

2010

# The Brazilian Street Child: A Child of the Local Community

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## Recommended Citation

Goulart, Rebecca (2010) "The Brazilian Street Child: A Child of the Local Community," *JCCC Honors Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 2.  
Available at: [http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/honors\\_journal/vol1/iss2/2](http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/honors_journal/vol1/iss2/2)

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## The Brazilian Street Child: A Child of the Local Community

### **Abstract**

The images of Brazilian slums, and the street children that come from them, are recognized throughout the world. There are two different kinds of kids who make up Brazil's street children population. The children who work on the streets, returning to their homes in the favelas at night, are referred to as the children 'on the streets'. These children do odd jobs, such as guarding cars or selling gum. On the other hand, children who live on the streets full time are referred to as the children 'of the streets' and are generally involved in some sort of criminal activity. Most of the children 'of the streets' have cut all connections with their families. The topic of Brazil's street children has been researched by many and numerous solutions have been suggested; however, not only does the problem still exist, but it is continuing to grow and is in need of more research and a stronger working effort to see it come to an end. The author suggests that the solution this problem can be found in the non-governmental organizations (NGO's) working with local communities to alleviate the suffering of these innocents.

## The Brazilian Street Child: A Child of the Local Community

People often call Brazil “the land of perpetual promise.” With the Amazon rain forest, the industrial units of Sao Paulo, the famous beaches of Rio De Janeiro, and the swamps of Pantanal it is also a land that is quite diverse. When the average foreigner thinks of Brazil, things such as soccer, Carnival, capoeira and samba may come to mind; however, Brazil is also a land that knows extreme poverty. The images of Brazilian slums, and the street children that inhabit them, are recognized throughout the world (Inciardi and Surratt). The topic of Brazil’s street children has been researched by many and numerous solutions have been suggested. However, not only does the problem still exist, but it is continuing to grow and is in need of more research and a stronger working effort to see it come to an end.

There are an estimated fifty million children and teenagers in Brazil today, and forty percent of them live beneath the Brazilian poverty line. Of these children, it is estimated that there are anywhere from 200,000 to eight million living or working on the streets. Statistics reveal that ten percent of them are under the age of thirteen. Figures also show that fifty-four percent of them are living in a single parent home or are living on the streets full time. Most of these children come from large families with seventy-nine percent having more than two or three siblings (Fernandes and Vaughn).

There are many socioeconomic difficulties that explain Brazil's issues with extreme poverty and the large number of street children. One such difficulty is that a significant concentration of income remains within a minute part of the population; twenty percent of Brazil's population owns sixty-five percent of its wealth. Furthermore, the lack of adequate public services, corruption that goes unpunished, and a government that suffers inefficient organization continue to threaten the economic development and well-being of the country (Fernandes and Vaughn).

Forty-five million people live in poverty in Brazil, making less than forty U.S. dollars a month. Poverty contributes to children being on the streets. The process by which children go to work on the streets to help support their families, leads to children living on the streets; hence, the saying, "the children who are on the streets become the children of the streets" (Fernandes and Vaughn).

Poverty is not the only reason children are leaving the slums, also referred to as favelas, to live on the streets. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse also play key roles. Parents of street kids were often themselves abused as children and repeat these actions with their own kids. Also, prostitution, drug use and drug trafficking within the favelas contribute to children wanting to make the streets their home. When researching the issue of street children in Brazil, one must take a close look at the favelas from which they come (Fernandes and Vaughn).

Though no one can really agree when the first favelas originated, it is generally agreed that the first large favela began to form in 1897. In November of that year 20,000 Northeastern federal troops, who had just finished fighting and winning a war in Bahia, were taken to Rio de Janeiro and left on the docks with nowhere to live, despite being promised housing from the government. They then went up on one of the hills outside of the city and constructed poor shacks, making the area their home. Also, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many of the hills around Rio began to fill up with runaway black slaves. These slaves sought refuge in establishing blacks-only towns. When slavery was abolished in 1888, freed black slaves began to pour in as well (Ferraz).

After the 1930's favelas began to spread quickly and now can be found throughout Brazil. They initially served as shelters for arriving migrant workers coming from areas struck by drought and unemployment. These people came to the cities in search of work, but found that they were unskilled, rejected and had nowhere to go (Inciardi and Surratt). In Rio de Janeiro there are now approximately six-hundred favelas that house over a million people. Packed together on hillsides that overlook Rio's wealthy tourist areas, only a small number have electricity, water, or sewage (Inciardi and Surratt).

