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Youth and Violence in Brazil and Latin America: Theoretical and Empirical Approaches

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Abstract

Studies in Brazil and other Latin American countries have demonstrated how the expansion of illegal drug markets and firearms trafficking over borders has increased the risks for young people, especially those who live in socially vulnerable neighborhoods, of becoming victims of lethal violence. In addressing this scenario, we review some of the most relevant research approaches that seek to understand the involvement of young men in organized crime, the rise of criminal factions or groups and their internationalization process, and the social and institutional mechanisms that contribute to the production and reproduction of lethal violence. Delving both into sociological and anthropological studies in Brazil, as well as other Latin American contributions, we elaborate on the most promising contributions that combine an intersectional approach to the sociological and criminological theories most often employed to understand the involvement of youth with lethal violence in Brazil and the Latin American context.

Keywords

youth – homicide – organized crime – criminal gangs – Brazil – Latin America

Youth mortality by violence is among Latin America's most challenging social problems. Unfortunately, public policy efforts have been unable to mitigate young people's mortality rates. Researchers have combined quantitative

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approaches that proportionate an alarming picture of the present situation with qualitative methods that help us understand why so many young people fall victim to lethal violence. In this paper, we offer a brief analysis of violent death rates, discussing the social profile of victims and the circumstances that lead to these rates. Studies in Brazil and other Latin American countries (LACS) have demonstrated how the expansion of illegal drug markets and firearms trafficking over borders has increased the risks for young people, especially those who live in socially vulnerable neighborhoods, of becoming victims of lethal violence. In addition, structural inequalities that compromise access and permanence in schools, low-income rates, and youth unemployment remain leading factors that push ever-younger people to get involved with illegal markets.

Moreover, government initiatives focused on the "war on drugs" have also been responsible for the ineffectiveness of public security efforts in preventing violence and homicide rates from escalating. However, social factors such as gender, masculinities, and racism also contribute to increased risks young people face of getting involved in organized crime.[1] As we will discuss in this paper, one of the striking features of this phenomenon is the prevalence of young men among the main victims of homicide. In addressing this scenario, we review some of the most relevant Latin American research approaches that seek to understand the involvement of young men in organized crime, the rise of criminal groups and their internationalization process, and the social and institutional mechanisms that contribute to the production and reproduction of lethal violence. Finally, we elaborate on the most promising contributions that combine an intersectional approach to the sociological and criminological theories most often employed to understand the involvement of youth with lethal violence in Brazil and the Latin American context.

1 Youth Mortality in Latin America

One of the most critical research issues in youth sociology is the involvement of young people in violence, both as victims and perpetrators. In Latin America, death by violent means affects teenagers and young people in such striking ways that it has become a severe social problem in various countries. Although considerable differences exist between countries, cities, areas within cities, and social groups, mortality rates due to aggression in Latin America are the highest in the world. (Alvarado, 2013)

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[1] In sociology and criminology, organized crime is understood as a group or groups that take part in illegal or criminal activities. To be classified as a criminal organization, such groups must have a structural or hierarchical organization, be able to continue functioning even if their leaders are arrested or killed, employ violence or forceful means to maintain power, take part in illegal (but not only) businesses, have an ideology, and resort to corruption to avoid investigation and persecution by the State. (Celis et al., 2019).

Violence against teenagers between 12 to 17 years old and those aged 18 to 29 manifests itself in various forms, from sexual abuse to homicide, including intentional violent deaths and police interventions. Violence can be interpersonal, self-inflicted, individually or collectively targeted, and be promoted by the State or the institutions designed to guarantee security.

To measure the scope and impact of violent acts on this population, researchers have referred primarily to data produced by public health offices, which register and publicize data on mortality by external causes. (Canudas-Romo & Aburto, 2019; Otamendi, 2019; Alda, 2017; Alvarado, 2013) According to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), established by the World Health Organization (WHO), these include intentionally or deliberately inflicted injuries that result in death, interpersonal injuries, legal interventions such as actions by the police or other law enforcement personnel, war, or civil insurrection, including disturbances and riots, and deaths caused with no identified intent. Among these, the most reliable indicator of violence is intentional homicide,[2] which is "one of the most measurable and comparable indicators for monitoring violent deaths" (UNODC, 2019, p. 7). As a violence indicator, intentional homicide is more precisely defined and accounted for in different international e geographical contexts, which makes it more amenable to cross-national comparisons. In most LACs, intentional homicide is young people's leading cause of death. (Canudas-Romo & Aburto, 2019)

However, it is essential to consider that homicide rates depend on how criminal offenses are reported and recorded by authorities in different countries and regions within countries. In many situations, registers are inexistent, or their quality is poor, so data on homicides, in a comparative approach, should always be treated as estimates. For instance, in many African countries, statistics on crime offenses are unavailable because data-gathering is conflict-disrupted, or criminal justice data on homicide are unreliable. In Latin America, such difficulties are also present. For example, in Brazil, the quality of the data registered by the Mortality Information System (SIM) from the Health Ministry (MS) has deteriorated since 2018, so homicides have not been correctly recorded.[3]

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[2] Intentional homicide is defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as "unlawful death purposefully inflicted on a person by another person" (UNODC, 2011, p. 15).

[3] According to Cerqueira (2013), approximately 73,9% of intentional deaths without identifiable cause are in fact, homicides not registered as such.

According to the latest Global Study on Homicide, produced by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2019, homicide rates in the Americas are almost three times higher than the global average. Although accounting for only 13% of the world's population, the region reported 37% of the worldwide victims. Homicide rates have been consistently high for at least three decades. (UNODC, 2019, p. 17) Despite significant variations between countries and regions within countries, some urban areas have reached homicide rates as high as conflict and war zones in the past thirty years. In contrast, other regions have consistently declined lethal violence rates. Most homicides are due to organized crime (Schultze-Kraft, Chinchilla, and Moriconi, 2018), and young men aged 15 to 29 are disproportionally affected by homicide compared to all other age groups. In addition, the great majority of crimes resulting in homicides involve firearms. (Otamendi, 2019, p. 6)

