

Brazilian Street Children

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This document has been produced to provide factual information on Street Children in Brazil. It examines the underlying reasons for the problem and presents statistical evidence on the children and the death squads.

Measurement of phenomena such as this is not without its problems. Jubilee would like to state that there are a variety of figures in circulation on the actual number of children living on the streets of Brazil and holds no responsibility for the accuracy of the figures that are reproduced in this report.

2.0 UNDERLYING CAUSES

Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world with a population of approximately 166 million people. The disparity between the rich and the poor in Brazilian society is one of the largest. The richest 1% of Brazil's population control 50% of its income. The poorest 50% of society have to live on just 10% of the country's wealth.

Street Children are an urban problem which has its roots in rural poverty, neglect and the enforced, even violent displacement of large numbers of people from the land.

This problem is accentuated by the fact that the urban population is becoming younger. The Independent Commission on International Issues states that in Latin America alone, projections for the year 2020 point to 300 million urban minors, 30% of whom will be extremely poor. 78% of the Brazilian population live in cities and towns.

The persistent poverty, rapid industrialisation and the burgeoning of urban shanty towns (favelas), generate massive social and economic upheaval. Profound poverty means family disintegration, violence and break-up become more prevalent. Unemployment rose by 7.6% in the month to January 2000, the largest increase since 1984.

3.0 THE CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY

The violence of poverty has claimed the lives of thousands of Brazilian children. There is some dispute over the exact figures, but the following statistics highlight the consequences of poverty in Brazil.

3.1 Prostitution

It is illegal in Brazil to exploit a child for purposes of prostitution. ARBRAPIA, the Brazilian Interprofessional Association for the Protection of Children and Adolescents states that approximately 2 million children aged between 10 and 15 years have been forced into prostitution.

A recent investigation into child prostitution in the state of Paraiba indicated the existence of organised networks both within Paraiba and links to cities in neighbouring states.

3.2 Social Injustice

Almost one in ten of the urban population exist below the UN's Absolute Poverty Line. An estimated 800 000 of Rio de Janeiro's 5.6 million residents live in shanty towns. Brazil has 21.1

million under 18 years who live in families earning half of the Brazilian minimum salary, a little over a US dollar a day.

3.3 Death by Preventable Disease

According to UNICEF, without an effective immunisation programme 320 000 children under the age of five die every year from preventable causes, that is:

877 per day ... 36 per hour ... 3 every five minutes

3.4 Infant Mortality

The national average for under five mortality is 42 per 1 000 births, compared to 30 in Colombia. Malnutrition, diarrhoea and respiratory disease are still major causes of infant death. 6% of Brazilian children under 5 are underweight.

Newsweek reported that while 1 000 children were murdered in 1991, over 150 000 Brazilian infants died before their first birthday from lack of proper nutrition, sanitation and health care.

3.5 Maternal mortality

The Brazilian maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the Americas. It ranges from 110 per 110 000 live births in the south of Brazil to 298 in the north.

3.6 Teenage mothers

Statistics from the Brazilian Ministry for Health indicate that 1% of all births occur in girls between 10 and 14 years. 18% of 15 to 19 year old girls are pregnant or are already mothers. In a phenomenon associated with poverty, 0.4% of Brazilian women who have been sterilised because of medical problems associated with births are between 15 and 19 years.

3.7 AIDS

Brazil has one of the highest numbers of AIDS cases in the world. 537 000 people between 14 and 49 years have HIV in Brazil. Women make up 204 000 of these people, around 3 000 of whom are pregnant.

3.8 Child Labour

The International Labour Office (ILO) estimate that 16.1% of children 10 to 14 years old are economically active in Brazil. 4.2 million children are believed to be working in abusive conditions. Brazil has the third largest amount of working children in Latin America after Haiti and Bolivia. According to the ILO, 7 860 children and adolescents in eight cities in Rio are working in painful and unhealthy conditions. 2 160 do not go to school.

A new law was introduced in January 1999 which makes it illegal for children under 16 to work. Child care agencies are concerned though that this may force more children into undertaking more dangerous illegal activities as the formal job opportunities are diminished. In Rio de Janeiro, it is reported that approximately 3 000 9 to 15 year olds are involved in drug trafficking. Brazil became the first Latin American country to ratify the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and also ratified the minimum age convention 138 at the same time in December 1999.

3.9 Illiteracy

17% of people over fifteen in Brazil cannot read or write, in some regions it reaches 50%. Only 40% of children who start school complete their primary education. 4 million children of school age are not in school. In some states such as Para, 76.1% of its children do not attend school.

According to statistics from the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics, there are one million illiterate adolescents in the 15 to 19 age group. Peoples' attitudes are slowly changing though with the numbers of 7 to 14 year olds attending school gradually rising.

4.0 BRAZILIAN STREET CHILDREN

Estimates on the numbers of Brazilian Street Children vary from 200 000 to 8 million . In 1992, a head count of children sleeping in the streets of Great Rio (the centre of Rio de Janeiro) showed 900 . In one recent survey in Sao Paulo, 609 children were found to be sleeping on the streets, at least 50 were under 12 and unaccompanied by adult relations.

