

# BPC Policy Brief

## Recommendations for two violence-reducing policing programs in Brazil: the Pacification Police Unit in Rio de Janeiro and the Pact for Life in Recife

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## Executive Summary

Innovative but polemic policing programs, such as the Pacification Police Units in Rio and the Pact for Life in Recife, have achieved vast decrease in homicide rates. The positive results of such programs are encouraging, as they show clearly that improved public safety through policing programs is possible. But they also suffer from institutional weakness, lack of federal support, and low civil collaboration. I argue that successful public security depends on three factors: political backing, police commitment, and community cooperation. To strengthen these variables, policymakers need to institutionalize and formalize state security programs, invest in and improve child protection, and drastically improve work conditions for public security agents.

# Recommendations for two violence-reducing policing programs in Brazil: the Pacification Police Unit in Rio de Janeiro and the Pact for Life in Recife<sup>1</sup>

Marta-laura Suska

## Introduction

Recently Latin America was once again declared the world's most murderous continent. An article in the Guardian from 6 May 2015 reveals "that a third of the world's 450,000 murders each year occur in Central and South America and the Caribbean, though the region is home to less than a tenth of the population". Brazil ranks as one of the most violent, with nearly 56,000 homicides per year – the highest rate for a country which is not at war. The characteristics of violent events differ drastically from region to region, as my case studies show. Rio de Janeiro is dealing with a full grown urban war between government agents and heavily armed organized crime, while northeastern capital of Pernambuco, Recife, faces violence fueled by a "culture of honor" and chaotic conflicts between individual drug dealers. But they have one thing in common: violence spares the upper classes and prevails almost exclusively in the poorest and most marginalized communities. In those "hot spots" of violence, not only are dark-skinned men between 15-29 the most likely to be victims of homicide, they are also most likely to be perpetrators. This chronic overlap between victims and perpetrators needs to be addressed.

Several public safety initiatives have emerged to address alarming murder rates. Following the rollout of these programs in São Paulo, Rio, Belo Horizonte and Recife, among other, homicide rates plummeted. Innovative but polemic policing programs, such as the Pacification Police Units (UPP) in Rio and the Pact for Life (PPV) in Recife, have achieved vast decrease in homicide rates by as much as 60%. The UPP is a military take over of territories ruled by armed drug gangs and the installation of a permanent police presence with the idea that social services and improvements of infrastructure would follow. Based on New York City's COMPSTAT, the PPV in Recife unites state and municipal actors with police through weekly meetings that analyze violent incidents in the 26 areas of the state. Police officers and representatives of each area have a set goal for each month and stand question and answer in weekly meetings. The positive results of programs such as UPP and PPV are encouraging, as they show clearly that improved public safety through policing programs is possible. But they also show increasing vulnerabilities. I argue that successful public security depends on three factors: political backing, police commitment, and community cooperation. To strengthen these variables, policymakers need to institutionalize and formalize state security programs, invest in and improve child protection, and drastically improve work conditions for public security agents.

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# 1. Political backing: Institutionalization of state-led homicide reduction efforts

Innovative policies move forward only when executives provide resources and incentives for other agencies to co-operate and co-ordinate with the police. Limited resources, institutional tensions, and political rivalries, however, can make implementation an uphill struggle, particularly when some officials advocate different methods and philosophies. A new government may dismantle a reform if associated with a particular executive, a concern that many civilians share, especially in Rio favelas. The institutionalization of the UPP and PPV programs, which already have decreased homicide rates, is a necessary step toward promoting their long-term improvement. In addition, there is an urgent need for standardization, federal support and funding. Considering that murder has become the leading cause of death for young, poor people in Brazil, it is shocking that federal financing for anti-violence initiatives has decreased since 2011. The loss of 56,000 people annually to murder requires the foundation of and sustained financial and political support for a federal anti-violence program to support the most affected states.

For UPPs in Rio, the institutionalization of monitoring and evaluation remain weak and materialize by happenstance, where denunciatory voices in protests and in the press force the hand of state officials. In Recife, although the Pact for Life centers on evaluating statewide crime at weekly meetings, such meetings are voluntary and the governor, secretaries, and police representatives can choose to not participate. More importantly, monitoring and evaluation should focus predominantly on procedures, not results, because they lay the foundation for engendering positive results. In fact, the establishment of guidelines and clear goals accompanied by ongoing monitoring would mitigate disasters before they occur.

In field interviews with police commanders in Rio and Recife, I found that most, if not all, saw themselves as standing alone against a criminal system, where their superiors provided neither clear administrative support nor sufficient weaponry. There is a concerning disconnect between the public security agents working on streets in the communities and the administrators of the programs. Most importantly, the goals of policing must be clear. Police cannot be expected to break down a complex criminal organization by filling prisons with street corner traffickers.

The illicit drug economy generates multiple threats to the state and society. However, a complete suppression of organized crime is illusory, especially in the context of acute state weakness. Brazilian military police, which is accustomed to zero-tolerance approaches to drug and crime, often fail to suppress criminality while alienating the residents. Focus-deterrence strategies, selective targeting, and sequential interdiction efforts are more promising law enforcement alternatives. Such approaches want to minimize most pernicious behaviors of gangs, mostly violence and maximize desirable behavior, such as unarmed drug dealing. Those strategies give overwhelmed law enforcement institutions the chance to overcome certain lack of resources and infrastructure. The main focus is to move away from random non-strategic strikes against low level offenders, and strategically select targets for counter-crime operations. This requires the collaboration between military police, civil police and the judicial system.

