

The vulnerability of youth to violent death: a case study in the context of “Crimes of May” A vulnerabilidade dos jovens à morte violenta: um estudo de caso no contexto dos “Crimes de Maio”

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Abstract

This article discusses the life story of a young resident of a suburb of Sao Paulo executed in the context of “Crimes of May” which occurred in 2006. We used the conceptual framework of vulnerability in order to understand the different elements involved in his victimization. This concept provides a broad and dynamic perspective that considers the susceptibility of potentially threatening events as dependent not only on individual aspects, but also on relational processes and contextual elements, avoiding stigmatizing effects. The analysis emphasizes the uncertainty and the situation of social liminality of the young population with the “world of crime”; cases of police violence directed at particular groups of people, and the situation of impunity. These elements occupy a central role in youth vulnerability to lethal violence, making it necessary to consider all the above mentioned elements for the development of preventive actions, inclusive in the health sector.

Keywords: Vulnerability; Youth; Summary Execution; Police Violence.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda a história de um jovem morador de um bairro periférico de São Paulo sumariamente executado no contexto dos “Crimes de Maio” ocorridos em 2006. Utiliza-se do arcabouço conceitual da vulnerabilidade como forma de compreender os diferentes elementos envolvidos na sua vitimização. Esse conceito proporciona uma perspectiva ampla e dinâmica que considera a suscetibilidade a um determinado evento enquanto dependente não só de aspectos individuais, mas também relacionais e contextuais, evitando efeitos estigmatizantes. A análise desenvolvida enfatiza a incerteza social juvenil e a situação de liminaridade em relação ao “mundo do crime”; os processos de violência policial que recaem sobre determinadas parcelas da população, bem como a situação de impunidade. Tais elementos ocupam hoje uma posição central na conformação da vulnerabilidade de jovens à violência letal, o que torna necessária sua problematização para o desenvolvimento de ações de prevenção, inclusive no setor da saúde.

Palavras-chave: Vulnerabilidade; Jovens; Execução Sumária; Violência Policial.

Introduction

The violent deaths of youth, especially in large urban centers, is a problem that started in the 1980s raising concerns on the national scene, especially in relation to homicides. The Ministry of Health (Brasil, 2012) shows a sharp growth of this phenomenon that occupies the first place among the causes of deaths in the 15-24 year old age group. The Violence Map (Waiselfisz, 2011) indicates that, from 1998 to 2008, the victimization of youth by homicides more than doubled compared to non-youth. In 2008, the mortality rate was 53/100 thousand inhabitants for the young and 20.5 for non-youth. Moreover, the magnitude of this mortality is even more pronounced among young males, who were victims in more than 92% of cases. In São Paulo (MSP), this situation is no different. According to Mello-Jorge (1998), in the group aged 15-19, male mortality rates increased from 9.6 / 100,000 inhabitants (in 1960) to 186.7 / 100,000 inhabitants (in 1995), which represents an increase of over 1800% (in a period of 35 years). Currently, despite the sharp drop in homicide rates in the city, as of 2001 (Peres et al., 2011)², youth continue to appear as the main victims.

There are several studies concerned with this problem. We emphasize here, firstly, the analyses that consider the profound changes in the social structure itself and its effects on the production of violence, including the restructuring of the field of work, which greatly affects the younger generations; the process of economic globalization, promoting growth in the movement of goods (sometimes illegal, such as drugs), together with the intensification of consumer desire; and the increasingly early involvement of youth in activities related to “criminal world” activities (Peralva, 2000; Zaluar, 2004; Feltran, 2008; Telles, 2006; Telles and Hirata, 2010). On the other hand, cultural continuities in the country emerge as essential in understanding the

production and acceptance of violence as a means of conflict resolution, including in the scope of police institutions, as well as the ineffectiveness of state institutions to ensure justice (Caldeira, 2000). No less important are considerations of deep social inequalities which appear among and within different states in the conformation of this violence (Adorno, 2002). Thus, although all youth live the uncertainties caused by contemporary life, there is a social gap that interferes directly in the present possibilities in their trajectories.

This article is positioned in alignment with these studies, seeking to contribute to a deeper analysis of the social processes involved in these types of fatal violence among the youth and to reflect on its prevention. Therefore, it presents the reconstruction of the life story of a young resident of a São Paulo suburb summarily executed in the context of “Crimes of May” which occurred in 2006, problematizing the different aspects that were present in his vulnerability to violence.