Favelas vary in the number of residents they have. Some have a few hundred people, while others have more than two-hundred thousand residents. They can be found anywhere from hillsides to swamp-filled flatlands. The ownership

of favela land also varies, with some being owned by private parties, and others by the government, churches, military, and sometimes by the residents themselves. In general, these favelas are stable communities. Residents are usually there long term, and some populations span several generations (Leeds).

The streets of favelas are usually unpaved, and when it rains the gutters fill with mud, trash and human waste. Without medical facilities and unemployment benefits, disease and societal problems are a constant (Inciardi and Surratt). With this kind of widespread poverty throughout favelas, children are forced to head out to the streets at a young age to work in order to supplement income or fully provide for their families. Some children do not return, choosing to make the streets their home and other street children their family.

In few countries of the world are street children more noticeable, and more detested, than they are in Brazil. Due to drug abuse, predatory criminal behavior and the general negative attitude of the public towards them, Brazilian street children have become live targets of vigilante organizations such as “drug gangs and police death squads.” Public resistance to the presence of street children continues to grow, as the number of street children and the crimes associated with them increases. These children, who once may have been viewed as worthy of mercy and kindness, are now seen as a danger to

society. They are looked at as future criminals who need to be locked away in order to protect public safety (Inciardi and Surratt).

Two different kinds of kids make up Brazil's street children population. The children who work on the streets, returning to their homes in the favelas at night, are referred to as the children 'on the streets'. These children can be found doing any number of odd jobs, such as guarding cars or selling gum. On the other hand, children who live on the streets full time are referred to as the children 'of the streets' and are generally involved in some sort of criminal activity. Most of the children 'of the streets' have cut all connections with their families (Inciardi and Surratt).

The majority of children who live on the streets are boys, but the number of girls who make the streets their home is on the rise. These young girls are often found trying to escape hard labor or abusive family situations. Once on the streets they generally fall into prostitution as a means of survival. Also, sex is commonly used by all street children in exchange for food and affection. Many of these children, both boys and girls, are raped frequently, the perpetrators often being policemen and older street children. The children are thus exposed to numerous sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV (Sheper-Hughes and Hoffman).

Substance abuse is also a common problem amongst street children in Brazil. Substances such as inhalants, alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, and Valium are most common. The majority of kids on the streets use inhalants,

and inhalants are generally the first drugs that a younger child will use. The inhalants that are most commonly used, probably because they are legal and easy to obtain, are products such as nail-polish remover, lighter fluid, glues, hair sprays, deodorants, spray paints and cleaning fluids, with glue sniffing increasing significantly. In general, street kids suffer from extreme hunger, poverty, an abusive past, poor grades in school and subsequent drop-out. All of these issues, and others like them, contribute to substance abuse. The use of these drugs, especially the inhalants, can result in liver damage, renal failure and death (Fernandes and Vaughn).

Up until the early 1990's the issue of Brazilian street children was not widely discussed outside of Brazil; however, in 1993, the world's awareness was brought to the situation when eight sleeping children were murdered by an off-duty police officer in the center of Rio de Janeiro. The children who tried to run away were chased and gunned down. Afterwards, the obvious lack of concern shown by the authorities assured substantial media coverage. In very little time, the entire world was reading of groups of children wandering the streets of Brazil, being hunted and killed (The Economist).

Following this incident, many different suggestions on how to change policies towards street children were offered; however, it appears that there continues to be little progress. Historically, Brazil is known for creating limiting and penalizing programs for street children. From the early 1940's up until 1990, the National Foundation for the Well-being of Minors and the State

Foundations for the Well-Being of Minors were the organizations responsible for providing shelter to street children. These programs were restrictive, harmful and abusive. These institutions have since been replaced with newer, rehabilitative programs that seek to educate children and decrease social exclusion (Fernandes and Vaughn).

