

## An ecosystemic view of homicide

### Visão ecossistêmica do homicídio

Maria Cecília de Souza Minayo<sup>1</sup>  
 Patrícia Constantino<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** *Four towns are analyzed in relation to their homicide rates: two in Brazil and two in Argentina. In both countries, a location with high homicide rates and another with low rates were studied over the same three-year period. The theoretical approach used was that of complex systems, which considers a connection between the local system, with its internal interconnections, the influence of the external context and psychic coupling that is, the interpenetration of the social system and subjectivities. The analysis of the common points between the cases was performed via qualitative research with observation, interviews and focus groups. The results show that in both the locations which concentrate high homicide rates and those presenting low rates there is synergy between the external environment (macro-social and macroeconomic policies), the social system (social organization, local government, community participation) and subjectivity, whether in the construction of solidarity or in social disintegration. Studies about changes in violent social systems show that persistent, coordinated actions that connect economic, social and educational investments with measures to prevent and curb homicide have historically presented a positive impact.*

**Key words** *Homicide, External causes, Violence prevention*

**Resumo** *Analisam-se quatro casos de municípios em relação a suas taxas de homicídio: dois brasileiros e dois argentinos. Em ambos os países, estudou-se uma localidade com taxas elevadas de homicídio ao longo de três anos e outra com baixas taxas, no mesmo período. Utiliza-se a abordagem teórica dos sistemas complexos que considera uma articulação entre o sistema local em suas interconexões internas, a influência do contexto externo e o acoplamento psíquico, ou seja, a interpenetração entre o sistema social e as subjetividades. A análise dos pontos comuns entre os casos ocorreu a partir de uma pesquisa qualitativa com observação, uso de entrevistas e grupos focais. Os resultados mostram que tanto nas localidades que concentram altas taxas de homicídio como nas que apresentam taxas baixas existe uma sinergia entre ambiente externo (políticas macro-sociais e macroeconômicas), o sistema social (organização social, governo local, participação comunitária) e a subjetividade, seja na construção da solidariedade seja na desintegração social. Estudos sobre mudanças nos sistemas sociais violentos mostram que ações coordenadas e persistentes que articulam investimentos econômicos, sociais e educacionais com medidas para prevenir e coibir os homicídios historicamente apresentam impacto positivo.*

**Palavras-chave** *Homicídio, Causas externas, Prevenção da violência*

<sup>1</sup>Centro Latino Americano de Estudos de Violência e Saúde Jorge Carelli, Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Avenida Brasil 4036/700, Manguinhos. 21040-361 Rio de Janeiro RJ. cecilia@claves.fiocruz.br

## Introduction

In this article, we try to answer the following question: why do certain social spaces (here considered as ecosystemic nuclei) present different and opposing homicide rates during constant periods? To follow this path, we performed a rereading of four case studies carried out in medium-sized towns in two countries – Brazil and Argentina – within an ecosystemic view of the phenomenon.

From the perspective of the theory of complex social systems, we understand an ecosystemic view to refer to a central nucleus – an ecosystem is always arbitrarily defined – that is closed upon its permanently interacting structures and elements. This common nucleus is surrounded by an external environment which, while differing from it, also recognizes its specificity. And it is coupled (which in Luhmann's<sup>1</sup> view means interpenetrated without confusing itself with) a psychic system (of identification of people) whose organization has its own rules, but is affected by the main nucleus's devices and affects it recursively. We highlight that there is a dynamic relationship between these three spheres, which do not however dissolve into one another: they interact and strengthen each other<sup>1</sup>. Each of the four cases is here seen as a social system that influences and is influenced by the inhabitants' subjectivity and is related to the external context.

Some theories try to explain the relationship between certain social spaces and high or low homicide and crime rates. The oldest of these is the so-called *Disorganization Theory*, developed by authors such as Thomas and Znanieki<sup>2</sup>. These researchers showed how rapid economic and population growth and intense internal migration in the city of Chicago in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about the disintegration and disorganization of traditional social forces, creating an ideal environment for increased crime. The thesis of *Disorganization Theory*<sup>2-4</sup> is that participation in community activities develops a sense of belonging in people, which then reinforces social cohesion and curbs crimes and delinquencies. Social disorganization, on the other hand, occurs when a community is unable to attain common goals and solve problems such as poverty, territorial deterioration, excessive residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity and weak communication ties.