We have adopted the concept of vulnerability as a fundamental theoretical framework in order to promote a dynamic understanding of the cultural and social processes involved in violence. The references are the studies on HIV / AIDS, which has been progressively using this conceptual scope, given the shortcomings of traditional epidemiological risk analyses in understanding the susceptibility to disease (Ayres et al., 2003; Delor and Hubert, 2000). A theoretical approach concerning the possibilities and advantages of using this concept for studies on violence and, more specifically, concerning the homicides among youth, was developed in previous work (Ruotti et al., 2011) and is also present in Ayres (2010). Overall, this is a broader and more dynamic perspective that avoids the dangers of stigmatizing terms such as “risk groups”, when considering the susceptibility to a particular event while dependent not only on individual, but also on contextual and

² Considering the period 2001-2008, there was a decrease of 74% in the homicide mortality rates (*Taxas de mortalidade por homicídios - TMH*) in MSP. This decrease was generalized nationwide, however it was even higher among: young males (15-24 years) and residents of areas of extreme exclusion. (Peres et al., 2011) This does not mean, however, a change in the patterns of unequal distribution of TMH. These continue to be more pronounced in districts that have more unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, as well as among the youth. In 2010, according to data from Brazilian Unified Health System Information Technology Department (*Departamento de Informática do SUS - DATASUS*), TMH was 12.1 / 100 000 inhabitants for the total population and 18.7 (aged 15-19) and 27.5 (20-24)

programmatic aspects (Ayres, 2010). In contrast to the risk analysis, the concept of vulnerability does not assign fixed group identities, thus it seeks to prove that an individual “is not always” vulnerable, but “is temporarily” vulnerable because of the set of constraints of different orders that shape their experience and relationships in given time and context. It thus presents a potentially unstable nature (Delor and Hubert, 2000) and depends on the institutional responses offered.³

This concept is understood here as the weakness of individuals, at certain times or places, in dealing with the occurrence of certain risks (i.e. potentially hostile or adverse events) (Delor, 1997; Delor and Hubert, 2000), which brings into play both the possibility of exposure of the subject to crisis situations (exposure), the resources that the subject has to face them (capacity), and finally, the consequences of this exposure (potential) (Watts and Bolhe cited Delor and Hubert, 2000). According Delor (1997), this concept has three levels of intelligibility: 1) the level of social trajectory, which relates to the individual’s position occupied in the course of life, especially at moments of social mobility and strong affirmation of identity, such as the transition to adulthood, the departure from the nuclear family, the recognition of homosexuality, etc. (which consist of key passages shared by several people); 2) the level of interaction, at which two paths intersect and reveal differences of status and power among others; 3) the level of social context, which implies in social settings and cultural norms that act directly on the forms and interests that affect the meeting of two trajectories. Ayres (2010) also includes the programmatic dimension, i.e., the actions taken (or not) by the institutions before a specific appeal as “an active part in the production of situations of vulnerability or, conversely, to overcome them” (p. 65). These levels,

together, allow a dense look at the different aspects present in a given circumstance of vulnerability.

This article is divided into two main parts: the first one reconstructs the trajectory of Gabriel, from the information provided by respondents, without establishing any type of analysis, nor an explanation connecting the facts presented and his death. And the second, divided in three axes proposed by Delor and Hubert (2000), dedicated to the analysis of the elements that stand out in their vulnerability to homicide. These parts are preceded by methodological considerations and followed by closing remarks, in which we highlight the need for an increase in intersectoral actions, including healthcare, dedicated to the protection of the youth against violence. Overall, the analysis developed emphasizes the social juvenile uncertainty and the liminality situation in relation to the “world of crime”; police violence that falls on certain portions of the population, denoting processes of stigmatization and criminalization; and the situation of impunity. These elements now occupy a central position in the conformation of the vulnerability of many youths to lethal violence, which requires its problematization for the development of preventive actions.

Methodology

The case discussed in this article is part of a qualitative study whose overall objective was to identify situations of vulnerability present in the pathways of the youth killed in São Paulo, from the 2000s, which was adopted as a methodological procedure to rebuild the trajectory of young (aged 15 to 24) homicide victims, through in-depth interviews with members of their social network next: family, friends and partners (considered indirect victims).

The interviews were conducted from October,

³ However, it is noteworthy that the term “vulnerability” is not without risk when used, as it comprises different meanings not only in academic studies, but also in the conceptions of common sense and institutional uses. Although the way the concept is utilized here clearly tries to escape the fixation of identities and processes of stigmatization, draw attention to inequalities present in the vulnerability to violence, as pointed out by Smith (2004), and can have the opposite effect than expected, depending on the interpreted reading, serving not to protect and humanize, but to further stigmatize certain groups or even as indicates Telles (2010), but to transform them away from being right bearers but into individuals who should be constantly monitored. The solution for this problem would not be to abandon this type of analysis and the preventive discourse inherent to it, but to always have a critical stance on the ambivalence that such statements involve (Soares, 2004).

2008 to March, 2010. In total were reconstructed trajectories of 5 young males and 3 females through 34 interviews (an average of 4 per case)⁴. With this strategy, our objective was to capture a plurality of discourses in order to identify different dimensions of the trajectory and therefore situations of vulnerability related to the homicides. A study was conducted by the Reference and Victim Support Center (*Centro de Referência e Apoio à Vítima - CRAVI*) in order to facilitate the identification of cases and contact with these indirect victims, as well to provide a safe environment⁵. For the selection of cases, we established criteria that confer heterogeneity with regard to the victim's gender, age, place of residence and circumstances of the crime.

