São Paulo’s prison Gang and the side effects of public security policies*

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- The author will launch a book about the homicide rate in São Paulo publish by
São Paulo’s prison Gang and the side effects of public security policies*
This article investigates the homicide rate in São Paulo and the process that led to the rise and fall in killing rates between 1960 and 2010. In-depth interviews with murderers will help to describe the micro-social context where decisions were taken. In order to understand how the city was capable of lowering homicide rates after 1999, it is necessary to see the earlier rise in rate also. The emergence of São Paulo’s criminal organization, the First Command of Capital (PCC), must be seen as an outcome of the pre-existing violence and as a side effect of public security policies.

Keywords - Homicide rate, violence, police violence, First Command of Capital, PCC, prison system, mass incarceration, organized crime

Even though São Paulo is not officially at war, homicide rates in the state was similar to those seen in places undergoing these kinds of conflicts. Between 1960
and 1999, homicides in the city grew by 906 per cent without any clear reasons to explain why so many people were killing and being killed by guns in the poorest neighbourhoods of São Paulo’s poor periphery. While in wars the reasons for the political, ethnic, and religious rivalries are evident, this was never the case in São Paulo. At the height of violence in the city, most of the cases were related to interpersonal conflicts, and accounts of killings sometimes mentioned a lingering stare that put the killer’s honour at risk. It was as if the decision to kill no longer involved the same taboo as before. Taking a life seemed to have become a banal decision and rate of homicide in the city reached more than 50 cases per 100 thousand inhabitants.

Surprisingly, it was in the midst of these daily conflicts, without any hope for improvement from authorities and researchers, that situation reversed itself as if some good medicine was found for blocking this contagion process. There had

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been significant changes in the direction taken by investment in public security policies - which will be discussed in this work - but at the time, not even the most optimistic would predict that a persistent inversion in the trajectory of murder rates could occur in the city and in the state. Between the year 2000 and 2010, the murder rate in São Paulo fell 82%, declining to the same level of 1960’s rate\(^4\). This process continued until 2015, albeit at a slower rate. The data can vary depending on the source and the criteria for counting murders, but all of them show a similar movement of growth followed by decline.

Table 1: 100 years of homicide in the city of São Paulo (Homicide per 100 thousands inhabitants)

\(<\text{Table 1}\>

**Source:** Data compiled from Fundacão Seade archives, based on cases noted by the Department of Public Safety / Centre of Study on Violence of São Paulo University.

If there are no apparent overarching social conflicts guiding these choices, why did so many people become killers after 1970? Why and how were so many people affected all of a sudden? In the name of what values and rules did they kill? And why, after so many years of seemingly interminable deaths, did the number of homicides begin to fall in these same neighbourhoods, as if the contagion ceased to have an effect and the murders stopped spreading? This article intends to describe the social process of rising and fall of homicides as two sides of the same coin. In order to understand how the city was capable of lowering homicide rates, it will be needed to see previous spreading as well.

This work is an in-depth case study of the city of São Paulo that investigates
the variations in the murder rate between 1960 and 2010 with the goal of identifying the social mechanisms of formal and informal control that were absent or at work during these drastic changes in behavior concentrated among certain groups and neighborhoods in the city – in general, young men between 15 and 29 years of age living in the periphery of São Paulo. It’s not a matter of simply investigating correlations between homicides and causal variables. The main subject of analysis is the process that led these murders to multiply and then quickly cease in an equally unexpected manner, producing the curve in the graph above in the form of a high mountain. Emerging of São Paulo’s criminal organization First Command of Capital, as I will argue, must be comprehended as an outcome of pre-existing violence which and as a side effect of public security policies that were introduced by government mainly after 1990s.

In these extremely complex social phenomena, a theory capable of accounting for the quality of interactions between people in these places and contexts which moulded their relationships has an important complementary role, permitting the micro-reality of this universe of violence to provide some more pieces that are lacking in this complicated jigsaw puzzle. More precisely, it is necessary to

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understand how interaction between person and environment encourage breaking rules of conduct. Moral norms and then enforcement must be analyzed in relation to the situational context where opportunities are provided and frictions are generated⁶.

The methodology is in-depth interviews and analyzes the accounts of killers in regard to the deaths they caused in the city, and the motives that led them to kill someone. In-depth interviews with confessed killers who were active during these last 50 years will help to reveal their justifications and what led them to believe that, in those circumstances and contexts, murder was the best choice to make. This series of in-depth interviews occurred over a 16-year period in the city of São Paulo. The first interviews happened in 1999, when for the first time I spoke with a group of 11 confessed killers, all of whom were out on the street, to write an article about massacres (chacina was the word that came to be used to refer to multiple homicides with at least three victims in São Paulo) for a national news magazine⁷. Excerpts from these seven hours of interviews were used in the story published in September of that year.

The conversations dealt with two main themes: why did you kill, and what


kind of people did you kill. The successive meetings strengthened their trust and allowed for conversation to flow freely. “I killed a lot of people. But I never killed an innocent person,” was one of the ideas that many of the interviewees tried to reinforce. Over these 16 years, I have got in touch and interviewed members of military police (specialized in territorial patrolling of the city, with uniforms and guns) and civil police (specialized in investigation of crime), prosecutors, leaders of civil society, religious men that work in violent communities, local traders who supported vigilante actions, politicians and other sources for questioning about violence and homicides.

Their accounts show individuals with a capacity for evaluation and reflection based on justifications that show the limits and incentives that the context provided in terms of available choices, as well as the circumstances and opportunities available in light of the prevailing morality. These in-depth interviews, therefore, aren’t meant to describe facts, but end up being essential in revealing the city, just like the characteristics and circumstances present in those environments which incentivize or inhibit the construction of a morality shared by different kinds of killers.

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Ideas of deservedness of death were behind the actions and the inactions on the part of these institutions of security and Justice (formal controls), and affecting the role of neighbourhoods in establishing social behaviours by informal controls over deviants⁹. This process will be described in light of the effects that they provoke in local interactions and homicide rates.

