

# **Vulnerability and violence: a new conception of risk for the study of youth homicides**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the Public Health field, violence has been studied according to the classic risk approach. Generally speaking, the analyses developed in such perspective are able to show population tendencies of morbidity and mortality, and they also identify risk factors that are part of the causal chain of violence. Nevertheless, even though they are important as sources of information and hypotheses, when isolated such analyses are not capable of dealing with the complexity that is involved in the phenomenon. This paper aims at starting a reflection on the possibilities of the use of the vulnerability concept in the study of violence, specifically for understanding the set of situations that make youths be the main homicide victims. It is proposed a new approach to risk that takes into consideration socio-cultural processes that are present in the vulnerability of such group to lethal violence, through a perspective that presents the specificities of the youth condition and the challenge imposed by the contemporary social life.

**Key-words:** Risk. Vulnerability. Homicides. Youth.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The impact that violence has been causing on populations' morbidity and mortality in the last decades, modifying the profile of health problems in Brazil and in the world, has transformed violence into a public health issue (Krug et al., 2002). However, in principle, violence as a socio-historical phenomenon is not an object of the public health field and does not constitute a

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations were translated into English by us.

typical medical problem (Minayo, Souza, 1997). Nevertheless, the diverse consequences of violence to people's physical, psychological and emotional integrity, affecting their quality of life, as well as the effects on the demand in the healthcare services and the high social costs that are produced, end up legitimizing violence as a concern in the health field, not only in the treatment of health conditions, but also in the proposition and implementation of preventive actions.

Among the different manifestations of violence, this impact is greatly felt in the increase in the number of homicides in Brazil, especially in the population aged between 15 and 24 years (Souza, Lima, 2006; Mello-Jorge, 1998; Minayo, 1990). According to data of the Ministry of Health (SIM/DATASUS), homicides became the leading cause of death among youths already in the 1990s, that is, not only do they rank first among the external causes, but they surpass all the other groups of causes. Souza and Lima (2006), based on the year of 2003, show that the coefficients of mortality due to homicides (/100 thousand inhabitants) reach 42.5 among adolescents aged 15 to 19 years and 70.0 in the age group 20-24 years, which is much higher than the national average for the total population in the same period (28.9/100 thousand inhabitants). Furthermore, the most exposed group to this type of violence has been the male sex. In Brazil, from 1999 to 2000, the risk of men from this age group to be homicide victims was almost 12 times higher than that of women (Souza, 2005), which points to gender differences acting in the configuration of these deaths. Therefore, not only has a male over-mortality caused by homicides been observed, but also significant differences regarding place of occurrence and factors involved in these events. Male homicides, for example, prevail in the public space (like streets and bars) and are today strongly related to criminality; female homicides, in turn, occur mainly in the private space, and are more related to family conflicts (Souza, 2005; Schraiber, Gomes, Couto, 2005). In both cases, the aggressors are predominantly males.

The large urban centers were the most affected by this tendency, and consolidated an "endemic" character with an unequal pattern of distribution of deaths caused by homicides, as the result of a set of social processes that become more prominent in these areas, such as unequal life conditions (Gawryszewski, Costa, 2005; Cardia, Adorno, Poletto, 2003; Barata, Ribeiro, 2000) and the establishment of a market of illicit and criminal activities, mainly related to gun and drug trafficking (Zaluar, 2004, 1994). An example can be found in the municipality of São Paulo: up to the beginning of 2000, it presented high mortality rates due to homicides, especially among the youth population, with large intra-urban disparities in the death risk distribution (Gawryszewski, Costa, 2005)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it is verified that within the urban centers

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<sup>2</sup> The municipality of São Paulo has presented since 2000 a significant decrease in the mortality due to homicides, both for the general population and for youths aged 15 to 24 years. Specifically concerning the latter, it is verified, according to data provided by PRO-AIM, a

the inequalities remain in a youth's chances of being a homicide victim, and these chances are higher in areas that present unfavorable socio-economic conditions.