*Disorganization Theory* fell into disuse because it presented a very simplified scheme for reality analysis. However, it gained new momentum in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century following works by some authors<sup>5,6</sup> who created

a systemic model that incorporated the interference of internal and external factors on social spaces<sup>7</sup>. Internal factors are informal control, social ties, social capital and local culture; external ones are the formal control exerted by security bodies, social policies and economic policy.

## Method

The research that gave origin to this article was performed in four locations, two in Argentina and two in Brazil. The places were chosen according to the following criteria: (1) towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants, excluding capitals; (2) two in each country, with different homicide profiles: one with high rates and a trend towards growth, at least in the last three years; another with low rates and a trend towards decline; (3) for the selection, we performed a preliminary analysis of deaths by homicide and external causes in capitals, metropolitan regions and towns in Brazil and provinces and towns in Argentina from 1980 to 2007.

For the group with a falling homicide rate (3.5/100,000 inhabitants) and improved information quality in the last three years, we selected the towns of Jaguará do Sul, in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil, and San Rafael, in Mendoza, Argentina (3.9/100,000 inhabitants). To represent the group with high rates and an increase in the last three years, we selected the towns of Paulista, in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil (55.1/100,000) and Venado Tuerto (4.5/100,000), in General Lopez department, Santa Fé province, Argentina.

We highlight that Brazil as a whole and most of its towns have much higher homicide rates than Argentine towns. However, we sought to preserve the same abovementioned criteria to analyze common points and differences, between the towns themselves and within the countries. Based on epidemiological studies and in dialogue with these, we worked with the qualitative approach of case studies<sup>8</sup>, seeking to look at the crime and homicide phenomenon from various angles. But the emphasis of the case studies was on observing local dynamics and on residents' perception.

The case studies emphasized only the interviewees' discursive aspects with respect to the problem in question: public security officers, welfare officers, counselors (in Brazil), police officers, community leaders, primary and high school teachers, health care professionals working in basic care, students, religious young peo-

ple, young people in conflict with the law and family members of young people and journalists covering crimes (Argentina).

The results are presented according to analysis categories which, despite the differences in approach, can be examined in all four situations: the internal dynamic of the community and its different actors; attribution of causes of the situation for homicides and crime; and perspectives for the future and for change.

For the ecosystemic analysis, we used some concepts developed by researchers who work with the specificities of social spaces in relation to violence and crime: “social capital”, “collective efficacy” and “reciprocity effects”, understanding them within a binary polarity, that is, the three concepts can be used to explain both the presence and the absence of solidarity and social interaction<sup>1</sup>.

By “social capital” we understand the possession of intangible resources, produced in the relationships between people, which facilitate mutually-beneficial social action<sup>9</sup>. The concept of “symbolic efficacy” highlights the importance of the ability to act developed by a given community, which largely depends on mutual trust and solidarity between citizens to create effective control and social cohesion networks<sup>10</sup>. And the concept of “reciprocity effect” believes that the location’s structure and the residents’ subjectivity influences and are influenced by crime or by healthy relationships in a recursive way<sup>1</sup>.

## Results

### Internal dynamics of the two Brazilian towns

**Paulista** has twice the population of Jaguará do Sul (300,466 and 143,123 inhabitants respectively). In the latter, the Gini index (0.38), the HDI (0.855), and the GDP (2,979,318 billion reals in 2008) are substantially better, and the percentage of poor people (5.1) is six times lower, as is the illiteracy rate (1.2). In Paulista, during the same period, the data showed a GDP of 1,612,924 billion, despite the population being double; the Gini index was 0.55; the HDI, 0.799; the percentage of poor people, 30.4%; and the illiteracy rate, 6.0.

Other indicators of infrastructure, education and health do not vary as much. However, the adjusted homicide rates for the last three years are 15 times higher in Paulista (55.1/100,000) when compared to Jaraguá do Sul (3.5/100,000).

In Paulista, much more than in Jaraguá do Sul, there are demographic (accelerated popula-

tion growth) and economic instability, high unemployment rates, high poverty rates, as well as high rates of inequality, under-employment and income deterioration for formal workers. The qualitative research shows the internal and external elements of this differentiation more intensely.