Figure 2: Maps of homicides in São Paulo’s neighbourhood (2000, 2010)

Source: São Paulo Department of Public Safety / Centre for the Study on Violence of University of São Paulo (NEV/USP)

⁹ Debate about this morality that tolerates some kind of homicides can be seen in Graham D. Willis. The Killing Consensus. Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil. University of California Press. 2014
Why do they kill?

The interviews were with killers who acted alone or worked in groups, as member of state police force or civil society, and primarily in the poorest and most violent neighbourhoods of São Paulo. Homicides are seen notably as a tool of self-
defence and as an alternative social response for lack of institutions control over deviant behaviour\textsuperscript{10}. In general, field work brought three narratives produced historically by three different groups who defended the homicides that were carried out in these places:

a) Members of Police who took part in informal death squads or who carried out homicides during their police work on city streets; they don't believe that the system of Justice and Public Security is able to deal with threats caused by criminals so they would promote cleansing and extermination against criminal threats.

“When I see a dead Military Police officer …. That criminal that I arrested, who killed the policeman, not even three months went by and he was out, and I didn't really understand that. What happened? My heart started to harden, the moment came when I decided … I always tell people that we’re made by God, right? So what happened? \textit{DEUS} [Portuguese for ‘GOD’]: I removed the letter D and the letter S. What’s left is \textit{EU} [Portuguese for ‘ME’]. So I started to decide, I became God: Starting today I won’t arrest anyone else, because it’s useless. I don’t know what the courts do to release people, I don’t know what happens in there. But I think everything is wrong, so if that’s not working, and I see so many victims, then I want to fix the problem. So every guy that I catch doing something wrong from now on, I’ll be the judge, I’ll be the prosecutor, and I’ll try him”\textsuperscript{11}.

\textsuperscript{10} Most of these interviews will be publish in a book called Homicides Rates in São Paulo: an examination of trends from 1960-2010 that will be launched in 2016 by Springer Book, New York.

\textsuperscript{11} Manso. Crescimento e queda dos homicídios em SP entre 1960 e 2010. P – 142
b) Vigilantes and their supporters in their neighbourhood, who were active mainly in the 1980s and who sought to “clean” the neighbourhood and defend “workers” from “criminals” in the places where they lived;

If there were at least seven or eight others like me, I think things would improve 100%. You’d be getting rid of these perps that egg on other perps, you understand? Because if you nip it in the bud… - You’re going to say, hey, but killing a 13-, 14-year-old kid…. But that’s when they have to die. Because they’re the worst. [He tells the story of a boy who killed a pregnant woman] Shit, I felt so bad that if I could strangle them one by one… I feel so much disgust that I can’t feel pity for anyone. (…) I have a lot to say to those human rights people. The truth is, this Dom Paulo Evaristo12 is responsible for everything that the human rights people do. He defends a lot of criminals. The criminals can do whatever they please. He doesn’t criticize them at all. In all the debates I’ve seen on TV he’s always different from everyone else. It also makes me mad to see them have three, four lawyers to accuse me. Why are they putting so many lawyers on me to try to incriminate me, when all I did was kill hoodlums?13

Vigilante Florisvaldo de Oliveira, who became known as Cabo Bruno (“Corporal Bruno”) and who start to kill in 1982 and was killed 30 years

c) Young men, usually residents of the poor neighbourhoods in the periphery of the city, not necessarily linked to criminal careers, who kill mostly in response to interpersonal conflicts among neighbours and as a way of self-defence in their neighbourhood, or as result of conflicts promoted by drug or criminal market.

12 Paulo Evaristo Arns was a bishop in São Paulo during the military dictatorship and campaigned against the regime and its use of torture.
13 Interview given to Valdir Sanches for the Nov. 20, 1984 Afinal Magazine.
There are a lot of things that can make a guy deserve to die, and I can cite three, four, or ten reasons. First is the guy who delays your side. You’re doing a movement [carrying out an illegal activity] and then a guy shows up who’s got nothing to with anything and gets in the way - like, rats you out. Second: sometimes, you see, we’re all brothers, we’re all tight, right? Then, you see, some guy arrives who has nothing to do with anything, and accuses someone and affects one of our bros. That guy, I don’t think there’s any forgiveness, I think it’s right to kill him, isn’t it? Another one. This guy comes, kills, in this case a worker – like that guy who went into the bakery and killed a guy who lived in the neighbourhood for more than 20 years, who built something, gave jobs to the people in the community – you understand what that’s like? A guy who produced something, and then out of nothing, pa-pa-pa, real crazy, and brings the lead down on the guy. I think it’s justified [to kill that person]. That kind of thing doesn’t stand a chance14.

Flamarion didn’t allow me publish his real name. He was 32 years old during interview in 1999. Flamarion used to belong to a group of peers in south periphery of São Paulo which was in conflict with members of rival groups in his neighbourhoods. He was killed in front of his son in march 2006.

For understanding how these narratives strengthened and later lost their moral support, this study separates the explanation into three stages. First, the beginning of the growth in homicide rates; then, the killing proliferation; and finally, in the third stage, the drop in rates.

Beginning of the rising of homicides – Lack of Legitimacy

14 Manso, Crescimento e queda dos homicídios em SP entre 1960 e 2010. pp-193
The broader relationship between the drop in homicides and legitimacy has already been studied in criminology, with authors correlating low rates of homicide with societies where institutions and state authorities are seen by citizens as legitimate\textsuperscript{15}. Historically, declines in murder rates normally accelerate when there is a coalition between state authorities, community leaders, and philanthropists to emphasize the defence of civility and of self-control, changing social beliefs about the damage of doing harm to one another and taking the path towards the civilizing process\textsuperscript{16}. This widespread compliance to authorities indicates the existence of laws and institutions in full alignment with the beliefs of the population, generating respect for norms due to positive reasons and not out of fear of punishment.

The feeling of the corrosion of and threats to these values shared by the population and by authorities can provoke reactions from groups, classes, or individuals who feel threatened. The institutions tasked with controlling deviants can restrain those willing to go against the system by the threat of force. But during periods of deep social changes, when old institutions no longer serve as moral and


legal reference points in the new world, new perceptions are created that can reflect social imbalance, confusion, conflicts, and violence. Homicides can emerge as a response to the conflicts arising out of those deep social changes and the loss of legitimacy that the previous world represented.

