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



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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

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than 47 million inhabitants, or some 23% of the total population, under age 15 in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Of the urban population in 2010, nearly 42% were under age 25.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

socio-economic class, often correlated with ethnicity. These perceptions and practices may also play an important role in contesting or stabilizing such urban inequalities, which are often entrenched in what James Holston (2008) calls 'differentiated citizenship'. In addition to formal laws and regulations, urban residents' 'common-sense' ideas about who belongs where, together with everyday movements and encounters within the spaces of the city, are significant in structuring substantive access to rights and opportunities in domains such as employment, housing, education and leisure.

Various urban researchers have pointed to the role of fear and perceptions of insecurity in exacerbating socio-spatial inequalities. Insecurity can reinforce segregation and marginalization through material interventions that separate populations, e.g. when wealthier classes retreat to gated communities and other forms of fortified enclaves (Caldeira, 2000).<sup>5</sup> Rodgers (2004) even speaks of a 'disembedding' of the city, as wealthier residents create an entire fortified network that aims to connect private, secure enclaves through the construction of high-speed roads and roundabouts. The reinforcement of inequalities can also occur through discursive processes that consolidate social and spatial boundaries and legitimate inequality, differentiating between urban citizens and the 'good'/safe or 'bad'/scary neighborhoods to which they are seen as belonging. However, spatial practices and discourses can also be central to contesting these same inequalities. In urban Brazil, researchers have pointed to the role of urban slang, music, graffiti and most recently *rolezinhos* (social gatherings of low-income youth in shopping malls) in challenging differentiated citizenship (Roth-Gordon, 2009; Caldeira, 2014a, 2014b). As such, the everyday socio-spatial perceptions and practices of different groups of urban residents can contribute to the normalization or conversely the contestation of urban inequalities.

#### 4. Research findings

In this section, we highlight a number of themes that emerged during our field research. Specifically, segregation and insecurity came out as central factors in young people's perceptions of Rio de Janeiro and their use of urban space. Both themes, set out in two subsections below, reflect the impact on inequality on the socio-spatial perceptions and practices. In a third subsection, we discuss how young people understood the impacts of inequality on urban life, and the solutions they saw as most effective. While low-income and high-income youth's perceptions and practices were quite similar in some regards, their responses also diverged in a number of ways, which we outline below.

##### 4.1. Residential and leisure segregation

Both groups experience the city of Rio de Janeiro as highly segregated in terms of spaces for living, leisure, work and education, but interpret this segregation differently. Residential segregation is most evident in the gated condominiums that dominate the formal neighborhoods. Youth from *o asfalto* saw these gated buildings as offering a safe, secure and socially homogeneous environment with neighbors who share norms, values and similar class background. While wealthier youth did note that living in condominiums had a number of disadvantages, most notably high rents and lack of privacy, they did not express a concern over the

impact of such fortified enclaves on urban space more broadly, for instance their solidifying of social and spatial boundaries between wealthier and poorer *Cariocas*. Some respondents from wealthier neighborhoods did suggest that gated communities give their residents a false sense of security, based more on perceptions than on reality.

In contrast to their counterparts from *o asfalto*, young people from favela neighborhoods perceived the gated condominiums more critically, interpreting them as aimed at keeping them out. These different interpretations of formal housing complexes tied to perceptions of class and area stigmatization. As Thiago, a 17-year-old from the *favela* of Rocinha, told us, he felt discriminated "outside of Rocinha, on the streets of Ipanema and Copacabana. If you are from a *favela*, prejudice is there in all places." Young people from the *favelas* felt that wealthier *Cariocas* branded them as poor, criminal and violent based on their place of residence. Notwithstanding, these respondents expressed strong feelings of place attachment and pride in their neighborhoods, emphasizing their contributions to Brazilian culture and local norms of reciprocity. These findings contradict other studies (e.g. Blokland, 2008; Wacquant, 2007), which found that residents of stigmatized communities internalized prejudices, and held negative attitudes towards their places of residence. While much has been written about the stigmatization and discrimination that *favela* residents suffer, youth from wealthier neighborhoods also felt that they encountered prejudices based on their residence. For example, Nicholas, a 23-year-old young man from Leblon, one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, told us, "Because I live in Leblon, practically everyone think that I'm a playboy; that I'm rich, self-centered, and don't speak with black people or people living in the *favelas*." Nonetheless, young people from wealthier areas also expressed pride and positive emotions in discussing their neighborhoods.