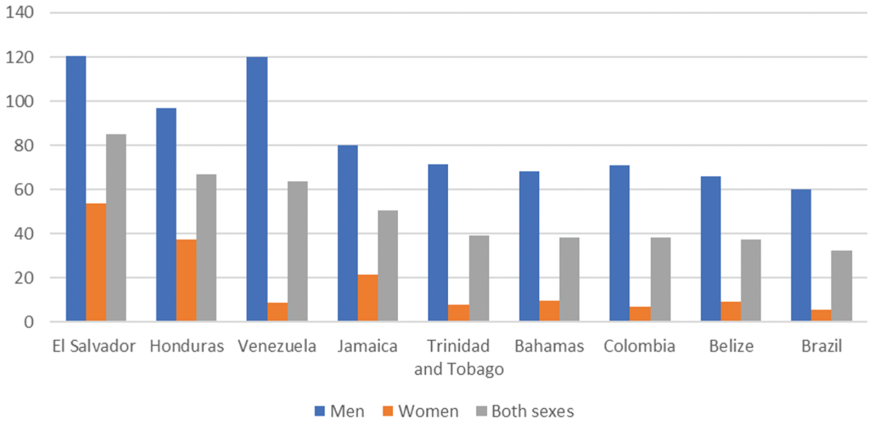
When analyzed comparatively, LACs vary enormously when homicide rates are considered. For example, the latest estimates show that homicide rates may reach alarming levels in El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela, while in Antigua and Barbuda, they are 35 times lower. Table 1 shows four groups of countries according to the average homicide rate estimates for 2019.

Another essential feature is the difference between estimates for men and women. Among the ten most violent countries in Latin America, homicide rates for men can be 13 times higher than for women and twice the average for both sexes, as shown in Graph 1.

TABLE 1 Estimates of rates of homicides per 100,000 population.

The rate for 100 thousand inhabitants	Countries
Less than 10	Antigua and Barbuda, Chile, Cuba, Suriname, Argentina, Grenada, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia, Nicaragua
From 11 to 19	Barbados, Costa Rica, Panama, Dominican Republic
From 20 to 29	Saint Lucia, Haiti, Guyana, Guatemala, Mexico, Saint Vincent, and the Grenadines
From 30 to 39	Brazil, Belize, Colombia, Bahamas
40 or higher	Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Venezuela, Honduras, El Salvador

SOURCE: WHO GLOBAL HEALTH OBSERVATORY DATA REPOSITORY, 2019.



GRAPH 1 Estimates of rates of homicides per 100,000 population, 2019.
SOURCE: WHO GLOBAL HEALTH OBSERVATORY DATA REPOSITORY, 2019.

LACs are among the most dangerous countries in the world compared to other regions, including Southern Africa and conflict zones.[4] When considering the impact of homicides on the population's life expectancy, homicide mortality is the primary factor for the difference in life expectancy in LACs compared to high-income countries – especially among young men aged 15 to 29 (Canudas-Romo & Aburto, 2019). The latest estimated homicide rate for that age group in the region was 64 per 100,000 (UNODC, 2019, p. 25). As to the victims' profile, several ecological studies in Brazil (Sousa et al., 2018; Cardoso et al., 2016; Ribeiro & Cano, 2016; Barcellos & Zaluar, 2014; Rivero, 2010; Peres et al., 2008), the U.S. (Pyrooz et al., 2020; Fox & Fridel, 2017; McCall et al., 2008; Strom & MacDonald, 2007) and other LACs (Alvarado & Ewig, 2020; Gutierrez-Martinez et al., 2020; González-Pérez & Vega-López, 2019; Otamendi, 2019; Alda, 2017; Alvarado, 2013) have demonstrated that the risk of becoming a victim of intentional homicide is associated to being young, male, black or ethnic mixed, with few years of education, living in great urban centers, mainly in slums, suburbs, and precarious neighborhoods. Furthermore, the risks increase when access to firearms is widespread, organized crime is established, and young men are involved in gangs and illegal activities such as drug trafficking.

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[4] This feature of the Americas has been systematically signaled over a decade. In the 2013 Global Study on Homicide, UNODC pointed out that some LACs and Southern African countries presented homicide rates over 30 per 100,000 population, well over intentional homicides and civilian casualties documented in Afghanistan (6.5 and 9.3 per 100,000 population) and Iraq (8.0 and 10.0 per 100,000 population), both situations of ongoing conflict. (UNODC 2013, 22).

Brazil's participation in the international death toll is alarming: whereas it bears only 2.7% of the world population, it concentrates 20.5% of the world's violent deaths. According to the Brazilian Forum for Public Security (FBSP), 50% of all homicides were committed against people aged from 12 to 29 years old. The majority of intentional violent death victims are men (91.3%), black (77%), and had completed just a few years of schooling. (FBSP, 2022) Firearms were used in 70% of homicides. Police interventions are also a significant cause of violent deaths. According to the FBSP (2022), between 2013 and 2021, at least 43,171 people were fatal victims of police actions; 99.2% were men, 77% were aged up to 29 years old, and 81.4% of those with a racial record were black, in a clear overrepresentation of poor, young black men who live or transit in urban peripheries. Researchers (Cerqueira, Ferreira & Bueno, 2021), however, have noted a decrease in mortality rates due to homicide in the last ten years in Brazil. Three factors explain this phenomenon: the demographic decline of the population between 15 and 29 years, qualified violence prevention and reduction programs initiated in some states and cities, and the Disarmament Statute issued in 2003.

Although youth mortality indicators also include feminicides, suicides, and accidents, this article will address the social group most prone to victimization: young men. The reasons for this phenomenon are not always discussed when homicide rates are analyzed. According to Fox and Fridel (2017), "in the research literature on homicide, gender has generally received less attention than other demographic characteristics, specifically the age and race of victims and offenders" (p. 1), especially because the majority of homicides involve men killing other men. Gender disparities are frequently linked to gender-based generalizations, such as the notion that men use violence as an aggressive tactic for asserting dominance, while women generally perceive violence as a last-ditch measure of protection. Consequently, males face elevated susceptibility toward becoming targets of fatal aggression.

To understand why so many young men become victims of intentional homicides in Latin America, we will discuss the role of organized crime, its expansion, and its diversification in recruiting young men into illegal activities. These processes are directly connected to the phenomenon of the so-called "juvenilization" (Pimenta et al., 2020, p. 39) of drug trafficking.

