

# A CYCLE OF YOUTH STREET VIOLENCE IN MACEIÓ, BRAZIL

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## Introduction

The concept of violence is as diverse as the situations and social settings behind it. In Maceió, a beautiful city on the coast of northeastern Brazil, street violence and homicide rates have increased over the years. Maceió, the capital of Alagoas, gained particular attention and notoriety in 2008, when the media pointed out that it had become the most violent place in Brazil and, in 2013, that it was now among the most violent cities for youths in the world. The need to understand this phenomenon and introduce a different view of youth-related street violence led the researcher to conduct fieldwork in Maceió in 2013.

During the fieldwork, the researcher visited prisons for adults, internment units for youths, violent areas of the city, and had direct contact with people who are, in different ways, connected to the youth violence in Maceió. The primary data used by the researcher in his doctoral thesis came from twenty-four interviews conducted with male youths (14 to 24 years of age) who had perpetrated violent street crimes, such as homicide and robbery. Their stories displayed a range of situations that influenced them to engage in a criminal lifestyle. During seven months of investigation, the researcher collected information about these youths, the place where they lived, and the situations in which street violence occurred. In the end, the fieldwork became a unique experience that went far beyond the documented observations and interviews. It was an experience full of impressions and images: an experience that often transcended words.

By following the daily lives of the youths, the researcher traversed more than 1,500 public spaces, streets, and open-air markets. However, another step was necessary to follow the consequences of street violence: prisons and internment units needed to be visited. Unfortunately, permission to take photos in prisons and internment units was initially not granted, which posed a serious research problem. However, in January 2016, with the full support of the State Prosecutor Office of Alagoas, the researcher was able to overcome a range of issues and freely take photos within the prisons and internment units of Maceió. The result of this effort can be seen in more than 2500 photos taken in 2016. These photos enable outsiders to see (probably for the very first time) the real conditions of imprisonment in Maceió.

The current exhibition is based on twenty-six photos that display the trajectory of youths involved in violent street crime in Maceió. Twenty-two photos belong to the second phase of fieldwork from 2016; the remainder were taken during the first phase in 2013.

By exposing the images in a circular space, the exhibition explores the concept of youth street violence in Maceió as a vicious cycle which, once started, is hard to break. The cycle usually begins in the streets and leads to an early attachment in informal activities and criminal behavior. The cycle continues in internment units for adolescents or prisons for adults. Rather than ending the cycle, release generally starts it once again, as the social settings do not provide those releasees with the means to cease their criminal activities.

This exhibition is divided into four blocks: The first is composed of four photos (photos 1 until 4) and displays the neighborhoods where most youths involved in crime come from. The second block (photos 5 until 8) explores the day-to-day life in public spaces within their communities, as well as informal activities and deviant behavior on the streets of Maceió. The early engagement in criminal activities and the conditions inside internment units are displayed in the third block (photos 9 until 14). The last block (photos 15 until 25) is devoted to showing the perpetuation of this cycle through the imprisonment conditions. Once the prison cycle begins, criminal bonds are fortified. From the final photo '*Freedom?!*' to the first photo '*Grota Vale do Reginaldo*', the exhibition illustrates the likely trajectory of youths involved in violent crime in Maceió.





## 1. Grotta Vale do Reginaldo

The term *grotta* means the area between two hills. In Maceió, *grotta* is used to refer to a shantytown. In the same way as *favela*, the term indicates irregularly occupied urban areas. The *grotas* have similarities with *favelas*; however, while the *favelas* are usually situated on hills, *grotas* are located in valleys. This photo displays the *grotta* Vale do Reginaldo, which is located close to the central bus station, the city center, and Jatiúca beach. Vale do Reginaldo, Cidade Sorriso, Favela Sururu de Capote and Gama Lins (photos 2 until 5) are clear examples of deprived areas, from where a vast number of youths involved in drug dealing and violent crimes come from. As the spot was photographed from a bridge that connects the two *grotas*, a passerby warned the photographer not to go down to the *grotta* and to leave the area as soon as possible. According to this individual, the area is too dangerous and taking photos could be viewed with suspicion by dwellers and drug dealers.



