



# Safety in the global south: Criminal victimization in Brazilian rural areas



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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss our finding that crime was on the rise not only in Brazil's urban areas, but also in rural ones between 1988 and 2009. Its main objective is to investigate how different economic, demographic and other variables can help one understand criminal victimization in Brazilian rural areas. Data from a 2009 national survey were used to fit probit models for four types of crime: theft, robbery, attempted theft/robbery, and physical assault. Moreover, we estimated a model for a category that encompasses the three first crimes. We found that men, middle-age and single people in rural areas are at a higher risk of being victimized, as well as higher-income and more educated people living in those areas.

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of violence has been of great concern for the Brazilian population over the last 25 years. The fast urbanization process observed in Brazil between 1940 and 1990 changed not only dramatically its cities, but also its rural areas. It is therefore important to understand the incidence of crime in these different areas of the country and how it has evolved in recent years. Until the mid-80s, however, the criminality issue was not at the core of Brazilian social debate and this is especially true in relation to rural areas.

Although less than 14% of the Brazilian population lives in rural areas today as a result of urbanization, this population is also experiencing an increase in violence. Data from the national survey used in this paper show, for example, that attempted robbery/theft victimization (This category encompasses both attempted robbery and attempted theft, but excludes consummated cases of theft and robbery) in rural areas in Brazil increased by 296% between 1988 and 2009. However, high growth rates were also observed for other crimes investigated here: theft, robbery and physical assault (assault is an *aggravated physical attack*, a crime against a person). This upward trend is widespread in different states and regions of Brazil

and crime rates in a single state are typically different in rural and urban areas, depending on the type of crime. In terms of both theft and robbery, urban areas experienced higher growth rates than rural ones between 1988 and 2009. The opposite was observed for physical assault and attempted theft/robbery, whose growth rates were higher in rural areas (see Table 5). All of these facts suggest that growth of violence in Brazil is neither an issue affecting only specific regions of the country nor an urban problem alone. For this reason, it is important to investigate rural and urban areas separately.

Emphasizing the focal issue of this paper, i.e. victimization in rural areas, it is necessary to highlight that crime incidence can also change from one community to another and from one space to another. Muhammad (2002) points out that many papers on crime and victimization have been written for urban areas, as these problems tend to be more prevalent in urban communities, but they are also increasingly prevalent in rural areas nowadays (e.g., theft of cattle and other animals, produce, inputs, equipment, etc.). In fact, Rand and Catalano (2007), for example, found that violent victimization in sampled rural areas increased by 62% between 2005 and 2006 in the U.S.. This phenomenon is associated with the fact that urban areas are increasingly close to rural ones and therefore are also exposed to their negative elements. As observed above, there is no absolute isolation between rural and urban areas, and it is easier for thieves to hide in rural areas since they are theoretically less policed than cities.

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**Table 1**

Percentage of people who felt secure in their home, neighborhood and city in rural and urban areas, by Brazilian regions, 2009.

Region	Rural				Urban			
	Home	Neighb.	City	Obs	Home	Neighb.	City	Obs
North	80.07	74.91	62.84	9072	69.20	55.61	44.20	34,581
Northeast	85.41	80.02	68.78	22,360	76.34	60.74	44.97	83,252
Mid-West	84.79	81.92	68.18	4243	74.66	62.15	52.36	32,726
Southeast	84.27	81.32	71.30	8026	78.69	66.62	49.94	91,698
South	84.74	83.26	73.13	7396	81.34	70.49	57.93	44,156
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>84.47</b>	<b>80.38</b>	<b>69.34</b>	<b>51,097</b>	<b>77.54</b>	<b>64.66</b>	<b>49.69</b>	<b>286,413</b>

Source: 2009 PNAD, IBGE (see Table A.2).

**Table 2**

Percentage of people using safety devices to protect themselves in rural and urban areas by Brazilian regions, 2009.

Region	Area	Additional locks	Window bars	Alarms	Dogs	Obs
North	Rural	9.84	7.46	1.72	17.58	9072
	Urban	23.64	40.61	15.79	12.99	34,581
Northeast	Rural	6.64	4.80	2.26	9.75	22,360
	Urban	20.07	39.42	17.86	7.63	83,252
Mid-West	Rural	4.88	17.49	4.86	23.10	4243
	Urban	18.91	44.68	25.27	14.80	32,726
Southeast	Rural	8.75	13.46	5.88	12.61	8026
	Urban	18.06	42.89	22.61	8.44	91,698
South	Rural	7.17	6.60	4.87	18.90	7396
	Urban	23.73	34.61	23.24	12.72	44,156
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>7.41</b>	<b>7.88</b>	<b>3.52</b>	<b>13.36</b>	<b>51,097</b>
	<b>Urban</b>	<b>19.82</b>	<b>40.83</b>	<b>21.28</b>	<b>9.67</b>	<b>286,413</b>

Source: 2009 PNAD, IBGE (see Table A.3).

