

URBAN VIOLENCE IN BRAZIL TODAY: CHALLENGES FOR THE PUBLIC SECURITY SYSTEM

URBAN VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL: CHALLENGES FOR THE PUBLIC SECURITY SYSTEM

Andrew Schneider – IBRA

Nilson Guedes Batista – IBRA

SUMMARY

This paper addresses urban violence in Brazil, its structural causes and the challenges faced by the public security system. The research, of a bibliographic nature, analyzes factors such as social inequality, poverty, unemployment, spatial segregation and precarious public services, which create an environment conducive to crime and hinder the implementation of effective solutions. The theoretical review explores the contributions of renowned authors, such as Alba Zaluar, Teresa Caldeira and Luiz Eduardo Soares, in addition to analyzing prevention, repression and resocialization programs, such as the *Stay Alive* and the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs). The results indicate that the fragmentation of the public security system, the militarization of the police, and the absence of structured preventive policies are significant obstacles to addressing urban violence. The study concludes that addressing this phenomenon requires integrated and sustainable approaches, focusing on prevention, the promotion of social justice, and transparency in the actions of public security institutions. Public policies that address the structural roots of violence and promote social inclusion are essential to effectively reduce crime rates. Finally, the study highlights the importance of future research that analyzes integrated policies and adapts solutions to local specificities, contributing to the development of safer and fairer cities.

Keywords: Urban violence; Public safety; Preventive policies.

ABSTRACT

This study addresses urban violence in Brazil, its structural causes, and the challenges faced by the public security system. This bibliographic research analyzes factors such as social inequality, poverty, unemployment, spatial segregation, and inadequate public services, which create an environment conducive to crime and hinder the implementation of effective solutions. The theoretical review explores contributions from renowned authors such as Alba Zaluar, Teresa Caldeira, and Luiz Eduardo Soares, as well as the evaluation of prevention, repression, and resocialization programs like *Stay Alive* and the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs). The findings indicate that the fragmentation of the public security system, police militarization, and the lack of structured preventive policies are significant obstacles to addressing urban violence. The study concludes that tackling this phenomenon requires integrated and sustainable approaches, focusing on prevention, promoting social justice, and ensuring transparency in public security institutions. Public policies addressing the structural roots of violence and promoting social inclusion are essential for effectively reducing crime rates. Finally, the importance of future research analyzing integrated policies and adapting solutions to local specificities is highlighted, contributing to the development of safer and fairer cities.

Keywords: Urban violence; Public security; Preventive policies.

1 INTRODUCTION

1

Urban violence is one of the most challenging phenomena facing Brazil today, reflecting both historical and structural issues that permeate society. The rise in crime in urban areas, combined with factors such as social inequality, economic exclusion and failures in the public security system, makes the analysis of this topic essential to understanding the dynamics of contemporary Brazilian society. In this context, this work seeks to explore the causes, consequences and challenges related to urban violence, with an emphasis on the role played by the public security system.

The choice of the theme is justified by its social and academic relevance. From a social point of view,

Urban violence directly impacts the quality of life of the population, especially in the outskirts, where vulnerability is greater. In addition, the feeling of insecurity and the inability of many sectors of the public security system to contain violence generate social tensions and distrust in institutions. In the academic field, the topic is essential for the construction of theoretical and practical proposals that can contribute to the formulation of more effective public policies. Thus, this study aims not only to understand the factors that contribute to the phenomenon, but also to propose ways to address it.

The research problem that guides this work is: what are the main challenges faced by the public security system in combating urban violence in Brazil? This question will be addressed with the aim of identifying the structural factors that intensify urban violence, analyzing the limitations of public security policies and discussing possible alternatives to reduce the impact of this phenomenon on society.

The objectives of this paper include: analyzing the concept of urban violence and its multiple dimensions; identifying the structural and contextual factors that contribute to the escalation of violence; discussing the limitations and challenges faced by the public security system in Brazil; and evaluating existing public policies, proposing strategies for their improvement. Each of these objectives will guide the chapters of the theoretical review, ensuring a comprehensive and critical analysis of the topic.