The methodology strategy adopted is part of the life history approach, which has the narrator's account of his/her existence as central axis (Queiroz, 1991). Although this methodology is employed primarily for the reconstruction of a trajectory through the narration of the investigation itself, sometimes it is not even possible due to his/her death. In this situation, we utilize a derivation of life histories, called biographical narratives (Meihy, 2005). It constitutes an ideal method for the study of vulnerability, since it is directed at understanding the existing mediations between the structural aspects of a given society and the individual trajectories. Thus, we turn apprehension not only to the singular, but the character of the social settings to which each individual belongs.

Each reconstructed trajectory was considered "a life case" (Pais, 2005). Specifically for the purposes of this article, only one case was selected. This selection was due to its exemplarity, which allows in-depth discussion of some situations of homicide vulnerability of youth living on the outskirts of São Paulo. From Gabriel's trajectory, it is observed that the aspects involved in his homicide are present in the death of many youths with a similar social position. Thus, although there are no two equal paths, there are classes of experiences that provide

for the establishment of an approach of different trajectories by an "affinity of destinies" (Alvim and Paim, 2004). Thus, as indicated by Pais (2005) "a case may not represent the world, although this may represent a world in which many similar cases end up reflecting one another" (p. 89).

The interviews were addressed following a guide of open-ended questions with minimum intervention, according to the methodology of life history, which privileges narrative freedom and chronology of facts (Queiroz, 1991; Meihy, 2005). Different themes were discussed, which were formed by primary categories of analysis: structure and family relationships; socioeconomic status (work, education, income, housing conditions); friendships and romantic relationships; risk situations (use of alcohol and drugs; commitment of infractions; institutionalization, carrying weapons and others); violence in the community; the homicide event and its implications. Following the proposal of Delor and Hubert (2000), the narrative fragments, initially classified according to these themes were categorized in three dimensions that compose the situations of vulnerability: social history, interaction and social context.

Gabriel's trajectory

The attempt to reconstruct the trajectory of any person is imbued with many limitations. There are several biases present in this task. In the case of young homicide victims, one of the main barriers that arises is the very absence of the person one is trying to remember. The strategy of trying to evoke the memories of those who lived more closely with these youth, despite trying to suppress this first barrier (certainly insurmountable) also casts as barriers the limits that memory itself imposes: beyond the lapses, the forgetfulness, what is remembered is irremediably contaminated by this present moment. Thus, the violent event itself, which interrupted so early this trajectory, also prints its outlines on what

4 All interviews were made after joint reading of an informed consent form and signing, as set forth in Resolution 196 of the National Health Council.

5 Linked to the Department of Justice and Defense of Citizenship of the State of São Paulo. Available at: <<http://www.justica.sp.gov.br/Modulo.asp?Modulo=45&Cod=45>>. Accessed on: June 4th, 2014.

is remembered, what is mobilized to try to understand what happened, to make it plausible. Thus, the reconstruction of Gabriel's trajectory, which is presented below, is a reconstruction based on the different speeches of those interviewed, therefore, consists of a reconstruction based on many other reconstructions. At this time, although the information was arbitrarily arranged to compose some of the events that comprised his trajectory, not necessarily related to the circumstances that led to his assassination.

A life and some contours

Gabriel was born in July 1986 and was 19 years old on the day of his assassination. He lived in a suburb of São Paulo and was raised largely by his mother due to his father's alcohol problems. He had only one brother, who was four years older. He had not completed primary education. The withdrawal from study followed a progressive distancing from school. From the third or fourth grade on, he already had some discipline problems, which demanded the frequent presence of the mother. He started repeating several grades, first the fifth and then the sixth. He had no more desire to go to school. The mother, even though she scolded the child, could not directly supervise his class attendance because of her work. However, his total withdrawal from school had a decisive motivator: his arrest as a result of a theft attempt, when he was 17 or 18 years old. This fact was used by other students as a differentiation factor and stigma in relation to him, and shaken by the situation, he no longer wanted to attend school.

On this occasion, Gabriel was, at dawn, in the company of a group that decided to commit a robbery on an avenue home near his home. The police came and took them all to the police station. The mother, surprised with her son's involvement with this event and for going against all her advice, decided to leave him in jail. She only went to get him out of jail after two days. She also did not go visit him and wanted prison to serve as a punishment and a lesson. According to her, this apparently had an effect, as from that time onwards he started to get home around 22h and did not do anything else "wrong", refusing invitations to participate in unlawful activities that came from his group of friends.

