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Reducing Gun Violence in America

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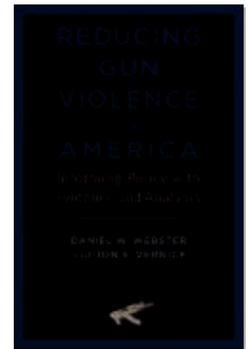
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Brazil

Gun Control and Homicide Reduction

Antonio Rangel Bandeira

Brazil accounts for 13% of the world's firearm homicides, despite having only 2.8% of the world's population. Brazil holds the sad world record for the highest number of annual deaths by firearms in absolute numbers. Faced with such deplorable rates of death by gun violence, Brazil has started reversing this trend by implementing a series of controls on these lethal products. The results have been impressive. According to the national Ministry of Justice, Brazil has reduced deaths by firearms from 39,284 in 2003 to 34,300 in 2010—a saving of 5,000 lives.¹ This essay analyzes the steps that have been taken.

Guns in Brazil

The research organization Viva Rio found that Brazil has about 16 million guns in circulation, half of which are illegal.² Recent gun control reforms have made it more difficult to qualify to buy weapons. This has resulted in a dramatic

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decrease in the annual sale of guns from 155,834 in 2010 to 93,334 in 2011 and down to 12,530 as of July 2012.³ To offset this decrease in domestic sales, the Brazilian gun industry has expanded its international exports by 370% since 2000. The country is now the fourth biggest firearm exporter, just behind the USA, Italy, and Germany, selling \$314 million worth of weapons internationally in 2010.⁴ In 1981, the Brazilian gun maker Taurus S.A. established a manufacturing facility in Florida. This plant and the exports from Brazil account for 20% of the pistols and revolvers sold in the North American market.⁵

Scientific Facts versus Myths

Nineteen years ago, faced with growing urban violence in Rio de Janeiro, Viva Rio sought to implement policies within the classical progressive paradigm focusing on unemployment, social inequality and illiteracy. It soon became clear that this was not enough; reducing urban violence required both gun control *and* reforms to the police force. The proliferation of weapons, which initially was viewed as a secondary cause of violence, turned out to be the key. This factor explained why personal conflicts that did not result in fatalities in other countries so often proved deadly in Rio de Janeiro. It became necessary to understand the universe of firearms.

At that time very little research had been done on gun markets, the use of guns by civilians, or their impact. Viva Rio had to create a research methodology to analyze the dynamics of arms and ammunition. (Researchers were fortunate to have as a colleague Dr. Pablo Dreyfus, an expert from Argentina, who had done field research on drug trafficking before becoming a researcher for the Small Arms Survey. He was a brilliant pioneer in this new field and his work influenced research on guns elsewhere, both in developing and developed countries. Sadly he died in the Air France crash on June 1, 2009.)

We found that guns belong to a nebulous, almost secret world. Those who profit from the production and sale of guns have no interest in sharing information with outside analysts. In Latin America gun control authorities frequently are co-opted by those who profit from the firearms trade. The arms market had never been studied in a serious manner in Latin America and usually governments did not share data with independent experts.

In 1999 a progressive city government gave us information on 250,000 weapons seized by police in Rio de Janeiro. Our analysis of this data drastically altered the public perspective about guns in Brazil. The prevailing belief

was that most illegal weapons were smuggled in from abroad, but we discovered that no more than 14% were imported⁶ (and we later showed that the figure was only 10% nationwide).⁷ Thus the overwhelming majority of guns used in crime had been manufactured and originally sold legally in Brazil.

Furthermore, it had been assumed that most of the guns used in crime were large caliber rifles and machine guns, but we showed that 83% were actually revolvers and pistols. In other words, because of a lack of research, the police were battling the illegal arms trade based on completely erroneous information. Our analysis provided the foundation for better policies based on factual knowledge rather than myths and ideology.

