

Kids, guns, and gangs

The failure of public security in rapidly mushrooming slums creates a security vacuum which is increasingly being filled by organized armed gangs that take advantage of readily available weapons and a vast pool of unemployed youth from which to recruit members. This toxic mix of kids, guns, and gangs presents serious human security challenges. In fact, this combination is so dangerous that in some cases more young people are dying due to urban violence in countries that are not at war than those in countries that are. A 2002 case study of children in organized armed violence found that between 1978 and 2000, more people, particularly children, died in armed violence in the slums of Rio de Janeiro (49,913) than in Colombia (39,000), a country that is actually experiencing civil conflict.²³ Examining human security through an urban optic reveals that poorly-policed slums with kids, guns, and gangs are generating conditions for what are effectively "urban child soldiers".

Urban gang warfare

Roughly 35,000 Salvadorians, 40,000 Hondurans, and 100,000 Guatemalans are members of gangs. These gangs, or *maras*, are the main cause of violent crime in Central America.²⁴ So too are gangs in major cities such as the Fatherless Crew (Kingston, Jamaica), the Bakassi Boys (Igbo, Nigeria) and the Cape Town Scorpions (Cape Town, South Africa). In Guatemala, gang warfare has been a main cause of the 20,000 murders that have been committed over the past five years.²⁵ In Cape Flats, an estimated 130 well-armed criminal gangs with 100,000 members cause 70% of all crime in the South African city.²⁶ In Colombia, urban militias, some of which are made up of 85% youth, have close ties to paramilitary and rebel armies waging civil war against government forces.²⁷

These gangs are not just committing ad hoc, petty, or anomic crime. Using the definition from the Children and Youth in Organized Armed Violence (COAV) program of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Viva Rio, it is the existence of "children and youth [who are] employed or otherwise participating in organized armed violence where there are elements of a

²³ Dowdney (2003), p.12.

²⁴ Boccanera (2003).

²⁵ Rosenberg (2006).

²⁶ Standing (2005), pp.2-3.

²⁷ Amnesty International (2005).