Eisner calls our attention to the fact that homicide rates tend to grow during periods of agitation and political transition, such as what happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s\textsuperscript{17}. Almost five years later, Kazakhstan and Estonia, as well as Russia and Romania, were devastated by high homicide rates\textsuperscript{18}. A similar situation was observed in South Africa following the end of apartheid\textsuperscript{19}. It’s as if prevailing rules were lifted and, for a moment, citizens began to act in accordance with their own interests. According to these studies, the lack of political legitimacy affects homicide through deteriorating social institutions of control, violating the rules of reciprocity between the state and citizens, and/or creating an environment of “virtual statelessness” that encourages methods of “self-help”\textsuperscript{20}.

Major social transformations and political instability are central in the

\textsuperscript{17} Eisner: How to reduce homicides by 50% in the next 30 years. 2015,p-11
discussion about violence in some large Brazilian cities, as is shown by studies about homicides carried out in São Paulo and in other states such as Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo. It’s necessary to identify the context of disorderly urbanization happening in Brazilian cities in the 1950s and perceptions that were evolved. Public safety and legal institutions in the big cities, which were already discredited during the first half of the century, began to face the challenges of administering the megalopolises of the following decades.

The “selective moral disengagement” relative to murder in the context of São Paulo’s rapid urbanization in the 1960s and the institutional conditions favourable for the carrying out of these crimes help to understand the beginning of the growth in homicides rates. The term, used by Bandura to think about terrorism, helps identify the point when murders began to be viewed and practiced in the city as an action guided by the common good, morally tolerated, and dependent on the victim and the circumstances in which they took place. Instead of being an abominable crime, murders begin to be identified with an alternative form of social control for a population sceptical of public safety and legal institutions\(^\text{21}\).

*Death Squad and Military Police*

The Death Squad was founded by members of São Paulo’s police in 1968 and for the first time this one group of vigilantes became popular promising to clean the streets of criminals. In the first half of the last century, when homicides remained below the mark of 10 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, interpersonal homicides related to familial environments predominated\(^{22}\). These instances were linked to jealousies, hatreds, and passions, almost always related to family members of the victim or of the perpetrator, and as a result were morally condemned. These instances were extraordinary, rationally incomprehensible, and associated with probable madness or lack of self-control (passion) by the killer.

Between 1960 and 1975, most homicides took place inside of homes: in 1960, they accounted for 55%; in 1965, for 64%; in 1970, 42%; and in 1975, 45\(^{\circ}\)\(^{23}\). Mello Jorge put forth the hypothesis that these crimes are related to conflicts between friends and relatives\(^{24}\). In the 1980s and 1990s, homicides are characterized precisely by the fact they are crimes that happen on public streets - consistently accounting for more than 60% - with the victims’ bodies turning up in

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public spaces in the morning, usually after being shot during the middle of the night. When homicides begin to be tied to the situation of a lack of safety on the streets of São Paulo, and seek to control the urban disorder of the periphery, rates begin to climb rapidly. In 2000, this pattern of homicides in public places was well established. As shown by Gawryszewski, in the year 2000, 69% of victims were assassinated in public places and only 9.9% inside their homes. Homicides in bars accounted for 4.3%.

It’s not a matter of a simple transformation related to the overall increase in common crime, but of a broader sensation that police and court institutions were incapable of dealing with the threat of disorder and the lack of control over more traditional values. This new social configuration will open up space for “tales of crime” and for the construction of scapegoats, which sets up the differences between workers and criminals, as well as for attempts to build alternatives to the social controls that had been discredited. This new urban morality has the ability to transform killers into heroes rather than into the pariahs and villains they were in the 1950s and 1960s. The rise of heroic killers represents the strengthening of moral

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26 V.P. Gawryszewski Homicídios no município de São Paulo. 2002

cynicism.

Returning to the historical facts, in 1968, the Death Squad emerges giving interviews to newspapers without revealing their identities and justifying the homicides as a way to curb the activity of thieves and to demonstrate how productive they’d been to a population in retreat in the face of growing criminality. In Bicudo’s interpretation, these were members of the Civil Police who witnessed the growing status of the old Public Security Force after the coup of 1964 and which threatened to take over the Civil Police organization28. The killers sought, therefore, to show their greater capacity and willingness to combat crime. Led by Deputy Sérgio Paranhos Fleury, investigators and deputies came together to carry out homicides as a reaction to the growth of criminality at the end of the 1960s.

Members of the Death Squad, state employees who were supposed to act in accordance with the law, therefore, began to carry out killings with the supposed goal of inhibiting the criminals’ actions. Within the public security institutions themselves, borrowing an idea that originated in Rio de Janeiro, homicide is no longer seen as a crime and becomes an instrument to be used for control. Counting on the tolerance of the state’s governor and secretary of public safety, homicides begin to be used as a method of social cleansing. Estimates about the number of

people killed at the hands of the Death Squad in São Paulo vary from hundreds to 2 thousands\textsuperscript{29}. The rising of the Death Squad is a seminal moment because it reveals the growth of this new urban practice in São Paulo. When criminals are transformed into an enemy to be pursued and combated in order to ensure safety, and when this proposed social control is tolerated by institutions, a new door is opened and homicides start their upsurge in the city.

The Military Police was created in 1969 by the merging of the Public Forces and the Civil Guard and is made subordinate to the army. Bomb attacks, bank heists, kidnappings and homicides committed by guerrilla groups opposed to Dictatorship began to grow and attract the focused attention of the entire police structure, especially after the first few years of the 1970s. Fleury, singled out as the informal leader of the São Paulo Death Squad, instead of being punished by the justice system for his crimes, becomes the key figure in police repression staring in August 1969 as deputy of the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS), a suppressive political police force that used the same aggressive and violent methods to find suspects as their target.