New Law on Arms and Ammunition

With the data showing that illegal guns originated from the poorly controlled legal market, we began a campaign for stronger regulations. Those opposed to our efforts did not present research, only ideological arguments like those of the National Rifle Association (NRA). Despite having support from the major media organizations, we initially had no luck with members of the national Congress. The arms industry in Brazil, as in the United States, donates money to election campaigns for many politicians. We tried unsuccessfully to persuade them to reform the weak gun law which had been originally enacted under the influence of the arms industry and the former military dictatorship.

It was clear that in order to change the law we needed to gain the support of the electorate, to exert popular pressure on Congress for reform. We identified strategic allies (churches, women, social groups victimized by guns, physicians, academics and sympathetic journalists and politicians, and unions). With their support, we toured the country disseminating our research and countering myths about weapons and disarmament. As public awareness increased, hundreds of thousands of people marched in the major cities demanding tougher gun laws. When the polls showed that 81% of Brazilians favored a new gun law,⁸ the climate changed in the Congress. Although the arms industry had the money, the voters were on our side. In December 2003 our bill was approved by all political parties. President Lula signed the Disarmament Statute into law as a Christmas gift to the people of Brazil.⁹

The new law is very advanced and is serving as inspiration for several other countries. The law banned the carrying of weapons by civilians, prohibited

guns above .38 caliber for civilians, raised the minimum age for gun purchases to 25 years, and added 15 requirements to the process of qualifying to buy a gun, including evidence of psychological stability and knowledge of gun safety. A national database was set up to monitor gun ownership, and ammunition sold to the police and armed forces is now marked to enable tracing. (The marking of ammunition sold to civilians is now also under discussion, with the same objective.) Once marked, cartridges left at the scene of crimes or confrontations can be traced. This procedure was used to prove that police officers were responsible for the 2009 killing of Patricia Acioli, a young judge who took a stand against organized crime and corrupt police, in Rio de Janeiro.

Myths about Firearms

The campaign for gun control drew on research to challenge widely held but mistaken beliefs about firearms.¹⁰ For example:

- A firearm is a good instrument for attack, but not for defense. The attacker uses the element of surprise and thus controls the circumstances of the attack.¹¹
- Of the nearly 30 countries that have promoted voluntary disarmament, none is a dictatorship. Democracies seek to reduce the level of armament in their society, depending instead on good police and a strong rule of law to achieve public safety. Democratic regimes may be overthrown by military coups, but it is an illusion to imagine that citizens with guns can defend democracy against tanks and aircraft. We Latin Americans know what we're talking about, having suffered military coups and dictatorships.
- It is a simplistic analysis to merely consider the polarization between "good guys and bad guys" or "good guns and bad guns." This represents just a small part of the discussion of self-defense. In Brazil, as well as in most countries with high levels of gun homicides, interpersonal conflicts represent more than 80% of murders perpetrated with firearms. If we add together men killing women; fights between neighbors, in nightclubs, and in traffic jams; fired employees fighting against former bosses; and suicides and accidents involving children, these deaths represent many more casualties than those inflicted by

bandits and burglars. All reliable research demonstrates that, when there is a lack of governmental gun control, the most accurate sentiment is that “good guys kill good guys,” usually with legal weapons. This situation represents a major part of the problem. Although the use of guns for self-defense sometimes results in successful self-protection, public policies cannot be established based on exceptions; they must be built on the facts of daily life.

- The old slogan says “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” In reality, “People with guns kill people.”

Public Destruction of Weapons

The campaign coincided with the request by the United Nations that countries publicly destroy their surplus firearms. In July 2001, on the eve of the United Nations Conference on Small Arms, the Rio de Janeiro government, with technical support from Viva Rio and the army, carried out a public destruction of 100,000 weapons. It also highlighted the danger created by the police stockpiling huge quantities of surplus weapons that are often diverted to organized crime.

Voluntary Programs to Hand in Weapons

Another aspect of Brazil’s attempt to stem gun violence has been a series of voluntary weapons buybacks. The first buyback in 2004 to 2005 saw Brazilians hand in 459,855 weapons, which were then destroyed.¹² Some of the country’s largest advertising agencies worked on the campaign pro bono, and famous performers and football stars donated their services as well. Feminist and women’s organizations also played an important role in changing the culture. Ad campaigns were implemented in which grandmothers, mothers, and girlfriends urged men to get rid of their guns, while pretty female soap opera stars ridiculed “insecure men who need firearms to prove their masculinity.” These initiatives were especially well-received among young people. The campaign slogan was *Choose Gun Free. It Is Your Weapon or Me!* The campaign symbol was a tube of lipstick, which appeared to look like a bullet.