As a whole, all the Paulista interviewees perceive and mention the high risk of being murdered in the town, and this problem is discussed in a rather fatalistic manner: ***this is the way, let yourself die, I'm already a [potential] corpse*** (young person's family member) – as something that marks the local identity, which is in turn echoed by the media: ***everyone lives in fear here***.

Another association with crime, mentioned by welfare workers and educators, is the unstructured family, whose parental figures of authority are weak or morally negative: parents and relatives are absent, or involved with crime and prostitution, which makes them incapable of imposing moral limits on children: ***abandonment within the home itself, within the family itself, is a terribly strong factor*** (Welfare Secretary).

A third element that many interviewees associate with the excessive number of homicides is the growing population density (a population that in the 1970s was of 57,000 inhabitants now exceeds 300,000), with an enormous proportion of poor people, which they consider to be a product of failed economic periods (first, a long sugar cane cycle, and then a textile factory one) followed, currently, by intense real estate speculation. These processes, according to young people, community leaders and long-time residents, have brought chronic unemployment, underemployment and informality among the poor population, with low-quality homes, limited use of urban infrastructure and low value given to formal education. The high percentage of poor people (30.4%) and unemployed, according to the authorities interviewed, leads to the lack of circulation of financial resources in the town: ***it is a highly populated town, the population's financial conditions are low and there is a damaged condition of access to job opportunities and education, which means that this set of factors strongly influences [young people's] entrance into crime*** (mayor's chief of staff).

Various sectors have been tackling the high homicide rates, although the actions occur within the scope and conception of public security as policing: increased numbers of police officers, expanded and improved intelligence equipment and management integration. There are some specific programs for young people, such as

“Agentes da Paz” (Peace Agents), which acts in preventive policing and “Pacto pela Vida” (Pact for Life), which proposes health promotion actions. There are many other governmental projects in place in the town, such as vocational courses, leisure activities, expansion of the Saúde da Família (Family Health) Strategy and the Bolsa Família (Family Benefit) program for the neediest residents.

In spite of all the governmental interventions, residents find it difficult to obtain results, as the homicide victims – usually poor young people and adults – do not belong to a specific group. Their socioeconomic conditions, as well as their educational conditions, are similar to those of the other residents. Some young people expressed themselves thus in a focal group: **there are a lot of poor people, without means, a low teaching quality and a high school dropout rate**, although, as everywhere else in the country, access to primary education is universal.

One matter which is often interpreted simplistically by those who propose to prevent violence is leisure in Paulista. Access to this important asset for any community has been linked to higher homicide rates by young people and police officers. They say that places and dates for commemorative events and spaces like nightclubs are the stage for disputes between “gangs” and score settling between rival criminal factions. **Most homicides are committed in situations where young people go out to nightclubs and also to take drugs** (student).

Prisoners being released to visit their families during commemorative dates is also mentioned as a potential crime facilitator: **on weekends when they let out prisoners in a semi-open regime, and on commemorative dates, the number of crimes goes up, as does the residents’ feeling of insecurity (...)** **There are a lot of homicides at prison exits** (police officers).

The weakness of the churches, especially the Catholic Church, was also pointed out, although some young people referred to the positive effects of the leisure gatherings and social events held under the protection of religious environments. Within the family scope, the negative aspect of physical and psychological violence was especially emphasized, along with child exploitation and abandonment (even with present parents), as facilitators of crime and obstacles to socialization and school learning. **The wrong family, a drunk mother, a drunk father, an addict child is a child let loose in the street, he could be 10 years old, then someone comes and says: let’s kill him!**

(student). The deaths occur among drug users with low levels of schooling, but there are also many homicides due to bar fights, quarrels among couples, jealousy, sexual abuse of women and rape.

A community leader in Paulista summed up the local situation thus: **we have been noticing that it is a system (...)** **of an absence of actions and consequences of actions that have contributed to this situation.** This is a wise systemic synthesis which is supported by studies of locations with high crime rates.