In 1974, after the dictatorship defeated the guerrilla’s groups, “criminals” once again became the main focus of police attention. During this phase, methods

were reinvented, based on the active patrolling done by Military Police officers in the outskirts of the city. The victims of Military Police would be suspicious residents who live in the territories they are tasked with patrolling. The alleged instances of resisting arrest that resulted in death - homicides which were allegedly committed in genuine self-defence by police officers and which had begun to be staged during the era of urban guerrilla warfare - would be the most common method for covering up the homicide of suspects. This is what Pinheiro defines as the “transposition of authoritarian practices”\(^{30}\). Unprepared for the task, the method of executing criminals was once again used as a means of territorial control in poor neighbourhoods. Military Police tasked with patrolling the territory of the São Paulo periphery, and influenced by the techniques and ideals of anti-guerrilla combat, altered the scale of violence and the social effect of homicides during 1970s and 1980s.

The dynamics of this process can be seen in the official numbers for cases of “resistance followed by death,” situations in which a police officer kills and alleges that it was in legitimate self-defence after being fired upon by the suspect. Many of the cases of shootouts were proven to be forgeries. In 1960 - despite the low trustworthiness of records - Mello Jorge found one instance of a death officially

\(^{30}\) Paulo S. Pinheiro. Violência, crime e sistemas policiais em países de novas democracias. (\textit{Tempo Social}, São Paulo, SP, 1997), vol. 9, n° 1, pp. 43-52. pp. 44
caused by police forces\textsuperscript{31}. Five years later, in 1965, there were two deaths. In 1970, when the military dictatorship was in its sixth year of power, these deaths had climbed to 28, and during the height of repression in 1975, they jumped to 59. In the years that followed, violence and homicides of the “resistance followed by death” kind would become a hallmark of the culture of the São Paulo Military Police. As noted by Oliveira Junior, between 1981 and 2005, 16,100 people were killed in these conflicts: 14,216 civilians and 1,884 police. Most of the people killed by Military Police were young men that lived in São Paulo’s poor neighbourhood in peripheries.\textsuperscript{32}

Figure 1: Map of Residents killed by Military Police between 2002 and 2011

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Source: Pro-Aim (São Paulo Department of Health)/ Sou da Paz Institute.

\textsuperscript{31} M.H.P. Mello Jorge. Mortalidade por causas violentas no município de São Paulo, pp 195
0 deaths
1 to 10 deaths
11 to 20 deaths
21 to 30 deaths
31 to 40 deaths
More than 40 deaths
At the same time, in the beginning of 1980s, in the outskirts of São Paulo, members of civil society started to articulate against young men suspects of being criminals. The first cases reported by police as vigilante crime date from the end of the 1970s. According to these reports, the group headed by Geraldo de Oliveira Pereira, known as Geraldão, started its streak of killings in 1977, active mainly in Santo Amaro, Jardim São Luís, and Capão Redondo, all in the south zone of the city. Geraldão was accused of six homicides, although it’s believed that he killed twice as many. But little by little other vigilantes appeared, and in the 1980s the practice had spread across the poor neighbourhoods of the city. The case that gained the most notoriety in the papers happened in the early 1980s. The Military Police private Florisvaldo de Oliveira - who became known as Cabo Bruno (“Corporal Bruno”) and who would be kicked off the force following the accusations – stood out in the newspaper accounts after giving interviews and assuming the title of “hunter of criminals.” In a November 1984 interview, he stated that he had killed more than 50. He was active in south periphery of São Paulo, and began killing in January 1982 while on break from the Military Police.

Between 1980 and 1989, Adorno and Cardia identified 184 cases reported in newspapers of homicides carried out by extermination groups in São Paulo -

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with victims being adults as well as 34 children/adolescents\textsuperscript{35}. In 1990, however, the police reviewed cases from the previous 15 years and calculated that close to one thousand people had been killed by vigilantes in Greater São Paulo.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Domino Effect – Spreading of homicides}

This social mechanism of proliferating homicides is able to widen the abyss between geographically close neighbourhoods. When a homicide happens in violent regions, where formal and informal controls over homicide are weakened due to a morality that tolerates socially selective executions and the inability to rely on the police and the courts, the act can provoke homicidal reactions and lead to the practice of new homicides between those who exist with and recognize the risk around them.

A circumstantial morality is created in light of the need to survive in this context where life itself is seen to be at risk. Young men start to connect with peers as a way of self-defence, stimulated by sensation of vulnerability and fear of death. Homicide became part of daily choices in an environment perceived as dangerous.

According to Glaeser, Sacerdote, and Scheinkman, when individuals kill and go unpunished in these areas, inevitably incentives arise to carry out killings


\textsuperscript{36} O Globo. "Mil mortos no rastro dos justiceiros.". May 27, 1990.
as a means of survival\textsuperscript{37}. In this social mechanism, which begins to take effect in
the periphery of São Paulo, homicides provoke new homicides. The choice of
homicide is contagious because it also demands a new type of strategy for those
who feel threatened or at risk. As a consequence, the aggregate result of this
phenomenon always ends up being greater than the sum of individual results\textsuperscript{38}.

This type of behaviour can be called preemptive action, that is, a type of
action where the “individual takes into account the homicides that occurred in the
past when deciding how to act”\textsuperscript{39}. More directly, the increase in the probability of
being killed increases the incentive to kill first the potential murderer in order to
survive. A seemingly banal conflict can end in death when the parties see each
other as potential killers. Killings are carried out to survive this environment full of
predators, a type of contextual morality transformed by local circumstances and
social interaction.

The growth of homicides had an effect on the environment to the point
that, increasingly, more bodies were left in the middle of the street, sometimes
for days, before being removed by vehicles from the coroner’s office. In São
Paulo’s violent neighbourhoods, residents described daily encounters with
cadavers. The circle of residents around those gunned-down bodies in the street
transformed homicides into local happenings, where they commented and

\textsuperscript{37} Edward Glaeser, L Edward; Bruce I Sacerdote; José A. Scheikman. The Social Multiplier, National Bureau of Economic
Research, 2002., Pp 345-353

\textsuperscript{38} Glaeser, Edward, Sacerdote; Scheikman. The Social Multiplier. pp 2-3

\textsuperscript{39} B. Flaherty; R. Sethi. Peaceable kingdoms and war zones. Preemption, Ballistics and Murder in Newark. 2010. The
economics of crime: lessons for and from Latin America. (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2010). pp 2.
speculated about the motivations for the crime and the possible perpetrators, becoming increasingly common rituals in the periphery during the 1980s and 1990s. Death became a recurrent topic and fear of death a common and justified feeling.