This study is based on a bibliographic review that brings together the contributions of renowned authors in the field, such as Alba Zaluar, Teresa Caldeira and other experts in urban violence and public security. The analysis is guided by a qualitative approach, which seeks to explore the complexity of the topic through critical reflection based on sociological theories and case studies. The structure of the work is organized into four main chapters, followed by the final considerations, which summarize the analyses and point out directions for future research on the topic.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 CONCEPT OF URBAN VIOLENCE

Urban violence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses different types of harmful behaviors and actions that occur in urban spaces. It ranges from manifestations of interpersonal violence, such as assaults and homicides, to organized actions, such as drug trafficking and armed conflicts between criminal factions. In the Brazilian context, urban violence also reflects historical and structural issues, such as social inequality, economic exclusion, and spatial segregation. These dynamics make urban violence a central theme for understanding social relations and the challenges faced by cities.

According to Alba Zaluar (1994),

Urban violence in Brazil is intrinsically linked to social exclusion and poverty, but it cannot be reduced to these factors alone. It is the result of a set of historical, economic and cultural processes that have shaped social relations in Brazilian cities. Disorderly urban growth and the lack of effective public policies have contributed to the formation of territories marked by vulnerability, where violence is often the only form of conflict mediation (ZALUAR, 1994, p. 112).

This approach shows that urban violence must be understood as a systemic phenomenon, which goes beyond individual acts and is directly related to the social and economic structure. Teresa Caldeira (2000), in turn, analyzes urban violence based on spatial segregation and the dynamics of Brazilian cities. For the author,

Brazilian cities are characterized by a striking duality, where privileged areas coexist with marginalized territories, marked by the lack of infrastructure and the constant presence of violence. This segregation not only reflects social inequalities, but also contributes to the perpetuation of violence, creating spaces of exclusion where the State often does not exercise its authority in a legitimate manner (CALDEIRA, 2000, p. 87).

Caldeira's contribution highlights the relationship between urban configuration and patterns of violence, showing how the spatial structure of cities influences the dynamics of crime and social conflicts.

Interpersonal violence, such as robberies, assaults and homicides, is one of the most visible dimensions of

Urban violence. These acts, often motivated by economic or interpersonal issues, reflect the impact of social inequalities on everyday life. However, urban violence also includes more organized dimensions, such as drug trafficking and conflicts between armed groups. These phenomena involve complex networks of power and territorial control, which challenge the actions of the public security system and intensify the feeling of insecurity in urban areas.

Furthermore, social conflicts, such as violent protests and clashes between different social groups, are an important dimension of urban violence. These events often express accumulated tensions regarding inequality, discrimination and lack of access to basic rights. For Zaluar (1994), “social conflicts are a form of manifestation of urban violence that reveals the weaknesses of institutions and the inability of the State to promote inclusion and social justice” (ZALUAR, 1994, p. 124).

Therefore, urban violence in Brazil must be understood as a complex phenomenon that involves multiple dimensions and is deeply rooted in the historical, social and economic dynamics of cities. The contributions of Zaluar and Caldeira help to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon, showing that it is not just a reflection of isolated acts, but also the result of structural processes that shape social and spatial relations in urban areas. This integrated approach is essential for the formulation of public policies that address violence effectively and sustainably.

2.2 STRUCTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS OF URBAN VIOLENCE

Urban violence in Brazil is a phenomenon rooted in structural and contextual factors that shape the social and spatial dynamics of cities. These factors, which include social inequalities, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, precarious public services and disorderly urbanization, are interconnected and contribute to creating an environment conducive to crime and conflict. Understanding these structural roots is essential to developing effective public policies that address not only the symptoms of violence, but also its underlying causes.

Social inequality is one of the main drivers of urban violence. According to Soares (2006),

the concentration of wealth and the lack of economic opportunities for a large part of the population create an environment of constant tension and conflict. Inequality not only exacerbates the feeling of injustice, but also leads to the formation of vulnerable territories, where the presence of the State is insufficient or non-existent, opening space for the dominance of criminal organizations (SOARES, 2006, p. 42).