In the public health field, violence has been studied according to the classic risk approach. Generally speaking, the analyses developed in such perspective are able to show population tendencies of morbidity and mortality caused by violence, like the weight of youth victimization due to homicide, and they also identify risk factors that are part of the causal chain of violence. Nevertheless, even though they are important as sources of information and hypotheses (Ayres et al., 2003), when isolated, such analyses are not capable of dealing with the complexity that is involved in the phenomenon of violence.

Because of the limits presented by risk analyses, the concept of vulnerability has become an important reference, mainly with the development of studies in the field of HIV/AIDS. The adoption of this concept points to changes both in the epistemological level and in the sphere of healthcare practices, namely concerning the prevention of health hazards (Sanchez, Bertolozzi, 2007; Ayres et al., 2003; Buchalla, Paiva, 2002; Delor, Hubert, 2000).

The fundamental contribution of the vulnerability approach is to shed light on the dynamics of the social, cultural and individual processes that configure the individuals' susceptibility to a certain event, promoting a broader reflection on the health-disease processes. Therefore, it enables to consider the organic susceptibilities, like "the form of structuring the healthcare programs, and also behavioral, cultural, economic and political aspects" (Ayres et al., 2003, p.20). In this way, its analytical and practical potential favors the establishment of interdisciplinary knowledge in the public health field and stimulates its applicability to the analysis of different objects of interest (Ayres et al., 2003), as in the particular case of violence (Peres, 2007; Paulilo, Bello, 2002).

In this context, this paper aims to start a reflection on the concept of vulnerability and the possibilities of its use in the study of violence, specifically in the understanding of the situations that make youths be, today, the main victims of homicide. Thus, we intend to take into consideration the social and cultural processes that are present in the vulnerability of this group to lethal violence, through a perspective that presents the specificities of the youth condition and the challenge imposed by the contemporary social life. We propose to take advantage of the heuristic importance of vulnerability, which has been relevant in the HIV/AIDS field, to understand the complexity of the processes involved in the problem of violence and help to define prevention measures. This does not mean a direct transference of questions posed by the AIDS epidemic to the study of violence, as the latter is not a health condition

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75.6% decrease from 2000 to 2007. However, disparities in the occurrence of these deaths remain across districts.

with a specific etiological agent, but a phenomenon whose causes are multiple and act in a complex and dynamic relationship (Peres, 2007; Minayo, 1990). However, the advances in HIV/AIDS studies, which reflect on the concept of vulnerability, point to the need to consider the structural life conditions and the cultural values and norms that act in the configuration of the epidemic. Thus, they allow a fruitful and close relationship to the study of violence.

### **Epidemiological risk and vulnerability**

The concept of risk, central in epidemiological studies, expresses the probability of occurrence of diseases and health hazards in populations in certain situations or contexts (Ayres et al., 2003; Almeida Filho, 1992). The epidemiological risk analyses enable to establish probabilistic associations of population distribution of a certain health hazard between different objective and measurable conditions, like age, sex, income, etc., and their character is mainly quantitative and population-based. In this sense, it is an abstract and analytical category that presupposes a certain dependence relationship between an exposure factor (risk factor) and an effect on health, according to the model of causal reasoning. The identification of risk factors of a certain health hazard constitutes, therefore, a fundamental axis of the analyses that support preventive healthcare practices.

Czeresnia (2004) shows that, as the risk analysis models have experimentation as a criterion, they demand the control of all the factors that may interfere in the experience, so that the conditions that enable to observe a cause and effect relationship can be created. Nevertheless, as the author argues, the construction of these models establishes a “purification process” that creates an abstraction of the studied phenomenon and, consequently, reduces its complexity. According to Castel (1986), this process promotes the dissolution of the concrete subject or individual (the target of the preventive measures), and he is replaced by a set of risk factors.

Studies on HIV/AIDS, especially those carried out at the beginning of the epidemic, are an example of the adoption of the risk model and of its consequences to preventive measures. One of the great problems caused by this approach at the beginning of the 1980s was the stigmatization of certain groups, which were identified as **risk groups**.