2 Youth, Globalization, and Organized Crime

To understand the expansion and diversification of organized crime in LACs and how this process relates to youth homicide, it is essential to refer to a broader social, cultural, and political context. LACs have a history of colonialism, slavery, exploitation, and conflictive independence processes. Various countries still face the consequences of military dictatorships that tolled the lives of thousands of people and perpetuated violent social control practices by police and army institutions, despite the transitions from military-authoritarian to democratic-civilian rule. (Schultze-Kraft et al., 2018, p. 466) Latin American youth have inherited structural inequalities that are the product of these countries' long colonial domination and the different pathways through which the region has been integrated into the global economy. (Alvarado & Ewig, 2020)

The global integration process of Central and South America was accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked both by re-democratization and the introduction of neoliberal policies aimed at "liberalizing capital and labor markets, privatizing state-controlled industries and reducing state regulatory role in the economy." (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 4) The dismantling of the previous development strategy, the so-called import substitution industrialization model (ISI), which was centered on the active participation of the State and industry in promoting development, involved restructuring the economy to promote liberalization towards a financially oriented market. In addition, areas such as education, health, pensions, and housing were subject to marketization. According to Calderón and Castells (2020), although economic reforms were accompanied by an increase in rates of electoral democracy, they "did not translate into a significant reduction in rates of poverty, indigence, inequality, or unemployment." (Calderón & Castells, 2020, p. 7) The limits of the region's integration in the global economy became evident in its vulnerability to an economic and political crisis as happened in Brazil, in 1999, and Argentine, in 2001. Inflation rates, devaluation of national currencies, and high fiscal debts led to social unrest, widespread protests, and a series of political changes, such as the Bolivarian Revolution after the election of 1998 in Venezuela. The so-called "pink tide" in LACs in the first years of the twentieth century began a new stage in development strategies centered around the State, exploiting natural resources, and creating productive infrastructure to generate government funds to improve the living conditions of the population. (Calderón & Castells, 2020) These "post-neoliberal" policies can be understood as a set of progressive alternatives designed to counter the effects of neoliberal policies, such as income redistribution, investment in productive infrastructure, and increase in public spending. (Macdonald & Ruckert, 2009)

Despite efforts to advance competitiveness in a globalized economy, competitive development has been hindered by persistent social inequalities and poverty levels. These factors have had a profound impact on the lives of young people, exacerbated further by labor market deregulation and the rise of precarious jobs and informality.

This process has deep roots in the modernization process that took place mainly in the twentieth century, characterized by intense urbanization during industrialization periods that directed millions of rural workers towards ever-growing cities, stimulated the formation of poor suburban areas – also called slums, *favelas,* or *barrios* – where urban infrastructure (access to water, energy, and sewage) is precarious or nonexistent, public services such as health care, schools, childcare facilities, and sports and leisure equipment is scarce. (Briceño-León, 2018) Most young people in urban and rural areas have low-quality education and tend to perform irregular educational trajectories. Low-income drives teenagers and even children to drop out of school to work to help families striving for minimum living conditions. This reality is commonplace in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Ciudad de México, Caracas, Cali, and Medellín.

According to Bagley (2004), engagement in illegal activities, including forms of organized crime, is part of the survival strategies of populations facing severely limited life opportunities who find criminal practices such as drug dealing a source of income easily accessible. However, the rationale around this engagement carries more than a pragmatic or instrumental feature. Illicit behavior often exerts an irresistible allure to youth and adolescents, who are drawn to them by the prospect of swift financial gains via their social circles or familial ties with established offenders. One of the explanations for the involvement of young people in criminal activities is their exposure to global consumerism. (Umaña, 2018) There is also something deeply compelling about being perceived as a member of a powerful gang – one that commands both fear and respect in equal measure. (Barros & Pimenta, 2022; Paiva, 2019; Sá, 2018; Contreras, 2013; Zaluar, 2004; Bourgois, 2003) This will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Among the illegal activities easily accessible to young people from low-income families, who often dwell in the major cities' suburbs, *barrios,* and *favelas,* is the commercialization of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and crack, all of which have been systematically prohibited and became the main targets of the "war on drugs" policies in the U.S. and LACs.

The excess mortality among young men in Latin America is directly related to organized crime involving drug trafficking. Teenagers and young people get involved in drug trafficking in various activities, such as "vigilantes" (watchmen), drug transporters, informants, collectors, hitmen for hire, or assassins. (Alvarado, 2013, p. 239) As a result, some will end up dead or incarcerated, and only a few will leave their criminal careers.

Narcotrafficking is one of the main strands of globalized organized crime in LACs – who are either producers of cocaine and derivates or routes to the global drug trafficking system. Innumerous criminal activities are directly or indirectly related to international illegal drug commerce. Zaitch and Antonopoulos (2019), on analyzing several different research studies on organized crime in the region, point to some trends in the globalization process of criminal groups. First, criminal networks in LACs have expanded their activities and borders by "fostering alliances with other criminal groups and opening up new drug hubs and routes," including among these "more links with European, African or Chinese criminal collectivities, and the proliferation of transit and export cocaine routes." (Zaitch & Antonopoulos, 2019, p. 142) Second, there has been a process of dispersion and fragmentation of criminal networks, derived mainly from the growing disputes within criminal groups and between factions, contributing to the escalation of violence. (Barros & Pimenta, 2022; Ferreira, 2019; Paiva, 2019; Sá, 2018; Dias, 2013; Vergara, 2012) Third, illegal activities have expanded beyond cocaine trafficking, including other crimes such as human trafficking, arms trade, timber smuggling, illegal mining, etc. These changes are related "to the speed with which criminal groups are evolving and their capacity to develop connections with the legal world and international markets." (Vergara, 2012, p. 2) On top of this, there also has been an increase in the involvement of legal actors (such as government agents, police institutions, and politicians) in organized crime activities, which foments corruption and collusion of state agents and criminal organizations. (Zaitch & Antonopoulos, 2019, p. 143)

The dynamics of the globalization process in Latin America also implied the emergence of the neoliberal State, an analytical interpretation of the new state forms in the Americas following the widespread of neoliberalism. Authors such as Loïc Wacquant (2009) argue that the neoliberal State is not only characterized by a shift towards market-driven policies and a reduction in social welfare programs, which have exacerbated inequality and increased poverty levels, but it also plays a role in reinforcing racial and class divisions within society, by promoting individualism and meritocracy, and social control over marginalized populations through punitive measures. Rodríguez (2021) and Iturralde (2019) point out that the neoliberal reforms laid the foundations for not only free markets integrated into the global economy but also the reforms on law and order that contributed to the emergence of the "penal State." A penal State refers to a government or society characterized by a punitive justice system that emphasizes harsh punishments and incarcerations, often at the expense of rehabilitation and restorative justice. (Wacquant, 2009) In such a State, the criminal justice system is the primary means of addressing social problems. The penalty for the crime is severe imprisonment, including solitary confinement and other forms of torture or torture abuse. (Garland, 2001)

Among the effects of punitive measures in LACs is the hyper-incarceration process, which often sends to prison young men from black or ethnic mixed communities. On the one hand, even if post-neoliberal regimes have been relatively successful in reducing poverty and inequality levels, structural social and economic exclusion still affects the lives of millions of young people, especially on account of the flexibilization of labor relations and expansion of precarious work and unemployment. On the other hand, the individualistic and meritocratic rhetoric that forms the basis of neoliberal ideas tends to obscure the role of structural social inequalities in the production and reproduction of violence, emphasizing individuals' responsibility in adhering to criminal careers. According to Iturralde (2019), the emphasis on individual responsibility for social problems can be understood as a form of social control over the poor. (Iturralde, 2019, p. 7)

Furthermore, historical and political aspects must be addressed to understand how social control policies on drug consumption, criminalization of drug consumption, and commerce have been implemented throughout the Americas.