## **2 and 3. Favela Sururu de Capote #1 and #2**

The term *Sururu de Capote* comes from a regional dish based on sururu, which is a mollusk produced and commercialized in this part of the city. The favela Sururu de Capote is located on the banks of Mundaú lagoon in the downtown area. This favela emerged from the illegal occupation of the banks of Mundaú lagoon alongside Senator Rui Palmeiras Avenue. The primary economic resources of the area are fishing, shellfish harvesting, and informal activities including drug dealing. This area was photographed from the back seat of taxi driving slowly down the avenue. This strategy lowered the likelihood of being assaulted. In photos 1 and 2, the type of dwellings people live in can be seen. The houses are mainly made from pieces of wood, metal, and plastic. Since this area was illegally occupied, the state does not provide essential services such as electricity, water, sanitation, etc. However, residents have built up a precarious distribution system for electricity and clean water. On a scale of layers of poverty, this is the lowest level of housing in Maceió. It is one of the most violent areas in Maceió.



#### 4. Layers of Poverty

This photo portrays the wall which once divided two communities in the Uptown. The wall separates the Conjunto Habitacional Novo Jardim and Gama Lins on the right. This wall was part of the original project, which aimed to isolate the new public housing project (Novo Jardim) from the surrounding Gama Lins Community. Part of the wall was demolished by the residents of Gama Lins; the other part (seen in the background and covered with letters and numbers) still separates Conjunto Habitacional Novo Jardim from a supposedly dangerous area on the other side of the wall. An informant from the left side reported that the wall was built to improve the value of the properties, as well as to protect the residents of Novo Jardim from the criminality that was happening in the Gama Lins Neighborhood. However, an informant on the opposite side assumed, to the researcher, that the wall was made to separate those with a 'bit more money' from the ones already living there. Inhabitants from Gama Lins decided to break down part of the wall to get better access to public services (e.g., schools, healthcare, and transport).

On the right, the houses are larger and were designed to provide more

spacious public housing for those who could afford it. On the left, dwellers themselves built their houses. They began by illegally occupying the land and then building houses.

This photo, together with the three previous images (photos 1, 2, and 3) and the next one (photo 5) portray the distinct layers of poverty in deprived areas of Maceió. In this photo, the houses on the left are bigger, have cable TV, and are protected by an electric fence. One side of the street is paved, the other side is dirty and has open sewage.





## 5. Cidade Sorriso

Benedito Bentes is an area composed of several public housing projects. This area was designed for individuals migrating to the city and as an area for low-income families living in grotas and around the lagoon. Cidade Sorriso (City of Smile) is one of the public housing projects in Benedito Bentes designed for families living in extreme poverty. Cidade Sorriso is known as a very poor and violent spot with an intense relationship to the drug trade. This picture was taken in 2013 when the researcher went to Cidade Sorriso with a resident to observe how people lived. The researcher had the opportunity to speak with a 13-year-old pregnant girl. While talking, the kids were playing on the streets. The pregnant girl said the kids usually play on the streets while their parents are working. She and her brother used to do the same when they were kids. Her brother worked in the drug trade and was killed one year earlier (2012). She said that everything happens on the streets of Cidade Sorriso and kids are likely to get involved with criminality very fast.



## 6. Kids at the Informal Market

This photo was taken on a weekday morning close to the favela Sururu de Capote (see photos 2 and 3). Considering the approximate age of these two kids on the picture, it is reasonable to guess that they should be at school (especially since the so-called 'Ensino Fundamental' (the first nine years of schooling) usually take place during the mornings). Male school drop-outs often engage in informal economic activities in impoverished areas of the city. Despite the fact that Brazilian law forbids youths under the age of eighteen to work formally at the market (minor exceptions exist), they conduct informal activities to increase their family income. The event displayed in the picture is an everyday sight, even in areas not subject to abject poverty. The boys are using a kind of wheelbarrow made from an old fridge to transport goods across the neighborhood in exchange for some money. The exhausting work, and the small remuneration they receive, can entice them to seek more lucrative, albeit illegal, engagements.





## 7. A Lack of Employment

This photo was taken in favela Sururu de Capote and displays a common situation alongside the streets of the poor neighborhoods of Maceió: children playing and youths chatting. Streets and sidewalks and intense socialization in those areas. The lack of labor opportunities drives individuals to an intense street-life. This photo portrays another clue concerning informal labor activity: Moto Taxi (motorcycle taxis). This kind of alternative transportation is widespread in poorer neighborhoods. Poverty and a lack of employment seem to be the perfect environment to increase informal and illegal activities such as running motorcycle taxis and drug dealing.



## 8. 'Pague Menos!' (Pay Less!)

This photo was taken around 7 a.m. in the Ponta Verde, an upper-class neighborhood on the coast of Maceió. The boy was sleeping close to a drugstore called *Pague Menos* (Pay Less). He had probably been begging for money in front of the drugstore or roaming on the streets of this rich district, looking for money. Normally, kids start to get involved in illicit activities when they are far from the parents' supervision and under the influence of peers. The fact that he was using cartons that say Pay Less to keep himself warm and protected, and also having on his t-shirt the symbol of justice (the Greek goddess Themis) and the word *direito* (right/law) made this photo a unique image of the vulnerability of black youths from poor neighborhoods of Maceió. The scene is a clear contradiction between reality and the written guarantees stipulated by Brazil's Constitution.



