

The problem of violence in favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

by Marina Khamitsevich

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I am a Russian living in Brazil. These are basically two different worlds in many aspects and it took me quite a while to get used to them. What still strikes me after 1,5 years living in Rio de Janeiro (as well as any other visitor of Marvelous City) is the truly enormous gap between rich and poor and the level of violence perturbing the city despite numerous measures being taken to solve the problem.

Income gap and the level of violence are indeed interconnected and the problem is complex. In this article, I will dwell upon a notorious problem of violence in favelas of Rio de Janeiro: its causes, taken measures and results.

Although there were many violent episodes in Brazilian history, on the whole, it has been "remarkably peaceful"¹. While avoiding open conflict, Brazilian society has gone through transitions that in general have moved in the direction of modernization and democracy.

Despite its peaceful heritage at the national level, Brazilian life is marked by considerable violence on a day-to-day basis.

In urban areas, especially the largest, violence has become commonplace, with frequent thefts, robberies, break-ins and assaults. In Rio de Janeiro the government historically had little control over the favelas, dominated by gangs that control drug trafficking. For decades, Rio has seen police raiding favelas, having shootouts with traffickers, and then withdrawing again. Wars between different traffickers were also commonplace, all of that endangering lives of the people living there.

To change the situation, back in 2008 Brazilian government launched a project to build Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) in which policemen would be stationed to take back territory controlled by drug gangs. Favela residents then supported the initiative dreaming of life without violence. But today the failures of this program are starting to show.

¹ See Rex A. Hudson, ed. *Brazil: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1997. <http://countrystudies.us/brazil/54.htm>

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The very concept of “pacification” program was questionable. It is not a secret that a program was a condition for the city to host 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games. So the government first intended to pacify (that is to free from drug and gung dealers) some favelas located in the southern part of the city, in the neighborhood of its wealthiest district along the ocean, where most of the tourists also reside. The way it was implemented did not actually ensure the efficient resolution of criminal problems: gang leaders were officially informed of UPP coming (the official reason for that was to avoid crossfire and the possible impact on innocent favela residents) and thus simply migrated to other favelas in northern part of the city. Therefore, while the favela areas under pacification have seen improvements, there has been an increase in the concentration of criminals in other parts of Rio de Janeiro.

Furthermore, the positive results of the project even in the pacified areas seem to be only temporary. The first UPP police officer was killed in 2012², and the violence is coming back to Rio communities since then, number of deaths in conflict with the police rising significantly every year. ³ According to Amnesty International's study, "reports of police abuse have increased around protests in advance of the 2014 World Cup and during military operations in [favelas]".⁴

It is worth mentioning that there is a well known history of police abuse and corruption in Rio de Janeiro. The government was taking measures to root out corrupt police. That is why the UPP program were staffed by new recruits coming straight from the UPP police academy. However, favela residents now report that the police officers placed in the pacifying units are untrained and abusive, and often use unnecessary violence. Although they claim to be there to protect the population, there is hardly any policing during the night, which allows crime to roam free. And it is not rare that innocent people are shot as it happened to a 17-year-old Eduardo Santos, an alleged drug dealer.⁵

I live near a well-known favela called Santa Marta. It was the first one to be pacified. I am lucky to know a local activist – a woman who was born in Santa Marta, still lives there with a teen-aged son and organizes events aimed at explaining “comunidades”, its people problems and aspirations.

² <http://odia.ig.com.br/porta1/rio/pol%C3%ADcia-encontra-explosivos-em-casa-na-fazendinha-1.472091>

³ <http://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2014/03/26/mortes-em-confronto-com-a-policia-sobem-quase-70-no-rj-em-um-ano.htm>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT40/004/2014/en/96fde57f-61d9-487b-90dc-7da21c6c505d/act400042014en.pdf/>

⁵ <http://extra.globo.com/casos-de-policia/jovem-morto-na-providencia-aparece-em-video-vendendo-drogas-diz-pm-17655118.html>

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She tells that before UPP came to Santa Marta, residents often found dead bodies and many drug addicted people openly using drugs at the entrance to the community. So a huge progress has been made in just within several years. But at what price? She also mentions that her black skinned teen-aged son as well as other young people of the favela are regularly stopped and searched by the armed police, the security measures are not discussed in any way with residents, and the community seems not to belong to its people anymore.

Some people consider UPPS to be rather a PR action and not a public security policy. They are designed to hide the violence and drive the criminals away from the places that will be popular during the major global events Rio is hosting. Apparently, the project does not work towards long-term solutions, they argue. In most cases, the UPPs are simply a military occupation that fails to protect the people. ⁶

The current situation is just one of the consequences of a very complex problem of social division de facto preserved in Brazil. A true social dialogue is required in order to raise the confidence in authorities' measures and find the long-term solutions to keep the next generation out of crime and violence.

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/dec/14/rio-olympic-games-2016-favelas-hopes-of-pacification-are-shattered>