3 Sociological Explanations for Youth Involvement in Violence and Crime

Sociologists have proposed different approaches to understanding violence and deviance in young people's social actions. (Becker 2008; Cloward & Ohlin 1998; Cohen 1956) These approaches and theories have resonated in Latin America differently and contributed to new interpretations of violence and deviance among young people.

Many sociological and criminological approaches associate crime with poverty. Precariousness and material deprivation has long been dubbed a motivator for deviant, illegal, or criminal activity. If the individual is deprived of the means to survive but finds no legal means to obtain the resources to live, he will resort to illegal or violent means to reach them. Poverty is not an individual condition but a collective one shared by social groups with limited access to the social and economic means to live with dignity. This thesis is attractive because it brings a collaborative perspective to the individual, rational motivation formerly used to justify criminal activity. However, it has been criticized extensively in the recent past. Some argue that criminal behavior cannot be solely attributed to poverty as it stems from structural factors. (Misse, 1995) Additionally, illegal activity occurs in all social classes and is not limited to the poor. (Wacquant, 2009; Garland, 2001) Furthermore, statistical analysis has been used to question the correlation between crime and poverty by scrutinizing data production methods. (Ribeiro & Cano, 2016)

Social inequality is argued to be a more powerful contributor to violence and criminal activity as it can create resentment towards social injustice. Violence, in this context, is viewed as a reflection of class struggles (Briceño-León, 2012). Additionally, some attribute crime to the disintegration of family structures within working-class households affected by alcoholism or unemployment that lack strong moral foundations to instill traditional societal values among young individuals (Lyra, 2013). Another common explanation associates crime with degraded living environments where marginalization poses an ever-present threat of seducing vulnerable youth into delinquent behavior.

In Brazil, the association between poverty and crime is old in the social imagination. However, it gained relevance when urban violence and criminality rose in the 1980s, following the economic recession, hyperinflation, and the country's integration into the international drug trafficking routes. (Adorno, 2002) Since then, the sociology of violence field has tried to defy this association.

Recent studies (Kerr, 2020; Cecchetto, Muniz & Monteiro, 2018; Tavares et al., 2016) suggest that social vulnerability, especially in LACs, may be a significant factor in the violence experienced by young people. Due to social inequalities, limited access to cultural, leisure activities, and sports facilities can lead to tension and violent behavior among youth. However, this explanation does not address instances where youth violence occurs independently of socio-economic circumstances but portrays them solely as victims of violent conditions. From a different perspective, this relationship can also be analyzed based on the role of young people as agents of their life trajectories, also considering subjective motivations and positive and negative interactions in the various areas of sociability (family, friends, schoolmates, work colleagues, neighborhood relations) that condition the actions. In building a sound sociological interpretation of violent or criminal actions, young people must be considered both subjects to social factors that structure their actions and agents of these actions.

An essential feature in young people's sociability dynamics is their relationship with their peers. Social interactions among youth often happen through group associations based on neighborhood, colleague, and friendship connections. Sometimes such groups might develop a sense of identity.

Members will gather around nicknames, standard social practices, and shared symbols. Peer groups, mostly known as "gangs," have been studied in Sociology since the beginning of the twentieth century by the Chicago School. (Cloward, & Ohlin, 1998; Cohen, 1956)

According to Elijah Anderson (1999), young people are driven to violent and deviant behavior because they lack respect and protection in their communities, often plagued by poverty, crime, and lack of opportunities. As a result, they adopt a "code of the street," which prioritizes toughness, aggression, and retaliatory violence, as a means of survival and social status. This code is reinforced by street culture and peer pressure and is often perpetuated by negative interactions with law enforcement and authority figures. Other authors, such as Bourgois (2003), have also indicated the importance of peer groups in reinforcing the "code of the street" based on values of honor and respect. Peer groups play a significant role in influencing young people to adhere to crime. These groups provide a sense of belonging, identity, and protection, often lacking in their households or communities. The norms and values of the peer group are highly valued and respected, and individuals who do not conform may be ostracized.

Although there are essential temporal and cultural differences between American street gangs, which are generally based on neighborhood relations and have a solid ethnic character, similar gang formations are found throughout urban centers in LACs. It is important to emphasize that youth gangs are not necessarily involved in criminal activities. Most peer group formations get together for leisure and conviviality purposes. (Diógenes, 2008) Identity limits vary and are not necessarily confined to territorial borders between neighborhoods but also refer to gender, age group, musical preferences, leisure practices, and organized football fans. (Pimenta, 2014, p. 711) The attractiveness of gang membership is also the excitement of hanging with peers, gaining social respect and public recognition. The gang also provides assets to those young people whose families are deprived of resources and protection. (Cruz et al., 2017, p. 6) However, rivalries between groups can result in violent behavior.[5] Collective identity is also asserted through contention with rival groups from another street, neighborhood, or style.

Youth gangs vary enormously in formation, characteristics, social dynamics, and criminal involvement. Conversely, most youth gangs do not engage in organized crime and are related to peer sociability and leisure practices, often confined to neighborhood boundaries. For this article's purposes, we will specifically address gangs that operate illegal activities, mainly related to drug trafficking and their role in escalating youth mortality in LACs.

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[5] "The 'enemies', then, tend to be representatives of groups categorized as ideologically opposed; the places of the confrontations are very diverse, from the respective meeting zones to the interstitial zones of leisure or transit; the reasons, finally, are based on the antipathies designated by the subculture of belonging and the history of previous disagreements" (Scandoglio, 2009, p. 59).