Away from school, the possibility of staying longer on the streets became greater. It was then that his mother, who as worried about this situation, led him to work in the same business that she worked at. In addition, Gabriel has exercised some informal activities, such as work as an assistant mover with the father of a friend of his, who had a moving truck. His last job was at a carwash, where he was still working at the time of his homicide. This was an activity that allowed him a certain flexibility. He spent the day there, starting at 11am and would leave at around 22h. However, between a car wash and another he could time for fun with friends in front of the car wash or in places nearby, like the school court, used for football matches. As his uncle points out, he did not find good jobs due to his poor level of education. The car wash job did not earn much money, so he still depended on the help of his mother.

Gabriel did not spend time at many places outside the neighborhood, he had fun there, being considered a happy, spontaneous, playful young man who was always in the presence of many friends. He didn't have the habit of drinking; the only time he came home with signs of intoxication after a party, he was reprimanded verbally and physically by his mother. After the episode, at the age of 12, alcohol use was restricted in a moderate way, to sporadic festive occasions. However, he began using marijuana around the age of 13 or 14, through contact with a guy in the neighborhood who was involved with selling drugs. He used to smoke with a group of friends in the little street of the carwash. Although the mother knew and asked him to quit the habit, he did not. Sometimes, she herself provided money: she was afraid that her son would get involved in illegal activities in order to get the drug. She tried in this way to protect him, trying to help him avoid bigger risks.

However, the concern of the mother was not able to prevent certain complications related to this consumption, especially with regard to contact with law enforcement institutions. Thus, there were the searches by the police, of which Gabriel was generally the target when he was with his group of friends in front of the car wash. There was also a specific episode in which illegal drugs were found in the

house where he was with a guy who introduced him to the consumption. In this circumstance, Gabriel was sent to the police station and the mother had to go pick him up. Moreover, according to reports, in front of the car wash there was a group present that was in charge of the drug trafficking. Thus, the two groups shared much the same space in the neighborhood and both were indiscriminately treated in violent ways in police raids. The carwash was therefore a location under surveillance by police and ended up being the scene where Gabriel was fatally victimized.

It was one shot after another...

It was May 2006, near Mother's Day. São Paulo was the stage of actions associated with the criminal gang First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital - PCC)⁶. The climate of fear and insecurity haunted the population since the weekend. During this period, the faction was responsible for coordinating huge rebellions within prisons, attacks against banks, public buildings and fatal attacks against police officers and civil servants.

The concern with this wave of violence affected Gabriel's family directly, since some of his relatives were police officers, one of which was in full active duty. There was therefore the direct fear of reprisals. Faced with this situation, on Monday, May 15th, the family had mobilized to try to protect themselves, including avoiding leaving home. The concern with Gabriel was evident since he spent most of the time at the car wash, and thus, close to the street. That was the day that the feeling of disorder and disruption caused by violence attributed to PCC caused changes in São Paulo's routine, with the interruption of public transport and closing of shops, schools and colleges.

The next morning, Gabriel's mother went to work as usual and left him sleeping. According to her, everything was calmer. So she thought everything had passed. *It was Monday, the 15th, when that whole conflict happened. On Tuesday she woke with everything ok, everything normal, everyone following their day-to-day lives there.* Thus, she no longer feared for Gabriel's well-being, and believed he would go

to work and after work would come home as usual. However, that's not what happened.

In the evening, a little before ten o'clock, Gabriel was in front of the carwash, sitting and chatting with his friends. Just then, six or eight motorcycles without plates passed by and the bikers approached them. They said not to run in a threatening tone, and that they would return, addressing specifically the guy who had introduced him to drugs. Faced with this threat, this guy did not stay there and had reportedly told the others to get out of there, but the others did not want to, claiming they didn't owe anything to anyone. That is when the bikers went to the end of the street and came back wearing hoods. As they returned, they began shooting at Gabriel and his friends. Almost all of them were able to run away, but not Gabriel. He and two of his friends were executed, even though he pleaded not to be killed.

After killing the three youths, bikers continued firing, trying to hurt those who had run into the parking lot (located next to the car wash). However, they failed to hurt anyone else. As reported by a friend of the family who lived across the street, the bikers clear intention was to kill and not leave anyone as a witness. Thus, although they demonstrated, at first, that they had a specific target, they actually had gone there to kill all those who were present. She also mentioned this in her statement to the police, when she was asked about the responsibility for the killings, if they had been executed by "criminals" or the "police".

[...] they came to eliminate everyone, not to leave a single trace, as a witness. [...] I was called into the Department of Homicides and Protection of Persons (Departamento de Homicídios e Proteção à Pessoa - DHPP) and gave my testimony of what little I saw, of what I could see, as unfortunately I live in front of the car wash. Now just like the others, they asked if it had been done by the police, or criminals, and I said: "I don't know, how could I know?" There is no way for me to know that, but I do know they came to kill." (Miriam, friend of the family).

If at that time no one could say for sure the iden-

⁶ The faction emerged within the prisons of the State of São Paulo, in 1993, more specifically in the Annex to the House of Detention of Taubaté (Teixeira, 2009; Dias, 2009).

tivity of bikers, several clues began to point in one direction: it had been done by the police.