This relationship between inequality and violence is especially visible in urban peripheries, where the lack of access to basic rights, such as health, education and security, intensifies the conditions of social exclusion.

Unemployment and job insecurity are also critical factors in urban violence. The lack of stable and formal employment deprives individuals of legitimate means to support their families, pushing many to turn to illicit activities as an alternative means of survival. Bauman (2005) argues that “in a society marked by economic insecurity and labor market volatility, those who are excluded from the formal system find in violence a form of expression and, in some cases, subsistence” (BAUMAN, 2005, p. 89).

Another important structural factor is disorderly urbanization, which results in the formation of areas of irregular occupation, often lacking basic infrastructure and adequate public services. According to Caldeira (2000), “uncontrolled urban expansion and spatial segregation create territories marked by vulnerability, where the absence of the State is replaced by the actions of informal actors, such as militias and drug traffickers” (CALDEIRA, 2000, p. 102). Spatial segregation, by physically separating the rich and the poor, reinforces inequalities and creates barriers to equal access to opportunities and resources.

Furthermore, the precariousness of public services, such as health, education and security, contributes to the worsening of urban violence. The lack of quality schools and the absence of prevention policies aimed at young people increase the vulnerability of this age group to crime. According to Zaluar (1994),

The inefficiency of the State in providing basic services and opportunities for social inclusion is one of the most significant structural factors in the perpetuation of urban violence. When the State fails, other actors, such as organized crime, take on this role, offering protection and resources illegally and consolidating their influence in communities (ZALUAR,

Finally, social exclusion is a cross-cutting factor that connects all the others. The lack of economic, social and political inclusion creates a sense of abandonment among the most vulnerable populations, increasing distrust in institutions and fostering behaviors of resistance or transgression. Wacquant (2008) observes that “social exclusion in urban peripheries is a direct reflection of the structural failures of the system, which concentrates power and resources in a few hands while marginalizing large segments of the population” (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 76).

Therefore, the structural and contextual factors of urban violence in Brazil are multiple and interdependent. Social inequality, unemployment, disorderly urbanization, spatial segregation, precarious public services and social exclusion create an environment in which violence becomes a constant element of urban life. Understanding these roots is crucial for the development of public policies that seek not only to control violence, but also to promote social justice and inclusion.

2.3 PUBLIC SAFETY IN BRAZIL: STRUCTURE AND CHALLENGES

Public security in Brazil faces a series of challenges that reflect both historical and structural issues, making its effectiveness a widely debated topic. The organization of the Brazilian public security system is fragmented, composed of different forces and agencies that, in theory, should act in an integrated manner, but which, in practice, face serious difficulties in coordination and collaboration. In addition, factors such as the militarization of the police, systemic corruption and the absence of effective preventive policies aggravate the inefficiency of the system and contribute to the perpetuation of urban violence.

One of the main criticisms of the structure of public security in Brazil is the lack of integration between the Civil and Military Police. According to Cano (2006), “the dual model of policing in Brazil, with the coexistence of an ostensive police force and an investigative police force, creates significant barriers to the exchange of information and cooperation between institutions” (CANO, 2006, p. 57). This lack of coordination prevents the police from acting in a coordinated manner, making it difficult to combat crime in an effective and integrated manner.

Another important challenge is the militarization of the police, which has been the subject of constant criticism due to its impact on the relationship between security forces and the population. Militarization is reflected in police practices that prioritize violent repression and combat logic, to the detriment of building relationships of trust with communities. As Pinheiro (2003) points out, “the militarization of the police in Brazil reinforces a public security approach based on the use of force, often disproportionate, instead of prioritizing mediation and prevention” (PINHEIRO, 2003, p. 34). Military logic, applied in a civilian context, often exacerbates conflicts rather than resolving them.