Some of these urban youths – born in the periphery of São Paulo in the 1980s and 1990s and growing up under the risk of being killed in the daily violence of the neighbourhoods in which they lived, constantly losing friends to bullets – would come face to face with moral dilemmas at a much higher rate than youths living in peaceful neighbourhoods. It’s necessary to understand what the day-to-day in these violent neighbourhoods provoked in the outlook of those who live there, and how circumstances ended up creating a regional feeling of fear and vulnerability capable of inducing choices among members of certain groups. Reporting a killer to the police following someone’s death was practically discarded as an option. In this environment of tolerance and high vulnerability, marked by code of silence, fear of death, which became ever-present in their daily lives, helped create a social mechanism conducive to new homicidal choices.

I have followed the trajectory and accounts of three groups of youths living in three different neighbourhoods of São Paulo, who during the 1990s committed dozens of killings motivated by conflicts that took place in the districts where they lived. The first group was made up of youths from Jardim Ângela in the south zone. Ranking as the most violent place in the world in 1995, with 108 homicides
per 100,000 inhabitants, a large part of these killings were carried out as a result of interpersonal conflicts between youths in adjoining neighbourhoods who had formed rival groups to kill each other. Between 1993 and 1998, according to the police and prosecutors investigation, 156 youths died during conflicts between members of these groups in Jardim Ângela. I have interviewed some survivors of this period in the city. Most of deaths were responses to previous killings made by rivals group in neighbourhood.

The same mechanism of revenge and conflicts was at work in the other two neighbourhoods studied: Grajaú, in the south zone; and Jardim Pantanal, which is a south zone neighbourhood that borders Diadema. Youths in Grajaú were interviewed in 1999, a period when homicide rates in São Paulo had reached their highest levels. They described the dynamic of homicides and massacres they carried out. Seven years later, five of the seven people interviewed had been killed. In Jardim Pantanal, the dispute between local youths also lasted more than 10 years and spanned three different generations. Revenge and association with peers in order to improve the mechanism of self-defence; to kill the enemy rather than be murdered; be the predator and don’t become the prey.

In addition to vengeance and disputes between allied groups of youths, whose identities are usually tied to the territory in which they grew up, petty

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41 For more details of these three trajectories see Bruno Paes Manso, Crescimento e queda dos homicídios em SP entre 1960 e 2010. Uma análise dos mecanismos da escolha homicida e das carreiras no crime, Unpl. Dissert., University of São Paulo
conflicts, such as courting someone else’s girlfriend, bar fights, or looking at someone the wrong way, could be enough to sentence someone to death.

Vando, a resident of Jardim Ângela and a brother of three youths who in the 1990s were involved in numerous homicides, lived in a three-story house with a slab roof from where he could fly his kite and from where he witnessed various shootouts and killings.

I remember that before I turned 13 [between 1984 and 1997] I saw eight people being killed in front of me. We end up remembering the number because afterwards we’d tell stories about it. At the time, it was so I could tell the story to the other kids: I saw this happening, I saw so-and-so dying, and so you end up remembering. It was common to see people with guns, hear shots. It was so common that you’d hear a shot right in front here and you wouldn’t even jump. It was so normal that you didn’t even close the door, you wouldn’t head back home. What would happen is you’d think: “somebody must have died.”

Homicides, therefore, in this situational context, should be viewed as choices that were intertwined with and determined the behaviours of third parties. Spatial dependence is based on the notion that interpersonal crimes, such as homicides, are dependent on social interactions and therefore subject to diffusion. What the accounts of killer’s interviews show is that, before choosing,

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42 2010 author interview.

a person is engaged in a perception process where they identify the viable alternatives in response to a temptation or provocation. The spreading of homicide is induced by this kind of context – supported by a cynical morality that weakens formal and informal control over homicide.

Acts of violence can of themselves lead to a sequence of events that lead to more violence. In addition, the majority of murders happen between people who know each other and normally involve networks of association that follow geographical vectors\(^\text{44}\). Homicide is always capable of provoking the revolt and indignation of the victim’s colleagues, relatives, and friends. These are small daily tragedies which can lead to consequences that last for years and provoke endless deaths. The cycles of revenge were among the main causes of rivalries and successive deaths in neighbouring districts of the city’s periphery, as data about homicides in São Paulo show.

The expansion of the retail drug sale points across peripheral communities, especially starting in the 1990s, was another important factor in expanding fatal conflicts in poor neighbourhoods. The increase in the number of *biqueiras* was associated with the arrival of crack cocaine to Sao Paulo, which happened at the end of the 1980s and began to be widely sold the following decade. In communities with high homicide rates, the development of the “crack

\(^{44}\) The Information Technology Management Group of the DHPP’s Police Intelligence Unit analyzed 576 police investigations from January 1 to December 31, 2003, where the perpetrator was identified. The data show that 85.5% of victims knew the perpetrator of the crime, and in 80% of the cases the victim lived less than one kilometer from the scene of the crime. For the same issue, see A. Reiss; J. Roth. *Understanding and preventing violence*, vol. I Washington, National Academy Press, 1993.
“addict” character - someone who is uncontrollable, incapable of following any rules, and a slave to their addiction - transformed these noias (a term derived from paranoia which is used to describe crack addicts because of their frantic behavior when they have to go without the drug) into a favourite target for killers. The noia, after all, brought together all the defects of the new enemy in this setting of heightened vulnerability. The noia represented the essence of what could not be tolerated in this context, because the noia represented a lack of predictability and a disrespect for any social norms as a result of his addiction. In short, the noia had the stigma of being a “bad blood” 45.