There are four general types of programs that are presently working to address the issue of children on the streets: the correctional approach, the rehabilitative approach, outreach strategies, and the preventive approach. The correctional approach looks at street children as an issue for the juvenile justice institutions, resulting in thousands of children being placed in crowded, and sometimes still abusive, institutions. The rehabilitative approach views street children as victims of poverty, abuse and horrible living circumstances. Practical help, such as housing, drug detoxification centers, and educational and work programs are provided. Due to the fact that these resources are not able to provide for all street children, rehabilitative services are also provided through outreach into the streets themselves. The preventive approach tries to deal with the foundational problems of poverty. Organizations use campaigns to teach policy makers about the causes of children living on the streets. These organizations also provide work, education and other activities to deter children from working on the streets. They also offer child care, family planning centers, and community kitchens (Inciardi and Surratt). In recent years, the government of Brazil has sought to establish programs that help prevent children from

ending up on the streets. Programs such as Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) and Toda Crianca na Escola (Every Child in School) focus on issues such as “hunger, child labor, school attendance and poverty” (Fernandes). The Brazilian Constitution was even revised to state:

It is the duty of the family, society and the state to assure with absolute priority the rights of children and adolescents to life, health, food, education, leisure, occupational training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life, and in addition to protect them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression (Scheper–Hughs and Hoffman).

This drastically changed the legal status of children, redefined the role that the state and civil society played in children’s lives, and forced into formation participatory committees at each level of government. Unfortunately, progress has been slow and it appears little effort has been made to speed it up (Scheper–Hughs and Hoffman).

The broadest attempt to rectify the problem of street children in Brazil is the National Movement for Street Children (MNMMR). MNMMR is a national alliance made up of street children and teachers that was founded in 1985. This effort centers on changing the direct care of street youth away from the criminal justice system, turning the rights of children into law, and organizing ground–breaking approaches in providing education to children right on the streets. MNMMR programs are reaching an estimated 80,000 children and adolescents.

The majority of young people who are reached by this program work on the streets and have homes in favelas close by (Inciardi and Surratt).

Most of the programs operating today for street kids in Brazil have been created by non-governmental organizations (NGO's). In Rio de Janeiro alone, NGO's manage more than fifty-seven shelters and group homes for street kids. Sao Paulo also has a large number of NGO operated programs, including shelters. Programs such as the Children at Risk Foundation and the Street Migration Prevention Program help former street kids and other at-risk children, providing them with pathways to a more dignified way of life. There are also international Initiatives such as the Institute for International Cooperation and Development. This organization and others like it supply volunteers that educate and help meet the needs of street children (Fernandes and Vaughn).

One NGO that is having an impact on the streets of Brazil is Voice For Change. Located in the southern city of Curitiba, Voice For Change has a vision to establish one thousand homes that will house six thousand children. They strive to provide for each child's physical, mental, educational and emotional needs. Each home is run by a set of house parents who offer "the children security, affection and a secure home environment." The children grow knowing that they are loved. They also know that they have been given the opportunity to fulfill their dreams (Voice For Change).

Another NGO that is working hard to bring change is Task Brazil. Founded in 1993, Task Brazil began as a small team of people attempting to make contact with street children in Rio de Janeiro. As Task Brazil grew, numerous teams were sent out into the streets offering to provide for childrens' basic needs. In 1997 the organization was discovered by Jimmy Page, the Led Zeppelin rock star, while he was performing in Rio. Page, who was impacted deeply by what he saw going on in the favelas and on the streets, gave a very large donation to Task Brazil. They used the donation to purchase a home in order to house and provide further care to the children that they were reaching. The house, Casa Jimmy, has opened its doors to many children and provides a stable family like environment to those who live there (Task Brazil).

Casa Jimmy has now been running for over 8 years, helped by a talented team of childcarers, psychologists, administrative staff and volunteers from both Brazil and around the world. Over 340 children, teenage mothers and their babies and their families have benefited from the facilities funded partly by the Prefeitura of Rio de Janeiro and largely by private donations. More recent donations have funded the purchase of land neighbouring Casa Jimmy providing housing for volunteers and land for a future project "Casa Charlotte" which will provide a home for teenage mothers and their babies independent from Casa Jimmy (Task Brazil).