Several clues and a suspicion: violent police action

Some studies about the “Crimes of May” indicate that the actions of the PCC focused on the first two days of the attacks, culminating in the death of public officials, civil and military police, firefighters and correctional officers (Cano and Alvadia, 2008; Global Justice and IHRC, 2011). Notwithstanding these deaths and the spread of fear caused by the faction, the crimes committed in the following days were not limited to the faction’s actions. The high number of civilian victims killed with firearms⁷, between May 14th and 17th, indicates the existence of operations that can be classified, also according to these studies, as a reprisal of the police institution. That is because we observe not only the increase of police interventions, but also the resurgence of violent and arbitrary actions, in the form of death squads, with strong evidence of police involvement.

The reports of the death of Gabriel showed the suspicious way in which the events occurred, raising the suspicion of police responsibility. Shortly after the deaths, before anyone had asked for help, a police car arrived and took Gabriel and another boy, now dead, to the hospital. The third boy, who was still alive, was also taken and was found dead with a gunshot to the head. Thus, the crime scene was not preserved for expert investigation. Neither the young men’s bodies nor the bullet shells remained at the scene.⁸

Furthermore, after Gabriel’s death, a series of threats followed. The next day, some police raided the parking lot. They demanded silence about what had happened, stating otherwise there would be retaliation. Moreover, the family itself began to be subject to threats, including one of its members, who was a policeman, being nearly ambushed due to his efforts to try to determine who the culprits were within the corporation. The mother also reported oc-

casions when she felt threatened, including by the presence of a retired police officer, who had assumed the role of executioner in the neighborhood. He was the father of one of the officers who participated in Gabriel’s execution.

The investigation initially occurred at the police station in the area and then moved to the Department of Homicides and Protection of Persons (*Departamento de Homicídios e Proteção à Pessoa - DHPP*). Meanwhile, due to the inefficiency of this formal system, the identities of some policemen, who were possibly involved, were being investigated by the family members. However, obtaining information and passing it to the police was not done without risks and impediments. Initially, this relationship was mediated by a strong fear, since there was no confidence in denouncing policemen to the institution itself. Only after a few months had passed did the family begin talking about what they knew. However, Gabriel’s mother could not tell the police where their information came from, for fear of reprisal: [...] *Because you have no faith, a policeman will call another one and he’ll talk, and they’ll go get him on any street corner, then you’ve got no way out. So I said “no, I heard it somewhere.”*

According to the findings of the DHPP, police accountability was recognized, especially after identifying a peculiar mode of action: *So this investigator came to the same conclusion, “It truly was the police, the way they act, how they do it, that’s really what happened,” he said.* However, up to the time of the interview (end of 2009), very little seems to have been done to actually identify the culprits and ensure the legal procedures for their punishment. Given this slowness and limits of the formal justice system in responding to the case, there was a reproduction of private violence after the episode: reports indicated the murder of two or three officers involved in the Gabriel’s execution. Homicides that, on one hand, appear to have been committed by the police to silence possible complaints within the corporation itself,

⁷ According to reports, there were 493 deaths by firearms in the period, for the whole state of São Paulo, and it is estimated that 400 are related to the event (Cano and Alvadia, 2008).

⁸ Similar circumstances were observed in at least 121 other executions related to the possible role of police in this period (IHRC and Global Justice, 2011). Although such participation does not appear officially in the police reports, there are several posterior indications that confirm this (Cano and Alvadia, 2008).

and on the other hand by people involved with local crime, a logic of revenge for the killings perpetrated by the police in the neighborhood, which seem not to have ceased and therefore was not restricted to May 2006, although they have reached an alarming proportion in this circumstance.

As emphasized in the report of the Global Justice and International Human Rights Clinic (2011), the executions carried out by police during the “Crimes of May” were marked by the lack of response from the government. The investigations were selective and corporatist. In general, cases involving attacks on public officials were investigated, unlike those where officers appeared as suspects - most were archived early by the Judiciary. The clarification was made difficult by the very action of the police who, in addition to altering the crime scenes, registered many of the deaths as “Resistance to Authority”, and threatened witnesses and family.

Discussion: areas of vulnerability

Level of social history: the juvenile condition, lack of social supports and liminality in the world of crime

In Gabriel’s trajectory, it becomes clear a route that stood too close to risk events, including the condition of liminality that he had in relation to the “world of crime”. The area where he lived was characterized by the strong presence of drug trafficking, armed conflict and homicides, and some of his friends were directly involved in illegal activities. In his path, there were situations of involvement in these activities, as well as a process of institutionalization (prison for theft).

