

# "Kids, guns and gangs"

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COAV – Viva Rio

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...with education



According to ISER data, 80% of youth killed by firearms in Rio de Janeiro left school before completing 8 years of schooling.



Article 53 of the Child and Adolescent Statute (Law 8.069) says that all children less than 18 years old have a right to **education**. Although the law is not always reality, some social initiatives prove that it is possible to educate for life and for the job market, creating future possibilities for youth at risk.

*After the presentation of the Paulo Sergio Pinheiro report we can celebrate the fact that it's the first time there has been a report in the world that looks at all forms of violence against children, including outside of war situations- that has never happened before, it is ground breaking. With respect to armed violence against children, as very clearly outlined in the report: "where guns and weapons are available, fights often lead to severe lesions and deaths." We have seen a massive rise in gun related death among youth over the last thirty years. A rise that is clearly related to the increased availability of weapons and the emergence of groups and gangs around the world marked by the involvement of young people, which often use violence as a tool for social recognition, dominance or economic gain.*

## **a) Who we are**

Viva Rio is a non-governmental organisation committed to field work, research and advocacy in the areas of urban violence prevention and the promotion of human security.

Viva Rio was created in December 1993 by representatives of diverse sectors of the civil society as a direct response to the increasing levels of violence in Rio. Since its founding, Viva Rio has developed and consolidated a broad set of actions and strategies in the areas of public security and reduction of urban violence through direct projects in the field, public mobilisation campaigns, advocacy, research and communication.

Viva Rio's purpose is to research, design and test specific solutions that effectively deal with the complex problems of urban violence. Moreover, Viva Rio's ultimate purpose is to promote those successful solutions through advocacy and communication strategies, so that they increase in scale, become public policy and are replicated by the State, the private sector or other NGO's.

## **b) What we do**

Our main goal is to promote peace and development, creating means of overcoming urban armed violence and social exclusion. Viva Rio develops its work based on human security as a guiding concept. It is believed that "development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing"

## **c) Thematic focus**

Within a human security perspective, Viva Rio's projects and actions focus on three key themes:

- **Security Sector Reform;**
- **Small Arms and Light Weapons Control; and**
- **Youth at Risk, with specific gender-oriented approaches to armed violence;**

### **What is COAV?**

COAV means Children in Organised Armed Violence. It has been defined as those children and youth employed or otherwise participating in armed violence where there are elements of command structure and power over territory, local population or resources.

Organised armed groups include a large variety of groups with different characteristics and modalities: street gangs, *maras*, *pandillas*, drug factions, ethnic-militias, vigilantes and even paramilitary groups acting in non-war scenarios.

Our involvement with children and youth in organised armed violence started with local research.

## Background

From November 2001 to August 2003, Viva Rio carried out a study regarding the roles of children and adolescents in the *favela* (or slum) based drug factions of Rio de Janeiro. This research was supported by Save the Children Sweden, The Ford Foundation and UNESCO, and led to the publication of Children of the Drug Trade: a case study of children in organised armed violence in Rio de Janeiro. The study analysed primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data, including personal interviews with armed drug faction workers carried out in three different communities selected due to documented histories of drug gang domination.

The results generated by this case study are important for different reasons:

1. **Firstly, although not at war, the number of deaths by firearms (especially children) is higher in Rio de Janeiro than in many armed conflict contexts.** The rate of deaths by firearms in Rio de Janeiro is extremely high. Taking in consideration the data from the WHO, 20 deaths for 100.000 inhabitants is considered serious context, and 30 is extremely serious context. The rate for Rio is around 50 deaths per 100.000. But, if we analyse this data breaking it down by gender and age groups, the situation is more worrying. As we can see, the levels of violence vary according to gender and age: among men between 15 and 24, the rate is over 100 per 100.000.
2. **Secondly, Rio's drug factions exert power over a concrete territory and population:** they carry parallel power over some areas. Our estimate is that in Rio de Janeiro drug factions have over 10.000 armed men. About 60% of them are below 18 years old of age. They earn a regular and highly competitive pay.
3. **Thirdly, these armed groups present a complex organisation and internal structure.** They have their own ranks, the same level of weaponry as a paramilitary movement (including assault rifles, machine guns and grenades). The arsenal of the drug factions in Rio rivals with those found in war contexts, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia or Uganda, for example.

The importance of drug trafficking facilitates this situation. According to some estimates by civilian police, the volume of cocaine traffic in just one *favela*, Rocinha, reaches about 50 million dollars per month.

Another reason for this situation is the irregular presence of the police and the State in slums. A lack of public services in the *favelas* (until more recently) left power vacuums and opened the way for factions to assume the role of imposing power within the community. High levels of police corruption and a policy of repressive attacks has led to a spiral of violence between both sides and a failure to deal with the socio-economic problems that leads to many children and young people choosing the drug trade as the "best" of poor options.