Street Kids International is also on the move in Brazil. Founded in 1988 and based in Canada and the UK, Street Kids International has reached more than

two-million street children in over sixty nations. Along with being recognized by the United Nations, the organization has received numerous awards for its work. The following is a brief overview of what they are doing in Brazil, and other parts of the world, as stated on their website:

Street Kids International is a global non-profit organization that helps street kids learn to support themselves and make healthy, educated decisions that positively impact their lives. Through our work we raise awareness about the needs and rights of street youth, and develop the skills of frontline workers who support these young people. Street Kids teams with youth workers worldwide to engage youth through innovative and interactive workshops, animations and tools about entrepreneurship, sexual health, and drug use (Street Kids International).

A very large number of the NGO's that are in Brazil working with street children are Christian. The Christian and secular NGO's are doing the same type of work; however, the Christian organizations are not only providing for the practical needs of these children, but are also interested in helping them find spiritual comfort and fulfillment. Youth With A Mission (YWAM) is one such organization.

Founded in 1960 by a young man named Lauren Cunningham, YWAM now has over sixteen-thousand full time staff and has centers in 150 nations, with more than forty locations throughout Brazil. Many of these Brazilian YWAM centers work with street children in their local communities, with several of

them focusing a great deal on them. YWAM Belo Horizonte alone manages five programs that either house or offer care for street children. They work to provide community development and are as follows:

1. Restoration House: works with street boys from broken homes; they go through the various phases of the RESTORATION HOUSE program, until they are ready to be completely reintegrated into society.
2. Refuge House: works with abandoned children and teenagers who have HIV/AIDS who are cared for in a family environment, coming to know the love and acceptance of our Father God.
3. Light House – The team works with the children, teenagers and families in one of the largest slums in Belo Horizonte, offering a variety of clubs.
4. Rock House – The team works with children, teenagers and families in one of the most violent slums in Belo Horizonte.
5. Sower House – The team shows the love of God to deaf children and helps the children with their education and in family relationships (Youth With A Mission).

YWAM Belo Horizonte also operates sports programs, and it provides opportunities for the street children to learn things such as dance and drama. They also provide counseling to children. Some of the children who are successfully rehabilitated in these programs go on to work with children who are still on the streets of Belo Horizonte (Youth With A Mission). YWAM Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo are also doing large-scale works to ensure a brighter future for the young people who come to them for help, and other YWAM centers across Brazil are aiding in local efforts as well.

Another Christian Ministry that works with street children is Chosen Generation. They operate a shelter for street children and if possible, eventually get them to return to their families. They also provide foster care for children up to the age of eighteen. The children in their foster care network have usually been victims of child abuse, sexual exploitation and teen pregnancies. They provide the children with practical things such as literacy and job training. They also provide basic needs such as food and clothing to entire households in the hopes that children will not need to work in the streets to provide for their impoverished families. The shelter that they operate has housed and helped over sixty street children thus far. (Chosen Generation).

Hope Unlimited for Children is a Christian ministry that serves almost 1,300 annually. Their strategy is as follows:

In the **rescue phase**, children are referred to Hope by the Brazilian courts, who have determined that these children are at mortal risk. Hope staff provides immediate emotional support, psychological and medical care, and spiritual healing. In the **transformation phase** (four to eight years), the child is guided through educational programs, and vocational coursework, within the context of family life. In the **re-entry phase**, Hope's young men and women intern with local businesses for a year and live at a transition home for six months. Upon graduation (around the age of 18) each Hope student is guaranteed a job and is given ongoing support through the Graduate Center. Each graduate receives basic household furnishings and a complete set of tools for the trade he or she has learned (Hope Unlimited).

Hope Unlimited for Children cares for approximately 250 children in residential programs on a daily basis. They also provide day programs for four-hundred children, and they have 150 young people in graduate programs. They also serve 450 young children in a preschool setting (Hope Unlimited).

Another Christian organization that is doing work with street children is Happy Child. Founded eighteen years ago by Sarah de Carvalho, who at the time worked with BBC television, Happy Child has “rescued over 7,000 street children from the city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil, and provided for their restoration and reintegration into family and community.” Their primary focus is in rescuing, restoring and “re-integrating street children physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually.” In 2007 they opened a new center in Recife, which is in North Brazil (Happy Child).

A dear friend of mine, Amanda DeSarro, lived in Brazil for a few years and worked with a Christian NGO serving the needs of street children. Some of her personal experiences and thoughts are shared in the following email that she sent to me:

I can humbly say that I care deeply about the plight of the street children in Brazil and the

hardships they face. My understanding is limited to my personal experience. What I

learned from my time with them is that they live in fear. They sleep in the day and roam

the streets at night. They are like packs or gangs. They are very territorial and possessive.