The situation in Paulista has been emphasized in this text because it could be seen as exemplifying the complexity of social and subjective processes acting in homicide occurrences: it is not only demographic, economic, social, health, education and environmental indicators that explain the worsening and persistence of violence per se. To understand them, it is also necessary to enter the local history, culture and representations, where not only customs are reproduced but beliefs and identifications also corroborate them.

**Jaraguá do Sul** has a population of 143,123 inhabitants, which, as in Paulista, is mostly made up of young people and adults aged up to 49. Its homicide rate has been at 3.5/100,000 over the last three years. Its HDI is higher than the one for Brazil and the state of Santa Catarina and it has a very small proportion of poor people (5.1%). It has a better income distribution than Paulista and the national average. It has diverse industrial and economic activities, including tourism. Its unemployment rate is only 2.15%, which, from the economic point of view, is considered full employment. Likewise, its illiteracy rate is low (1.2% of the population), and the school and health care network is quite solid (in Paulista, the network is also significant, not in quality but in dimensions).

Homicides do not constitute a problem for residents. The few events that have occurred are remembered with names and circumstances and generally attributed to the so-called traditional causes, such as violence between intimate partners, jealousy and bar fights. Other questions stand out as more relevant, like traffic deaths. However, the same concern with drugs and alcohol that exists in Paulista can be found here: **Our problems today have more to do with drugs and alcoholism. Crack is very strong among teenagers.** (Counselor).

To explain the town’s calm atmosphere, residents present various factors: quality of life, wide offer of formal jobs, ostensive policing, trust in

institutions, solid family bases, religion, work culture and business spirit: *people here work hard and don't have time to think about that* [committing homicides]. *There are a lot of jobs here and anyone who wants to work can work* (young person). These arguments were presented with a greater or lesser emphasis by all the interlocutors. In the interviews, the authorities called attention to their investments in health and education and also attributed an important role to "German" culture, directed at material progress. Many of the people heard used different words to refer to the *culture of a hard-working, peaceful, non-violent people with little taste for parties and gatherings* (educator's quote).

These factors, seen as qualities, demonstrate on the other hand a society quite closed in its system, which is especially highlighted by young people in conflict with the law. They complained a lot about excessive control, lack of freedom and permanent vigilance on behalf of residents and police officers. For their part, the residents attributed the evils that exist in Jaraguá do Sul, such as poverty, crime and drug use, to the presence of immigrants from other states and locations: *We have some neighborhoods here in the periphery that are a bit complicated, which are drug sales points, it's people who came from outside. They came especially from Paraná* (counselor).

One point that was raised by almost everyone to show the internal cohesion of their social system was the weight of the various councils, the community associations and the citizens' own vigilance: *People are very solidary and are always alert. If they suspect anything they don't remain quiet. They demand that measures be taken* (health professional). Given the low homicide rates, there are no strategies to prevent them. However, it can be seen in the town and in the words of its people that the areas of security, education, health and social management have been integrated with the aim of creating a safe and healthy environment. There are also therapeutic communities in charge of treating people with alcohol and drug problems and programs that focus on other questions the local society deems more relevant, such as prevention of traffic accidents and intrafamily violence.

To sum up, here there is also a complex system of actions and interactions where causes and consequences become stronger but, contrary to in Paulista, increase the effectiveness of citizens' respect for life: there is a strong presence of external elements (companies and the socioeconomic dynamic) which positively influence the social system and the socialization of individuals.

### Internal dynamics of the two Argentine towns

It is important to note that Argentine provinces, departments and towns present much lower homicide rates generally than those in Brazilian regions, states and towns, and the differences between the Argentine rates are also narrower. However, in the two cases studied it was possible to see factors that explain the greater or lower homicide rates, adjusted for the 2007 to 2009 three-year period. In the department of General López (with a population of 200,000 inhabitants), in the Santa Fé province, an agricultural region located in the country's center, we studied the case of Venado Tuerto, where the rates are of 4.5/100,000 inhabitants. And in the province of Mendoza, Argentina's wine region, the case study was carried out in the town of San Rafael, with a slightly lower population than Venado Tuerto and homicide rates of 3.9/100,000.

**Venado Tuerto** is a regional reference for the health sector, the judiciary and the educational system, hosting subsidiary branches of national universities. Over the course of history, the town has been marked by two important facts: the construction of a railroad, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which made it possible for immigrants to go work in rural areas; and in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, strong industrial development in the metal-mechanical sector.