### **Is COAV an isolated phenomenon?**

Since publishing the case study “Children of Drug Trade” by Viva Rio researcher Luke Dowdney, it became apparent that Rio de Janeiro is not the only urban centre in which organised armed groups employing children and youth are active. Furthermore, like Rio’s drug factions, armed groups in other settings may also have clearly defined command structures, dominate territory, local populations and resources, and actively arm the young people working for them.

For this reason, the second step was the implementation of another research project to generate analysis of common elements in different contexts. The result of this research is the book, “*Neither War nor Peace*”, a comparison of 10 field experiences in different contexts: Latin America, North America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.

The title of this book, as it suggests, reflects a tragic paradox: a variety of armed conflicts that cannot be classified as wars, and where at the same time, it is clear that peace does not prevail.

Research results demonstrated at the local and international levels that the emergence of organised armed groups in most countries is linked to a number of common risk factors.

### **COAV Cities**

In order to understand the commonalties and differences of these similar “non war” situations we are co-ordinating another research with local partners in four cities where partners have identified a similar phenomenon, with the support of Save the Children-Sweden. The COAV Cities project collected information and identified key actors – including armed youth, police officers, community leaders, municipal officials, etc.- to discuss and address the topic.

One of the biggest problems for governments and their electorates is how to get involved with this issue in an open and preventive way. It is true that these children and youth do kill people, and are involved in extremely high levels of violence. It’s a huge problem that we have because it often clouds our vision and generates fear. Traditionally, the only response and strategy employed by governments to date have been repression and incarceration. Tactics that often exacerbate the problem.

The result of this project is the formulation of a pilot project of a comprehensive nature in each of the four cases selected. I’m glad to announce that today, at the municipality of Niterói (Brazil), such intervention at local level will be launched by the Brazilian Minister of Human Rights, the City Mayor of Niterói and Viva Rio, with the partnership of several community actors.

### **One path for dealing with this phenomenon**

**During all this process we experienced the important challenge of defining what we were talking about? Child-soldiers? Delinquents? Criminals? It is clear that we need a new language to describe this phenomenon.**

Despite fundamental differences, there are similarities between COAV and child soldiers. That should be noticed. Here are some of them:

- **Voluntary recruitment:** Although some child soldiers are forcibly recruited or kidnapped, as with drug faction children in Rio de Janeiro, many child soldiers enter the fight “voluntarily”. This has been documented in numerous case studies including reports on child soldiers in Liberia, Uganda, Myanmar, etc. In any case, in the notion of “voluntary” recruitment we include child recruitment for cultural, social and economic pressure, because as I previously mentioned, being part of an armed group could be a viable economic choice.
- **Age:** The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers considers that although most child soldiers are between 15 and 18 years of age, significant recruitment starts at the age of ten, and in some cases the employment of even younger children has been recorded. Within Rio’s drug factions, although the recruitment process may start as early as ten years of age, armed combatants are most commonly aged between 15 and 24 years old.
- **Children and youth work within a hierarchy enforced by orders, rules and punishment:** Children employed by drug factions at the local level work within hierarchical structural units in which they follow the orders of ranking superiors. Faction employees are subject to rules and punishments that apply equally to children and adults. For those that don’t adhere to the rules, severe beating, torture, being shot in the hands or feet and execution are common punishments within drug factions in Rio de Janeiro. This can be directly compared with child soldiers who function within non-state military organisations - when being disciplined or punished, many child soldiers are treated as their adult colleagues.
- **Children and youth are paid for a service:** Both drug faction children and some types of child soldiers are paid in cash for their services.
- **Children and youth are on call 24 hours a day, and are armed by adults:** Comparable to child soldiers, working for a drug faction is a constant occupation that defines a child’s entire status within the community and in regard to rival factions or the police.
- **Children and youth are armed by adults:** Children in drug factions and child soldiers are armed with similar military-style weapons by the armed groups or militaries for which they work. Small arms and light weapons are simple to use and light enough for children to successfully manipulate in combat situations. The proliferation and easy access of inexpensive revolvers, pistols or assault rifles is a major factor to the increased use of child soldiers.
- **Children survive in a “kill or die” reality:** Due to working for armies or military organisations in conflict, child soldiers kill and are killed. Despite not being in a war situation, due to enforcing faction rules and repelling police raids of rival faction invasions, killing is part of the working reality for most minors in drug faction employment. Even unarmed children become the targets of small arms fire: As a result of children employed by drug factions involved in armed combat with the police or rival factions, children from communities dominated by factions may become suspected of involvement and subsequently targets of hostile gunfire from

rival factions, as well as police arrest, torture and execution. This is also noted in the case of child soldiers.