Segregation was less evident in young people's mobility patterns than in housing. However, these patterns also diverged between the two groups: while young *favela* residents regularly travelled to the formal neighborhoods, higher-income youth rarely visited the nearby *favelas*. This unidirectional pattern was highlighted by Fabio, a 20-year-old from the high-income neighborhood of Jardim Botânico, who spoke of *o asfalto* as "zones of exclusion, places that I don't go to because of lack of infrastructure and transport network, an absence of spaces for leisure and culture, and security risks". Although it is often assumed that the urban poor experience more restricted mobility than wealthier residents we found that high-income youth experienced significant social, practical and security restrictions as they moved about the city. Somewhat paralleling Gough and Franch's (2005) findings in the Brazilian city of Recife, low-income youth had a more extensive knowledge of their city (and especially the south zone), as they were more likely to spend significant time on the streets and moving around.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, high-income youth from the formal neighborhoods tended to concentrate their movements within the formal, regulated parts of Rio. For both groups however, these patterns are gendered, with young men enjoying more freedom of mobility than young women.

These findings in terms of mobility somewhat contradict analyses offered by Rodgers (2004), who emphasizes that the enhanced mobility of wealthy residents comes at the expense of the poor, or by Caldeira (2000), who sees fortified enclaves as

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the rather extreme cases of class segregation in the most researched Brazilian cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are not necessarily representative of the country's other cities, where urban space may be less divided and fortified (Garmany, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> In their work on Recife, Gough and Franch (2005: 159) found that adolescent boys and young men from *favelas* 'experience the greatest freedom in the city' as they were not confined to their neighborhood. However, this analysis is perhaps overly optimistic, as these youth are often excluded from (more prestigious) private spaces, such as up-market shopping malls.

damaging the quality of urban public space as it becomes ‘residual’ space. These processes are somewhat more ambiguous in the case of young people in Rio de Janeiro’s south zone. In addition to emphasizing the relative mobility of low-income youth, our research findings show both high-income and low-income youth frequently make use of the same public spaces for leisure purposes. In particular, the south zone’s beaches are popular places for people from different beach backgrounds to hang out, with Ipanema the most popular beach amongst young people. However, socio-economic and geographic background determine exactly what part of the beach young people frequent. For example, respondents from *favelas*, and particularly from Cantagalo-Pavãozinho and Rocinha, preferred to go to Arpoador, a popular surfing spot near Beach Post 7 known for its waves. In contrast, those from formal neighborhoods tended to spend their free time near Beach Post 10, which was considered the place to be seen for the middle and upper classes (see Fig. 1). Such spatial preferences imply that even ostensibly mixed public spaces are prone to practices of micro-differentiation and segregation, and do not necessarily facilitate cross-class interactions. These findings suggest a critical reading of the notion of Rodgers’ and Caldeira’s work: openly accessible public spaces and cross-class sites of leisure most definitely still exist, and it is not so much city-wide infrastructural interventions as young people’s micro-scale socio-spatial practices that reflect (and to some extent reproduce) class boundaries.