In Central America, Cruz (2011) states that gangs are essential actors of violence and play a significant role in its reproduction. Known as *maras*, *pandillas*, and *bandas criminales*, they have been responsible for crimes such as extortion and homicide. Two groups – the "Mara Salvatrucha 13" (MS-13) and "La Dieciocho" (18th Street) gained notoriety as the most powerful youth gangs in the region, acting in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, where gang members frequently face allegations related to homicide and extortion, with a majority (about 67%) also being accused of engaging in other criminal activities such as physical agression, armed thefts, abductions, and sexual assault. (Cruz, 2011, p. 5)

Another example of widespread gang activity is in Colombia. Although the number of street gang members is challenging to account for accurately, the Ministry of Justice estimated in 2017 that around 1,200 gangs, with approximately 21,000 members, spread through 12 Colombian cities, with Cali and Medellín at the top of the list. According to Kerr (2020), "gang activity is concentrated in crowded neighborhoods set apart from the city, with low-quality education and jobs, where young people are effectively excluded from the practices of citizenship" (Kerr, 2020, p. 4). For example, in Cali, street gangs are known to participate in micro-traffic of drugs and robberies. In addition, up to 34% of homicides are attributed to street-gang violence. (Gutierrez-Martinez et al., 2020, p. 40)

Criminal groups in Brazil, dubbed "commandos," "factions," or "criminal collectives," recruit young people and adolescents for illegal activities. These organizations have emerged from the prison system with a lengthy history dating back to Rio de Janeiro's Ilha Grande institution in the 1970s. The prisoners created these factions to withstand harsh conditions and torture practices, where Comando Vermelho (Red Commando) was one of the oldest and most violent groups. (Dias, 2017) In Rio de Janeiro, control of retail drug areas expanded inside prisons, with hierarchically superior criminals issuing "orders" to their companions outside the jails. Personalized bonds form the underlying logic of this organization, which is maintained through rigid control and highly violent sanctions such as summary execution of debtors and traitors. (Hirata & Grillo, 2017) The CV provided resources to its agents for loyalty, resulting in the continuous expansion of drug retail. Alongside controlling this trade, they channeled prisoners' demands to the penitentiary administration.

This was the case of the “Primeiro Comando da Capital” (First Commando of the Capital, or PCC), a group in São Paulo that emerged amidst institutional violence and high incarceration rates. The PCC was established in 1993 because of multiple rights violations, including physical abuse and torture techniques such as solitary confinement. The group subsequently initiated several large-scale uprisings within prisons and conducted attacks on various institutions, culminating in the events of 2001. By 2006, these rebellions had spread to encompass over seventy prison facilities throughout São Paulo, targeting security personnel and civilians alike (Dias, 2013). In the 1990s and the 2000s, the CV and the PCC expanded their presence throughout other Brazilian states, occupying suburban territories in major cities while maintaining strong bonds with leaders inside the prison system. In states such as Ceará and Rio Grande do Norte, for example, other “factions” emerged to face the growing domain of the criminal groups that originated in Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo, such as the “Guardiões do Estado” (Guardians of the State) and “Família do Norte” (Northern Family). The criminal faction phenomenon in Brazil has attracted various researchers due to the ever-younger age of their participants. (Paiva, 2019; Sá, 2018) As their leaders are killed or arrested, other young men and teenagers rise to occupy former control positions over drug selling points and other related criminal activities.

4 Youth, Gender, and Violence

Understanding the role of gender in producing lethal violence is crucial to comprehend why so many young men become involved in violent crimes and ultimately become homicide victims. Gender serves as a significant factor in social stratification, shaping life opportunities. (Risman, 2004) Additionally, it creates social inequalities while influencing societal roles. Gender inequality leads to differential access to socially valued assets, with men typically having more power and privileges than women due to hierarchical positioning. Historically, patriarchal structures privilege men with honor, prestige, authority, and economic capital, while violence is one way the dominant group maintains its status. (Acker, 2009) Violence is a resource mobilized by men in relations of domination and subordination. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2013; Bourdieu, 2003; Radtke, 1995), As well as a form of affirmation in disputes between hierarchically superior and inferior masculinities, including marginalized ones (Connell, 1995).

However, within gender positions, there are differences between men and women according to race, social class, sexual orientation, occupation, and other social markers. In this sense, to understand how gender impacts violent crimes and homicide rates, it is necessary to consider the intersection of different social characteristics, such as race and social class, in the social processes that contribute to producing and reproducing lethal violence.

Individuals who are at a higher risk of homicide victimization predominantly belong to lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with race as a notable social marker. This group often comprises young men residing in urban areas or neighborhoods that lack basic public services, rendering them susceptible to aggression from gang violence and drug conflicts. While poor living conditions also affect women in such communities and expose them to violence, research on gender and homicide suggests that women fall victim mostly to domestic violence perpetrated by their partners, as opposed to men, who face higher risks of being killed during gang wars and illicit drug trade conflicts. (Fox & Fridel, 2017; Ramos, Saucedo, & Saltijeral, 2016; Pasinato, 2011) Moreover, men are predominantly responsible for running illegal market activities. Drug trafficking is mainly a male activity. Although recent studies (Fleetwood & Leban, 2022) have shown that women have increasingly become part of illegal drug markets, sometimes even occupying leading positions, drug trafficking, both at international and national levels, as well as unlawful arms trafficking, extortion, cargo deft, smuggling, and other illicit activities are run mainly by men. Upon holding powerful positions within organized crime, men establish competition with other men from rival groups or factions that are frequently ruthless.

Implicit in these conflicts are value systems based on representations of the male gender, in which bravery and daring are highly valued. From this perspective, violence is a component of culture as it is inserted in the normative regulation of the conduct and self-conception of “haughty men.” (Franco, 1997) In other words, these confrontations refer to a culture of honor and respect that guides social practices between men and women and can be analyzed in terms of masculinity. (Pimenta, 2014, p. 713) Women who take part in illegal activities, including drug trafficking, are subordinated to patriarchal values that structure their role in criminal organizations. Although they may control drug dealing points and drug market networks, their power is limited in comparison to men’s. Trafficking represents a source of income for women from socially low backgrounds and a means of reaching certain respectability, but power over territories and subordinates are a prerogative of men. Women who are in intimate relationships with drug dealers often must remain faithful to their partners, even after they go to jail. (Barcinski, 2009)

Violence is also a feature deeply associated with masculinity. However, it is not an “essential” characteristic but an array of practices by which men occupy their position in a gendered society. In this scenario, violence is instrumental in establishing dominance over markets, people, and territories. It is possible to assert that violent acts against rival groups are a strategy to overrun or eliminate competition and an expression of power. In this perspective, violence can be understood as symbolic language based on a sense of "honor." (Diógenes, 2008)