It is important to highlight that this stigmatization process, denoted in the classic 4 Hs (homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts and Haitians), was structured, according to Ayres et al. (2003), through the transformation suffered by the concept of risk, which used to be an analytical category of causal inference (and, therefore, abstract and collective) and became an operational category with an individualizing character – which was recognized by the presence of characteristics that marked the subjects’ belongingness to certain “risk groups”, the main target of preventive actions. Thus, the concept of risk starts to demarcate identity frontiers and to support the proposition of measures of isolation and sexual abstinence (Ayres et al., 2003; Delor, Hubert, 2000). In

this sense, risk begins to operate as an ontological category, as an identity mark of the subject, who represents the risk that he virtually bears (Ayres et al., 2003).

With the identification of the HIV as the causal viral agent, a second stage begins, in which risk is no longer associated with specific groups, but with practices related to the virus transmission. In this stage practices centered on the category **risk behavior** and on health education/information strategies start to emerge (Ayres et al., 2003). Consequently, individual behaviors start to be the focus of preventive campaigns and the individual starts to be seen as being responsible for his possible contamination. Although this stage represents an advance in relation to the previous one, removing the stigma of certain groups and universalizing the concern about the disease, it in fact reinforces the model of rational individual whose behaviors could be modified by means of preventive campaigns. In addition, it reinforces the idea that each individual, when provided with the necessary information, is responsible for his own protection.

A third stage emerges due to the limits of the prevention strategies based on the categories of risk group and risk behavior and to the verification that the virus contamination continued to increase and affected with greater intensity areas with precarious socioeconomic conditions and weakened sectors of the society (like youths, women, Blacks). Therefore, it was possible to observe both the non-homogeneous character of the exposure to the virus in the population in general and the fact that changes in practices and behaviors are related to different factors that are beyond the individual will (Ayres et al., 2003).

It is at this moment that a new proposal starts to be outlined, a proposal that focuses on understanding the conditions of the context that compose the different susceptibilities to the disease. Thus, from individual risk we move to the understanding of vulnerability. According to Ayres et al. (2003), it refers to:

“[...] the movement of considering people’s chance of exposure to diseases as resulting from a set of aspects that are not only individual, but also collective and contextual, causing greater susceptibility to infection and to becoming ill, and, in an inseparable way, more or less availability of resources of all types to protect oneself from both” (p. 123).

Therefore, the vulnerability analyses attempt to rescue the complexity of the health-disease processes by incorporating the different factors that are involved and the mutual interferences (Ayres et al., 2003). In this sense, unlike the “risk group” category, the concept of vulnerability does not fix group identities, since it tries to apprehend differences in the susceptibility to the virus resulting from the effect of specific social relationships that concern the social body as a whole (Ayres et al., 2003). Thus, vulnerability is not a state, an essential characteristic of individuals; rather, it is a situation. It presents a potentially unstable nature that can change because of the passage of time,

because of relationships or because of characteristics of the wider social context (Delor, Hubert, 2000). In the vulnerability analyses, emphasis is given to intervention programs that aim at empowerment within the epidemic.

The vulnerability approach is characteristically interdisciplinary and is strongly anchored on the Social and Human Sciences. It aims to understand, besides the epidemiological determinants, the dimension of the senses and meanings of subjects' exposure to certain risk situations, as well as the implications and the different effects of these exposures on the individual and interactive trajectories.

Delor and Hubert (2000) propose three intelligibility levels to understand the concept of vulnerability: the level of social trajectory, the level in which two trajectories cross each other and the social context. Identity construction is the synthesis process in which these three dimensions should be situated. The first level regards the position in the life course that can be shared by different individuals, becoming essential to understand the adoption of certain behaviors. The second emphasizes the dimension of the interaction between individuals and the elements that are involved, like differences in status and power, which directly influence the possibilities in face of risk. The social context level, in turn, involves the social configurations and cultural norms that act directly on the forms and interests that rule the encounter between two trajectories. To the authors, identity construction is understood as a process that aims to maintain, expand or protect the space of life in which the subject is socially recognized, and the confrontation with different risks requires the constant construction and re-elaboration of this process, through which the subject strives to produce a synthesis (that is always temporary) of these three levels.

