Urban Pariahs. Infant – youth violence in Latin America
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Introduction

This research was conducted during the years 2006 and 2007 in Córdoba, Argentina and it is part of a major study carried out in three countries of Central and South America. Initially, this study describes the information obtained from judicial files from three Juvenile Correctional Courts of the city of Córdoba, about personal, familiar, socio-cultural, psychological and criminal characteristics on youth gangs in Córdoba, Argentina.

Then, we analyzed gender relations that take place between male and female in juvenile gangs using interviews.

For many young people today, traditional patterns guiding the relationships and transitions between family, school and work are being challenged. Social relations that ensure a smooth process of socialization are collapsing; lifestyle trajectories are becoming more varied and less predictable.

The restructuring of the job market, the extension of the maturity gap (the period of dependence of young adults on the family) and, arguably, the more limited opportunities to become an independent adult are all changes influencing relationships with family and friends, educational opportunities and choices, job market participation, leisure activities and lifestyles.

Not only developed countries are facing this situation; in developing countries there are new pressures on young people undergoing the transition from childhood to independence. Rapid population growth, the unavailability of housing and support services, poverty, unemployment and underemployment among youth, the decline of the authority of local communities, overcrowding in poor urban areas, the changes in family, and ineffective educational systems are some of the pressures young people must deal with.

Young people nowadays, regardless of gender, social origin or country of residence, are subject to individual risks but are also being presented with new individual opportunities, some beneficial and some potentially harmful. Quite often, advantage is being taken of illegal opportunities as young people commit various offences, become addicted to drugs, and use violence against their peers.

The majority of studies and programmes dealing with juvenile delinquency focus on young people as offenders. However, adolescents are also victims of criminal or delinquent acts. The continuous threat of victimization is having a serious impact on the socialization of young men and on their internalization of the norms and values of the society.

The problem of juvenile delinquency is becoming more complicated and universal, and crime prevention programmes are either unequipped to deal with the present realities or do not exist. Many developing countries have done little or nothing to deal with these problems, and international programmes are obviously insufficient.

Developed countries are engaged in activities aimed at juvenile crime prevention, but the overall effect of these programmes is rather weak because the mechanisms used are often inadequate to address the existing situation.

On the whole, current efforts to fight juvenile delinquency are characterized by the lack of systematic action and the absence of task-oriented and effective social work with both offenders and victims, whether real or potential. Analysis is further complicated by a lack of international comparative data.

Different approaches are used in scientific and practical literature on juvenile crime and violence, to define and explain delinquent behavior by young people. To criminologists, juvenile delinquency encompasses all public wrongs committed by young people between the ages of 12 and 20.

In an attempt to explain the theoretical underpinnings of delinquency, sociologists associate the specifics of youth behavior with their home situation, family, neighborhood, peers and many other variables that considered all together or separately, influence the formation of young people's social environment.

Antisocial behavior may be a normal part of growing up or the beginning of a long-term pattern of criminal activity.

Statistical data in many countries show that delinquency is a group phenomenon; between two-thirds and three-quarters of all juvenile offences are committed by members of various groups. Even those juveniles who commit offences alone are often associated with groups of relatives or friends

Different juvenile groups adopt a heterogeneous mix, or synthesis, of predominant (class-based) values, which are spread by the entertainment industry, and intergenerational (group-based) values, that belong to the family or neighborhood.

Subcultures can be defined as particular lifestyle systems that are developed in groups and are in a structurally subordinated position as a result of pressure exerted by the predominant systems.

Subcultures reflect individual and group attempts to solve structural contradictions. One of the most important aspects of subcultures is that they form patterns of behavior that have substantial symbolic value for the individuals involved.

Some groups and subcultures tend to use violence as a means of solving interpersonal conflicts, and the atmosphere thus created is an important mediating factor contributing to delinquent or criminal behavior.

This might even be referred to as a subculture of violence, in which aggression is considered an acceptable and even preferable and courageous approach to problem-solving.
Studies reveal that the most frequent offences committed by gang members are fighting, street extortion and school violence.

The fact that juvenile groups always exist in local communities must be taken into consideration. A community is defined by the similar social characteristics of its residents, such as membership to a social class or ethnic group.

In contemporary societies, the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality' are fragmented. Personal and collective identities change, and the notion of an integrated subject is eroded. A double de-centering takes place: with individuals in regards to their place in the social and cultural environment, and with subjects in regards to themselves.

These are all factors that have had different dimensions and manifestations in the regions. In fact, the problems affecting this generation group are articulated with greater or lesser dependence on the set of problems of the social environment, on the economic structure and the political situation, where these young people are immersed.

We found that an appropriate name for these youth groups was "Urban Pariahs ", term cited by Loic Wacquant, because of the social factors in which violence emerges.

On one hand, these young people wander between marginalization and exclusion needing to anchor in a socio-cultural territory, looking for a psychological safe situation given by a good exchange with the community they belong to.

In the same way, we analyzed the differences of male and females that are part of gangs. Available data show that delinquency and crime have strong gender associations.

There are a number of reasons why more young men than young women are involved in violent or criminal behavior.

