteristics in order to understand the social network that influences and leads young people into the world of crime.

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### **Public unrest and scientific concerns**

Since the early 1970s, the presence of children and teenagers roaming the streets of Brazil's larger cities begging, guarding parked cars, or selling sweets at traffic lights for small amounts of money, has been considered a social problem. However, public opinion, impacted by the rapid growth of violent urban crime, gradually started to fear a growing and inexorable involvement of these youths with crime, especially those from the poorest working class sectors.

A quick look at public opinion polls shows that among the country's most serious social problems, crime is one of the main concerns of Brazilians. Many have a story to tell of how they have been victims of some

crime, mainly theft and robbery, often committed by youths. The media, both printed and electronic, frequently describe dramatic scenes of youths – some on the threshold between childhood and adolescence – who are boldly and violently willing to commit any kind of crime, including killing someone for no reason at all.

Despite all the recent studies and research on the involvement of Brazilian youths with the world of crime, little is known of the evolution of juvenile delinquency. Little is also known of its impact on the judicial system as applied to children and adolescents or, especially, of the scope of the official measures adopted to contain juvenile crime within a rule of law context.

This paper is based on a two-stage survey of juvenile delinquency conducted in the city of Sao Paulo. The results of the survey's first stage show that between 1988 and 1991 the involvement of youths with violent crime in Sao Paulo follows the same pattern observed in the population in general. In other words, youths are neither more nor less violent than the population as a whole.

However, there are strong indications that recent changes in drug consumption and trafficking have rapidly altered behavioral patterns, resulting in a sharp increase in violent juvenile crime. These indications led us to conduct the second stage of the survey, covering the period between 1993 and 1996 and for which we updated the data we had already accumulated.

The survey had three major objectives. The first one was to quantitatively compare crimes – according to their penal classification – committed by adolescents in the city of Sao Paulo between 1993 and 1996 to those committed between 1988 and 1991. In both periods, the magnitude of violent crimes committed by adolescents was compared to similar crimes registered among the population as a whole. A second objective was to compare the social profile of the young offender in both periods. For this, sex, race, age, birthplace, educational level; and occupation were taken into consideration. The third objective was to examine the judicial measures applied in the selected cases.

In the second stage of the survey, the empirical universe for the investigation was made up of a statistically representative sample of all young offenders between the ages of 12 and 17. They were offenders whose cases were processed between 1993 and 1996 by Sao Paulo's first, second, third and fourth Special Courts for Children and Youths. The sample was comprised of 3,893 teenage offenders, with an average of 1.6 incidents per adolescent, for a total of 6,343. It is worth underscoring that in the previous survey (1988-1991) the average number of incidents was 1.4 incidents per adolescent, for a total of 5,425.

Based on some of the results obtained in the survey, this paper deals with the participation of adolescents in gangs.

### **Adolescence and delinquency: a constant theme**

The concerns and unrest caused by the link between adolescence and crime are not exclusive to societies plagued by social inequalities. Nor are they the exclusive domains of countries where social policies fail to guarantee fundamental social rights for large parts of the urban and rural population. The burden of all this is normally borne by children and adolescents. Even in societies with high levels of human development and quality of life, concern about the involvement of children and adolescents with crime is not something new. In many ways, the problem is perceived in these societies in the same manner as in modern-day Brazil. Both in the United States and in Canada, as well as in several European countries – most notably England, France, Germany and Italy – the social uneasiness surrounding this theme has been constant since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In determined social and historical periods, this unrest has been marked by moments that have been more dramatic than others.

The perception of adolescence as an intermediary phase between childhood and adulthood is a phenomenon whose emergence coincided with that of modern Western European society and its consolidation at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Adolescence was construed as a problem - a cause for collective concern and unrest. He was viewed as someone needing special attention. His working hours were restricted; compulsory education was instituted; programs to occupy his free time were established, creating the

first roots of the so-called youth cultures. The adolescent, in this scenario began to achieve more autonomy, especially in large industrial urban centers. He developed his own self-image and demanded that the different aspects of his personal and independent lifestyle be respected: choice of profession, clothes, consumption, leisure and sexuality. But at the same time, this autonomy was seen as a source of risks, the most feared of which was his involvement with the world of crime and violence.