Also according to the authors, in order to understand the vulnerability situations, it is necessary to apprehend the connections that exist between the notions of risk (as an adverse or potentially hostile event), identity and vulnerability. Thus, as the identity process is not something static but a constant, that is, a work of synthesis through which the individual deals with different risks in his daily life, the vulnerability situations would be "the circumstances – in terms of specific moments and areas – during which this vital exercise is most painful, difficult, or perilous" (Delor, Hubert, 2000, p.1560). Therefore, vulnerability would have an "external" side, represented by the tensions and hostilities that affect individuals or groups, and an "internal" side, which refers to the frailty to deal with these difficulties (Chambers *apud* Delor, Hubert, 2000). This produces the distinction between exposure, capacity and potentiality in the vulnerability space, that is, the subject's possibilities of exposure to crisis situations (exposure), the resources the subject has to face these situations (capacity), and finally, the consequences of this exposure (potentiality) (Watts, Bolhe *apud* Delor, Hubert, 2000). Thus, people experience the exposure to a certain health hazard in different ways, and one individual does not have the same vulnerability in different contexts, in different relationships and in different points of his trajectory.

In this way, the vulnerability framework allows us to understand the forms through which individuals face adverse events and adopt certain behaviors, not according to the view of a rational subject that guides his action only through the availability of information, but in the perspective of a subject embedded in a dynamic system of different types of relationships and constraints (social, political and economic) that influences his choices and existence conditions.

### **Violence, risk and vulnerability**

In the public health field, the centrality of the risk paradigm in the study of violence is consolidated in the *Relatório Mundial sobre Violência e Saúde* [World Report on Violence and Health] (Krug et al., 2002). Researchers try to identify the risk factors for the different manifestations of violence, learn about causal mechanisms and recognize the groups that are particularly exposed, so as to establish preventive actions. However, when the epidemiological risk analyses in this field fragment a complex phenomenon like violence, they also present limitations.

Thus, although the risk analyses continue to be important to identify differences in the population distributions of health hazards, they are not able to apprehend the concrete meanings of the individuals' experiences in distinct exposure situations. In addition, as exemplified in the case of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when risk, from an abstract category, is operationalized to preventive practices without the necessary mediations, it ends up stigmatizing population groups, which frequently occurs when we are dealing with violence.

From the 1980s onwards, with the increase in the rates of mortality caused by homicides, a vast academic production on the theme emerges, describing growth curves, the distribution of deaths across the national territory, including the identification of population groups with higher risk of death by homicide (Mello-Jorge, 1998; Minayo, 1990). These studies show that populations from peripheral regions, especially youths, constitute the clearest risk group for fatal victimization.

However, the identification of certain populations and places that are more victimized end up producing the negative effects mentioned above. According to Peres (2007), just like in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, in the case of homicides, those that constitute the "risk groups" for fatal victimization – youths, Blacks, inhabitants of peripheral areas – represent, for certain segments of the society, a potential threat, as members of the "dangerous classes". It is clear, here, the population's division into two groups – dangerous individuals and individuals to protect – and the creation of urban barriers to avoid contact and "ensure" protection. Such barriers are visualized in the urban fortifications – high walls, bars across windows -, in armored vehicles and in the closed windows of cars on the streets (Caldeira, 2000). The intensification of the feeling of insecurity and the strong tendency towards urban segregation, in

addition to the inefficiency of the public security agents, also generate demands for private security services and for extralegal “justice” actions.

Peralva (2000) points to some situations where the stigmatization of youths coming from peripheral areas is clear, especially when they look for jobs or courses in central areas. Moreover, police violence and corruption are other aspects that are strongly present in the daily routine of the populations characterized as “risk groups”, and are one more way to stigmatize these populations due to the police action. In a study carried out in a poor community of Rio de Janeiro, Zaluar (1994) also presents some reflections on the criminalization of the poor when he argues that they suffer the perverse effects of the economic crisis and of unemployment, besides being stigmatized as criminals and suffering repression actions performed mainly by policemen, who employ a violent treatment indiscriminately.