To understand this proximity, it is necessary to pay attention to a set of social changes taking place in recent decades, that have been mobilizing a series of tensions, including for the new generations. Changes related to wider social processes (with local consequences), such as the flexibilization and job insecurity in the labor market, intense urbanization processes of economic globalization as well as those related to the growth of violent crime. According to

Feltran (2010), in recent decades a reduced alienation of the population with regard to this “world” is increasingly emblematic on the outskirts of the city. This ends up influencing the sociability of youth, regardless of their involvement and participation in illegal activities. The restructuring of the work sector (Sennet, 2005) contributes to the blurring of these boundaries, to encourage the development of informal and even illegal economies. So, a crucial issue is raised for the new generations, their transition to adulthood and the challenges faced in order to succeed in social insertion, in social settings marked mainly by unemployment and precarious work. In a similar way, it also highlights the difficulty that other institutions such as schools, have had in currently referencing the trajectory of youth, producing failed processes, stigmatization and exclusion.

As indicated La Mendola (2005), the juvenile stage “represents the first moment in a process of building, testing and affirmation of identity” (p. 79). Thus, the social and symbolic repertoires available to youth are extremely important to endorse this process, as well as safety nets when facing different risks, that give support to the construction of their paths. As we follow Gabriel’s trajectory and the context in which it was inserted, there is a lack of institutional protection mechanisms on one hand, and on the other hand the proximity to the practical and symbolic references of the “world of crime” (with the different risks associated to it), acting as factors that increase their exposure to violence. Connected to these factors, there is the very social image attributed to him which contributes as a vulnerability factor.

The image built by family and friends, their liminality in relation to the “world of crime” did not associate him to the category of “criminal”. However, it is not possible to say the same for other social institutions such as the police and school. Thus, many of the existing institutions, rather than operating as a support to youth, have compounded their weakening. In this sense, a social image at

9 The term was used by police, when registering the police reports to define the deaths and injuries as having occurred in alleged confrontation with police.

tached to this category can be considered a factor of frailty in his route in relation to different social risks. The crossing of two key events contribute to this image: the total break from school, after a gradual distancing, and imprisonment due to theft. These are events that signal a suspension in relation to behavioral patterns and social expectations of insertion, producing a process of identity tension and promoting processes of social stigmatization. As stated by Becker (2008) “[...] being caught and labeled as deviant has important consequences for the wider social participation and self-image of the individual. The most important is a drastic change in your public identity” (p. 42). We add to the facts reported, the use of marijuana, which also corroborates a social image of “deviant”, and brings him closer to those involved in selling drugs. From this perspective, it is not the drug itself that is in question as a vulnerability factor to the homicide, but what that has meant in terms of the social image of this young man in the context in which he is located, including for security institutions and risks associated with proximity to the conflicts arising from the “world of crime”.

Thus, social divisions directly influence not only on the display or even involvement in certain risky practices but also the resources available to deal with these risks and the consequences resulting from this situation, shaping conditions of vulnerability. Thus, as Souza (2001) pointed out, living in a certain community or belonging to a certain social group makes living longer is a risk for a percentage of youth.

Level of interaction

Social image and institutional practices of stigmatization

The social image built around the residents of certain localities of low-income populations, strongly connected to the growth of crime, is directly associated with the differential treatment adopted by state institutions, including the police. Accordingly, several studies have identified peripheral areas and / or slums in urban centers in the country as spaces where police action is more violent and arbitrary (Zaluar, 1994; Caldeira, 2000; Peralva, 2000). Within those spaces, however, diacritical mechanisms operate that increase the victimization of certain groups.

According to Delor and Hubert (2000), there are groups more likely to commit not only harmful acts, but also to practice “criminalization”, that is, making the more vulnerable to be classified as criminals according to the problematic situation in which they are involved, indicating more general processes of differentiation and social stigmatization. This interpretation is already present in Becker (2008), who calls attention to the relational and political nature in the definition of behaviors and groups to be considered deviant or marginal, thus indicating power differentials as an essential aspect of this nomination. Following studies in this tradition, Misse (2008, 2010) explains the existence of perverse incentives in the country with regard to the accumulation of social and economic disadvantages and preventive prosecution of certain “social types”, including children and adolescents victims of fatal police actions against alleged “criminals”.

From this perspective, the division between the categories “workers” and “criminals” holds importance in these contexts both in the shaping of identity of the resident population as well as in the scope of public authorities (Zaluar, 1994; Feltran, 2007). Moreover, these are not static categories (Feltran, 2007) and the plasticity of their behavior, especially in the public arena, generates significant implications with regard to police interventions and hence the violence produced. Thus, “criminal” would not necessarily mean someone who commits criminal acts. In moments of great social crisis, as occurred in May 2006, this category expands and official action of repression ends up being targeted diffusely to residents of outlying areas, especially youth (tied or not tied to illegal activities) (Feltran 2007).