In addition, the 2004 to 2005 campaign featured significant involvement by community groups and the nonprofit sector (churches, NGOs, unions, etc.), which oversaw buyback locations for guns and ammunition. These sites

were numerous and easily accessible, particularly for groups reluctant to trust the police. The guns were damaged with a small hammer upon receipt; a cheap and efficient way to immediately improve public safety by eliminating the risk of diversion or reuse. Citizens were paid between US\$50 and US\$150 for their guns, depending on the caliber. (The amounts paid were deliberately modest to reduce the likelihood that recipients would use the money to buy new guns, as happened in Australia and Haiti.) The exchanges were anonymous and amnesty was offered to owners of illegal weapons.

From 2008 to 2009, the Brazilian government launched a second campaign involving the police, but at this time without the participation of civil society. Compared with the 2004 to 2005 effort, the results were modest: only 30,721 weapons were received.¹³ Then in May 2011, a month after the Realengo School shooting in Rio de Janeiro (where 12 teenagers were killed by a former student), the government announced another buyback, which continues today.

Before the 2011 launch, an international conference was convened to review the results of successful exchange programs from Angola, Argentina, Colombia, Mozambique, and Brazil. This analysis led to several improvements on our previous campaigns. Participants were paid within 24 hours, whereas previously there had been a three-month delay. And although only 18% who turn in guns do so for the money,¹⁴ compensation was increased to between US\$80 and US\$225.

The new campaign's slogan is *Hand in Your Weapon. Protect Your Family*, to counter the misguided practice of arming oneself to defend family and loved ones. Activities include programs exchanging toy guns for peaceful toys. The current campaign has some shortcomings—including not compensating for ammunition (as Argentina does, with excellent results) and a continued lack of involvement by the community sector. In a period of 19 months, about 65,144 weapons were handed in.¹⁵

According to the Ministry of Health, the following measures have reduced firearm homicides significantly: half a million guns were removed from circulation, public carrying of firearms was outlawed, and police reform was initiated.¹⁶ Gun deaths have dropped by more than 70% in São Paulo and by 30% in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁷ In addition, a process of “pacification” of the largest favelas of Rio de Janeiro has taken place over the past few years, which has contributed to the decrease. (Pacification refers to the institution of community-based police forces in the favelas, which were previously dominated by the

drug traffickers and by improved investments in health, education, and urban development.)

Parliamentary Oversight of Weapons and Ammunition

In 2004, a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) was formed to investigate Brazil's illicit arms trade. Among other things, the Commission investigated Brazil's international borders and was able to identify major smuggling points for arms and ammunition. Viva Rio supplied expert technical support and performed the field work for this endeavor.¹⁸ The PCI also forced Brazilian gun manufacturers to identify the initial purchasers of 36,000 weapons that had been seized by the Rio de Janeiro police, which revealed that most weapons used in organized crime had been diverted from initially legal sources.¹⁹ These included guns bought by civilians from gun shops, guns purchased by private security companies, private police and military officers guns, guns stolen from legal owners, and guns diverted from police stocks by corrupt police officers. The court system also turned out to be a significant source of diversion of guns to the criminal market, as hundreds of thousand of guns are stored in court evidence rooms. The PCI's final report has been called a pioneering document—mapping the previously unexplored world of one country's illegal arms trade.²⁰

A permanent Subcommittee on Control of Arms and Munitions was established in the Parliament in 2007, created with our influence and support, to oversee the implementation of the Disarmament Statute, conduct research on weapons and ammunition, and propose new control measures. Last year the parliamentary gun lobby got control of the Subcommittee and has been trying to revoke the Disarmament Statute.