With the objective of facing the problem of urban violence and criminality, guides and manuals have recently been published to stimulate the individual’s greater commitment to his security, following the action model centered on risk behavior and on education and information strategies. These materials teach how to avoid violence situations, with the adoption of safe and defensive behaviors in the traffic, on the streets and at bars. This information is provided mainly by the means of communication so that we are able to recognize possible suspects – based on the risk profile –, avoid situations of greater exposure, and behave correctly in violent situations, thus preventing a fatal outcome (Peres, 2007). Having the information, each one of us should watch over our protection, changing our behavior.

The issues raised above and the experience accumulated in the field of HIV/AIDS show the need for an approach to the violence phenomenon that overcomes the limits inherent in the risk-centered approach, enabling us to understand the social stigmatization that falls upon some youths and the different effects that this can produce, as well as other situations that may end in violent outcomes. The vulnerability analyses consider the dangers or hostile events that may affect individuals and also their frailty to face them (Chambers *apud* Delor, Hubert, 2000). Thus, they can help in the understanding of these cultural and social processes that are involved in violence situations, and also of the different forms youths deal with these situations, as well as the meaning they attribute to them.

Thus, one of the challenges raised by the study of youths’ vulnerability to homicides nowadays is to understand the meanings of the (voluntary or involuntary) exposure to risky situations, like their participation in some illicit activity, that make them prone to the possibility of dying in a violent way. This question has as its backdrop ongoing social processes that change the contours of the socialization of the new generations, implying different consequences to the construction of their life trajectories. Among these processes, there is the configuration of risk as the central category in the contemporary society, which opens the discussion about the transformations that affect the constitutive elements of modernity.



## **Context: risk and modernity**

Firstly, it is necessary to highlight the plurality of uses and meanings that the word risk has acquired in diverse societies throughout history (Ayres, 1995) and even today, depending on the area of study in which it is employed and according to different interpretative lines (Lupton, 1999). However, in modernity, as Giddens (2002) argues, the movement of abandonment of the traditional forms of doing things produces a new way of dealing with the future, instituting risk as a central concept, whose meaning is related to the possibility of predicting, in a probabilistic way, future events (risk calculation), and acting in a colonizing form in relation to this future, considering the unpredictability that is intrinsic to it.

According to La Mendola (2005), the modern interpretation of risk intends to state that the principles of the individualistic and utilitarian rationalism should guide the agents' conducts, thus arguing that dangers must be faced in an individual way and the agents should bear the responsibility for the consequences individually. Epidemiological risk is one of the fruits of this logic, which is strongly rationalizing (based on scientific knowledge) and strictly related to the individualization process in reflective modernity (Beck, 1997). Individualization is the process that transfers to the individual the responsibility for the construction of his trajectories and for the consequences of his possible failures; thus, "the opportunities, threats, and biography ambivalences, which used to be possible to solve within a family group, in the community of the village or resorting to a social class or group, should be more and more perceived, interpreted and decided by the individuals themselves" (Beck, 1997, p.18).

This individualization process occurs in a context in which the dominant social references instituted by the industrial society suffer from exhaustion, disintegration and disenchantment, and this imposes on individuals a lot of effort to define new significations (Beck, 1997). As Giddens (2002) indicates, the main dimensions of modernity are: the establishment of an "industrialized world", the development of capitalism, as well as the formation of nation-States. In contemporary times, we would be in the presence of a *radicalization* of this modernity, that is, we would be in another stage of this modernization defined by Beck (1997) as "reflective modernity", in which progress may be transformed into self-destruction. This happens because the risks produced by modernity seem to escape control, including the production of high reach risks or global risks (like the environmental risks), as a consequence of technological development. Besides, there are structural changes that affect also the work sphere, and some of the sources of cultural signification of modernity are in decomposition (such as the faith in progress). Therefore, uncertainty becomes a fundamental experience of modernity.