Around the urban center, simple homes and residential compounds for workers emerged, creating an irregular urban growth model and a climate of social mistrust in relation to the places inhabited.

Homicide rates are not high in Venado Tuerto if compared to Brazilian rates (4.5/100,000), but there is a climate of insecurity in the town. Generally, interlocutors attribute crimes to three main causes: a high degree of social inequality, as in this agricultural region, wealth tends to be concentrated in the hands of a few families; there is a sense of economic, social and moral decadence, expressed in a nostalgic reading of the past and the recrimination of young people who tend to disobey social rules by using drugs and fighting in rival gangs; and currently, when the many immigrant workers arrive for soy cultivation in the region, the local population feels suspicion and insecurity towards the "outsiders".

Apart from this common picture of general explanations, the set of interviewees refers to a deeper problem of disconnection and lack of dialogue in the management of institutions that

directly or indirectly deal with preventing violence and addressing the damages and traumas it may cause. Several interlocutors, especially local managers, complained about the judicial-police system, which answers to the provincial government and does not coordinate with the municipality. Internally, to maintain local security, they invest in gender violence prevention programs and urban intervention strategies such as cleaning and public lighting.

However, the professionals who work in the governmental programs and in the violence-prevention NGOs complain about three points: lack of resources to perform necessary actions; an absence of integration between organs; and low investment in the education of people who should be forming a network to prevent and punish crime and delinquencies. The local press was singled out for its role in solving crimes and publicizing problems, demanding measures from the authorities.

Drug and alcohol abuse, especially on weekends, was linked to fights which occasionally lead to deaths, especially among young people, the social group that commits the most crimes and dies the most from violence. However, as in the case of Jaraguá do Sul, health professionals say that the greatest problems they face are drug and alcohol abuse among young people and intrafamily violence.

To sum up, as a whole, the Venado Tuerto interviewees point to a lack of common perspective among the various public and non-governmental agencies, and a shortage of resources for violence curbing and prevention programs, as the main causes of the climate of insecurity experienced in the town.

The population of the **Department of San Rafael** is concentrated in the main town and in the smaller mountain towns. Unlike Venado Tuerto, where violence prevention policies are disconnected, here, the various interviewees (police officers, educators, health professionals, managers, young people, professionals who work in emergency services and journalists) attribute the low level of crimes and conflicts to an organized violence prevention network which links provincial and municipal agencies. For example, the police, as in all of Argentina, answer to the provincial level, but are connected to the local government via community policing and have a broad victim care program. All the local representatives interviewed spoke of the relevance of preventing intrafamily violence – which they identified as the main problem, and from which spring fights, aggressions and even deaths – and

of consolidating a network made up of all those who must deal with the problem.

During the field work it was possible to follow the actions of different agents and see that there really is a security and social defense network, made up of the community police and health and education professionals, which seeks to prevent violence and care (from the medical and psychological point of view) for the people who have suffered it. This set of actors believes that in the last few years drug consumption has gone up, with repercussions in interpersonal violence, as have traffic accidents, especially involving motorcycles. They say that aggression statistics have increased on weekends (as was also seen in Venado Tuerto and Paulista) and usually take place in the context of alcohol abuse and drugs. The police officers highlighted that the many forms of delinquency are concentrated in the town's periphery, where the poorer population lives.

To sum up, although the statistics show little difference between death by homicide rates in San Rafael and Venado Tuerto, in the latter, the local society feels much more insecurity, which it attributes to a lack of collective efficacy on behalf of public and non-governmental entities. Another important point to emphasize is that, in this town, there are as many governmental entities as in San Rafael and more non-governmental ones, although each one acts for itself. In San Rafael, on the other hand, there are practically no governmental organizations directed at violence prevention, because the public network is in charge of defense and citizens' rights.

## Discussion

From the situations described above, we will emphasize four aspects: the question of communication, local culture and history, the influence of the external environment and the role of social interventions.

