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What is the crisis in public security in São Paulo?

LSE IDEAS

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After a decade of decline in homicide rates, in the last quarter of 2012 residents in São Paulo were surprised by what appeared to be a re-run of a bad film: daily reports in the media about a surprisingly large number of cases of homicide involving police officers as victims, cases of multiple civilian victims shot by masked men using heavy weapons and civilians being shot by the police, allegedly while resisting arrest.

This raised fears that prior achievements in the reduction of violence were being lost and that the city and the state had lost control over the rising violence. The fear in the population is that São Paulo would be returning to the very high rates of violence, particularly those of homicide that prevailed in the 1990s and the early 2000s. As mentioned above, São Paulo has for the

last 10 years achieved major progress in the reduction of homicides. Other forms of violent crime also fell in a less dramatic way than homicide, but fell from the higher levels reached in the early 2000s. This was the case for: robbery, bank robbery, car robbery, robbery followed by death, and kidnapping. Two types of crime grew during that period: cargo hijacking and drug trafficking. The quality of the official data can be questioned but data from other sources confirm this decline (e.g., data from the health sector, surveys, etc.).

	1996	2011	Highest rate and year	2011 ¹	2012 ^{1a}
Homicide	Rate/100 thousand	Rate/100 thousand			
City	46,6	8,98	52,4 (1999)	1.019	1.212
State	30,3	10,2	35,4 (1999)	4.194	4.306
Robbery followed by death					
City	2,5	0,8	2,88 (1999)	91	95
State	1,5	0,75	2,39 (1999)	316	309
Car robbery					
City	289,8	357,4	590,2 (2000)	40.517	40.141
State	138,7	188,9	319,4 (2000)	79.190	79.483
Car theft					
City	548,5	377,3	581,7 (1999)	42.778	40.291
State	268,7	205,6	323,7 (1999)	105.090	100.611
Bank robbery²	2005	2011			
City	2,24	1,31	2,8 (2006)	149	106
State	0,85	0,6	1,12 (2006)	252	202
Cargo hijacking²	2005	2011			

City	34,4	37,6	43,4 (2009)	4.258	4045
State	15,9	16,7	19,1 (2009)	6.958	6.766
Drug trafficking	1996	2011			
City	19,2	57,8	Continuous growth	6.563	7.264
State	21,7	84,9	Continuous growth	35.584	37.943
<p>1: total number of cases 1a: total number of cases until November (included) 2: statistics for bank robbery and cargo hijacking available since 2005.</p>					

So far, the strongest indicators that the situation is becoming more alarming is the killing of police officers -whether in active duty or not-, multiple executions in public spaces by masked men and reports in the media that in some communities shops and schools have, on various occasions, been coerced to shut down due to threats from local criminals- the so called curfews imposed by groups to demonstrate power.

Official data revealed that 13 military police officers had died in action by the end of September 2012 in the state of São Paulo, which means that the official numbers of deaths of military policemen in action will exceed those for 2011 (16 deaths on duty). The media reported between August and November more than 100 deaths of military policemen, thus most deaths must have been off duty or ex-policemen (retired). Civilians killed by the military police while 'resisting arrest' totalled 369 persons (until the end of September) against 437 (total) killed in 2011.

Some journalists have attributed the growth of executions and the killings of military policemen to a 'war' between members of organised crime and the police. Following this line of explanation, the main organised crime group in the state ordered the killing of military police officers^[1] in retaliation for the killings of some of their members by the police. In turn, military policemen were retaliating by executing suspects belonging to this organisation. This explanation gained strength when investigations by the judicial police indicated that some of the civilian victims had had their police records checked by military police officers shortly before they were shot. The cases are still under investigation and so far only allow for speculations on the real backgrounds. Until more is known about the identity of the victims and the circumstances in which both civilians and active and non-active policemen have died, it is not possible to support any particular interpretation of the situation.

Studies by the [Center for the Study of Violence](#) have shown that impunity for violent crime and homicide in particular is very high, which makes it difficult to be optimistic about being able to fully explain what this crisis is about. This also suggests that the decrease of homicide rates cannot be attributed to major improvements in clearing cases and trying and sentencing perpetrators. Detailed studies on the causes of this decline (again by the Center for the Study of Violence) have shown that there are multiple causes at work and improvements in social and economic conditions and in public services with more investments in very deprived communities, as well as changes in the demographic profile of residents, with less youth in the population, have much impact on the drop of homicides. Such improvements coincide with a growth of drug trafficking and cargo hijacking, which are very profitable activities narrowly related to organised crime. How can we make sense of a scenario in which successes in the area of public security coexist with the growth of organised forms of crime? This is our challenge and one which every now and then acquires more poignancy as crises emerge and make visible to the public the continued presence of very shady and dangerous undercurrents- what are the true conflicts between the police and organised crime, what truces are made and at what costs for whom?

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^[1]The preventive police are called military, it is the uniformed police force and has no relation to the Military forces.

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