

# Rio rehab: Giving up old gangs for new goals

Some of Brazil's most notorious slums have been "pacified", and former child drug dealers are now mentoring youth.

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**Former child drug dealers are among those coaching football to keep Rio's youth out of trouble [Kitty Doets/IBISS]**

**Rio de Janeiro, Brazil** - A pile of AK-47 assault rifles behind the goalposts once signalled that drug traffickers were taking a timeout to play some football.

But today in Vila Cruzeiro - one of the most notorious *favelas*, or shantytowns, in Rio de Janeiro - many once-feared gang members are now seen beside the pitch coaching boys in an effort to keep them out of the drug trade - and to help the boys live longer.

"Other people were traumatised by the things we had to do," says 32-year-old Paolo, gesturing from the sidelines at teenagers kicking a ball. "But none of it bothered me, whether it was killing people or forcing them out of the community. I was just dead inside."

Surely he lived in fear during the nine years he was involved in trafficking? "Not at all, because I was a boss," Paolo, who goes by one name, replies.

Nevertheless, during his second three-year spell in jail, Paolo decided to quit running drugs for the Comando Vermelho organised crime ring. Leaving was not easy, but he managed to escape the lifestyle with help from *Soldados Nunca Mais* - "Soldiers Never More" - a programme run by the **IBISS** foundation, where he now works.

"We started by talking to the soldiers, by telling them they would be dead by 21 if they carried on drug trafficking. No one had ever talked to any of these boys."

- Nanko Van Buuren, IBISS founder

Since 2000, the programme has been using sport, culture and peer counselling to tackle the growing involvement of children in Rio's drug trade.

In the mid-2000s, drug trafficking and associated violence was out of control. An estimated 100,000 gang members roamed Rio's streets, brandishing more than 60,000 firearms. Many children who were not themselves selling drugs were involved in the bloody violence surrounding the trade, becoming the gangs' footsoldiers in the turf wars that frequently enveloped the city's most vulnerable areas.

About 20 percent of Rio's six million inhabitants live in the city's 200 or so favelas. Nestled between the sprawling communities of Alemão and Penha, Vila Cruzeiro - home to more than 65,000 people - has frequently been caught in the crossfire of drug wars. More than 300 people living in the community are believed to have been paralysed by stray bullets fired by rival gangs, according to human rights group Amnesty International.

In 2010, the police were sent in to regain control of the slum, and in 2012 the community was occupied by army soldiers as part of the city's "pacification" programme, before it is to host the World Cup in 2014 and Olympic Games in 2016. The government has spent an estimated \$3.3 billion "cleaning up" Rio's slums.

Thanks to the effort, youths toting heavy weapons as they run drugs are no longer a common sight on the streets.

Like all of the former child gang members who have been helped out of narcotics trafficking by *Soldados Nunca Mais*, Paolo's exit was hard won.

First, IBISS had to negotiate his departure with his drug bosses, persuading them he would stay out of Alemão, even though this would mean cutting off all contact with his family. It took Paolo a couple of years to pay off remaining debts before he was finally free to follow a different path in life.

## New goals

On a hot Saturday afternoon, heavily armed police watch as excitement grows in Vila Cruzeiro. Former child soldiers and drug-runners are featuring among eight teams competing in a tournament with a passion and a skill that puts many Saturday leagues to shame.



Police arrest a suspected drug dealer in Alemao slum in Rio de Janeiro in November 2010 [Reuters]

At the side of the pitch, a banner reads: "Liverpool FC, faith in God."

Locals meander in and out of several bars edging the field, shouting for their teams and handing out beer.

One of the players is "Baby", who, as a child, was a footsoldier in one of the drug-trafficking gangs. He was helped out of the life after pop musician Madonna took an interest in the community and offered to pay for his education.

"We started by talking to the soldiers, by telling them they would be dead by 21 if they carried on drug trafficking. No-one had ever talked to any of these boys," says Nanko Van Buuren, a Dutch psychiatrist and social activist who founded IBISS more than 20 years ago.

IBISS closely monitors the progress of the teenagers and young men who leave trafficking through the programme. Nearly 3,500 children have so far been helped out of the trade.

Some of the former gang members work for *Soldados Nunca Mais*, including seven former bosses who now mentor youths and encourage them to steer clear of trafficking and drug gangs. Van Buuren says success hinges on building up their self-respect.

"They think that getting respect is about having guns and money, but we show them there is another way," says Van Buuren. Many of the gang members start to think about leaving when they are sent to jail or after the birth of their first child, he says.

Other former child gang members follow vocational training or work in football schools for children, a key element of the work by IBISS, which will provide a girls' team to the **Street Child World Cup** in Rio in March 2014.

## Resurrection

A motorcycle cruises through a warren of streets to the church of Our Lady of Penha, where a steep climb is rewarded with a view of Rio's bustling southern beaches.

"I tell them: 'You can choose how you go through life just like you can choose how you get upstairs ... The stairs take longer, but the elevator will come crashing down.'"

- Paolo, former child gang member

Eduardo, another former child gang member who spent three years in jail for trafficking, says the church was off-limits for many years before the "pacification" programme began.

"The church was a lookout position in the drugs war," says the 32-year-old. "Everyone was too afraid to come here."

But the church has now been renovated and the congregation has started to return, as have tourists. Eduardo is one of several former child drug dealers who are learning English and other languages in order to welcome visitors to the city ahead of the World Cup.

"When I was in jail, I knew that I didn't want to go back to that life, but I didn't know what else I could do. Now, there are more possibilities, to study or get a job," he says.

These days the main battle for many former gang members is against the discrimination and scepticism of those who doubt they're prepared to make the sacrifices it requires to get out of trafficking. And for some, the lure of easy money does prove too hard to give up.

Back at the football pitch, Paolo is asked what is the best thing about his work as mentor to Rio's youth.

"It's the affection, it's their trust in me," he says. "I tell them: 'You can choose how you go through life just like you can choose how you get upstairs. You can take the stairs, working and studying hard, or you can take the elevator, and you'll soon have plenty of women and money. The stairs take longer, but the elevator will come crashing down.'"

In the distance, there is an explosion. This time, it's not gunfire but fireworks - the favela's way of celebrating a football victory.

Source:

Al Jazeera