The first aspect is the question of communication, a central element of the dynamism of complex social systems<sup>1</sup>. This internal interaction movement constitutes what Coleman<sup>9</sup> calls *social capital* and is constructed and given value by institutions and people. It is evident that in Jaraguá do Sul and in San Rafael the social ties and internal relationships which promote social solidarity have been internalized by culture; while in Paulista and Venado Tuerto the dispersion of efforts stands out. In these two locations, there is no shortage of proposals for consolidating a cul-

ture of peace. The empirical narratives even suggest that they possess more socio-educational and public security programs than in the first two towns. But the existence of social ties and social capital does not explain, per se, the capacity for dealing with crime and homicides<sup>11</sup>: they are necessary elements, but they are not enough. The most powerful concept seems to be collective efficacy<sup>10,12</sup>, which highlights the importance of communication networks to promote social control and cohesion among residents, as can be seen in Jaraguá do Sul and San Rafael.

A second point to be stressed is the importance of culture and local history<sup>11</sup> in the reproduction of values and their distribution among citizens, as this type of relationship between the community and crime or delinquency is a long-lasting phenomenon<sup>4</sup>, involving social and economic processes, the ways in which the local society and the distribution of power developed. Looking at the case of Paulista, it is clear that, apart from a saga in which cycles of wealth and decadence alternated and succeeded each other, the social inequalities in the town are historical and persistent, as the Gini index shows, and the high crime rates are reinforced by various competing subcultures, values and social structures. This set of factors reduces collective efficacy to tackle problems, creates a feeling of surrender and impotence in face of crime, and homicide is seen as an inevitable fatality.

As the authors who study complex systems say, there is a *reciprocity effect* between the behavior of the social system and that of the subjects: good schools, access to jobs, and a clean, healthy and safe environment generate peaceful coexistence, and people tend to seek these types of places to live in, as is reflected in the words of the residents of Jaraguá do Sul. And vice-versa: fear and insecurity generate a deficit of cohesion and participation in community life, reducing people's will to engage in formal or informal social control, and a form of cynicism towards legal norms develops, as can be seen in Paulista and to a lesser degree in Venado Tuerto. In this social control vacuum, delinquents tend to assume power and use cruel sanctions towards those who disrespect them, creating thus a subculture of crime that is feared by all<sup>13,14</sup>. On the contrary, in locations with low delinquency rates such as Jaraguá do Sul and San Rafael, there is more consensus, uniformity and clarity as to common values<sup>4</sup>, expressed in the lifestyle and nurtured by local reference groups such as churches, families, companies and various associations.

A third point to discuss is the influence of the external environment on the social system. It is known that macroeconomic and macrosocial policies influence crime and informality rates in violent locations. There is empirical evidence that deindustrialization and removal of investment (as in the case of Paulista) result in a higher number of unemployed and poor people, demographic instability, more precarious and non-legalized housing and informal occupations. In these towns, as in a vicious cycle, economic opportunities escape and the residents' territorial and social isolation grows. But it's not only economic ventures that are scared away, so is public power – even if it is investing in social programs in places in economic decline, it does so in an uncoordinated fashion.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the role of social interventions in provoking changes and reducing homicide rates. In this point, some Brazilian examples, although they have occurred in slums and neighborhoods on the urban periphery and not in towns, are interesting. One of the most successful cases we know of is the intervention of the “Programa Fica Vivo” (Stay Alert Program) in the state of Minas Gerais, which was aimed at reducing homicides in areas where their concentration was high, combining preventive and repressive actions. The preventive actions included community participation and social support for solving local questions and a focus on proposals for and with young people. The repressive actions were aimed at a quick response from the police and judicial system, so as to increase the probability of apprehending arms and incarcerating delinquents. The impact evaluation performed by Peixoto et al.<sup>15</sup> indicates that *Fica Vivo* was able to reduce crime and homicides in all six areas where it was implemented, since 2002, although the results are different in each area. Two observations should be made here: the first relates to the internal cohesion of local societies and the different coverage of the program among residents, which reinforces the idea that social reorganization and transformation are possibilities and not certainties. The second observation springs from the evaluators' findings that results tend to be better in the locations where the program has been going for longer. This point highlights the important role of cultural reproduction, which requires time to be consolidated.