UNICEF have classified Street Children into the following categories:

Children On the Street: This is the largest group consisting of children who work on the street.

Children Of the Street: These include runaways, abused, alienated children from deprived and poverty stricken families who are unable to maintain normal family units.

Children In the Street: The smallest group covering orphans and abandoned children who parents may have died from war, illness or simply been unable to look after the children because of their family circumstance.

The options that face the Street Children are few. These consist of: finding food in rubbish bins or on refuse tips; being financially exploited by street sellers or as shoe shiners; becoming involved in stealing; prostitution; drug running and drug taking. Street Children often receive beatings from the police or members of the public and also can face imprisonment, malnutrition, disease and AIDS. Generally a teenager in Rio is twice as likely to be murdered as in one in Bogotá, Colombia, considered Latin America's most violent city.

5.0 DEATH SQUADS

Street Children are not unique to Brazil. Brazil stands out though because most of its Street Children expect to be killed before they are 18.

Backed by citizen groups and commercial establishments, death squads have become more and more violent in their goal to "clean-up" the streets and "guarantee public safety". It is estimated by child care agencies that up to 5 or 6 children a day are assassinated on Rio's streets, even conservative figures put the number at 2 killings every day.

Children have been executed and some mutilated almost beyond recognition. 4,611 Street Children were murdered between 1988-1990. In 1993, eight children and adolescents were killed in a shooting near the Candelaria church in Rio. Between 1993-96 juvenile court statistics showed over 3 000 11 to 17 year olds met with violent deaths in Rio. The majority believed to have been murdered by death squads, the police or other types of gangs. In Sao Paulo, for example, 20% of homicides committed by the police were against minors in the first months of 1999.

A recent investigation by the Rio de Janeiro State Legislature found that drug gangs now account for roughly half the child murders in Rio.

The death squads have been met with little opposition from ordinary people who feel threatened by gangs of children. The police also fear the children who are becoming knowledgeable witnesses to their own criminal activities in the drug and prostitution business.

6.0 RESPONSES TO BRAZILIAN STREET CHILDREN

6.1 Brazilian Government

In 1990, the Brazilian Government enacted the Statute of the Child and Adolescent, which purports to guarantee a Street Child the "right to freedom, respect and dignity as a human being" and the "right to be in a public and community space."

According to the statute, children can only be arrested if they are committing a crime. Some critics argue that this has simply endangered them further, making their criminal exploitation more attractive than ever for Brazil's drug traffickers and encouraging the police to resort increasingly to clandestine violence.

New initiatives were announced in October 1991, including a literacy and employment programme for children. Critics point out that this only catered for 5,000 children and that government spending on children in 1991 was cut to two-thirds of the 1990 level. The 1992 Centre of Infancy and Adolescence budget in Rio was less than half the figure for 1991. In February 1998, President Cardoso launched a scheme to get 5 000 illegal child labourers back into school. Parents of the children receive 25 reals (approx £12) a month for each child they send back to school. This forms part of Brazil Social Security Minister's "Brazil Child Citizen" project which aims to eradicate child labour in Brazil. Since then, the Brazilian press have been monitoring the progress of this programme and have reported that some parents are not being paid to keep their children in school.

A congressional human rights report in February 1992 listed 103 alleged vigilantes, more than two thirds of them police officers. Law enforcement agencies have dismantled five security companies since then, and 36 others are under investigation.

6.2 All Party-Parliamentary Group For Street Children

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Street Children was launched on March 3rd 1992. It was formed because MPs were receiving a lot of correspondence from their constituents concerning Street Children. It was felt that a group was necessary to effectively air public feeling about the children's plight. Jubilee has been its Secretariat since its formation.

The All Party Group represents the three major political parties in Britain. MPs who are part of the group include, Ian Bruce (Conservative Dorset South), Llin Golding (Labour Newcastle-under-Lyme), Nigel Jones (Liberal Democrat Cheltenham). The group has been actively involved in the plight of Street Children in Guatemala and Brazil and has over seventy members.

6.3 JUBILEE ACTION

Jubilee Action is a registered charity (No. 1013587) working to protect the rights of children at risk world-wide by supporting aid and awareness programmes. It developed from Jubilee Campaign, a human rights group which has been supported by over 100 MPs from the major political parties. Jubilee Campaign has foregone charitable status in order to lobby without restriction.

Jubilee Action in Rio de Janeiro is supporting the Princess Diana Home for Girls. We were awarded a three year joint-funding grant by the British Government to start the programme in 1997.

The House provides a secure family environment and a refuge for up to 30 Street Girls and where necessary their babies. The project aims to reintegrate the Girls back into their families or place them with relatives if more appropriate. The Residence also offers training and education. Computer studies and jewellery and dress-making programmes give the girls skills to enhance their employment prospects.

For more information on Jubilee Action please e-mail:
info@jubileeaction.co.uk
[Back to Top](#)