Associating youth with delinquency thus gave rise to the adolescent/problem concept, in which the theoretical framework is constituted by the “storm and stress” model formulated by American psychologist Stanley Hall. Hall conceived adolescence as a period of “hormonal agitation” in which adolescents needed the freedom necessary to give vent to their explosive potential and at the same time needed to be controlled and made aware of the importance of social discipline. Along the same lines established by this model, several sociological theories began emerging during the first decades of the century, especially in the United States. According to these theories, a social context marked by a lack of self-control and social controls, especially those exerted by parents gave rise to juvenile delinquency. At the same time, precarious social conditions, mainly in terms of leisure activities and opportunities for the adolescent to occupy his free time, were seen as the causes that prevented young people from playing a constructive role in society. It was believed that this was the reason why many poverty-stricken youths in large American cities joined local gangs. Perceived as an inexhaustible source of conflicts between youths and their communities, these gangs seemed to be the cause for the upswing in violent crime that began at the start of this century in the United States and in Europe after World War II.

In part, studies conducted in North America and Europe corroborated these collective beliefs. The University of Colorado’s Center for Study and Prevention of Violence conducted a study to determine if the U.S. “epidemic” of violence in the 90s was the result of a distortion caused by media coverage of violent incidents, or a true reflection of adolescent behavioral changes. The results of this study showed: 1) an increase in the number of young victims of violence, especially those between the ages of 12 and 15; 2) a slight increase of between 8 and 10 percent in the

involvement of teenagers in some kind of serious violent offense; 3) a dramatic rise in the number adolescents murdered since 1988. Thus, the presence of youths in the world of crime and violence amounts to two sides of the same coin – they are both perpetrators and victims of violence.

Trends in England were not very different. Between 1979 and 1994, a total of 210 adolescents, aged 17, were found guilty of murder and 220 of involuntary manslaughter. Between 1987 and 1993, the number of violent crimes in that country increased 40 percent. Meanwhile in France, while crime rates dropped by close to 3 percent in 1996, incidents of juvenile delinquency rose by about 14 percent.

Information on juvenile delinquency trends in Brazil is scarce. According to Assis, the number of violent crimes committed by adolescents in Rio de Janeiro increased 25 percent between 1991 and 1996. A detailed study on juvenile delinquency in the city of Ribeirao Preto also showed a sharp increase in adolescent crime rates between 1974 and 1996. In this medium-sized city located in one of the richest agricultural regions in the state of Sao Paulo, drug trafficking was 23.75 times higher in 1996 than in 1974.

Everything indicates that the growth of juvenile delinquency and its share in the overall increase in violent crimes is not an isolated phenomenon, unique to large urban centers with the same social traits that prevail in the city of Sao Paulo. Perhaps the roots of this phenomena lie in the wide ranging social processes resulting from market internationalization and the integration of social structures on an almost planetary scale. Perhaps the very social framework of adolescence, including its involvement with the world of crime and violence, is going through that process known as globalization. This does not mean we should ignore Brazilian society's endless capacity to accompany world trends, intensifying and making them more dramatic.

An analysis of the presence and participation of adolescents in urban crime in the city Sao Paulo reveals that between 1993 and 1996, significant changes took place compared to the previous period. The percentage of cases of assault and batteries and armed robberies increased while the percentage of thefts diminished. Yet, we cannot say that the differences

noted are significant, for the 1993-96 figures are within the period's confidence interval limits.

### **Juvenile delinquency, organized crime and gang participation**

The emergence of organized crime and especially of gangs of young delinquents seems to be a phenomenon typical of large urban centers like Sao Paulo, South America's most important industrial city. In 1997, Sao Paulo's population was 9,856, 900. Of this total, 19 percent were between the ages of 20 and 29. According to Bercovich and Madeira "it is important to emphasize the fact that the decade we are living in, is marked by a sinuous wave of youths."