Masculine interactions are driven by a code of honor, which dictates behavior and outcome. Violence is not the sole defining feature; social practices affirm masculinity through shared, unspoken rules of conduct. From this perspective, it is as if there was a "game of mirrors" in which self-image is constructed based on the relationship: when challenging each other, what is at stake is male "honor", which is reaffirmed when one prevails over the other demonstrating strength. (Pimenta, 2014, p. 716–7)

The violent acts against opponents may signify a claim of dominance over certain territories, including streets, alleys, drug-selling points, neighborhoods, regions, and women. The organized criminal groups or factions that control these areas are closely associated with the urban spaces they occupy. Furthermore, youth members of such gangs maintain strong ties to their places of origin (Pimenta, 2015). Belonging to a criminal faction is not only taking part in an organization that seeks profit (illegally) but an important identity marker. Factions demonstrate a strong sense of territorial and neighborhood belonging, motivating members to defend their areas. Challenges to the group's honor also contest individual honor, leading to violence as a means of communication between rival groups competing for power over territories, drug joints, "commandos," and communities. Violence operates symbolically within gang practices in two directions: communication among members and contact with rivals or "cons." As such, resorting to violence confers identity status upon factional membership. (Barros & Pimenta, 2022)

As Zubillaga (2009) noticed in her research in violent neighborhoods in Caracas, Venezuela, the young men interviewed exercised violence to obtain recognition and self-realization both as "warriors" and "protectors" of their *barrios*, as gang members, enforcing masculine identities with violent acts.

It is overly simplistic to attribute the intentional homicide of young men solely to illegal drug markets. Although drug dealers often use brutal violence to control territories and eliminate rivals or those who cannot pay their debts, homicides associated with global narcotrafficking extend beyond organized crime circles. The complex network connecting various players in these operations creates ripple effects that require a deeper examination of all the intricacies and subtleties. This examination may provide crucial insights for addressing these grave problems effectively. One must analyze the complex criminal activity across national boundaries and regions to comprehensively understand youth mortality. This entails closely examining organized crime syndicates in Latin America and law enforcement's countermeasures against the "war on drugs." However, these measures frequently involve severe crackdowns on illegal market activities and excessively harsh punishments for low-level drug dealers. Additionally, hyper-incarceration practices and selective punishment disproportionately impact marginalized young individuals.

5 Criminal Violence, Social Control, and Punitivism

To comprehend homicide victimization in Latin America, one must consider each country's historical, social, and cultural context and changes to public policies for crime and security control under different political environments. Ideological beliefs on democratic institutions' role in ensuring citizen safety have varied significantly. Some promote strict or harsh policies aligned with modern "punitivism," while others question such measures and strive for more democratic or citizenship security. Punitivism refers to a reaction by institutions and society in response to violations of shared values, laws, and beliefs. This response is driven by emotional and cognitive factors such as fear of victimization or institutional inefficacy in controlling crime. Scholars like Garland (2001) have characterized this trend as part of a new populism centered on the fear of crime and a culture of control. Wacquant (2009) suggests that the rise of punitivism can be traced back to social insecurities stemming from changes in production and work relations following neoliberalism.

This process can be observed in various LACs, such as Brazil, El Salvador, and Venezuela. In El Salvador, since the 1990s, many different right-wing governments have adopted extremely harsh policies against powerful street gangs, such as Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) and 18th Street (Barrio 18) (Cruz et al., 2017). As a result, in 2015, El Salvador registered the highest homicide rate in the world (103 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants), and the Salvadoran Supreme Court classified gang activity as terrorism. Harsh policies against "terrorist" gang members have increased the death toll through extrajudicial killings, torture, and other human rights violations. Incarceration has also propitiated that more young people get involved in gang activities inside the prison system. Support for hard-on-crime policies comes from fear of crime and violence and a loss of legitimacy of democratic means of dealing with violence. (Rosen et al., 2022; Cruz, 2011)

Like what has been happening in other countries, in Caracas, Venezuela – where homicide rates reached 75 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 – the State's response to criminal violence has been the progressive militarization of police forces and hard-hand politics reflect Nicolás Maduro's government strategies toward criminal organizations. According to Antillano et al. (2020), "in 2016, Venezuela's Attorney General reported that violence led nationally to 70 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, leaving 21,752 dead, with police accounting for 4,667 of those killings" (Antillano et al., 2020, p. 1) Violence in Venezuela is a continuation of historical practices and not solely due to government actions. The country's involvement in the Andean cocaine trade requires illicit markets, perpetuating systematic violence throughout its territory. In addition, the ongoing economic crisis, political instability, and international pressure have resulted in increased repressive security measures while criminal organizations thrive on social inequality and precarious urban areas by exploiting the poor population's demand for illegal income alternatives. (Briceño-León, 2012) Incarceration policies, extrajudicial killings, and militarized police repression stimulated gangs to "form alliances to confront the police and evolved into more complex crime groups." (Antillano et al., 2020, p. 4). To the authors, the violence affecting Venezuela is a combination of the crisis of the Bolivarian revolution and the criminal activities that operate in urban centers such as Caracas.

Hanson and Zubillaga (2021) explain this scenario because of the militarization of citizen security. From 2009 onwards, there was an increase in carceral punitivism. Delinquents from popular sectors were systematically deemed "an evil to be eradicated." (Hanson & Zubillaga, 2021, p. 70) Systematic incarceration of young men involved in minor drug trafficking created a prison system crisis. More specifically, the extensive confinement and concentration of young men who possess expertise and familiarity in unlawful financial activities facilitated the formation of illicit social connections. Upon reintegration into their respective communities, these formerly incarcerated individuals established a new structure that mirrored certain regional authority levels. This resulted in an upsurge of gang organizations structured by geographical areas with acknowledged leaders and assigned roles. (Hanson & Zubillaga, 2021, p. 71) This process was followed by a new phase of military response two years after the death of Hugo Chávez, that "gave way to a practice of systematic extralegal killings that became the fundamental strategy of social control of popular sectors." (Hanson & Zubillaga, 2021, p. 67)

According to Dias (2017), in recent decades, Brazil has been experiencing an intense expansion of prisons as an instrument of social and political control. This can be observed not only in the growing evolution of incarceration but also in the effects that it has had on people, urban territories, and public security policies. How the State, in its institutions of justice and general security, has been dealing with the prison issue puts at the heart of the problem how much political strategies emphasize the perspective of the permanent "war" against crime, especially against drug trafficking. The expansion of criminal "factions" and "collectives" within the prison system, whose articulations extend beyond the walls[6] and have national and international reach, reveals how much policies to combat trafficking contribute to worsening public security problems in the current context. It is a prohibitionist and repressive model whose main result is the mass incarceration of predominantly poor, young black men. Among the most important explanatory factors for imprisonment expansion is the militarization of the war on drugs and processes of penal state-building that aim most often practices associated with people at society's margins. (Hathazy & Müller, 2016, p. 116)