In response to the PCI's work, the International Latin American Parliamentary group, PARLATINO, asked Viva Rio and an international team of experts to draft a model law. The Model Law on Firearms, Ammunition and Related Materials was developed from this effort, to assist other countries with improved gun control measures.²¹

The Disarmament Statute mandated a referendum be held on the question of whether all sales of guns and ammunitions to civilians should be banned in Brazil. The referendum was held in October 2005, and our side lost. Although public support for strong gun control was extremely high, 64% of voters voted against the total ban. Analysts suggested several possible reasons for our

defeat. Institutions receiving funds from abroad were barred from campaigning, preventing the participation of historically active groups such as most churches and nongovernmental organizations. Also relevant was the strong financial support provided by the gun lobby to the other side, as well as a slump in popularity of the Lula government, which had been accused of corruption around the time of the referendum. Even so, national support for gun control remained above 80%.

In addition to the voluntary disarmament program, the Brazilian government decided to organize an arms legalization campaign. This campaign was aimed at the large number of people who were not “criminals,” but who held weapons illegally (i.e., without a license). In 2008 to 2009 the government, with support from the gun dealers, shooting clubs and pro-gun associations, secured the registration of 1,408,285 weapons²²—a good start toward regulating 4 million illegal weapons estimated to be in the hands of non-criminals. The legalization initiative included suspending the license fee and providing an amnesty for these gun owners.

The International Agenda—and Soccer

Trafficking arms and ammunition is an international phenomenon which requires a correspondingly international approach. The agenda for international action is clear but remains largely on paper. It includes harmonizing laws within and among countries (we recommend the Model Law as a starting point). Bilateral and multilateral agreements, regionally and internationally (like the Arms Trade Treaty) are necessary for collaboration between police in different countries. An important new regional initiative is the centralization of information about arms and ammunition in the database operated by the Observatory on Citizen Security, run by the Organization of American States.²³

In 2014 the Soccer World Cup will be in Brazil and the social theme of the tournament will be “disarmament.” Soccer fans will be able to hand in guns in exchange for tickets to the matches. Whenever the Brazilians play they will display a banner supporting disarmament, as they did before their game against the United States in Washington, DC, in May 2011. We want to unite the sporting spirit of fraternity with the culture of peace and disarmament. We invite the United States to organize gun hand-in programs during the Cup, joining other nations that have already made the commitment. We do

not want a violent society where people are armed, but rather a peaceful one where people are protected against guns.

NOTES

1. Brazilian Minister of Justice Declaration, Brasília, December 10, 2010.
2. Purcena and Nascimento, *Estoques*, 23.
3. Bergamo, “Venda de Armas no Brasil Despenca.”
4. Guerra, “Fabricantes de Armas Triplicam Receita no Brasil em Apenas Cinco Anos.”
5. Author’s conversation with ATF officials, during their visit to Viva Rio’s office, 2000.
6. Bandeira and Bourgeois, *Armas de Fogo*, 168–171.
7. Purcena and Nascimento, *Seguindo a Rota das Armas*, 20.
8. Instituto Sensus, June 2003, cited by Bandeira and Bourgeois, *Armas de Fogo*, 200.
9. *Estatuto do Desarmament*.
10. For more detailed analysis, see Bandeira, “Armas Pequenas y Campañas de Desarme.”
11. Cano, *Pesquisa sobre Vitimização nos Roubos*.
12. Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública (Brasília: Ministry of Justice, January 2006).
13. *Idem* (January 2010).
14. Viva Rio’s research, cited by Bandeira and Bourgeois, *Armas de Fogo*, 206.
15. Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública (Brasília, Ministry of Justice, January 2013).
16. Based on Sistema Nacional de Saúde (SUS), Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública (Brasília: Ministry of Justice, December 2010).
17. Instituto de Segurança Pública (Rio de Janeiro, Secretaria de Segurança Pública, July 2012).
18. Dreyfus and Bandeira, *Watching the Neighborhood*.
19. Jungmann, *Comissão Parlamentar*.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons and CLAVE.
22. Sistema Nacional de Armas e Munições (SINARM), Federal Police Department, cited by Purcena and Nascimento, *Estoques*, 39.
23. Bandeira, “Gun Control in Brazil,” 38.

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