4.2. Insecurity

In addition to segregation, insecurity emerged as an important theme in the socio-spatial perceptions and practices of Carioca youth. Fear of violence plays an important role in the everyday perceptions and practices of young people both from *o morro* and *o asfalto*. Nearly 57 per cent of respondents from *favelas* and 61% of respondents from formal neighborhoods stated that they felt unsafe on a regular basis. As 15-year old Camila, from the favela Rocinha, told us: “You always feel a little insecure and afraid. Afraid to do routine stuff, as there isn’t any safe place.” Interestingly, there were many parallels between the perceptions of young people from low-income and high-income areas towards their own neighborhood. The majority of both groups considered the neighborhood where they lived to be quite safe during the daytime, but saw it as unsafe or even dangerous at night. Figs. 2 and 3 show that 73% of

respondents from *o morro* and 79% of respondents from *o asfalto* regarded their neighborhood to be safe during the day, while 38% and 24%, respectively, felt this was the case at night.

In addition to this temporal dimension, insecurity is clearly differentiated spatially. While both low-income and high-income youth saw their own neighborhood as safer than other neighborhoods, they tended to be afraid of ‘the other’. Specifically, they expressed fear of people who lived far away or in neighborhoods that they did not frequent themselves, and of people with different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds, whose norms and values they felt diverged from theirs. These perceptions of danger tended to translate into patterns of social and spatial avoidance of certain areas and their residents. For example, while many youth from *favelas* saw their own neighborhood as safe, they regarded other *favelas* as dangerous. This came out clearly in the case of Rocinha and Vidigal; although these *favelas* are located very close to each other, their respective residents expressed great doubts about the security situation in the adjacent neighborhood. In interviews, many young people in Vidigal expressed the opinion that Rocinha was dangerous and Vidigal was safer, and vice versa in Rocinha (see Fig. 4).

4.3. Urban space, inequality and agency

Our research also focused directly on the impact that urban youth attributed to inequalities, and the solutions they proposed. Interestingly, a relatively large proportion of respondents from *favelas* (40%) indicated that inequalities did not have a strong impact on their life, while only 18% of high-income youth felt the same way. However, a majority of both groups of young people felt that inequalities directly shaped their daily lives. Youth in low-income areas experienced urban inequalities in an immediate practical sense, through differential place-based access to services, expressed in limited local education facilities and job opportunities. In addition, they are affected by area stigmatization and prejudices, which poses additional obstacles to accessing education and employment opportunities.

Youth from wealthier areas were also outspoken about in noting the negative impact of inequalities. Despite significant concern, they did not always experience these negative consequences personally or on an everyday basis. As Tamara, a 16-year-old from Copacabana, explained, “I can feel the inequality when I go to places



Fig. 1. Places on Ipanema and Leblon beaches where youth from the *favelas* and the formal neighborhoods hang out.

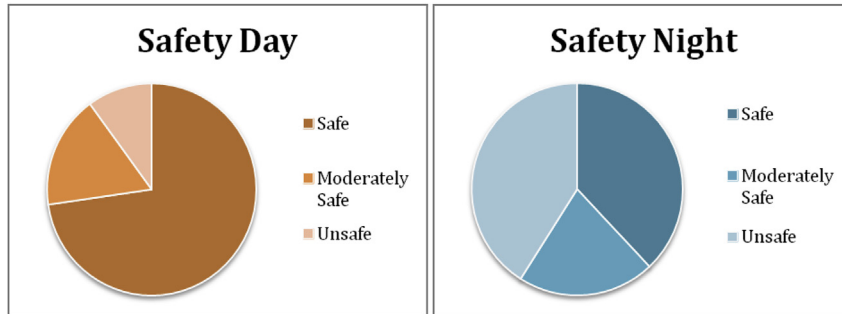


Fig. 2. Perceptions of safety for day and night of youth from high-income morro areas.