## 9. Early Criminal Life

An early criminal life is the first picture of a series of six photos devoted to the internment units for adolescents in Maceió. This series also displays the state's initial reaction to criminal youths. This picture was taken in the Internment Center UIM (*Unidade de Internação Masculina*) and portrays a crowded cell. The nine adolescents (aged 12 to 18) were interned for having committed a violent crime. This photo highlights patterns that will be continuously seen in the following images: young male youths with dark skin, scars, and tattoos. The cell had no proper circulation and stinking hot air came through a small window on a metal door. The bars on the small window are shaped like a heart (as seen in photo *Through the Hearts* at the beginning of the exhibition).





## 10. and 11. UIJA Internment Conditions #1 #2

The photo UIJA Internment Conditions # 1 portrays part of a unit intended to receive youth offenders who committed a violent crime before the age of eighteen. The UIJA Internment Unit is also the destination for youths considered 'more dangerous,' which basically means those connected to the drug trade and murders. This photo was taken in 2016 and displays the precarious conditions of this unit, with youths living in overcrowded rooms. Some of the blankets and the electronic devices were likely provided by the inmates' families. The high temperature inside forces them to use ventilators continuously. In all rooms with ventilators, the youths removed the front part to hang and use as a holder for their clothes (see the background of the photo). The youths use the wall to draw symbols and to tell their stories. In the background of this photo, there are three kinds of narrative which identify their status. First, there is the Chinese symbol 'yin-yang' which is the coat of arms of the *fação Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC). The PCC is one of the criminal organizations that controls drug trafficking in Brazil. Another indication of attachment to the PCC is the sentence 'Paz Justiça e Liberdade' (Peace, Justice, and Freedom), as well as the numbers 1533 (15 = P, 3 = C (another slogan of the PCC)). The second narrative on the walls concerns the indication of the committed crime through articles of the Brazilian Criminal Code (visible in photo 12). The third narrative is related to communities and neighborhood where they belong. In this photo, neighborhoods ([Chã da] Jaqueira and Sant. Dumu [Santos Dumont]) and communities (Grotta do Cigano, Grotta do Moreira, Palmeira and 15 de Março) can all be seen. With these narratives, the youths show their identity and their status in the criminal world. The photo UIJA Internment Conditions #2 has some of the patterns presented in the previous photo. Here the room can be seen in an amplified perspective that shows the poor living conditions.



## 12. A Narrative of Crime

As previously explained (photo 10), the youths use the walls to express their identities through drawings. By drawing symbols, sentences, guns, etc., they show how successful they are in their criminal careers. They do this without thinking about the evidence that may be produced against themselves. In the center of this photo, there is a *coringa* (joker) which is the symbol of those who are police killers. The joker is also used to indicate the *soldados* (soldiers) which is a group composed of individuals who are able to use guns and stay in front-line defense of the drug trade. The joker in this photo has the numbers 1533 (15 = P and 3 = C) which represents the youth's affiliation to the PCC. The weapons suggest that they have knowledge about various guns. On the top of the joker's head are the numbers 157, 33, and 121. These numbers refer to crimes in the Brazilian Criminal Code. Art. 157 describes the crime of robbery; Art. 33 (of the Law 11343/2016) defines drug trafficking, and Art. 121 defines the crime of homicide. The violent acts that generated their imprisonment are exposed with pride on the walls. Those who have committed crimes that are more serious and are linked to criminal organizations seem to subjugate the others in the cell.



### 13. A Cemetery of Souls

This photo follows the same context presented in the previous image. The researcher asked a youth to explain what the coffins in the picture mean. He proudly said the drawing represents the number of enemies he killed during street confrontations. He said: *'if you chose this way of life [criminality], your life will end in two ways: prison or cemetery. My life ended here. Their life there in the cemetery'*. In this allegory, he drew a cemetery in which the six boxes with crosses represent the coffins of his victims and the balloons above their heads represent their souls. Surrounding the coffins, he tried to draw small explosions (popcorn-circles) in order to translate his vision of gun shooting during a street confrontation. With this narrative, he aimed to establish a tough-image and gain prestige. The fact that he killed at least six of his enemies makes him a kind of 'legend' among criminal youths. During the fieldwork in 2013 and 2016, another two drawings were founded in internments units portraying similar narratives.