In many massacre investigations, cases abound of “little circles” of youth known in the neighbourhood for smoking crack being decimated. The massacres began to grab the attention of authorities and of the São Paulo press in 1994. The following year, the Department of Homicides and Protection of Persons reacted to the growing number of cases and created the Coordinating Group for Investigating Multiple Homicides in order to collect and analyze information about this new phenomenon. During the first years of the group’s activities, a rapid climb was noted in these kinds of cases: in 1994, there were 34 massacres in the SPMR; the following year, 49. The number would then remain relatively stable until 1998, when it jumped to 89 cases. That number that would be repeated again in 1999, and then reached a record of 95 in the year 2000 46.

At the end of the 1990s – with the multiplying process of murders at work

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45 Killer explain why they kill people addict in crack in São Paulo in Manso: Crescimento e queda dos homicídios em SP entre 1960 e 2010.
and homicides getting out of control, leading to the self-extinction of part of the population – these massacres revealed the chaotic environment that would precede the decline in rates. During the most dramatic phase of violence, however, everyone lost out as a result of homicides, including the killers. In interviews, they show themselves aware that would be better if they stop the self-extinction process. “I kill because I don’t see any alternatives. But I am definitely in danger and there are many people who want to kill me as well”. One of them has defined his condition saying that he was “working overtime” on earth. The social mechanisms that led to the decline in homicides can only be understood after we analyze the growth of this practice and note how institutions and society became more receptive to measures that lead to non-violent choices in order to avoid self-extinction. The abrupt decline in homicides was also an outcome of the cumulative growth in murders that had occurred in previous years and produced social losses mainly for young men and their relatives in neighbourhoods of São Paulo’s Peripheries. If was not about irrationality and madness, it would be space for another pact or contract in agenda, accepted by the majority and controlled by social mechanisms for reducing everybody’s losses.

*Drop of homicides*

The decline of homicides in São Paulo is confirmed by various sources,
both in the area of public safety and in the area of health. The Health Ministry’s Mortality Information Subsystem (SIM), published annually has reported continued declines in homicides in the state of São Paulo as well as city of São Paulo. The decline was greatest precisely among those groups that were most vulnerable to homicides in poorer regions, that is, youths between 15 and 24 and between 25 and 34 living in regions of extreme or high exclusion. For example, while in 2008 the decline for youths between 15 and 24 in conditions of extreme social exclusion reached 83.2%, for youths between 10 and 14 in conditions of medium social exclusion the decline was of 41%47. In addition, the most violent areas in the city were generally also the areas where homicides later felt more sharply.

Studies point to some hypotheses that merit consideration: the increase of 169.5% in public safety investments by the state between 1997 and 2008; growth in the rate of incarceration, which went from 276.5 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996 to 524.6 per 100,000 in 200848; reduction of firearms in circulation49; changes in policing; social investments50; and the activity of the

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First Command of Capital\textsuperscript{51}. It’s undeniable that the phenomenon of decline is multi-causal. But this section will describe how this process was induced by government policies and how new mechanisms of control ended up determining non violent behaviour. Just as this article identified a new moral alignment in some neighbourhoods in order to understand the growth in homicides using the perpetrators’ accounts, the same will be done to explain the inverse movement.

The decline was associated with a realignment regarding the morality of homicide produced by previous disorder and by cycle of violence and threat of self-extermation. Among young men in the São Paulo periphery, the 1990s was a time of perceiving that they were wiping themselves out. The effects of this morality were transformed into action via the construction of mechanisms of formal and informal controls that would curb the practice of homicide. In this sense, this new understanding formed during the period of killings allowed for the creation of new mechanisms of control that were able to change behaviours starting in 2000, a process that is ongoing today. The process was induced by public policies whose effects would be felt across the state, causing the decline to occur simultaneously in practically all cities. The side effect of these public policies, however, was the strengthening of gang leaders inside prison which in established new procedures and rules in criminal careers followed by young men

tired of disorder and willing to follow a criminal career. Compliance with stop- 
self-extermination behaviour was not a rule imposed from the top to the bottom 
by threat of violence, but a moral shared by young men that were waiting for a 
white flag which rose among “brothers”.

Analysis of gangs has suggested that violence causes gangs, instead of 
gangs causing violence. In other words, gangs form in a response to 
government’s failure to protect youths against violence. In São Paulo, high 
level of disorder led to a rise in new inter social arrangements induced by mass 
imprisonment and increasing of arrests made by police. Morality was 
transformed into actions when the criminal context started to be seen as a world 
under control: murder no longer was a matter of “life or death,” and other 
alternatives for interpersonal conflict were increasingly seen as viable and more 
advantageous since they didn’t provoke revenge and more conflicts. These new 
statute come from prison system, where people living in criminal careers would 
probably met. Compliance with new laws of crime – procedure – would ensure 
for a inmate a safer daily-life in prison. And the likelihood of being arrested was 
growing for members of criminal careers outside prison.

Signs of the new morality supporting a new contract between young men 
in poor neighbourhoods started to appear from the early 1990s as result of pre-
existing violence. The hip-hop movement, which gained strength in São Paulo

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due to the success of the Racionais MC’s, was full of lyrics that dealt critically with the theme of violence. One of the hip-hop movement's classic records was 2003’s *Direto do Campo de Exterminio* (*Straight from the Extermination Camp*) by the group Facção Central, which featured a dead white dove on the cover. In hip-hop lyrics the drama experienced by residents of the peripheries was summed up: “brothers killing brothers.” This is repeated in verses from various São Paulo musical groups. One of the Racionais MC’s biggest hits was “The Magic Formula for Peace,” which was already a success in live shows during the early 2000s but would be released only on a 2006 album.