As noted, Gabriel and his group of friends were constantly targeted by police checks. The proximity of peers involved in drug sales placed him publicly on the fringe of the category of “criminal” as well as his experiences in prison for theft and drug use. Therefore, the arbitrary and violent actions of the police linked to this image constituted social vulnerability factors in his path. Thus his homicide, although it contained elements of exceptionality related to a security crisis, reaffirm a procedural dimension of violence linked to police institutions in the municipality, including the connection of its

agents to death squads. As Pinheiro and Mesquita Neto (1998), the growth of crime served as a stimulus in the most disadvantaged areas, the formation of these groups involving police officers or even ex-police officers with the objective of the systematic practice of extralegal violence, especially under the aegis of the discourse of crime control, with the support of significant portions of the population.¹⁰

Social construction of victims and the process of impunity

This process of wicked social categorization continues operating after the violent police practices as a way to deface the image of the victims, blaming them for their own death. According to Galar (2011), death, especially violent, is not just an individual experience. Because of the impact it generates, this also tends to assume a political dimension and gains new meaning in the public arena, becoming the target of an intricate game of political-institutional relations. In cases of great social impact, various discourses are mobilized, emphasizing among other things the discussion of moral values that make the inclusion or exclusion of certain people within the category of “victims”.

Literally, a victim is any person who suffers some kind of harm. However, according to Schillagi (2009), the status of “victim” appears as a selective quality that is not attributed to all those who suffer an injury, but as something open to discussion and cultural interpretations that seeks a consensus as to its applicability or not about the particular individual. From this selection and differentiation process, two types of victims are formed in public discourse: the “innocent” and the “dubious” (Schillagi, 2009). These qualities are related to the visibility and social acceptance of those who suffer aggression, being crucial for the allocation of the status of victim the belonging or not to a moral community that is identified by the good conduct of those who constitute it.

During the investigation of the Gabriel’s homicide, one of the aspects that draws attention relates precisely to the selective character as a victim in this investigation. His conduct was called into question by the investigator responsible for the case, because

there were some characteristics in the young man seen as “threatening”, a profile that granted him the status of “dubious victim”: *to the investigator: “Ah, from marijuana to trafficking is a stone’s throw”, so I said “Then prove it to me he was a drug dealer.” “They went and investigated carefully and he really had nothing”* (mother). This is a device put into practice in order to justify the homicides committed and prevent public recognition of the victim.

Thus, it appears that this selectivity is a key to understanding the subsequent impunity present not only in the case of Gabriel as other victims of violence perpetrated by state agents as well as their social invisibility. This is because it is based on the assumption that not all the “victims” are entitled to public recognition and consideration of their suffering as equally legitimate or unacceptable by society. Within this logic, little is done to elucidate the killings and punish those responsible in court. So, these are processes which, although they occurred after the death of the victims, are also on aspects of vulnerability to lethal violence, since they comprise the social mechanisms of stigmatization and criminalization previously stated, corroborating a cycle of violence.

Level of social context: organized crime and police violence

Gabriel’s homicide indicates that victimization by violent death transcends individual situations of vulnerability, showing an entire procedural and contextual dimension that prevents us from considering vulnerability while a state, an essential characteristic of individuals (Delor and Hubert, 2000). In their victimization, it becomes relevant to the situation that triggered “Crimes May”, which involves the intertwined relationship between organized crime and public security institutions, as well as a vision of punishment strongly tied to private vengeance and physical elimination (Caldeira, 2000; Misse, 2008, 2010).

According to Adorno and Salla (2007), the process of detention in the country, which nearly doubled from 2000 to 2006, was not accompanied by appropriate policies to curb organized crime in

¹⁰ Successors of the former death squads formed and widely tolerated during the military period.

prisons and their roots in society. This growth trend, which was more pronounced in the state of São Paulo, further contributed to the precarious state of the prison system. It is within this background that the emergence of the PCC in prisons in São Paulo has been identified (Biondi, 2006; Adorno and Salla, 2007; Teixeira, 2009; Dias, 2009).

In a related way, the difficulty to contain the spread of this crime has been identified as a result of dangerous links between state officials and those belonging to the “world of crime”, through a network of intermediation based on “political merchandise” transactions (Misse, 2007). These connections, made through alliances, disputes, buying protection, exchange of favors, are always subject to destabilization, since what is at stake are valuable goods in circulation on the fringe of illegality, following the example of the retail drug trade. The conformation of “unstable equilibrium” between these actors can culminate in violent actions when alliances are broken (Telles and Hirata, 2010).

The violence perpetrated by the faction inside and outside prisons in 2006 holds evidence of a destabilization of this type¹¹. As a result, there was a severe police action, forming a kind of “revenge” (Cano and Alvadia, 2008), with the mobilization of an exacerbated extralegal violence. At times like this, according to Telles and Hirata (2010), a suspension of the difference between crime and the law occurs, putting into play a “license to kill” without this being considered a crime. Thus, “[...] under the guise of ‘hunt the criminals’, a succession of raids, home invasions, beatings, expropriation of assets, and also the summary executions, killings occurs” (Telles and Hirata, 2010 p 43).

