Growing up in Rio’s favelas

Children and adolescents living in Rio de Janeiro’s shantytowns face a barrage of assaults on their health, including drug-related violence and sexually transmitted diseases. Barbara Fraser reports.

When Fabrício Rosa Mendes was growing up, kids in Alemão—a rough Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood of steep, canyon-like streets stacked with haphazard houses—had two choices: studying or dealing drugs. “I felt a lot of discrimination. Because I was black and because my address was in Alemão, it closed off a lot of opportunities”, he says. “I’m one of the few who decided to study.”

Mendes is now in his second year of nursing school. When he is not in the classroom, he climbs up and down Alemão’s streets as a community outreach worker in the national Family Health Program, listening to and counselling his neighbours, preventing health problems, or referring them to medical or dental services at the health centre down the hill.

In more than 600 shantytowns or favelas around metropolitan Rio, children and adolescents grow up in overcrowded, poorly ventilated homes, surrounded by armed gangs that defend their drug turf with heavy weapons, and cutoff from the rest of the city by economic and cultural barriers that can be as effective as barbed wire.

That environment contributes to health problems from diseases like dengue, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS, to teen pregnancy and violence. National and city health officials are attacking the problems with preventive efforts, through community outreach workers like Mendes and adolescent health promoters who provide information to peers.

Although some health indicators have improved since 1990—a recent report by the national Human Rights Secretariat cites infant mortality down by 58%, a decrease in child malnutrition from 20% to 2%, and a 30% decline in pregnancies in girls between ages 10–19 years—others remain high. Particularly alarming is the youth homicide rate, which rose from 41.7 per 100 000 in 1996 to 52.9 per 100 000 in 2008.

“Kids on the streets or in the favelas—who are vulnerable to abuse and merit protection—are often seen as problems instead of as children.”

“Drug traffickers walk around openly in the communities”, says Fabiana Gaspar, a psychologist with the non-profit organisation Viva Rio. “When they kill someone, they make sure people see it, to teach them a lesson.”

Drug traffickers flaunt their physical and economic power with flashy motorcycles, multiple girlfriends, and guns that kids begin to crave. “For many young people, who lack a broader perspective and never go far from the favela, the world becomes reduced to the favela, and they want to be like that”, says Gaspar, who coordinates grassroots psychological and social programmes, including a harm-reduction programme aimed at reducing drug-related health problems.

“Some start to think the violence is normal”, says 25-year-old Ana Carolina da Silva Almeida, a tall, slender woman with a heart-shaped face and a talkative 2-year-old son, who grew up in Rocinha, a huge conglomeration of houses crowded on a hillside on Rio’s south side, not far from the tourist beaches of Ipanema and Copacabana. This stressful situation leads to behavioural problems, aggressiveness, and learning difficulties, Gaspar says, but there is little mental health assistance in the favelas.

Guns become a way of settling all kinds of personal disputes, and young people who get caught up in the drug trade as couriers or small-scale dealers might receive death threats because they dated a rival’s lover, pocketed proceeds from a deal, or smoked the drugs they were supposed to sell.

Several government agencies offer protective services, assigning a mediator to work with the victim and aggressor to solve the dispute, says Osmar Vargas, who recently completed a study for Viva Rio of protective measures for youths threatened with death. If the victim owes money, for example, relatives may chip in to pay the debt. “The system works, to some extent”, Vargas says. “If a mediator gets involved in time, it can be effective.”

Families are often unaware of the services, however, or fear that if they approach a government agency, the young person will be arrested. Vargas found that lack of communication among the agencies also undermines effectiveness.

In 2009, the Rio city government launched a “pacification” programme targeting the favelas. Instead of the violent police crackdowns of the past, authorities announce that they will be going into a favela, giving traffickers a chance to leave or surrender. They confiscate weapons, set up a police station, and patrol on
A pacification programme took place in the neighbourhood of Rocinha in late April.