Girls are subject to a stronger family control than boys are. Due to cultural concepts, society in general is less tolerant of deviant behavior among young women than among young men.

The reasons that any single juvenile can have for joining a gang are complex and personal: friendship and self-affirmation, economic and family pressures, migration processes, domestic violence, war.

However, violence exerted by adolescent women, is not substantially different than from the violence displayed by young men.

Possibly, the reasons for which young men and young women enter and resign the delinquency are different, but the criminal actions they develop are similar.

Sometimes adolescent females' need to connect with others may contribute to prolonged involvement in victimization.

Methodology

We used a qualitative methodology: legal files were reviewed and interviews were conducted.

Two hundred of judicial files belonging to three Minor Correctional Courts from the city of Cordoba about personal, familiar, socio-cultural, psychological and delictive characteristics were analyzed.

This documentation was complemented with deep interviews with these young people and key informants who are in close contact with them

Results obtained in our research

Nº: 200 analyzed judicial files	Male 76 %	Female 24 %
Age of initiation in crime	10-13 65% 14-16 35%	10-13 20% 14-16 80%
Primary Education School Desertion	57% 69%	71% 34%
Work (only temporary jobs)	63 %	29 %
Living with their family	58 %	85%
Addiction to drugs	89%	73%

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Kind of Crime

	Male	Female
Violent (total)	31 %	23 %
Homicide	15 %	11 %
Serius Injuries	16 %	12 %
Drugs (Total)	29 %	25 %
Cocaine possession		
Crack possession		
Other drug offenses		
Prostitution	------	12 %
Use of weapons	14 %	18 %
Street fights	31 %	28 %
Stealing	41 %	38 %

During the interviews we analyzed the family situation of these minors, and found out that in these families, even in those where the parents detected problems in their children, the traditional ways of controlling them weren't effective. It's like the families run out of intern regulation resources (talking with their kids, punishments) and in the end, they give up and give them free autonomy over their actions outside the private sphere.

There are other factors that can be investigated in relationship to the apparent "regulation deficit" at home. Some parents can justify their children, denying any kind of responsibility of them, or blaming all the problems in the "bad friends" they are spending time with.

There are a number of reasons why more young men than young women are involved in

violent or criminal behavior. Various restrictive and stimulating factors encourage women to conform to social norms that do not apply to men, one example being the fear of sexual assault.

Girls are subject to a stronger family control than boys. Due to cultural concepts, society in general is less tolerant of deviant behavior among young women than among young men.

In addition, aggression and violence play an important role in the construction of masculinity and sexuality in patriarchal societies, the primary objective being to reinforce and maintain the status and authoritative position of men.

The male perception of violence can be minimized, forgiven, denied or justified. Men often do not consider acts such as verbal or sexual insults to constitute violent behavior.

There are cultures in which the dominant type of masculinity is more or less openly directed towards violent confrontation, domination and control.

In other cultures the socialization of young males towards hegemonic masculinity is not attached to norms of physical prowess, hard work and a readiness to fight. For both boys and girls, the street gang is an ideal context for "doing gender" (establishing gender differences).

Consequently, girls who are gang members are not simply passive recipients of "patriarchy" but active participants in the construction of gender relations.

Differences in male and female behavior in this context are partly a product of the social construction of gendered dominance and subordination in gang arrangements.

Half of the male members claimed that female members were "possessions." This response referred to the females' sexual exploitation. The other half of the male members felt that female members were respected and treated like family.

In some cases, the resources obtained by the minors with their robbery, neutralize the discontent of their parents and mean a financial relief to their home. Juan, one of the minors analyzed expressed that: "…the first time that I brought a new jacket home, my parents asked me where did I get the money to buy that, the second time, they didn't ask

me anything…"

In the public sphere, this coercive individualism is expressed in a strong depoliticization, that is to say, the imaginary absence of any influence of the public sphere in their private life. Not only parents can't help, but also they don't create any exterior instance – real or imaginary – to direct demands. Nothing can be expected from anyone, and the most interesting thing is that this doesn't provoke anything, not even anger.

Finally, the existence of weapons among the population increases the risk of action of these minors, and maybe that's why you can observe an increase of violence in their criminal actions.

Conclusions

The intensity and severity of juvenile offences are generally determined by the social, economic and cultural conditions prevailing in a country. There is evidence of a universal increase in juvenile crime taking place concurrently with economic decline, especially in the poor districts of large cities.
In many cases street children later become young offenders, having already suffered violence in their immediate social environment, as either witnesses or victims of violent acts.

In general, the educational attainments of this group are rather low, basic social experience acquired in the family is also often insufficient, and the socio-economic environment is determined by poverty and under- or unemployment.

The causes of and conditions for juvenile crime are usually found at each level of the social structure, including society as a whole, social institutions, social groups and organizations, and interpersonal relations.
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Delinquent behavior often occurs in social settings in which the norms for acceptable behaviors have broken down. Under such circumstances many of the common rules that deter people from committing socially unacceptable acts may lose their relevance for

some members of society.