A comprehensive analysis of this trend would require more sophisticated technical procedures. However, we can at least offer a hypothesis. In Sao Paulo, the average growth rate of the urban population diminished between 1980 and 1996. However, this drop was not uniform in all of the city's districts, some of which have high growth rates and have formed different age group profiles. The concentration of youths in certain regions where the growth rate has remained high, despite the general trend in the opposite direction, is well known. For example, in the district of Jardim Angela – a veritable social laboratory due to the characteristics and composition of its population – the population grew at average annual rates of 4.4 percent in the 90s, while the city's overall average growth rate was 0.34 percent. It is no coincidence that Jardim Angela, one of the city's poorest districts, also has the highest levels of fatal violence. In 1995 the "Risk of Violence Map" showed a homicide rate of 222.2 per 100,000 inhabitants in the 15-to-24-age bracket. Exactly how these phenomena influence each other and how these demographic trends influence juvenile delinquency, are matters to be investigated at an opportune moment.

When crime patterns in the population as a whole are compared with those corresponding to juvenile delinquency, one verifies a greater increase in violent crime among adolescents. But an even more surprising fact is that during the second period investigated – 1993 to 1996, the percentage of

violent adolescent crime was greater than that corresponding to the population in general.

This is not an isolated trend. In England, during the 1980s, the number of crimes of all kinds increased. At the same time, juvenile delinquency tended to dramatically distance itself from adult delinquency. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s the number of crimes committed by male adolescents per 100,000 inhabitants increased significantly. This pattern then became stationary and even declined slightly until the mid-1980s, when it returned to the same levels registered 10 years earlier. The changes verified in France between 1974 and 1995 also confirmed the upward swing in the number of violent crimes committed by adolescents. During this period, robberies of all kinds lost importance, while crimes committed against individuals and public order, as well as drug-related crimes, gained ground.

Thus, the increased participation of adolescents in violent crimes, when compared to the number of crimes committed in the city of Sao Paulo by the population as a whole between 1993 and 1996, partially mirrors general world trends that affect other societies. These trends developed independently of the economic and social development of these societies, and despite the social particularities that may influence how youths join, participate and organize themselves in local gangs.

Besides the influence exerted by such factors as demographics, family, housing conditions, job situation, family income and assets, access to public services, crime rates, solidarity and conflict networks, and the sociability of neighborhoods where gangs are formed and operate, we must also take into consideration the influence of organized crime. The role it plays in the criminality observed in Brazil's urban centers has been the subject of studies and scientific research for the past two decades.

The 1988-1991 data available for analysis does not clearly and precisely confirm gangs as an emerging and dominating pattern of juvenile delinquency. But, in the period between 1993 and 1996, isolated criminal actions diminished, while crimes committed by one or more adults increased.

Organized crime and the formation of gangs of adolescents are quintessentially American themes. There is no consensus among specialists



as to the exact relationship between gangs of youths and delinquency. According to Klein, a gang could be any group of youths that: a) is seen by the inhabitants of a neighborhood or region as being very different; b) identifies itself as such through the use of a unique name; c) has committed so many penal infractions that the local population and law enforcement officials have taken a stance against them.

However, this definition is not consensual among researchers, especially in England, which since the 1960s has seen the emergence of teddy boys, mods and rockers, skinheads, rastas and rude boys – none of which are necessarily involved in conventional crimes like theft, robbery or drug trafficking. These groups seem motivated by class or ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts. These observations help refute categorical affirmations that automatically link youth gangs to crime.

Due to the lack of normative conceptual support mechanisms, there is a prevalence of heterogeneous technical and methodological procedures in the compilation of official statistics. This prevents us from having a precise picture of the penal infractions committed by members of youth gangs. For example, in some American cities like Chicago, only those infractions associated to the activities of groups from determined parts of the city are considered as gang crimes. In Los Angeles, this definition applies to any crime whose perpetrator or victim belongs to a gang. Another procedure helps undermine the reliability of official statistics. In the United States, the statistical reference unit is generally the penal infraction and not the youth that commits it. While this procedure may have some merits, it is a major obstacle in obtaining a clear picture of the universe of young offenders organized in gangs.

