



A rejuvenated approach to urban development and inequality: Young people's perceptions and experiences in Rio de Janeiro



Florine Bos ^{a, *}, Rivke Jaffe ^b

^a Sarphatistraat 25A, 1018 EV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, University of Amsterdam, PO Box 15629, 1001 NC Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Studies of urban development, and specifically studies of urban inequality, have tended to neglect the role of young people. While development studies more broadly have begun to take young people's experiences, perceptions and practices into account, research on urban development and inequality has remained largely focused on adults. This lack of attention to young people is all the more surprising given the large percentage of urban residents in low-income countries that is under 25. Drawing on research in Rio de Janeiro's *Zona Sul*, this article argues for including young people in debates on urban development and urban inequality. It argues that a relational approach, juxtaposing the views and experiences of both rich and poor youth, is especially valuable in this regard, as those studies that have paid attention to youth, development and inequality tend to focus on low-income youth living in informal settlements. Based on mixed-method research with adolescents and youth (age 14–24) from both low-income and high-income areas, the article analyses young people's socio-spatial perceptions and practices. The research highlights that both groups experience urban inequality and insecurity as major and interrelated development problems, and that these issues affect their opportunities and quality of life, albeit in different ways.

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1. Introduction

Urban development studies, including studies of urban inequality, have tended to neglect the role of young people. This is surprising given the demographic and political significance of people under 25 in urban areas, and in contexts of low human development in general. In this article, we argue for an explicit consideration of young people's experiences and perceptions of urban development issues, and specifically urban inequality. In addition, we emphasize the value of a 'relational approach' that pays attention to both low-income and high-income urban youth. Such an approach draws on recent work in development studies that seeks to (re)incorporate a strong emphasis on the role of historically embedded political, economic and social relations in producing durable inequality and poverty (Mosse, 2010).

The article presents research findings based on a study of adolescents and youth (age 14–24) from low-income and high-income

areas in Rio de Janeiro's *Zona Sul*. We discuss the socio-spatial perceptions and practices of these two groups of young *Cariocas*. Their perceptions and practices are shaped by their concern over inequality as well as insecurity, although these issues have a different impact depending on their socioeconomic background and spatial location. Our findings suggest a need for increased attention to the empirical and conceptual relations between urban development, youth, inequality and insecurity. Below, following a brief discussion of our research sites and methods, we continue with an overview of literature on urban youth, development and inequality. This is followed by a presentation of our research findings, focusing on segregation, insecurity and young people's own analyses of inequality, and ending with a discussion of the implications of these findings for further research.

2. Research site and approach

This research on which this article draws was carried out in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2013. Out of Brazil's total population of over 200 million, more than 85% is estimated to live in cities in 2015. In addition, the country's population is relatively young, with more

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: florinemarte@gmail.com (F. Bos), r.k.jaffe@uva.nl (R. Jaffe).

than 47 million inhabitants, or some 23% of the total population, under age 15 in 2015.¹ Of the urban population in 2010, nearly 42% were under age 25.² While recent economic growth has led to a somewhat more equal distribution of wealth, Brazil remains a country characterized by striking inequalities, and this is especially visible in the major cities. The Human Development Index (HDI) indicates that some parts of Rio de Janeiro (and especially the informal settlements, or *favelas*) have levels of human deprivation comparable to low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, while the most prosperous urban areas enjoy levels comparable to Scandinavian countries. These different contexts of development are not worlds apart but just kilometers, sometimes even meters. The proximity of poverty and wealth means that in addition to absolute deprivation (e.g. lack of basic services, access to education and health care), relative deprivation is an important issue, with the urban poor constantly exposed to the wealth and lifestyle of richer urban residents (Perلمان, 2013: 176).

This article compares the socio-spatial perceptions and practices of adolescents and youth from the *favelas* and the formal neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro's *Zona Sul*, or southern zone. These two types of neighborhoods are known, respectively, as *o morro* (the hill in Portuguese) and *o asfalto* (the asphalt, the term for the city's official neighborhoods), terms that reference their geographical location. A total of 68 adolescents and youth participated in the research, selected through a purposive sampling technique based on the criteria of age, residence and gender. All participants were between 14 and 24 years of age. In terms of residence, all participants lived in the *Zona Sul*. Of the 68 participants, 30 lived in a *favela* neighborhood and 38 lived in a formal neighborhood. The gender balance of participants was roughly equal, with 33 young women and 35 young men participating in the research.