Corruption is another factor that compromises the effectiveness of the public security system. The presence of corrupt practices within police institutions and the judicial system weakens the credibility of the authorities and limits their ability to combat crime in a fair and impartial manner. Zaluar (2004) argues that

Corruption in the security forces not only undermines public confidence, but also strengthens criminal networks, which take advantage of institutional weaknesses to expand their operations. The relationship between organized crime and corrupt agents creates a cycle of violence and impunity that is difficult to break (ZALUAR, 2004, p. 89).

The lack of effective preventive policies is also one of the main problems of the Brazilian public security system. Historically, security policies in Brazil have prioritized repression, neglecting initiatives that could address the structural causes of violence, such as social inequality.

4

and economic exclusion. According to Soares (2009), “public security in Brazil is marked by a reactive approach, which focuses on repressing crime, rather than investing in policies that prevent violence” (SOARES, 2009, p. 73). This emphasis on repression, to the detriment of prevention, contributes to the perpetuation of the cycle of violence.

Finally, the relationship between the state and communities also presents significant challenges. In many urban areas, especially in the peripheries, the absence of the state creates a power vacuum that is filled by criminal groups such as gangs and militias. These groups offer an alternative form of “security” and control, but they often operate in a violent and exploitative manner. As Caldeira (2000) notes,

“the absence of the State in many urban areas of Brazil allows non-state actors, such as militias and drug traffickers, to assume authority roles, controlling territories and imposing their own rules” (CAL-DEIRA, 2000, p. 112).

Public security in Brazil faces challenges ranging from disarticulation between police forces and militarization, to corruption and the absence of preventive policies. Overcoming these barriers requires a profound reform of the system, focusing on integrating institutions, strengthening public trust, promoting transparency and investing in preventive strategies that address the structural causes of urban violence. Only an integrated and comprehensive approach can provide an effective response to these complex problems.

2.4 PUBLIC POLICIES AND INITIATIVES TO COMBAT VIOLENCE

The fight against urban violence in Brazil has been the target of several public policies that seek to address the problem in a comprehensive manner, integrating prevention, repression and resocialization actions. However, despite specific advances, the results often reveal structural limitations and challenges in implementing these measures. This chapter analyzes the main initiatives adopted in the country, highlighting successful examples, their limitations and possible paths for improving the public security system.

Prevention policies have the main objective of acting on the factors that contribute to violence before it occurs. Programs focused on education, sports and culture, for example, have been implemented as a way of offering positive alternatives to young people in vulnerable situations. A significant example is the program *Stay Alive!*, implemented in Minas Gerais, which combines socio-educational activities with a more effective police presence in risk areas. According to Soares (2009):

The Fica Vivo! program demonstrated that the combination of preventive and repressive actions, when coordinated with local communities, can significantly reduce homicide rates in specific areas. However, its expansion faces financial limitations and the lack of an integrated national violence prevention policy (SOARES, 2009, p. 112).

Despite the positive impact on certain communities, the dependence on local resources and the lack of systematic replication of this model in other regions reveal the structural weaknesses of preventive policies in Brazil.

In the context of repression, the use of police forces in operations to directly combat crime stands out. Initiatives such as the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs), implemented in Rio de Janeiro, represented an attempt to occupy and control territories dominated by drug trafficking. According to Cano (2012):

The UPPs brought an initial reduction in violence rates in the occupied areas, especially in relation to armed confrontations between criminal factions. However, the lack of long-term planning and the absence of complementary public services undermined the legitimacy and effectiveness of the program, which quickly lost the support of local communities (CANO, 2012, p. 78).

This example illustrates how repressive actions, when not accompanied by social investments and inclusion policies, tend to be unsustainable and can even generate new forms of violence. Reintegration policies, in turn, face significant challenges in Brazil, particularly in relation to the prison system. The high rate of recidivism among ex-prisoners highlights the limitations of policies aimed at social reintegration. Programs such as *Start Over*, promoted by the National Council of Justice (CNJ), seek to offer professional qualification and employment opportunities for people in conflict with the law. According to Wacquant (2008):

Rehabilitation, when carried out in an integrated manner, can be a powerful tool for reducing recidivism and decreasing pressure on the prison system. However, the lack of coordination between the public and private sectors, as well as the social stigma faced by graduates, significantly limits the reach of these programs (WACQUANT, 2008, p. 91).