The harsher penalties for drug trafficking resulting from Brazil's Law 11.340 of 2006 have increased imprisonment rates and a strained prison system. The demographic profile of those incarcerated for drug-related offenses bears striking similarities to victims of homicide, including police violence. A closer examination reveals that the imprisoned population in Brazil largely consists of young black individuals with limited education – mirroring traits commonly found among victims of violent deaths. The criminal selectivity in Brazil is linked to its colonial legacy and structural racism, which has perpetuated the dominance of certain groups over subaltern social groups. This trend dates to the widespread use of forced labor through slavery. The First Republic saw new forms of social control employed to regulate dominated populations, particularly enslaved blacks, who were viewed with suspicion in urban areas (Guimarães, 2004). The legislative measures aimed at restricting the movement of formerly enslaved people were enacted following rebellions against their oppression by slaveholders, plantation owners, and political leaders. The 19th-century racist theories establishing black individuals as a threat justified white domination over blacks in Brazil. (Schwarcz, 1993)

Social control forms are seen in laws that divide the privileged from subordinate social groups. For example, "vagrancy" laws affected informal workers who could not adapt to industrialization (Teixeira, Salla & Marinho,

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[6] The Brazilian prison system is very different from the U.S. system. Most penitentiaries are run by the states, which often do not provide for the inmate's most basic needs. Food, medicine, and hygiene products are mostly brought by family members, who are allowed to enter the prison on determined days of the week. Although strict measures exist to control items entering the prison cells, inmates communicate with family members and faction associates outside the prison. Access to cell phones often escapes penitentiary controls. Moreover, the progression to conditioned parole enables faction leaders to issue orders and control criminal actions from within the prison system.

2016). In addition, State and police actions targeted marginalized populations in poor areas of cities perceived as places of deviant or immoral behavior (Misse, 2007). Since the integration into drug trade networks in the 1970s, State efforts have aimed at curbing illegal activities by targeting retail drug dealers among informal workers.

Young people engaged in illegal activities are frequently questioned by the police, particularly those residing or transiting in disadvantaged areas such as favelas and shantytowns. This approach to questioning is reminiscent of past practices used for classes deemed dangerous or threatening, now labeled as "suspicious." Incarceration policies targeting individuals involved in illicit drug trades have become a prominent means of combating urban violence. These crimes include property offenses, armed robberies, kidnappings, and homicides linked to settling debts between traffickers and debtors. Such acts epitomize societal understandings of criminality and crime associated with urban violence. (Misse, 2010)

Itturalde (2019) suggests that the globalization of neoliberal ideas on public security measures has also influenced crime control in the Americas. Although since the 1990s, leftist governments have tried to distance themselves from neoliberal agendas, global financial markets influence has reinforced neoliberal policies and measures in the region, shaping policy making and implementation in areas such as public safety, criminal justice, and prison reform. One of the effects of this influence has been the adoption of a law-and-order approach rather than one based on social justice or human rights. This focus on law and order has often led to the criminalization of poverty, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of repressive measures by police and other authorities. One of the features of neoliberal influence in Latin America's crime control fields is the rise of prison rates, which has become one of the highest in the world. According to the World Prison Brief (2021), Latin America has a prison population rate of 278 per 100,000 people, with some countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela having rates that surpass this average. Brazil, for instance, has reached the third highest prison population in the world, with an estimated population of 811,707 prisoners in 2021, behind only the United States and China.[7]

Contreras (2013) also argues that the criminal justice system in the U.S. exacerbates the cycle of violence and deviance, as it disproportionately targets and punishes young people of color. This unjust treatment breeds mistrust and resentment towards law enforcement and reinforces the gang culture, perpetuating violence and criminal activity. In addition, the emphasis on prison has been criticized for neglecting the root causes of crime and violence, such as poverty, inequality, and limited access to social services. Moreover, it has been argued that neoliberalism's influence in Latin America's crime control fields has also resulted in a lack of focus on rehabilitation and social integration for offenders, promoting instead a punitive and retributive culture that perpetuates cycles of violence and exclusion.

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[7] https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf.

Hyper incarceration is a feature of the "penal State," which is a state form characterized by its reliance on punitive measures and the prioritization of crime control over social welfare policies, often resulting in the massive expansion of prison systems. (Wacquant, 2009). In this regard, the influence of the U.S. war on drug policies over LACs is evident. To address drug trafficking, a law enforcement approach that takes on characteristics of both police and military action is employed. This involves the criminalization of all aspects of the drug trade, from production to consumption, and requires bolstering the criminal justice system and military and police forces. Additionally, extradition to the United States may be pursued for those involved in drug dealing. (Iturralde, 2019)

Although penal populism is not a characteristic exclusive to neoliberalism, in LACs, it has been widely adopted as a state response to increased insecurity and demand for harsh crime measures. Unfortunately, this approach to crime control has often resulted in human rights violations and the overrepresentation of vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples, women, and minorities in prisons. In the U.S., the "penal State" emerged in the 1970s, marked by the implementation of tough-on-crime policies that emphasized incarceration and retribution over rehabilitation and social welfare and the mediatic coverage of violent crime, creating both a spectacularized view of urban violence, as well as a sense of fear and insecurity among the population, which further legitimized punitive crime control measures.

According to Corva (2008), the increase in harsh criminal justice measures cannot be solely attributed to deindustrialization, capitalist media sensationalism, and neo-liberalization. Instead, it results from specific policies and cultural attitudes that transform issues related to these processes into significant security concerns. This has been particularly evident in the Americas, where a particular kind of crime associated with illegal drug production, distribution, and use has been constructed as an exceptional threat. The author argues that this is a liberal technique used to govern populations in other ways. First, the logic of federal "tough on crime" politics can be understood as an attempt to gain political power by outflanking opponents on neoconservative planks of morality and social order. Second, expanding the prison-industrial complex and the competition for prisons as development strategies are marketized ways to capitalize on drug war policies. Third, the juridical process of criminalization transforms excluded subjects into criminal ones, defining their actions as active choices despite coercion and highly constricted conditions of possibility. Finally, enacting criminal law constructs individuals as "free" choice-making individuals rather than acknowledging social relations of domination. This justifies their exclusion from the liberal order and subjects them to the penal apparatus of the State.

