

# Violence in the Rural Global South: Trends, Patterns, and Tales From the Brazilian Countryside

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the trends and nature of rural violence in Brazil. Assuming the hypothesis of an increase in violence rates, urban–rural violence rates are compared at three geographical levels: national (Brazil), state (São Paulo), and municipal (Rio Claro). The study combines the analyses of official statistics with newspaper reports, videos, and articles published by the national media. Findings indicate an increase in violence in rural areas in recent decades but such a rise is far from homogenous across the country; it shows links to patterns of population change, economic expansion, and organized crime. Although violence has long been an inherent characteristic of rural Brazil—a place of conflicts and struggles—it is argued here that the more recent rise in violence is distinct from the past, at least in its portrayal by the media. The article finalizes by suggesting a research agenda to improve the understanding of the dynamics of violence in the Brazilian context.

## Keywords

rural crime, homicides, police statistics, countryside, urban–rural relationships, media coverage

## Introduction

Although causes of violence vary worldwide, there is little doubt that those living in rural areas are not immune to acts of violence. This is particularly true in countries of Latin and Central America, Africa, and most of Asia, which collectively are known as the “Global South” (e.g., Collins, 2016; Dell’Angelo, D’Odorico, Rulli, & Marchand, 2017; Hogg & Carrington, 2016; Holmes, 2016; Ide, 2015; Waiselfisz, 1998, 2008, 2016; Wendt, 2016; White, 2016). In Brazil, for instance, violence has historically been an inherent feature of its colonization by forced occupation and slavery (Langfur,

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2006). More recently, rural areas and places outside traditional large Brazilian metropolitan areas are said to be showing signs of an increase in violence (Andrade & Diniz, 2013; Scorzafave, Justus, & Shikida, 2015; Waiselfisz, 2011, 2016). The nature of these violent events is not yet well understood, but media reports (e.g., Globo, 2014, 2016a; Terra, 2013) provide hints of its complexity: fights between spouses and neighbors, armed robbery, organized cargo theft, child labor, prostitution, slavery, and homicides in land and environmental conflicts.

This article attempts to make a contribution to the international literature of the rural Global South by discussing the trends and nature of rural violence in Brazil in recent decades. In order to achieve this goal, the analysis combines official statistics with newspapers reports, videos, and articles published by the national media at three geographical levels: national, state, and municipal; focus is given to the period 2010–2015.

Far from being a homogeneous entity, rural is defined in the Brazilian context as a diverse set of places with distinct characteristics and needs that share a number of qualities and challenges in terms of natural amenities, population, economic structure, and, not least, crime and safety. They are composed of municipalities outside large metropolitan areas, scattered settlements, and villages outside of the main urban cores in municipalities of varied sizes. This loose definition of ‘rural’ is used as reference for this analysis.

In this article, we also suggest that there is an urgent need for a better understanding of violence in rural areas and in contexts beyond those reported in North American and Western European studies. Little is documented about the nature of this violence and the potential geographical differences in crime levels between urban and rural areas in the international literature (but see, e.g., Scorzafave et al., 2015). Most of the current literature on rural crime is heavily dominated by North American and European studies (see, e.g., the special issue “Rural Crime and Community Safety” in the *Journal of Rural Studies*, edited by Ceccato, 2015, and *The Routledge International Handbook of Rural Criminology*, edited by Donnermeyer, 2016).

The novelty of this article is 2-fold. First, it provides an overview of violence in rural Brazil in the recent past, summarizing many new pieces of research in Portuguese that are not documented in the international literature. Second, in order to better unravel the nature of this violence, some key coverage examples by national media are discussed.

Rio Claro may not be a typical Brazilian municipality, and neither is Sao Paulo “an average” state (for details, see The Case Study section). They have been selected for this study since both state and municipality represent interesting case studies: They combine communities that despite being located in relatively economically dynamic areas of the country (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2016), they have recently witnessed drastic but not homogenous increases in reported crimes in rural areas (e.g., Globo, 2016a).

This article is organized as follows: The second section presents a brief discussion of theories linking crime increases and changes in a country’s socioeconomic, political, and cultural structural conditions. The case study, including data and methods are presented in the third section. In the fourth section, trends in urban–rural violence are discussed based on official statistics for Brazil and in particular São Paulo State and Rio Claro municipality. Also in this section, the nature of violence in rural areas are presented using examples from written media and internet accounts. In the fifth section, the article ends with concluding remarks and a brief research agenda addressing the need of in-depth knowledge of the nature of urban–rural violence in the Brazilian context.

## Theoretical Background

The international literature has a long tradition of seeking associations between crime and changes in countries’ socioeconomic, political, and cultural structural conditions. Much of the research in this area is based on work carried out in Western Europe and North America, and the following

discussion draws heavily on this context except where otherwise stated. This research in Western Europe and North America states that links between crime and social change occur because rapid transformations produce a chronic state of deregulation, in which valued goals become discounted and society fails to place normative limits on peoples' desires. Durkheim (1897) was the first to argue that rapid social change creates anomie, which can have a negative impact on society and may lead to crime, particularly violence. The Brazilian context qualifies due to rapid political, economic, demographic, and cultural changes that have been taking place in recent decades, especially after the start of the process of democratization and neoliberalization in the 1980s and 1990s.