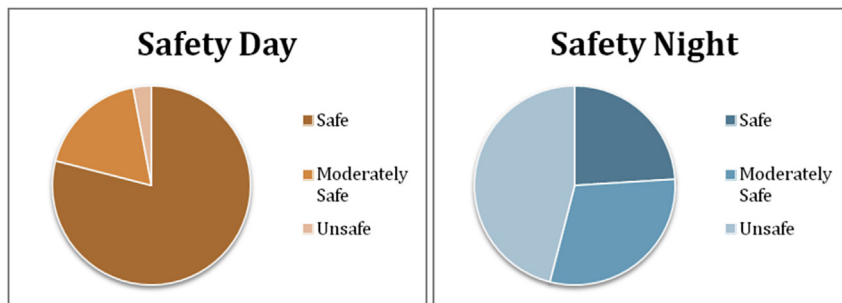


Fig. 3. Perceptions of safety for day and night of youth from low-income asfalto areas.

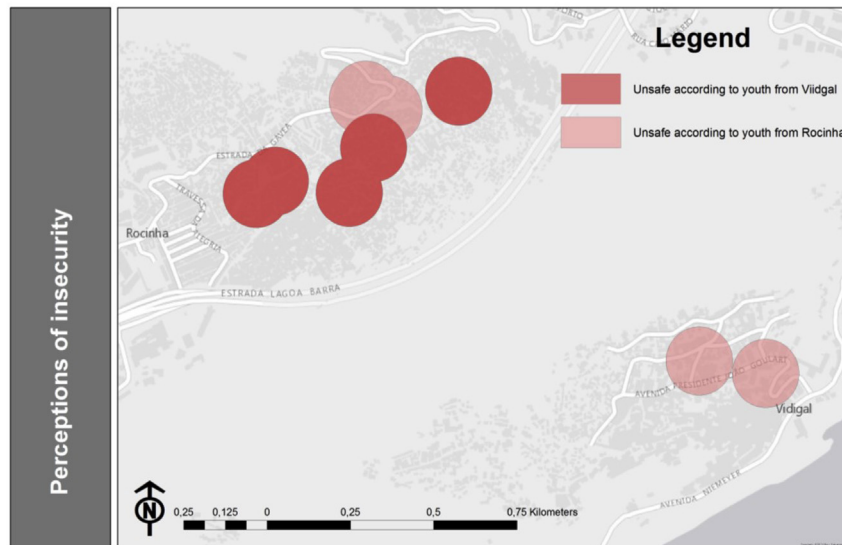


Fig. 4. Perceptions of insecurity according to youth from the favelas Vidigal and Rocinha.

that are not as privileged by the government than other places. The difference in services is huge.” Given that most morro youth did not visit the favelas frequently, they might not be confronted with urban poverty and inequality directly. However, many wealthier young people were worried about the implications of the city’s inequality and segregation, for their own security but more broadly for society at large. Felipe, an 18-year-old young man from the upscale neighborhood of Leme made a direct connection to insecurity: “The high urban inequalities cause segregation and an increase in violence.” Their concern was sometimes compounded by a sense of impotence, as they felt unable to the gap between o asfalto and o morro. As 20-year old Henrique from Leblon explained,

“Urban inequalities generate discomfort, a feeling of impotence to improve the situation”, or as Amanda, an 18-year old from São Conrado, put it: “I would like to help but do not know how.”

In response to the question of which strategies young people felt would be most successful in combating urban inequalities and segregation, three broad solutions strategies came up repeatedly: investment in public education and employment opportunities, free social and cultural programs for all Cariocas, and improvements in public transport and public space. For instance, Douglas, a 23-year-old from the wealthier area of Botafogo, felt that “The city can be more integrated with more education opportunities. The solution for overcoming the problems in Brazil is an investment in

education.” In addition, young people proposed that free programs promoting cultural exchange could make a difference. They felt that programs in which people from different socioeconomic backgrounds participated could increase mutual understanding, with shared experiences both revealing cross-class similarities and fostering the acceptance of differences. Young people also frequently put forward the need for improved public transport, which could integrate the city by making certain places, and specifically *favelas*, more accessible. They believed that improved public transport could lower the threshold for wealthier *Cariocas* to visit low-income areas, and as such could foster increased awareness and cultural exchange. Similarly, youth from different class backgrounds expressed a need for safe and freely accessible public places where they could study, engage in cultural and sports activities, and meet their peers.