## 14. Questioning

This photo closes the third block of the exhibition devoted to interned youths. The photo was taken in 2013 in a male interment unit. The area had a typical architecture of an upper-class house with the main building on one side, and small rooms for the servants on the other side. The main house was occupied by the administration of the unit, and the small houses worked as cells for youths in custody. The cells had no infrastructure and were not originally built for such purpose, which could be seen through the lack of space and bathrooms. This unit was for 'less dangerous' youths. The entire area brought back a typical scene of the administration of space in Brazil's colonial time, in which the main house was intended for the wealthy families, and the small habitations nearby were addressed to lock away the slaves under constant vigilance.



## 15. In the Cycle Again!

'In the cycle again' starts the new cycle of male-adult youths in the prison system of Maceió. After becoming an adult (eighteen years of age), criminal youths arrested by the police start a journey through different prisons categories in the city. This photo portrays one of the first steps after arrest, when they arrive in temporary prison called *Casa de Custódia da Capital* (Custody House of the Capital), which is known as 'Cadeião'. In this room, they are registered in the national prison system. Data on age, address, crime, size, weight, skin and eye color, health conditions, voice recording, and fingerprints are collected in this room. In this picture, two youths are waiting for their turn. Heads are down and hands are crossed. In this environment, the inmates are told to not look directly into the eyes of the authorities as a signal of respect. The hands crossed is a reference to the use of handcuffs, independent of actually being handcuffed. This is a shaming ritual found in all internment units and prisons in Maceió.



## 16. A Deposit of...

The photo 'A deposit of...' inaugurates a series devoted to displaying the conditions inside the prisons in Maceió. The 'Triagem II' (top of the image) is one of the first cells in the incarceration area of this prison. This cell is for youths who recently arrived at the jail and must wait for a judicial decision concerning their detention. The dirtiness and the yellow in this image make a striking contrast with the clean and red facade on the outside of the building. This photo makes a clear statement about the prisons in Maceió: overcrowded and unsuitable for human habitation. In this cell, there are no beds or mattresses. The inmates must lie on the floor. Since this cell has no proper airflow, they lie down close to the bars-door. The white bucket in front of the door is used as a trash can for food, and behind the bucket, there are pet bottles filled with drinking water. The drawings on the wall follow similar patterns than the ones described in photo 12.





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## **17. and 18. Prison Conditions #1 and #2**

These two photos show two perspectives of cells at the Cadeião prison. # 1 shows the front of the cell and # 2 the corridor and the extension of it. Overcrowding and a lack of space are clearly visible. The heat forces the prisoners to walk about topless. Ropes are fixed to the roof and used to hang clothes, towels, and blankets. The inmates are not properly occupied and spend their time chatting, sleeping, and drawing on the walls.



### 19. Prison Conditions #3

This photo was taken in the temporary prison Cyridião Durval in 2016 at the exact moment the inmates were receiving lunch. The food left the kitchen in large pots and was delivered to the 'módulos' (sectors). Once the food enters the sectors, the prisoners divide the food among themselves in plastic bowls. This lack of hygiene brings about the idea of animals being fed with controlled portions. The inmates patiently watch the process of dividing the food until they are allowed to collect their plastic bowls.



## 20. Prison Conditions #4

This photo was taken in the permanent prison Baldomero Cavalcante in 2016. Baldomero is an interesting example of an overcrowded male prison in Maceió. The active part of the prison was designed to accommodate 322 inmates. However, the prison is operating with more than twice as many inmates. (2013: 900 inmates; 2016: 950 inmates).

This photo was taken from the roof of a building and displays a common area that connects the corridors and the main entrance of the sector. Entering the sector is avoided as there are not enough guards in the prison to ensure that this can occur safely. Therefore, the only way to photograph those inside is by climbing on the roof. This photo portrays the day-to-day life in this common area and displays the overcrowding of this prison.





## 21. The Lowest of the Low

This photo was also taken in the permanent prison Baldomero Cavalcante in 2016. This was one of the sectors that complete access was given to, since the number of the inmates in this sector was lower and there were enough guards to prevent harm. This sector is for prisoners who have committed crimes considered unacceptable among other criminals, such as sexual offenses and the murder of close relatives. Most youths were convicted for a sexual offense. They are considered by the other inmates as the lowest category among criminals and are excluded from the other sectors of the prison. They belong to a broad group of prisoners known as *sem convívio* which means that they cannot stay together with regular inmates. In case they go to other parts of the prison, and the other inmates realize that they are sexual offenders or a killer of a close relative, punishment will be inevitable. Either they will be violently assaulted or even killed inside of the prison. In this sector, the inmates were open to speak about their conditions and let the researcher take pictures freely. The attachment to religion in this sector seems to be essential, and this can be seen in the bible quotations painted on the

wall (in the right side). The prisoners also showed their bibles and tried to convince the researcher how different things are now that they have joined the church.