In light of this, as Le Breton (2000) explains, modernity causes meaning discontinuities and confusion in the socially instituted references, conducting each individual to the need of self-reference, that is, to the imperative of “searching in himself, in his own resources, things which he used to find inside culture and in the company of others” (p.12). According to the author, it is within this process that the anthropological and social signification of the risk practices performed by people in general, and especially by youths, should be searched for. Consequently, another manner of conceiving risk is proposed, which is essential in the analysis of vulnerability to violence. It “considers risk as being the unstable fruit of a construction process carried out by individuals and collectivities” (Delor, Hubert, 1997, p.21), going beyond the technical approach to risk from which the epidemiological risk results.

### **Youths and vulnerability situations**

It is possible to suppose that the youths’ vulnerability to violence is related today to the general configurations of “reflective modernity” (in Beck’s (1997) terms) and, therefore, to the consequences that this process brings to the subjects’ individual trajectory. On the one hand, because it obliges the subject to make decisions by himself and to be responsible for the results of his “choices” (which are not free from constraints, as they are mediated by the ongoing social processes). Although this provides some freedom to the subject by opening new possibilities, it imposes the hard load of an individual accountability. In this context, risk control becomes more and more related to individual strategies, as socially there is greater exemption in relation to the collective responsibility of risk management, leaving to the individuals the onus for possible negative effects (Peralva, 2000; Mitjavila, Jesus, 2004). On the other hand, because it unmakes the symbolic limits that are capable of giving support to an identity feeling and it is in the search for these limits that many youths end up in risk situations, where the confrontation with death (in an imaginary or real form) may become a fundamental element in the affirmation of the value of their existence (Le Breton, 2000).

Thus, according to Le Breton (2000), the transition to adult life represents in modernity a critical moment in which these risk conducts become emblematic and strongly adopted. In view of the social indetermination instituted by modernity, there are no more rites of passage that can symbolize and legitimize the entrance into adult life and, mainly, focus on the future and remove the uncertainty about the conduction of existence, as it happens in traditional societies. This symbolization of passage becomes a responsibility of youths themselves, who need to find an answer to their expectations. And it is at this moment that risk conducts acquire an essential value, in the form of a rite through which youths try to find some meaning that justifies their lives.

In this sense, these risky behaviors, which many times are self- or hetero-destructive, should not be interpreted as an escape, an irresponsibility of the individuals. On the contrary, these behaviors, even the most apparently

irresponsible ones, indicate an implicit demand for responsibility (La Mendola, 2005) and, therefore, show the search for a feeling of identity (Le Breton, 2000). In this way, in light of the absence of symbolic limits that serve as orientations, it is in the essentially corporal experience that this feeling is searched for, and this is why risk, even the risk of death, acquires importance in this process. Defeating the death that was requested by means of risk practices means that the individual existence has value (Le Breton, 2000).

According to La Mendola (2005), the meanings of risk behaviors, even the most destructive ones, are also related to lack of trust in the social mechanisms of success distribution. When modernity makes risk be the exclusive form to pursue objectives in contemporary society, it establishes as a fundamental message that those who struggle hard will necessarily be successful. However, this formula is not always confirmed in reality, as the achievement of success is submitted to social rules of recognition that constantly escape from the rational criteria of selection of the best.

Therefore, the social system make individuals feel the need to adopt risk attitudes to acquire success without, however, emphasizing the element that is complementary to it, that is, safety, and this opens the way for destructive behaviors. Thus, we highlight the existence of a social system that legitimizes risk, even in the work sphere (Sennet, 2005), hiding the need of protection networks to prevent the negative effects that the action of running a risk may contain, especially in youth, a phase that is characterized as a moment of strong social and identity indetermination.

In addition to this general process that affects youth as a whole, there are deep differences in the experience of this phase according to the social position of these youths, even when we consider the exposure to violence. Thus, although the challenges are similar, the contexts and the available resources to face them are not the same, opening space for different vulnerability situations.