- **Children are increasingly used in armed combat situations:** Similar to any prolonged conflict situation, the use of children as armed combatants can also be seen as the result of a high incidence of imprisonment and small arms related fatalities amongst adult faction members fueling a subsequent demand for new generations of armed fighters.
- **Girls are also recruited:** Girls are recruited in war contexts, as well as in contexts like Rio de Janeiro. They are used for drug factions as drugs transporters, to introduce information and goods in prisons, as well as for sexual relations.

Despite these similarities, however, categorising child faction workers as “child soldiers” would be problematic, because they are different phenomena. Here are some of the differences:

- Contexts like Rio de Janeiro are not at war;
- Drug factions have no defined political objectives and no stated interest in substituting the Central Government;
- If we categorise these children as “soldiers”, we may legitimise the already high levels of lethal state force used against them. In a war context, killing is a legal activity regulated by the Geneva Conventions

In any case, while we are not talking of child soldiers, we are also not talking of a simple **juvenile delinquency problem**. Are these children and adolescents involved in organised armed violence “just” juvenile delinquents? The answer to the question is NO. They belong to a different, violent, reality. They are paid on a regular basis and they belong to organised groups which have a strong hierarchy system which they respect.

Concepts such as “**child soldiers**” or “**delinquents**” fail to correctly represent the growing number of children and youth around the world that participate in organised armed groups active outside of traditionally defined war zones. Correct definitions are important in order to probe further and deepen our understanding of changing phenomenon and successfully design policy for its treatment.

During the “Seminar on Children affected by Organised Armed Violence” held by Viva Rio in September 2002, international participants (including representatives from the Office of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, UNICEF, UNESCO, the Quaker Office in Geneva, Canadian International Development Agency, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, HRW, Save the Children-Sweden and IANSA) agreed on the following working definition for COAV: “**Children and youth employed or otherwise participating in Organised Armed Violence where are elements of a command structure and power over territory, local population and resources**”.

## COAV International

The best lesson learned from our experience is that despite the seriousness of this type of phenomenon, treatment is possible.

After the Paulo Sergio Pinheiro led U.N. Commission, we can celebrate the fact that there has been a report in the world that looks at all forms of violence against children, including children outside of war situations. This is ground breaking. With respect to armed violence against children, as outlined in the report: “where guns and weapons are available, fights often lead to severe lesions and deaths.” We have seen a massive rise in gun related death among youths over the last thirty years. A rise that is clearly related to the increased availability of weapons and the emergence of groups and gangs around the world marked by the involvement of young people, which often use violence as a tool for social recognition, dominance or economic gain.

Now we have an opportunity to look at young people and children affected by armed violence and organised armed violence. We need to evaluate the problem, its commonalities and variations, across the planet: in Central America (*maras* and *pandillas*), Africa (former child combatants), Asia (for example in Afghanistan, where children are often recruited by warlords involved in drug traffic activities), and more and more, including in developed countries like my own, Spain (where there is a growing process of creation of *pandillas*).

### **What would be the main objective of this proposal?**

Our focus has three dimensions: prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of children and youth involved in organised armed violence.

### **How?**

By developing an international network to promote an awareness of the plight of children and youth involved in COAV. This may imply establishing an international working group composed by NGOs, UN agencies, Governments and other actors - at national and local levels. The first task of this Working Group would be the adoption of a definition of this issue that can serve long term international actions.

For this, we need to:

- **Identify actors with an accredited and successful experience in the treatment and prevention of children and youth involvement in armed violence.**
- **Identify indicators to study and understand the impact of armed violence on children and youth, with special gender considerations.**
- **Extract the best practices and lessons learned for an international definition, including a comparative study on legislation, criminal and correctional treatment, as well as political and social approaches.**

During the 90's, the issue of child soldiers posed a relatively similar challenge. Graça Machel was asked by the UN Secretary General to carry out an assessment of the impact of armed conflicts on children. In the assessment she emphasised the abuses they normally suffer, human rights violations, and the lack of access to basic resources or the oversight of the own community. This report was a benchmark in the struggle for the recognition of the plight of children who were and still are employed as soldiers, carrying out logistical tasks in open armed conflicts and elsewhere. The international community finally understood that girls and boys involved in armed conflicts as soldiers are not to be simply described as criminals.

This has also been noted in the draft of Paulo Pinheiro's report: it says that repressive measures adopted by governments against criminal groups or gangs without consistent prevention strategies, gathering appropriate data or respecting human rights, contributes to the stigmatisation of poor youth and rising violence.

It is now our challenge to effectively address the emerging phenomenon of children and youth in organised armed violence and we know that is not going to be easy.



***For further information:***

**Viva Rio**

[www.coav.org.br](http://www.coav.org.br)

[www.comunidadsegura.org](http://www.comunidadsegura.org)

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**Save the Children Sweden**

[www.scslat.org](http://www.scslat.org)

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