Gabriel was yet another victim among many youths executed in illegal police actions, with strong indications of being part of death squads, which intensified their actions in May 2006. The crisis, therefore, exacerbated that processes of criminalization of the population living in outlying areas,

especially young males having the appearance of the social categorization of “criminals”. As Feltran states (2007, 2008), at that time, there was a lower selectivity of police repression, which shows a “plasticity” of those who are considered “criminals” in the public space. According to the hypothesis of the author, the wider the repressive police action, the lesser it is directed to illegal acts and more is directed to individuals who by the diacritical signs they bear, would be considered “suspicious.”

According to Minayo and Cruz-Neto (1994), we can consider these acts in a perspective of a policy of extermination, which is based on the prerogative that there are “superfluous” segments of society to whom death would be desirable in order to promote a “social cleansing” - present even in democratic societies. This reflection also acquires significance in Foucault (2000), for whom racism (in the sense that the more degenerate are eliminated, the stronger and more vigorous will be the rest) is used by modern states to justify the introduction of a cut between those who deserve to live and who should die. Racism of this type, including related to crime, renews the old law of the sovereign power to kill within the current institutional political context, with ample resonance in society in general.

Speeches of different public authorities, conveyed through the media in the period, show that this violent and extralegal action by public security officers have extensive sedimentation within state structures, thus, on behalf of an alleged act of fighting crime, these deaths end up being legitimized publicly. The speech of the general commander of the Military Police at the time is emblematic: *One does not negotiate with criminals, a criminal is a criminal, the State is the State, and if a criminal goes into conflict he'll die for sure*.¹² As Misse (2010), there has always been some justification in the country for physical elimination of alleged criminals. Persistent death squads and/or extermination groups cannot be understood without this background, without

11 Global Justice and International Human Rights Clinic Report (2011) calls into question the hypothesis of prisoner transfers as the only trigger of rebellions and attacks. Although it does not discard this factor, it sheds light on the role of corruption in the outbreak of the crisis. According to the Report, since 2005, with judicial authorization, telephone calls of PCC prison leaders were being monitored and some police agents took advantage of the improperly obtained information and used it to extort money and threaten their families.

12 “Banks are the new target of the PCC, says the police”. *Folha de S. Paulo*, May 15, 2006.

considering that there is “some kind of social setting in search of its legitimacy” (Misse 2010, p 19.), in a clear detriment to civil rights.

Gabriel was the victim of such violations - an emblematic case about the persistence of authoritarian and illegal practices of public safety officials. This type of action, which are manifested in the invisibility of victims and consequent impunity, brings, in turn, barriers for real consolidation of a democratic system of law in the country. Therefore, one violent, unequal social order of delegitimization of human rights is reaffirmed to a large portion of the population.

Final Thoughts: vulnerability to violence prevention and intersectoral actions.

As emphasized by Delor and Hubert (2000), the various “spaces of vulnerability” intersect and often reinforce each other. In the analysis of the case of Gabriel, we observe at different levels (social history, interaction and context) these overlapping spaces that seem to increase the likelihood of a fatal violent outcome: social inequality, the situation of being young, processes of criminalization, police violence, the consolidation of organized crime, the selectivity in the justice system, which historically has left state officials responsible for crimes unpunished, including against life, among others. In this sense, there are several challenges and should be several actions aimed at the prevention of homicide victimization that is so unevenly distributed and greatly affects the youth of certain localities.

As Ayres (2010) indicates, reducing vulnerability implies in the capacity of transforming the contexts that are producers of violence, including their own institutional responses to the question. Specifically in the area of health, the great impact on morbidity and mortality that this scenario of violence in general represents has resulted in a perspective of specific attention in recent decades. However, although this space is one of the most sensitive and suitable for the identification of violence, it is often the one which least has resources “to take, alone, more effective action against the conditions of vulnerability to the problem” (Ayres, 2010, p. 69). We recognize,

therefore, the need to develop a permanent system of monitoring and preventive actions, articulated both internally and externally (with the sectors of education, social services, agencies for protecting and guaranteeing human rights - community councils, public prosecutors, defenders, and police stations and courts) (Melo, 2010).

Thus, it has long been recognized the importance of developing integrated intersectoral actions for the prevention of violence in its many forms, in the specific case of lethal interpersonal violence which victimizes, especially the young population. Its importance becomes imperative. In the “National Guidelines for Comprehensive Health Care of Adolescents and Youth in the Promotion, Protection and Recovery of Health” (Brasil, 2010) intersectorality is considered a “[...] a basic tool of comprehensive health care” (p. 123). Thus, it is not only essential to ensure the articulation of different levels of care, internal policies and programs of the health sector, but also to create mechanisms that enable an articulation between the different spheres of government and civil society.

In this sense, the results of the article indicate not only the need for a substantial increase in prevention geared to the young population, but also the challenge of imperatively intersectoral action, that creates needed support mechanisms for the trajectories of youth and promotes changes in the practices in different institutions, so that they can contribute to changing situations of violence and not repeat them.

Authors' collaboration

The authors worked together at all stages of the production of this manuscript.

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