Pais (2005) argues that the social situation of youths in modernity has been more and more characterized by unpredictability. The new social configurations marked by globalizing tendencies, technological advance and work mutations (Telles, 2006; Sennet, 2005; Giddens, 2002) transform the future into something that is undefined and risky, posing challenges to the society in general and especially to the new generations. In this sense, the crucial problem that emerges is the process of transition into adult life and the youths' possibilities of being able to attain their social inclusion. Although this problem affects all youths, the economic and social inequalities certainly imprint important differences on the existing resources and on the possible forms of achieving this inclusion.

According to Telles (2006), the new generations highlight the problematic points of the new social configurations. On the one hand, youths enter into a social world that is already marked by precarious jobs and unemployment, in times of dissolution of the Fordist capitalism and emergence of the flexible capitalism (Sennet, 2005). On the other hand, they live the

experience, unimaginable to the previous generations, of globalized capitals, which extend the consumption circuits of material and symbolic goods beyond the frontiers of the large nations, reaching the popular markets. And it is in the center of this new reality, which redefines new local dynamics, new social networks, new sociabilities, that the youths delineate their trajectories, which are becoming increasingly unstable and precarious (Telles, 2006).

The youths' trajectories become, in this context, non-linear trajectories, as they are subject to different contingencies, unpredictable events, uncertainties (Pais, 2005), whose main characteristic is the return to paths that had already been taken. The uncertainties that compose these trajectories gravitate intensely in the work sphere. Due to the flexibilization that characterizes capitalism in modernity, the youths' experience in the world of labor does not occur based on a stable routine or a predictable career, and they end up inventing different forms to earn money or to "make a living". Still according to Pais (2005), this flexibilization of work that affects everybody is experienced by youths as an adventure or even a misadventure. The reason is that, to some of them, this flexibility represents living precariously, with all the negative aspects that derive from this situation, and to others, this flexibility represents the opening of new opportunities, the possibility of ascending social trajectories. Nevertheless, it is uncertainty and improvisation that characterize their paths. It is in this sense that getting a job is many times seen as a stroke of luck and life itself starts to be lived as it were a game, in which cunning and the elements of randomness and luck become central.

According to Sennet (2005), flexible capitalism institutes risk as something necessary. This is a time, therefore, that values performance and success. Running risks, trying one's luck become a daily necessity to everybody and this attitude ends up being valued: "The modern culture of risk is peculiar in that not making a move is seen as a sign of failure, and stability is similar to death in life. Destiny, therefore, counts less than the act of departing" (p.102). Risk in this culture is a test of character; it is necessary to run risks even when rationally one knows that it is possible to fail. Specifically concerning youths, their threshold situation makes them become more flexible, also in terms of running risks. However, as Pais (2005) indicates, the propensity to run risks and play with one's own life would be stronger among subjects whose life is full of indeterminations. Thus, in the game of life, many youths would be led to defy their own destiny, as in the case of youths who are in social exclusion trajectories. In this way, the resources that youths have (school titles, knowledge networks and also cunning) vary, as well as the forms they invent, based on these resources or in their absence, to make a living.

Telles (2006), who reconstructed the trajectory of young inhabitants of the periphery of the city of São Paulo, also shows the different strategies and resources youths employ in an attempt to participate in the job market. The outlined paths show, likewise, the precariousness and instability that mark their experiences and reveal new patterns of inequalities that question the traditional forms of reflecting on the social dimension. According to the author, the cross

between labor precarization and the globalized circuits configures a social world that cannot be understood in terms of a dualistic society, which has, on one side, “social exclusion” and, on the other, the “global city”. Youths, including those from peripheral areas, transit across these globalized circuits, which function as gravitational poles, where the experience of the precarious job takes place.

Telles also argues that this does not mean that we are in a society where a democratization of the consumer society is established. Inequalities are inherent in the contemporary capitalism, pervading the entire social field. However, what is supposed are new social configurations where the current excluding forms of employment join the expansion of these consumption circuits of material and symbolic goods, configuring different ways of “making a living” and different participation strategies, also among the poor. In this sense, it is possible to highlight indebtedness in the purchase of these goods and the performance of activities that can be almost informal or even illegal. The expansion of the organized market of drug trafficking, for example, is directly connected with this globalized economy, capturing a large number of youths, as drug use has a strong attraction over these youths (Zaluar, 1994).