Once we became friends with a particular group of children they warded off all other

children from even approaching us. They were clear to tell me I was now part of them

and not to interact with any other children. They were very good to me. The little ones

wanted to be held, the girls wanted to talk, the older boys wanted to show off and

protect me if needed. They wanted to share their food which I went with them to find. I

discovered that Restaurants' leave food out in the allies for the children. It appeared to

me to be food that was partially eaten (peoples food scraps). I was very sad to see 13

year old girls pregnant and that they were not certain of who their baby's father was.

When I got to know them and felt comfortable asking them questions, I was sad to learn

many of them actually have families. They left their families because of abuse at home

and because of the extreme poverty in the favela they were from. They form their own

culture and families in the streets. Many of the children I was with were children of street

children and they knew no other way of life. I was grieved to see how the children abused

one another. They were also very sexual, and many sniffed glue, smoked cigarettes

and used drugs. Despite all of this, I found that they have the same needs we all have: to

be loved and to belong. They find a sense of security in belonging to one another and

form families with other street children. The children who we were helping were given

the opportunity to go to school, learn vocational skills and life skills and were truly

enabled to have a hope & a future. There is hope. The program I was working with, and

others like it, are hugely successful in rehabilitating street children. The director

of our program was a former street child, and one of the greatest encouragements to me

was in him and the other former street children who were out there loving and serving

the kids who were still on the streets. I believe it is through these people working to show the unconditional love of Jesus, people who are willing to come along side these precious children and see them set on a path to a new life, that all children will have the opportunity for a hopeful future. The key is relationship. NGO's – Non Government Organizations– are the most effective efforts to reach and rehabilitate street children. There is HOPE. It was inspiring to see people willing to sacrifice their own lives, time, talents, and opportunities to come along these children and believe in them.

The work that is being done by NGO's, both Christian and secular, is having an impact on the streets of Brazil. Through the efforts of these NGO's, thousands of street children are leaving the streets and pursuing healthy lifestyles. Many of them go on to college, and some even remain with the ministries or the organizations that rescued them to help with children who are still on the streets. Although the number of street children in Brazil is on the rise, the numbers of NGO's who want to help them are increasing too. Brazilians and foreigners alike are joining together to work towards seeing an end to the suffering of these children.

Through the work that is being done by the NGO's, and because of the success that they are having, some people in the local communities are beginning to have a change of heart toward the children who roam their streets. Local churches are rising up and reaching out to the favelas and the children that come from them; they are not only reaching out in prayer and compassion,

but are providing funds for housing, school and vocational training. Some local businesses are also pouring money into the NGO's that are working in their communities, and many of them offer jobs to youths that successfully complete rehabilitation programs. Also, many schools are joining in the effort and are working alongside NGO's in pushing for local street children to remain in, or return to, school.

The solution to the problem of Brazil's street children is found in the work of the NGO's as well as in the local churches, businesses and schools that support and partake in the work that is being done. Additionally, more research needs to be done so that a correct analysis of the situation can be made. This will allow the NGO's to plan more strategically in their attempts to get every child off of the streets.

The Brazilian street child can no longer be viewed as a problem for the Brazilian government, but instead must be seen as a child of the local community. If the local communities come to understand that these children are their children, and the favela families are their neighbors, and if they take responsibility for what happens to them by either working with or fully supporting the efforts of the NGO's, not only with finances, but by opening their own homes and hearts to these children, then the dream of every child having a home in Brazil may become a reality. These children are longing to be loved, longing for a future with dignity and are crying out through their drug use, crimes and deaths.

Through a sweeping effort, and with support from the local authorities and local and federal government, NGO's could potentially reach every street child. The shelters that they are operating, the education and vocational training that they are providing, and the basic needs of the favela families that they are meeting are having a huge impact on the face of child poverty and homelessness in Brazil. Given the high success rate that these programs are having, with some as high as seventy-five to eighty percent, (Hope Unlimited, Happy Child and YWAM) it can be assumed that the same effort, on a much larger scale, could potentially see an end to the problem all together. If the government of Brazil begins to channel its funds to these programs, and if more people, both Brazilian and foreign, come alongside to work, it might one day be said that every child in Brazil has a home, a future and a hope.

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