When considering the historical modes of domination that have prevailed throughout the colonization period in the U.S. and Latin America, the combination of punitive measures with the production of criminal subjects, such as young black men, Latinos, immigrants, and other marginalized groups, can be understood as a continuation of historical processes of oppression and social control. In the U.S. and LACs, racial bias in policing has been extensively pointed out by researchers (Sinhoretto, 2021; Butti, 2018; Wacquant, 2009; Rios, 2007). For example, Sanchez and Adams (2011) argue that "police officers in urban areas play a key role in the criminalization of Latino and African American youth" (Sanchez & Adams, 2011, p. 323), primarily through "tough on crime" policies, which include zero-tolerance approaches, and aggressive policing, usually targeting Latino and African American youth in urban areas with high crime rates. Moreover, the "war on drugs" has created social scenarios and stereotypes around drug use and drug-related crime that have perpetuated stigmatization and marginalization of certain groups in society, contributing to the overrepresentation of such individuals as prone to dangerous acts and criminal offenses. Dollar (2019) argues that fear of drug-related behavior is closely related to gender, race, and class divisions, which have been used to justify the criminalization of specific individuals and communities, particularly those who are already marginalized, resulting in human rights violations and the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system.

Conclusions

Youth mortality by violence in LACs, especially homicide, is a complex, multifactorial phenomenon that cannot be explained by young people's exposure to risk factors or social and economic vulnerabilities. Theoretical advances toward more careful consideration of historical and political changes in military and authoritarian regimes in the emergence of democratic governments have contributed to a better understanding of the institutional role played by social control policies, public security forces, and justice systems in the administration of violence related to criminal activity. (Rosen et al., 2022; Cruz, 2011) Empirical approaches combining multilevel analysis of inequality, unemployment, human development, and law enforcement indicators help clarify which factors are associated with homicide trends from a comparative perspective. (Lehmann et al., 2022; Singer et al., 2020; Briceño-León, 2012)

It is evident that there exists a strong connection between economic inequality and homicide, as confirmed by cross-national studies (Asongu & Acha-Anyi, 2019; Lappi-Seppälä & Lehti, 2015) which revealed income disparity to be a significant predictor of murder. Historical factors such as oppression, socio-economic disparities, poor governance standards, elite corruption, gang violence and excessive alcohol consumption also contribute to contemporary high homicide rates. (Cole & Gramajo, 2009) Similarly to LACs, Sub-Saharan African countries have faced colonization, slavery, and exploitation. Post-independence, these nations also struggle with underdevelopment, corruption, inter-ethnic conflicts, and both conflicts that hinder economic development. Cao and Zhang (2015) examined variables related to non-Muslim areas within Sub-Saharan Africa along with Islamic regions while predicting positive correlations between homicides in non-Muslim parts of the region, but negative relationships in Islamic territories, which suggests that ethnic heterogeneity and the influence of religion in regulating relationships among people and governments has a positive effect on homicide rates. Yet, what seems to differentiate LACs from Sub-Saharan countries as to the elevated levels of homicide prevalent in these regions can be attributed to the "macho" culture, a phenomenon which emphasizes an aggressive form of masculinity characterized by obstinacy and violence. This quality is rooted in colonization and exploitation, embodying bravery, fearlessness, and never conceding defeat. (Ortega et al., 1992)

Sociological and criminological approaches, combined with various necessary locally-based qualitative research, allow us to examine young gang members' minds and social representations of the "criminal world," its workings, value systems, and attractiveness. (Sá, 2018; Baca Zapata, 2017; Feltran, 2008) However, an aspect that remains to be understood is the intensity and volume of lethal violence reflected in soaring homicide rates in LACs. Why do so many young men fall victim to lethal violence, often by extremely cruel means?

On the one hand, the long history of colonialism, with its brutal exploitation of enslaved native and African populations, justified by religious and ideological beliefs on "natural" differences between human "races," is an indispensable key to reading into the most violent and inhuman means to enforce submission of the enslaved labor force. On the other hand, subjected populations have always rebelled against their enslavers, often violently, refusing to subside. In this perspective, the criminal "subjection" of certain social types associated with crime and deviance through the interpellation of police and social control institutions has contributed to producing and crystalizing the social figure of the "outlaw" (Misse, 2010).

Nevertheless, criminal subjection must not be reduced to a victimization process that labels certain social types based on gender, race, and class. It also "backfires" into reaction – and rebellion. (Zaluar, 2004) Deteriorated and stigmatized identities associated with being an "outlaw," a drug dealer, or a gang member, can also be subverted into meaningful social identities, even if deemed despicable. That is why young gang members embrace social "outlawed" identities and delve into criminal careers, mainly because they "gain respect" (Zubillaga, 2009) by responding violently – as men – in their communities, against rivals, and especially against the State, represented by military and police forces.

The synergic relation between punitive practices against marginalized social types and young people's agency over blocked opportunities, discrimination, and the violence of social deprivation of their right to dignified living conditions produce most of the lethal violence that tolls the younger generations in Latin America.

Youth mortality due to homicide is a critical issue in Latin American countries that requires urgent attention from policymakers and researchers. Comprehensive strategies are necessary to address this multifaceted social dilemma, including access to full-time schools, leisure activities, and culture and sports facilities for young people. In addition, law enforcement officers must undergo training on community policing practices, human rights protection protocols, and effective violence prevention strategies. Finally, the involvement of youth is also essential.

To effectively address the complexity of the "war on drugs," a paradigm shift is necessary. This involves moving beyond viewing individuals as intrinsically deviant and criminal toward greater recognition of social factors perpetuating cycles of violence – a change in perspective that governments, policymakers, and law enforcement agencies have systematically failed to support. Narcotrafficking reflects deeper societal problems such as labor shortages or unemployment escalation exacerbated by exploitative work exploration tactics during late-stage capitalism's advent. The widespread acknowledgment must occur regarding how public security institutions, law enforcement agencies, and the current criminal justice system have contributed to hyper-criminalization in marginalized and racialized communities. This means acknowledging and grappling with complex social factors such as poverty, institutionalized racism, and inadequate public resources for education or healthcare. Furthermore, it requires us to critically examine how security institutions have contributed to hyper-criminalization within marginalized communities based on race or ethnicity. Without this critical introspection and action toward change, we risk losing an entire generation of young people whose potential may be cut short by senseless violence perpetuated by systemic injustices.

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