Most of these proposed interventions involve structure-oriented, top-down strategies that necessitate government investments and initiatives. This approach is broadly in line with the relational approach, which emphasizes the social and political structures that sustain poverty and inequality. However, in addition to such structural solution strategies, young people themselves can also play an important role in tackling their city's entrenched social and spatial divides. Our research found that young people from different backgrounds have a clear capacity to analyze the mechanisms and consequences of urban inequalities, but see themselves as having limited agency in effecting change. While they clearly object to Rio de Janeiro's socio-economic divisions, deeply rooted fear and prejudice make both low-income and high-income youth hesitant to visit “unknown” neighborhoods or to interact with “different” people. While achieving a less segregated, more equal city will most likely require structural interventions – an approach evident in a number of current government initiatives in Rio – we suggest that a greater focus on agency, that highlights solutions that address youth's capabilities, may be fruitful as well. More perhaps that adults, a new generation of young people can question existing social relations and bring about social change, by actively seeking out different perspectives and opportunities to encounter new places and people.

## 5. Concluding discussion

This article sought to explore how young people's socio-spatial perceptions and practices reflect urban inequalities in Rio de Janeiro. We have argued that debates on urban inequality must take into consideration the role of youth, given their increasingly significant role in cities, both in demographic and political terms. Our analysis drew on a relational approach (Mosse, 2010), which highlights the need to understand the role of different groups in making urban poverty and inequality so enduring, as these are embedded in historically developed economic and political relations and legitimized through social and cultural discourses and practices. Discussions of inequality must consider the perspectives and behavior of both poorer and wealthier urban segments, as all residents contribute – albeit often from very different starting positions – to either reproducing or contesting unequal socio-spatial relations. Consequently, we included young people from both low-income and high-income neighborhoods, attempting to address a bias in many studies to concentrate on underprivileged youth in informal settlements. Our findings further suggest debates on urban youth and inequality to focus explicitly on issues of security, which, again, affect urban livability for all income groups, if in different ways.

Young people are largely the victims of unequal urban relations; poverty and inequality deprive them of a secure urban environment with equal opportunities. Yet, as the future urban generation

they can also be seen as the key to a less divided, safer Rio de Janeiro. Our findings highlight the extent to which young people's perceptions and socio-spatial practices reflect classed divides, and marked by segregation, mutual distrust and fear. However, the findings also suggest, if somewhat tentatively, that their narratives and uses of urban space may also contribute to maintaining the status quo, if unconsciously and unintentionally. While the use of public space is not fully segregated, the spatial distance between low-income and high-income youth is maintained not only in their residential separation, but also in the micro-segregation that characterizes their use of ostensibly mixed leisure spaces such as the beach. In addition to these socio-spatial practices, their perceptions and narratives were shaped by ideas of almost insurmountable social distance, with *favelas* and formal neighborhoods represented as worlds apart. Both groups felt they were unfairly subjected to the stereotypes or stigmatization based on their area of residence, although this obviously has a more direct impact on the opportunities of *favela* youth. Yet despite young people's vehement rejections of such prejudices, they often reproduced the same polarizing discourse.

In addition to adult practices over which young people have limited control – the decision to build or live in fortified enclaves, the availability of safe and attractive public spaces – these findings do suggest some scope for them to shape their urban surroundings. While they are afraid of “different” places and people, and discursively establish a social and spatial distance between themselves, many of the young people who participated in this research stressed the need, and their desire, to enhance mutual knowledge and understanding between peers with different geographic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. While the difficulties of overcoming entrenched notions of social and spatial difference should not be underestimated, a first step to overcoming fear and segregation might be just a beach post away.

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