Keeping these considerations in mind, it is possible that the extent of organized juvenile delinquency is being either underestimated or is hidden under the mantle of adult criminality. For example, in Thrasher's pioneering 1928 study an estimated 10 percent of Chicago's 350,000 youths, in the 10-to-20 age bracket, were under the influence of gangs. Years later, Klein concluded that the percentage in Los Angeles was smaller. In 1960, he established that six percent of the youths in the 10-to-17-age bracket belonged to gangs.

Recent American estimates vary according to age group and city, but as a whole these proportions are less than 10 percent. It is important to underscore that these percentages are significantly higher among young Afro-Americans. In the city of Los Angeles, at the end of the 1980s, 25 percent of these youths between the ages of 15 and 24 were, in one way or the other, under the influence of gangs. Some American studies have also revealed a recent aging trend among the leaders of gangs of young delinquents. In other words, the presence of young adults in leadership positions is growing as well as their participation in violent crimes.

In Brazil, according to Zaluar, the emergence of organized crime among Rio de Janeiro's low-income population is due to the breakdown of traditional mechanisms of juvenile socialization and of equally traditional networks of local sociability. In the past, these networks were based on relations of patronage between rich and poor and more recently on a new form of political clientage anchored in the numbers game and samba schools. The dismantling of these traditional networks of socialization was accompanied by a widening gap in parent-children relations that led to a redefinition of social roles. It also redefined the functions of socialization instruments like schools, social assistance centers and political organizations, which have now assumed the roles that once belonged to parents.

It is precisely in this process of social transition, for which new socialization instruments have not yet been formed, that organized crime, especially drug trafficking, attracts young dwellers of low-income housing projects or of the shantytown slums nestled in the hills of Rio de Janeiro. It is not a reaction against a world of injustices and moral degradation, nor an alternative to the lack of opportunities offered by the formal job market. What attracts these youths to organized crime is the access it offers to the world of consumption and the possibility of establishing a masculine identity associated to honor, virility and social status in a era marked by limited options of personal choice. The result of this process is not, as Zaluar underscores, solidarity among the poor and excluded built around drug trafficking. The result is the explosion of individualism, which for youths means attributing more value to "weapons, marijuana, money, nice clothes and to the willingness to kill."

These enticements lead to the presence of youths in gangs, either as bosses or as followers who subject themselves to a division of labor determined by unending gang wars that result in their premature deaths. On average, these youths seldom survive beyond the age of 25. Even when considering the fact that the number of youths involved in violent crimes is lower than the number of youths murdered, everything indicates that a small number of young offenders are responsible for the increase in violent crimes. This means that some of these youths are becoming more violent and aggressive. Once having built a career in the world of crime it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for them to abandon it. The life of Carlos Ferro makes this clear: at the age of 9 he committed robbery; at 11 he was involved in a shootout; he was sent to a juvenile detention center at the age of 12; at the age of 16, he was addicted to crack; and at the age of 20 he was sent to jail. He then wrote his autobiography.

Studies on juvenile delinquency in Sao Paulo clearly indicate that organized crime, especially drug trafficking, is not restricted to Rio de Janeiro. Since the circulation of money nourishes drug trafficking, it established itself in Sao Paulo, although in different forms than that which prevail in Rio de Janeiro. As mentioned before, gang wars, mostly involving drugs – especially crack – are most likely responsible for the sharp rise in the number of adolescents killed over the past several years.

In conclusion, perhaps we should not abandon the hypothesis that explains the existence in Sao Paulo of organized juvenile criminality in low-income districts and in the outskirts of the urban area. In this sense it would be worthwhile focusing a bit more on the findings of Alba Zaluar that are contained in her study on criminality among Rio de Janeiro's low-income population. By studying the cases, careers and the life stories of adolescents involved in crime, it will be possible to develop new ideas and hypotheses that can lead to a better use of official documents, allowing us to observe reality in areas where currently there is little, or no, visibility.

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