Another emblematic case in this study is what occurred in the city of São Paulo, where homicide rates fell from 56.4 in 1996 to 14.9 in 2008<sup>16</sup>. Although we must exercise caution with expla-

nations for the fall, some elements must be highlighted: São Paulo presented a significant decline in homicide rates in all regions of the city and in all socio-demographic groups, but the fall was most relevant in the areas with greater social exclusion and among the group considered of the highest risk: young men aged 15 to 24. This decline, according to analyses<sup>16</sup>, led to the reduction of other inequities, as social and economic investments in education, health, public security, population disarmament and integration of residents in the various activities covered the areas of extreme exclusion. This was the case with Jardim Ângela, for example, a slum with around 300,000 inhabitants in the periphery of São Paulo, which the UN once considered the most violent location in the world (117 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996) and which saw a fall of 73.3% in the rates during this period.

A third example is the “Programa de Polícia Pacificadora” (Pacifying Police Program, UPP) in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which was always accompanied by a broad policy called “Social UPP”. This action has been responsible for a sharp decline in homicide rates, which were 51.0 in 2000 and in 2010 had fallen to 26.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, a drop of 46.9%<sup>17</sup>. Studies separated by city areas show that in the regions where there are UPPs, homicides fell by up to 77%<sup>18</sup>. It must also be highlighted that the Social UPP joins efforts from the municipal, state and federal spheres as well as from businesspeople, the education, health and environment areas and civil society. Projects and programs have been planned for each territory already occupied by the UPP, always based on the needs of the community, which acts in unison with external forces in a communicative and interactive way. In the case of Rio de Janeiro, we must also not forget the influence of important macroeconomic factors that increased formal jobs and reduced informality in all its aspects.

All three examples highlight investment both in crime coercion and social cohesion and, although none of them can be transplanted, each in their own way demonstrates that seemingly chronic historical processes of crime and homicide can be modified when internal and external forces ally themselves in favor of life and social inclusion.

## Conclusions

From the methodological point of view it is important to highlight that, despite the discrepan-

cies in the situations and data of the four locations, the cases allow a reading about what complicates and what promotes security, social defense and respect for life. Police action, definitely only one of the elements to be considered, must be present and preventive, effective and legal. In many cases, such as with the programs Fica Vivo and UPP, due to the characteristics of the locations where they were implemented, the coercive force must be imposed first, in an operation where the state reclaims territory. However, there is no historical example where police action by itself was effective in transformation.

A second important conclusion is that, both in the locations with concentrated homicide rates and in those presenting low rates, there is synergy between the external environment (macro-social and macroeconomic policies), the internal system (social organization, local government and community participation) and the psychic system (the subjectivity) of residents, whether in the construction of solidarity or in the responsibility for social disintegration.

In a cumulative effect, disadvantaged social spaces are less secure, receive less attention, have fewer protection services and formal control always comes in the wake of homicides and crime. Generally, even the forces of crime repression, in their communication with the population, tend to treat residents with brutality and cruelty, as if they deserved that behavior. Equally, in locations with high homicide rates there is a visible negative reciprocity effect: an increase in the consumption of illegal drugs; power struggles between drug traffickers or rival gangs; a collapse of the public security system; increased unemployment, especially among the young; low value given to formal education; a culture of violence; disdain for social norms and legality; and the collapse of dissuading factors.

A third point to emphasize is that if a town has low homicide rates this does not mean it is free from other forms of violence. For example, Jaraguá do Sul has elevated rates of external causes (63.3/100,000), which must be looked at more deeply. In all four towns, the interviewees pointed to a strong presence of intrafamily violence (of a patriarchal nature), drugs, alcoholism and traffic accidents, particularly involving motorcycles.

Finally, it is important to highlight the need for a set of connected interventions when we are dealing with high homicide rates: socioeconomic investments; quality education and training, especially for young people, reflecting the requirements of the labor market; effective social poli-



cies; citizen participation in community actions and actions that strengthen citizenship, in convergence, confluence and reciprocal empowering via networks that communicate and strengthen over time – no change happens from one day to the next. The culture of violence is grounded in social structures and is reproduced in the consciousness of citizens, becoming naturalized. For this reason, deconstructions are slow, but always possible.

### **Collaborations**

MCS Minayo and P Constantino participated equally in all stages of preparation of the article.

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