## 2. Community cooperation: the need for child protection

Integrating citizen's knowledge is the best basis for successful preventive policies. Only groups with both organized structures and citizen trust can ease long-standing tensions and maintain the oversight critical to reforms. However, these groups are at the same time the weakest members of society in terms of income, education, and marked by lack of confidence in the state. Since victims and victimizers overlap to such a large extent, asking for collaboration with the police from those communities is challenging.

On a daily basis, children in poor communities witness violence, including homicide, rape, bar fights and domestic violence. Often accompanied by parents, small children are exposed to scenes of death and violence at crime scenes. Even if they do not suffer physical abuse, the emotional consequences are serious and long term such as PTSD, trauma, depression, and drug use. It is well known that children who are abused or witnesses to violence are much more likely to become abusers themselves as juveniles and adults. According to the US Department of Justice, children who were victims or witnesses of violence are 53% more likely to behave violently as adolescents and adults. Thus, any policy strategy needs to pay attention to the emotional stability and health of children in fragile settings. The mapping of violence and how it is experienced by children, as the Igarapé Institute proposed with a Child Security Index – a cellphone app – is a crucial step to understanding the severity of the problem and developing solutions.

First, there should be an age restriction for being present at violent crime scenes, such as homicide scenes – just like in cinemas. Crime scene isolation should include police officers turning away children and informing parents about the risks of their child witnessing violence, as an exemplary act. In Recife, police recently enacted this proposition in response to my suggestion. Second, an educational campaign about the importance and risks of witnessing violence in children needs to be adopted, similarly to the “don't beat, educate” or “30 seconds against crack” campaigns, that were launched a few years ago. Finally, law enforcement needs to develop mechanisms to protect under-aged witnesses and survivors of violence at crime scenes. At one crime scene I surveyed with the homicide task force, we had to leave behind the only survivor of a family massacre, a seven year old girl covered in blood. The neighbors took her in but there were no psychological assistance or security measures available for her protection. A solution to this problem could be to establish a collaboration between police and mental health professionals, such as exemplified by the Child-Development Community Policing Program (CD-CP) in New Haven, Connecticut. The CD-CP is a partnership between the Child Study Center of Yale University and the New Haven Department of Police Service and provides cross training for police and mental health professionals as well as regular “ride alongs” with patrol officers for clinicians. It provides acute response and follow-up service involving child victims or witnesses to violence in their homes, schools or the broader community. Follow-up home visits are also provided to help provide support and ensure the safety/security of families following a traumatic event. The development of a Child-Development Community Policing is an example of how to unite already available resources in order to create cost-efficient and effective assistance and to minimize personal and social damage caused by traumatic experiences.



### 3. Police Commitment: working conditions

The commitment and motivation of the people working in the field is as crucial to program success as sustained political support for administrative and material resources. Support from law enforcement officers is essential to any reform since their resistance to change can interfere with the implementation and development of a program. Law enforcement officers tend to resist such change if they perceive disregard for their profession, abandonment by their superiors, and growing precarity in work conditions. In Rio and Recife, I met police officers who had to buy their own bullet proof vests, handcuffs and, in some cases, guns because their department did not provide reliable equipment. Most UPPs in Rio are precarious, old containers which are not safe and do not provide the necessary and decent conditions to attend fragile communities. At times, there are no functioning toilets, air conditioning or possibility for retreat. Moreover, containers are a temporary solution and their image does not communicate stability to the residents.

It has been long assumed that salary increases are an effective measure to decrease corruption and incentive to police commitment. However, police officers need to know that they will receive essential support, equipment, manpower and intelligence in order to be reasonably able to decline offers by criminal entities. In Rio, where pacified favelas currently face the return of heavily armed traffickers, UPP commanders are regularly offered money and peace in exchange for tolerating drug dealing activities. The money is rather secondary – the primary concern is the choice between continuous and seemingly endless armed combat with drug traffickers, or peaceful drug trafficking and safe conditions. In that sense, a troubled UPPs which accounts for many armed confrontations can signal that the commanding officer did not accept the offer by the local drug gang; while a calm and peaceful UPP probably signifies the existence of some sort of illegal accord. In both cases, the residents will be distrustful, frustrated and not ready to cooperate.

Standardizing collaboration between military and civil police is crucial to long-term success, along with sustained improvements in the basic tools of safety in the work environment. A safe work environment in pacified favelas is largely dependent on information. However, intelligence and investigation is not the expertise of military police, but of civil police. In Recife's Pact for Life, civil and military police recognize the fundamental importance of information-sharing, thus it is a discussion item that routinely appears on weekly meeting agendas. On the other hand, the UPPs in Rio have no such mechanism, thus collaboration between UPPs and civil police departments usually hinges on an individual commander's initiative. Overall, the cooperation and flow of information between different public security departments needs to be drastically improved and standardized.

#### Recommendations

Policymakers should advance these strategies to support successful violence reduction programs:

- push for a national homicide reduction strategy
- creation of a federal fund supporting successful public security programs
- institutionalization of already successful programs
- implement obligatory regular monitoring and evaluation
- invest in child protection: minimize exposure to violence
- standardize and improve working conditions for public security agents, beyond salary
- force collaboration and flow of information between different public security sectors



## About the author(s)

Marta-Laura Suska is a PhD Candidate in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Marta is currently conducting her dissertation research on new police practices in Rio de Janeiro and Recife, funded by the SSRC Drugs, Security and Democracy Fellowship. Using ethnographic methods Marta wants to shed light into the changing relationship between favela residents and police officers. Before coming to UW-Madison, Marta completed a Master of Philosophy in Latin American Studies at the University of Oxford. She grew up in Poland, Greece, and Germany and has spent several years working and studying in different cities in Brazil prior to entering graduate school.



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