Finally, the formulation of effective public policies requires an integrated approach that combines prevention, repression and rehabilitation in a balanced and sustainable way. This includes greater investment in community-based programs, training police forces to act in a humane manner and expanding

tion of initiatives that promote social inclusion. As Caldeira (2000) argues, “confronting urban violence requires a comprehensive vision that goes beyond repression and incorporates policies that promote equal opportunities and the strengthening of public institutions” (CALDEIRA, 2000, p. 98).

Although the initiatives analyzed show significant progress, there is still a long way to go before Brazil achieves a more efficient and fair public security system. Integration between the different levels of government, active participation of communities and strengthening preventive and resocialization actions are essential steps to address the challenges of urban violence more effectively.

3 MATERIAL AND METHOD

This work adopts the literature review as its main methodology, with the objective of critically and in-depthly analyzing the dynamics related to urban violence and the challenges faced by the public security system in Brazil. The research is based on works by renowned authors in the area, such as Alba Zaluar, Teresa Caldeira, Ignacio Cano and Luiz Eduardo Soares, as well as on case studies and reports of relevant public policies.

The qualitative approach guides the analysis, allowing us to explore the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon of urban violence, its structural and contextual causes, and the institutional and social responses. The work is organized around specific themes, such as the factors that influence violence, the structure and challenges of public security, and the public policies implemented, providing a broad and articulated view of the topic.

By integrating theoretical contributions and data from practical experiences, the study seeks not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to offer a critical reflection that contributes to the academic debate and to the formulation of more effective solutions in tackling urban violence in Brazil.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to analyze urban violence in Brazil, its structural causes and the challenges faced by the public security system, in addition to discussing public policies aimed at addressing this phenomenon. Based on the theoretical review carried out, it was possible to identify that urban violence is a complex problem, rooted in factors such as social inequality, poverty, unemployment, spatial segregation and precarious public services. These interconnected factors create a scenario conducive to the perpetuation of violence and hinder the implementation of effective solutions.

The public security policies analyzed revealed both advances and limitations. Programs such as *Stay Alive* and the Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) demonstrated potential in their initial phases, but lacked continuity, resources, and coordination with other social policies. In addition, the militarization of police forces, corruption, and the absence of preventive and integrated strategies weaken the system's ability to provide security in an efficient and inclusive manner. The reliance on repressive measures, without a parallel investment in preventive and resocialization actions, reinforces a cycle of violence that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations.

The critical reflection carried out points to the need for a public security model that goes beyond repression and incorporates integrated approaches, based on prevention and the promotion of social justice. Investing in public policies that address the structural causes of violence, such as inequality and exclusion, is essential to building sustainable solutions. In addition, active community participation and transparency in public security actions are essential to strengthen trust in institutions and reduce violence rates.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of deepening the academic debate on the topic and suggests that future research explore the effectiveness of integrated policies in different urban contexts, as well as the role of new technologies in public safety. Understanding local specificities and developing strategies adapted to the needs of each territory are essential steps to address the challenges of urban violence and build safer and fairer cities.

REFERENCES

BAUMAN, Zygmunt. **Net Life**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.



BOILER, Teresa PR **City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo**. São Paulo: Edusp, 2000.

CANO, Ignacio. **Public Safety in Brazil: Challenges and Perspectives**. Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 2006.

PINE, Paulo Sergio. **Urban Violence and Public Safety: Reflections on Brazil**. São Paulo: Peace and Land, 2003.

ROSE, Tricia. **Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America**. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

SOARES, Luiz Eduardo. **Violence and Inequality in Brazil**. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2006.

_____. **Security Has a Way Out**. New York: Routledge, 2009.

WACQUANT, Loïc. **The Damned of the City: Studies on Advanced Marginality**. Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 2008.

ZALUAR, Alba. **Devil's Condominium: Violence and Social Protection Networks**. Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 1994.

_____. **Perverse Integration: Poverty and Drug Trafficking**. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2004.