**Table 3**

Percentage of victimization in Brazil by type of crime, 1988 and 2009.

Type of crime	1988	2009	%Δ
(1) Theft or robbery	5.44	7.32	34.5
(2) Attempted theft/robbery	1.63	5.36	228.8
(3) Physical assault	1.03	1.55	50.4
(4) Property crimes – (1) or (2)	6.40	9.18	43.4

Sample size: 224,941 in 1988; 337,510 in 2009.

Source: 1988 and 2009 PNAD, IBGE.

**Table 4**

Percentage of victimization in rural and urban areas, by type of crime, Brazilian regions, 2009.

Region	Area	Theft or robbery	Physical assault	Attempted theft/robb.	Sample size
North	Rural	5.28	1.38	4.08	9072
	Urban	11.43	2.02	7.96	34,581
Northeast	Rural	2.56	1.01	1.74	22,360
	Urban	9.31	2.10	6.22	83,252
Mid-West	Rural	3.28	0.91	2.18	4243
	Urban	9.47	1.75	7.27	32,726
Southeast	Rural	2.88	0.88	2.27	8026
	Urban	6.97	1.39	5.26	91,698
South	Rural	3.31	0.88	2.03	7396
	Urban	7.56	1.55	6.10	44,156
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>0.99</b>	<b>2.14</b>	<b>51,097</b>
	<b>Urban</b>	<b>8.11</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>5.95</b>	<b>286,413</b>
	<b>Both</b>	<b>7.32</b>	<b>1.55</b>	<b>5.36</b>	<b>337,510</b>

Source: 2009 PNAD, IBGE (see Tables A.4 and A.5).

An important question raised is why criminals choose rural areas to commit their crimes? Criminals look for secluded targets (houses, etc.), such as areas with lots of unprotected barns where high-value tools, equipment and products are stored. These targets

**Table 5**

Growth rate of victimization (%), Brazil, 1988–2009.

Region	Area	%Δ 1988–2009		
		Theft or robbery	Physical assault	Attempted theft/robb.
North	Urban	64.7	57.8	332.6
	Rural	–0.4	159.0	228.3
Northeast	Urban	68.1	90.9	281.6
	Rural	25.2	71.7	246.0
Mid-West	Urban	46.4	62.0	139.9
	Rural	23.1	54.4	320.4
Southeast	Urban	9.8	16.8	160.4
	Rural	5.8	23.9	275.9
South	Urban	0.1	10.7	199.0
	Rural	16.0	94.1	296.3
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>27.1</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>197.5</b>
	<b>Both</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>50.4</b>	<b>228.8</b>

Sample size: 224,941 in 1988; 337,510 in 2009.

Note: The 1988 PNAD does not cover rural areas in the North.

Source: 1988 and 2009 PNAD, IBGE (see Tables A.4 and A.5).

offer less risk of failure and potential high profits from crime. In the west of Bahia state (Brazil), for example, many cases of robbery in large soybean, corn, and cotton farms have been registered. In this region, most robberies have occurred on Sundays, when the farming activities are not as intense, giving thieves more time to act. High-value products such as machines, pesticides and fertilizers are the most coveted ones.

As a result, the main characteristics of victimization in rural areas need to be urgently understood, especially in Brazil, where agribusiness accounts for an estimated 23% of the Gross Domestic Product. So the main contribution of this paper is to document the evolution of crime over time in urban and rural areas of Brazil. We found that violence has increased not only in urban, but also in rural regions of the country. We present the evolution of theft, robbery, attempted theft/robbery and physical assault between 1988 and 2009 broken down by regions and states, age groups, gender and race. And we show that in some cases, the violence growth is steeper in rural areas.

We also show some data that provide the first evidence of how residents in rural areas in Brazil feel in terms of security and self-protection. Wherever possible, brief comparisons with urban areas will be made. But the main objective of this study is to investigate factors driving crime victimization in rural areas. For this purpose, the latest victimization data from a national survey were used.

Several previous studies investigated causes of victimization. This extensive literature includes studies by Sparks (1981), Miethe and McDowall (1993), Levitt (1999) and Gaviria and Pagés (2002), all presenting relevant empirical results. In Brazil, Carneiro (2000), Beato et al. (2004), Gomes and Paz (2008), Carvalho and Lavor (2008), Madalozzo and Furtado (2011), and Justus and Kassouf (2013) also analyzed this issue. However, none of them performed empirical modeling using only individual data collected in rural areas. Thus, as far as we know, our study is the first one to come up with empirical results using nationally representative sample data restricted to rural areas. It should be mentioned, however, that although we used the lifestyle and opportunity theories (Cohen et al., 1981) as the basis for specifying our empirical models, we recognize that our inferences of causality are only suggestive and tentative.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section describes the data used. Section 3 provides a definition of rural areas in the Brazilian context. Section 4 discusses the perceived

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