When faced with this ambivalence, this "habitus", the supposedly all-powerful State waits for global solutions to be presented by other powerful agents. The social ambivalence towards the State has serious consequences, because if the State is incapable of providing expected solutions, then people feel justified in using violence.

At the same time that the State is being asked for radical and global solutions, there is distrust as to whether this macro-structure has the goodwill to solve anything. In effect, the State is understood as being an entity endowed with thought and its own will, as if it were an individual, plotting and reasoning of its own accord.

In both, developed and developing countries, consumer standards created by the media are considerably beyond the capacity of most families to achieve.
Nevertheless, these ideals become a virtual reality for many young people, some of whom will go to great lengths to maintain a lifestyle they cannot afford.

The contradiction between idealized and socially approved goals and the sometimes limited real-life opportunities to achieve them legally, creates a sense of frustration in many young people. A criminal career becomes one way of addressing this contradiction. One of the reasons for delinquent behavior is therefore an excessive focus on proposed goals (achieving success) along with insufficient means to achieve them.

Even considering the historical and cultural differences in each of the countries comprising Latin America, we can delimitate certain social conditions that allow each region to adjudicate a particular significance to violence in these groups. And therefore, mark and influence the biography of these urban youth gangs, and that often play as an identifying model or as a stigma hard to leave behind.

This defines a situation of structural stagnation, in which young people have a relatively high symbolic participation in society that shapes its aspirations, and a material involvement that does not allow the satisfaction of those aspirations by legitimate channels.

In the cases analyzed in Córdoba, Argentina, the criminal action has individualistic features. The relationship with family and identification patterns refer to a repetition of family models, i.e., it'd be about certain loyalty to the group of origin and hence, the social group of belonging, incorporated with negative and transgressor characteristics.

Other factors that may provide motivation for joining a gang are the possibilities of economic and social advancement. In many socio-cultural contexts the delinquent way of life has been romanticized to a certain degree, and joining a gang is one of the few channels of social mobility available for disadvantaged youth.

In regards to gender relations in juvenile delinquency, we can say that it depends on the hegemonic ideology, though violent practices of males and females are similar in each region.

Youth gangs reflect the gender-based power relations in society and the corresponding discourse and practices in which the peer group plays an important part in the construction of gender roles and relations.

Consequently, differences in male and female behavior in this context are partly a product of the social construction of gendered dominance and subordination in gang arrangements.

In the past, many researches have shown that there is a substantial difference between the violence produced by males and females. These studies also show that juvenile males have a larger chance of using a firearm and committing murder then females.

Once they are initiated in criminal actions, it's hard for them to find reasons to quit them. Nevertheless, maternity is for women, an important motive to take distance from delinquency. On the other hand, men rarely stop committing offences once they are involved in offensive acts. The results showed that getting married was followed by a reduction in delinquency but only for early (age 18—21) and mid-range (age 22—24) marriages.

It was found that males are more concerned with material success, whereas females are more concerned with interpersonal relations.

When women respond to strain with crime and deviance, they tend to engage in an act consistent with their emotional responses to strain, thereby making it more likely for them to use legitimate coping strategies in response to pressure and distress than men.

Therefore, females tend to be more rational and not as aggressive as men. Although women act in a more emotional way because of their lack of aggression, they are more likely to verbalize an attack against someone. When females are strained, they tend to internalize the situation instead of lashing it out, like men do. This can lead to many other problems such as substance abuse.

While the connection between strain and delinquency is not a new idea, the notion that anger or frustration is the intervening variable linking strain to delinquency is a significant reworking of the original formulation of classic strain theory. For example, Merton proposed that anomie resulted from a lack of correspondence between positively valued goals and the socially acceptable means to acquire those goals.

He suggested that different types of delinquency or crime resulted from different forms of adaptation to anomie-induced strain. Crimes against property, such as theft, represented innovative adaptations. Using alcohol and other drugs, on the other hand, could be thought as a retreatist mode of adaptation; i.e., behavior that not only symbolically rejects the institutionalized means to achieve a positive goal, but also rejects the goal itself.

 In addition, women tend to worry more than men about the possibility of their anger hurting others and jeopardizing valued relationships, which would be inconsistent with their nurturing and supportive roles.

In conclusion, juvenile delinquency is a complex problem, hard to fully understand. The general strain theory gives one look at why these juveniles commit crime.

The more aggressively charged crimes are usually male based. Males get frustrated, then angry, and they externalize this anger taking it out on their peers or others. Females internalize their anger when strain is put on them. This leads them to feel guilty and lowers their self-esteem, which can lower their willingness to commit a crime.

Even when we found gender differences, female criminality showed a new pattern of masculine-style violence and attributed this pattern to the egalitarian ideology of the women's movement.

The gender relations are marked by the predominant representations of every region. Nevertheless, in Argentina the criminal actions of young women in gangs tend to be equal in quantity and quality to crimes exercised by young men.

According to this, young delinquent groups would be a way of local resistance, individually and within the family group, to the marginalization, exclusion and loss of identity.

In this way, every region has its own history, its own beliefs and its own violence. This research deals with issues such as the emergence of gangs, the personal situation of young people, social intervention actions, etc, are representative of a determinate society.

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