## 22. Cacan

This photo was taken in the maximum security prison of Maceió in 2013. This prison is for highly dangerous criminals. This has to do with their leadership role in criminal groups and organizations.

Tattoos are used to express identity, political statements, belonging, etc. Usually, the tattoos are made by colleagues and friends who do not have the necessary training. Common tattoos include skulls, jokers, criminal group acronyms, biblical quotations, and names.

In this photo, the five letters form the name cacan can be seen. Cacan is a nickname in the criminal world. Usually, members of criminal groups or criminal organizations receive a nickname based on personality traits. Nicknames are used as a strategy of anonymity in conversations that may be intercepted by public authorities.

The youth in this photo showed the researcher his tattoo with pride and asked that a photo be taken.



### 23. A Way Out!

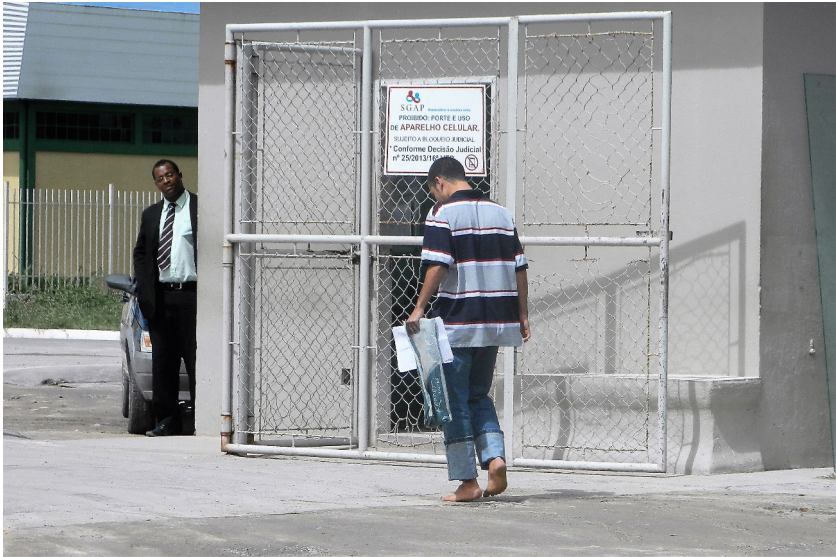
This photo portrays the most effective way to change negative perception inside of the prison: religion. In this photo, a prisoner from the sexual offender's sector is reading the bible and taking notes. His evangelical engagement is a strategy to change his negative image since he belongs to the 'lowest of the low' (see photo 21). The re-birth through religion seems to be also the only way to have an acceptable excuse to 'get out' of a *facção* (criminal organization of drug dealing). One of the interviewed youths who was sentenced for homicide and drug dealing assumed that religion is the only way drop out alive from the PCC (First Command of the Capital) since the members have an everlasting moral duty to the criminal organization. Once an individual becomes part of the *facção* and learns the trade, this person is not allowed to leave the organization since they may become a threat due to the amount of information they possess about the business.



## 24. Dreaming behind Bars

'Dreaming Behind Bars' closes the series on prisons in Maceió. This photo was taken in Baldomero Prison in 2016 and portrays a youth holding the bars while looking outside of the prison. This image was chosen because of the eyes looking forward. The outside world (family, friends, and communities) was presented in the inmates' interviews as the main reason to 'play the game' and survive prison. 'Play the game' is a reference of the informal code of behavior among the prisoners. Engagement in criminal organizations or criminal groups inside prison is a way to be accepted and protected during imprisonment. Once they get attached to criminal groups inside of prison, they must execute duties on the outside: this forces them to continue the cycle of crime and violence.





## 25. Freedom?

This photo was taken during the researcher's second visit to the temporary prison Cyridião Durval in 2013. It was taken from the main entrance of the building and shows a youth being released from prison. The youth, apparently ashamed, walked towards freedom carrying the release order and a bag with clothes (probably donated). Outside, someone (perhaps his lawyer) is waiting for him as he slowly crosses the line toward freedom. This moment could be a starting point in his life. However, considering the social conditions and possible attachment to criminal groups made during his time in prison, there is a high likelihood that this youth will stay in the cycle of crime and street violence.

## About the Photographer

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