Criminality, which is strongly tied to this expansion in drug trafficking, has been more and more present in peripheries and slums from the 1990s onwards, and it has become part of the “options” and “choices”<sup>3</sup> presented to the inhabitants of these places. Thus, it is configured as an aspect of vulnerability to many youths, although only a minority accedes to criminal activities (Feltran, 2007; Peralva, 2000). In the presence of the countless difficulties people have, mainly youths, to enter the job market, the “choice” of this “option”, on the one hand, is a form of access to consumer goods, income, and amplification of one’s individual status inside the group. On the other hand, it also becomes part of a context of omnipresent risk of death, that is, in a context marked by the violence that results both from the police institution and from the illegal drug trade (Feltran, 2007; Peralva, 2000).

The response strategies to this risk of death can vary, from the attempt to bypass it to participating in drug trafficking. This reveals a dynamics that goes beyond aspirations to a diverting social mobility, encompassing different meanings of existence and alternatives of life to better deal with the risk experience, in view of the lack of stable patterns of family, social and political organization, including the absence of a legitimate public order (Feltran, 2007; Peralva, 2000). It is in this sense that Peralva (2000) explains that the youths’ risk conducts before these conditions are strictly related to familiarity with the risk of death:

“[...] this caused the development, in the midst of youth, particularly of poor youths (as to them the quota of risks

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<sup>3</sup> These “choices” presuppose the existence of a vulnerability that surpasses individual will and the notion of risk as individual behaviors and desires.

associated with violence is higher), of the feeling that risk conducts maybe constitute an efficient modality of response to risk. Thus, they would anticipate the risk, appropriate it, in order to better subdue it” (p.127)

Therefore, the lack of trust in social mechanisms that deny promises made through the ambivalence and ambiguity of the messages, the violence perpetrated by policemen and drug dealers, as well as the lack of access to rights are aspects that are strongly related to the adherence of many youths to drug trafficking or to other risk practices (La Mendola, 2005; Peralva, 2000).

### **Final Remarks**

“Although to some youths risks offer opportunities and are accepted in the expectation of benefits [...] to many others life is a lottery, where risks are out of control and safety is a question of luck” (Pais, 2005, p.55).

Being young, more than biologically having a certain age, means belonging to an age group or to a *generation* that shares a common social situation in the historical and social process (Mannheim, 1982). This specific belongingness, marked by the chronologization of life, alters the type of cultural heritage, as well as the form of thinking and experiencing the different challenges imposed by social changes.

Thus, the new generations experience in a specific way the processes engendered by current modernity. Although the imposed challenges, like the precarization of labor and the need to run risks, reach everybody, to youths they acquire a stronger dimension. This happens because being young also means a period in which the process of identity construction is nuclear, but it takes place based on a plurality of realities, many times without an available support network (La Mendola, 2005).

In this sense, the fact of being born in the same period of time does not imply having the same experiences. The social and cultural factors are configured in particular ways according to the social position of these youths, which directly influences the formation of their trajectories and, consequently, the situations of vulnerability to violence. These situations are aggravated in specific contexts, in which the socioeconomic conditions are restricted, the lack of access to rights persists due to the State’s inefficiency, and violence, both from policemen and from groups related to drug trafficking, is intensely present. A scenario is outlined where the risk conducts acquire a favorable space and the fatal outcomes in the trajectories of many youths end up composing the sad story of many families.

Therefore, the use of the concept of vulnerability becomes pertinent to the understanding of violence involving youths, as it enables to consider the

multicausality that involves this phenomenon and the diverse meanings and senses that are attributed to risk exposure, which should be understood in connection with the social and cultural configurations that pervade the process of individualization in reflective modernity.

## **COLLABORATORS**

The authors worked together in all the production stages of this manuscript.

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Translated by Carolina Siqueira Muniz Ventura.

Translation from **Interface - Comunicação, Saúde, Educação**, Botucatu, v.15,  
n. 37, p. 377 - 392, 2011.