A multi-method approach was used to analyse the socio-spatial perceptions and practices of youth, including attention to those related to urban inequalities and insecurity. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were conducted with both groups of young people; all interviews were transcribed and entered into Atlas.ti. Participants were also asked to map no-go areas in the neighborhood and city in terms of feelings of insecurity or of being unwelcome. Participants were asked to elaborate on why they considered these places to be no-go areas. The young people's socio-spatial practices were analyzed using ArcMAP. In addition, participant observation in both *favelas* and formal neighborhoods in *Zona Sul* provided further insight into the everyday use of space by youth from different socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds.

3. A relational approach to urban youth, development and inequality

This section focuses on the connections between recent research on urban youth, development and inequality, and suggests the need for a 'relational approach'. In recent years, (urban) development researchers and practitioners have begun to incorporate a stronger emphasis on inequality or relative deprivation (e.g. Mosse, 2010; Sen, 1999: 87), in addition to concentrating on poverty, absolute deprivation and economic growth. This renewed attention to inequality is also evident in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in which the tenth goal is to reduce inequality within and between countries. In urban research,

inequalities have long been an important focus, with many studies emphasizing the spatiality of urban inequalities, including attention to the causes and consequences of socio-spatial segregation, marginalization and limited mobilities. However, young people have only recently begun to attract attention within these studies of urban development and inequality.

While urban development studies has paid relatively scant attention to the role of young people, development studies more broadly has begun to recognize the importance of studying children and youth (Ansell, 2005). Youth and childhood studies also present a growing field of research in (urban) geography and associated disciplines (e.g. Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Evans, 2008). This increased attention reflects the growing recognition of the demographic and political significance of young people in general, and in cities in particular. Young people represent a large proportion of the population of urbanizing low-income countries, where around 45% of the population is under 25.³ In addition, as has been especially evident in recent urban protests (including those associated with the so-called Arab Spring), urban youth are important political actors, and inequality is often an important mobilizing frame (Gordon, 2010; Jeffrey, 2012, 2013).

Urban youth are also starting to emerge as a topic on the agenda of international development agencies. In recent reports, agencies such as UN Habitat and UNICEF have focused explicitly on youth and inequality. For instance, UN Habitat's 2010/11 report *Leveling the Playing Field: Inequality of Youth Opportunity* made urban inequalities the main focus of the report, while the organization's 2012/13 report *Youth in the Prosperity of Cities* also paid specific attention to unequal opportunities. Similarly, UNICEF dedicated their 2012 report on the State of the World's Children to 'children in an urban world'. Urban inequalities, including socio-spatial segregation and marginalization, can have profound adverse consequences for young people in particular, limiting their educational and employment opportunities. UN Habitat (2010), for instance, notes that the degree of outcome inequality that defines people's exclusion or inclusion in urban life is strongly related to the unequal opportunities that occur during childhood, adolescence and youth.

These reports, like many of the urban policies they engender, tend to focus on how urban inequalities impact on, and are experienced by, poor children, adolescents and youth. In many cases they further limit the discussion to young people living in informal settlements (e.g. UN Habitat, 2010). Policies aimed at combating the social exclusion of the low-income youth often concentrate on improving their capabilities or social capital (e.g. Jacobi, 2006), framing the urban poor as the appropriate target of intervention but neglecting the role of their wealthier counterparts. Although urban inequalities clearly also affect middle-class and upper-class youth, their perspectives and practices are too often omitted from research.⁴ Studying inequalities cannot entail focusing only on the poor – as inequality is a social, political and economic relation, its study must include differently positioned groups, and take into account the role of their beliefs, behavior and interactions in sustaining or contesting inequality (Mosse, 2010).

Taking a relational approach to urban youth, development and inequality involves attending to spatial relations within a city. Residents' socio-spatial perceptions, experiences and practices tend to reflect urban segregation and marginalization in terms of

¹ See <http://esa.un.org/unpd/popdev/popdevdb/popdevdb2014.aspx>, accessed February 2, 2015.

² See <http://esa.un.org/unpd/popdev/urpas/urpas2014.aspx>, accessed February 2, 2015.

³ <http://esa.un.org/unpd/popdev/urpas/urpas2014.aspx>, data for less developed regions, accessed February 2, 2015.

⁴ For important exceptions in the case of Brazil, see Caldeira (2000) and Owensby (2001), who both focus on wealthier urban residents. On the impact of inequality on all social strata, see Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) who underline that although urban inequalities are particularly detrimental to the lower socio-economic strata, they also affect the wealthier classes negatively.

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