But pay attention, look around and tell me: what’s improved? / Who’s left from the game? / I don’t know, a lot of wakes have happened since then. / Who’s the next mother who will be crying? / Ah, it took a while but today I can understand that the real scoundrel is the one who can survive / I’m going to search and who knows what I’ll find / You don’t believe, but I’m going after / my magic formula for peace (Racionais MC’s – A Formula Mágica da Paz (2006))

The discourse that defended respect among equals – who up to then had been killing each other was reproduced among other groups of youths living in the periphery, such as soccer team fans of Corinthians, the most popular in São Paulo. During the 1990s they created an enormous banner with the catchphrase “Loyalty, Humility, and Proceedings” that preached obedience and respect
among members of the team's fans. The establishment of the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Command of Capital, PCC) was an attempt by members of São Paulo criminal world to organize themselves and deal with the disorder reigning in that world. PCC grew in strength and dominated members of the underworld precisely because it preached, inside the prison, obedience to the norms of the criminal world and mutual respect between its members, using the motto of Peace, Justice, and Liberty. Among the 16 articles of its bylaws – which would be published in the official government gazette in 1997 after being seized – the appeal to or imposition of unity among members is mentioned in eight of them.

The PCC’s influence was essentially concentrated in and flowed from the inside of prisons in São Paulo, and the gang became dominant outside of prisons with the passage of time mainly after 2000. In general, however, this control over murders could be more easily put into practice in those neighbourhoods where people live who know people in the prison system, or where the parents of those in prison system live. Inhabitants in these places of


pre-existing violence have a better understanding of the deleterious effects of the cycles of homicide and know the real risk of being arrested as a PCC’s enemy.

_How this morality turns into actions_

Important changes primarily in the outlook for criminal careers in São Paulo were the result of public policies implemented during the 1990s. The first change was linked to the increase in the number of arrests carried out by the Military Police, a process that began in the 1990s. The increase in arrests led to an increase in imprisonment, which in turn led to a sevenfold increase in the number of inmates in the state over a period of two decades\(^5\). As the years passed, those who decided to follow criminal paths had to reflect upon their behaviour and consider the likelihood of spending time in jail in the future. This large-scaled imprisonment ended up strengthening the criminal groups that took it upon themselves to mediate control of prisons through the establishment of norms of conduct in the criminal world. PCC has member and rule the inmate procedures in 90 percent of prison system.

The initiative became well-established over the years as this informal control became seen as legitimate by the inmates and as the criminal underworld in São Paulo offered a series of advantages to those who formed alliances with

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\(^5\) Rate of incarceration in São Paulo was 65.2 per 100 thousands inhabitants in 1988 and rose to 418 in 2010. Data can be seen in Camila Nunes Dias: Camila Nunes Dias. _Da pulverização ao monopólio da violência: expansão e consolidação do Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) no sistema carcerário paulista_. Unpl. PHD dissert. University of São Paulo. Pp 104
them – and disadvantages to those who got involved in conflicts. The formation of this new mechanism of informal control over behaviour was, therefore, a consequence of public policies put in place in the 1990s and of pre-existing violence.

There is already a vast literature showing the individual effects of imprisonment on the reduction of crime in general. Currently, however, mass incarceration policies practiced in various countries and Brazilian states have led researchers to pay more attention to the side effects of these policies: the strengthening of gangs which act inside prisons, and the weakening of legal and public safety authorities. Both the positive and negative effects have been prominent in political debates. As writes Lessing, from Los Angeles and El Paso to El Salvador and Brazil, prison managers are losing authority in the penal establishments, especially to drug dealers who are able to expand their domination over streets and neighbourhoods into a lucrative criminal network.

Skarbek identifies ‘gang members’ expectations of serving jail sentences as a necessary factor for more efficient criminal governance, insofar as these organizations focus on the absence of the state and provide norms and controls in spaces where these rules aren’t mediated by the state. Skarbek’s findings

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59 Lessing: How to build a criminal empire from behind bars: prison gangs and projection of Power. 2009. Pp 1
remind us that the ability of prison gangs to do so doesn’t depend only on the absence of the state, but essentially on its actions, since they arrest people in the regions where these gangs are active. Thus a paradox arises in the punitive state: the harsher, the longer, and the more likely the prison sentence, the stronger are the incentives for allies on the outside to maintain the good behaviours promulgated by criminal leaders and, consequently, the greater the coercive power of gangs over those who expect to spend time in prison.

Recognizing the prevailing values in the São Paulo criminal underworld and the opportunities and limits in the world in which they are formed is essential for understanding the effect of legal and public safety policies. Mass incarceration, thus, wouldn’t have the same effect on robbery drug traffic activities in the city of São Paulo, which underwent a different dynamic. These crimes continued to grow and, in 2014, the number of robberies climbed to a historic high in the city, with 1,346 per 100,000 inhabitants, while homicide rates were the lowest in recent history of the city, according to the data from Public Security Department of São Paulo.

The inability of incarceration to reduce other types of crimes, such as robbery, shows the relevance of juxtaposing the criminal world morality against security and legal policies. If risk of arrest were a sufficient measure for criminal behaviour in general, cases of robbery and drug trafficking would also have diminished over time alongside homicides. We can see, therefore – ignoring for now that robbery statistics are less precise than homicide statistics – that
imprisonment had an impact on a type of criminal behaviour that was prejudicial to those involved in the criminal underworld themselves. Profound behaviour’s change doesn’t come from the top to the bottom. As São Paulo’s context shows, it comes from the bottom to the top. First, a new moral consensus is build in order to allow the work of informal control over deviants to work in a more efficient way.

Table 3 and 4: Inmates in São Paulo State (rate per 100 hundred inhabitants) and robberies in São Paulo (per 100 thousands inhabitants)

Sources: Department of Penitentiary System and Department of Public Security of São Paulo
Returning to the analyses of PCC’s role in this process of control, the story of the PCC was founded in August 31, 1993. During the first few years of the PCC, however, there was an increase in prison rebellions, in breaking out of prisoners, in murders, and in escapes. In 2001, the success of a widespread rebellion – which affected 29 prisons in the state thanks to the use of cellular
phones by prisoners to communicate – helped the expansion of the PCC. During the initial period of the gang’s establishment, which coincided with the expansion of the prison system and of the number and proportion of people imprisoned in the state, homicides rapidly increased within the prison system, climbing to more than 100 cases in 2000. That means that, despite the insistence of the gang’s statute that “brothers” need to be united and to stop killing each other, the proposition was more of an ideal goal than a practical possibility.

The construction and consolidation of this new organizational structure of control began in 2003, but it was only at the end of 2006, following the PCC’s attacks, that the gang took on its more definitive format, with the spread of this new model and its talk of distribution of power. Along with the more horizontal management model, Marcola’s command was also characterized by the change in the gang’s criminal interests, which focused on strengthening alliances tied to drug trafficking. Before that, however, in 2000, members of the criminal underworld began communicating with each other thanks to proliferation of cellular phones, which had already been decisive in organizing the PCC’s mega-rebellion across 29 prisons in 2001 and more than 50 had been confiscated. The number of phones confiscated jumped to more than 200 in 2004, and was close

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60 To understand this period of conflicts within PCC, see Nunes Dias: Da pulverização ao monopólio da violência: expansão e consolidação do Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) no sistema carcerário paulista. 2011. PP 67-68
to 350 in 2007, according to inquiries carried out at prisons. The proliferation of cellular phones brought rules establish by inmates closer to those on the outside, allowing for the informal controls established inside the prisons to extend beyond prison walls.

These rearrangements in management and improved communications helped guarantee these norms and proceedings in the poor neighbourhoods, especially the prohibition against homicides, which could no longer happen in the city without the PCC’s go-ahead. The mediation of conflicts would be carried out by the sintonias spread across the São Paulo neighbourhoods, with support for those decisions coming from inside the prisons. Debates outside of the prisons began to work more effectively in the mid-2000s, around the time that the PCC increased its presence in the drug market.

The PCC’s increasing stake in the drug market is another phenomenon that is pointed to as important in the decline in homicides and in the formation of this moral alignment critical of the conflicts. That’s because the building of alliances and of trusting relationships is an important part of commercial activity – even in the case of illegal activity – in that it increases sales and reduces losses. In this way, more importantly than the efficient control mechanisms capable of regulating behaviour, crime began to coexist with a morality that

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61 To understand this period of conflicts within PCC, see Nunes Dias: Da pulverização ao monopólio da violência: expansão e consolidação do Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) no sistema carcerário paulista. 2011. PP 67-68

valued alliances over confrontations. Partnerships with drug dealers of various sizes were what guaranteed increased gains from drug distribution. This expansion and formation of a sales network was one of the traits of this decade, and helped expand sales to various states, as police investigations and the gang’s accounting records show. Investigations by the police and state prosecutors show that the PCC formed partnerships in at least 22 of Brazil’s 27 states and federal district\textsuperscript{63}.

At the present, the “axe” of violence and homicides in São Paulo is concentrated mostly in the conflict between police and suspects. In 2014 and 2015, number of people killed by police broke historical records, even though homicides rates were respectively the lowest in recent historical homicide trends. In 2012, 96 polices were killed and most of the murders were attributed to PCC’s members who sent orders for killings from prison. The gang leaders wrote one year before a new statue ordering this strategy of attacking policemen:

\begin{quote}

When a cowardly act, an extermination or large extortion are confirmed, whether having occurred on the street or in the prison, on the part of our enemy, we will respond at the scale of crime. If a life is taken away in this manner by our enemies, the members registered in that “hood” (\textit{\textquotedblleft}quebrada\textit{\textquotedblright}) must unite to respond with the treatment that they deserve. Life is paid with life!!!

Blood is paid with blood!!!\textsuperscript{64}

In response to these homicides, members of police were accused of killing inhabitants of neighbourhoods where these policemen were shot. \textit{Chacinas}, or
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{63} Bruno Paes Manso; Marcelo Godoy. 20 anos de PCC – Os efeitos colaterais da política de segurança. Revista Interesse Nacional, 2014, Ed. 24. PP 26-36

multiple homicides cases, started to rise again after 2012 and the reasons for these crimes are associated with police retaliation\textsuperscript{65}. If “brothers” don’t kill “brother” as before, and the cycle of revenge stops in poor neighbourhoods of São Paulo, conflicts currently involve members of police and organized crime. But victims do not a connection with both sides most of the times. They are still killed because of the stigma of the social group they belong to – young men of poor neighbourhood of the city.

\textit{Conclusion}

The rise and fall in homicide rates in São Paulo can be better understood as a single social process in a longitudinal perspective analysis. Lack of legitimacy is a key concept to comprehend the huge short-term change in the homicide rate in São Paulo. Perception of the collapse of formal controls over homicides can start a process of violence and cycle of killings. Homicide is seen then a solution to deal with the permanent threat of being killed in some violent neighbourhoods until this spiral out of control.

This process of the growth of violence in São Paulo is behind the strengthening of PCC’s power nowadays. PCC doesn’t have the capillarity or intelligence network to coordinate control over homicide from the top to the

\textsuperscript{65} About this conflict evolving members of Police against organized crime see Camila Nunes Dias; Maria Gorete Marques; Ariadne Natal; Mariana Possas; Karen Ruotti. A prática de execuções na região metropolitana de São Paulo na crise de 2012: um estudo de caso. Rev. bras. segur. pública | São Paulo v. 9, n. 2, 160-179, Ago/Set 2015
bottom by threat of violence. The strength of PCC, however, came from the bottom and went up to the top because its leaders were able to guarantee a new moral consensus against self-exterrmination. They were able to establish order by fulfilling the expectation of controlling deviant behaviour in the criminal underworld inside the prison system.

PCC became the biggest supplier for the drug market in Brazil even though the majority of their members and leaders are inside the prison system. PCC’s leaders knew how to work strategically in this scenario. They make illegal money at the same time as they keep low levels of violence inside and outside prison. If illegitimacy of authorities is an important condition for understanding the rise in homicides, as we saw, it is not possible to associate lower rates of homicides with more legitimacy. In São Paulo, informal control made by prison gangs is cynically tolerated by the authorities. PCC, at the same time, has an important role to maintain the mass incarceration system that goes on thanks to the order that its members establish inside the prison. The strengthened of PCC role is one of the outcomes and these side-effects of public security policies must be discussed, as well as the quality of the peace process that São Paulo has reached.