Another set of criminology research that is relevant to consider here to explain variations in violence in rural contexts is the one that assumes the existence of local- and regional-level processes that promote crime. Some argue that the effect of poverty per se in generating violence is not as important as the impact of relative deprivation (Burton, Cullen, Evans, & Dunaway, 1994). The fact that a group is relatively deprived in comparison with others provides the conditions for conflict and violence. Cultural differences in values, norms, and beliefs are believed to be fundamental to allow and explain differences in violence; what is called in the criminological literature, "subcultures of violence" (e.g., Messner, 1983; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1982). In these areas, violence is an indicator of socially disorganized communities (Bursik, 1999; Kornhauser, 1978; Shaw & McKay, 1942) that are, at least in the North American urban context, characterized by poor levels of collective efficacy (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Thus, more violence would be expected where such subcultures of violence are the norm and where chronic socioeconomic inequality remains as a fuel for severe social disorder (Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

More recently, criminologists have started to challenge current mainstream criminological theories and concepts, especially when these theories are applied to rural contexts. Donnermeyer, Scott, and Barclay (2013) are particularly concerned with the applications of social disorganization theory and collective efficacy in rural contexts. They contest the assumption that places with low crime must manifest high levels of social organization or collective efficacy, while areas with low social organization must inevitably display more crime. Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2013) suggest that there are multiple forms of social organization, or collective efficacy (instead of social disorganization or anti-efficacy) at the same place and same time, allowing individuals to simultaneously participate in multiple networks, some of which may be criminal. For example, they state, "it is quite possible that many rural communities have a social or moral order which keeps some crimes such as violence in the 'dark'" (Donnermeyer, Scott, & Barclay, 2013, p. 71).

It is important to note that despite being informative, it is not entirely problem-free to accept these theories in reference to the study of violence in Brazilian rural areas. Firstly, because these theories are based on Global North perspectives of the dynamics of violence and societies, and therefore, they are highly dominated by North American and Western European contexts. We agree with Carrington, Hogg, and Sozzo (2015) that there is a need for new theoretical frameworks capable of appreciating the understanding of differences in dynamics of crime across the world, especially in countries from the Southern Hemisphere.

Secondly, most of the current theories are urban-centric with little or no reference to contexts outside the big cities or other urban environments. Most of them rely on references to neighborhood and individual dynamics, rarely considering crime at the regional scale or as a result of people's flows between urban and rural areas or across borders.

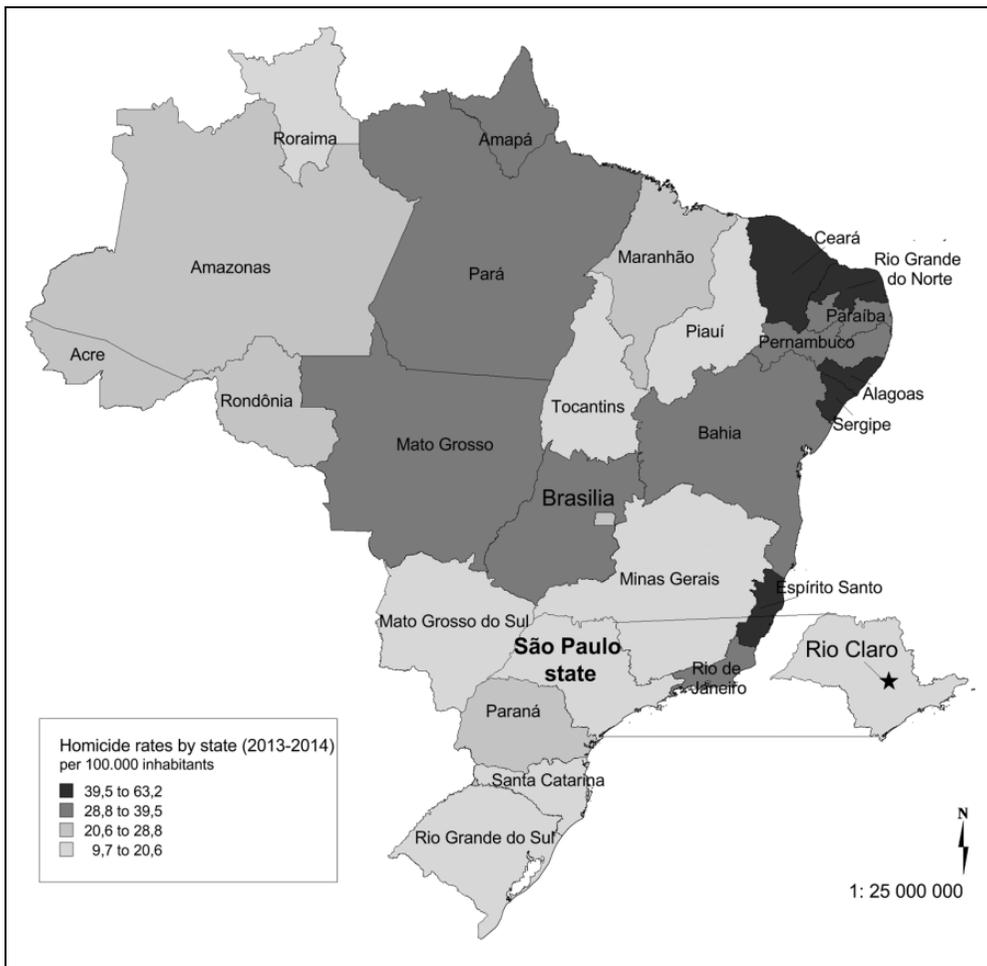
Thirdly, these theories are "stuck in time" as they do very little to offer an understanding of the current complexity of crimes that happen in rural areas (e.g., Ceccato, 2016). This means that these theories disregard rural as multifaceted environments that are in constant transformation in a globalized and interlinked world.

In this section, a set of criminogenic features is discussed in relation to conditions in Brazil. The focus is on the impact of processes of change on violent crime and how they may have helped to delineate violence rates and geography in the last decades at national, state, and local levels. At the national level, it is expected that areas in rapid transformation would be more exposed to these anomic conditions, characterized by intense population mobility/inflow such as municipalities in “new frontier” areas (characterized by deforestation, illegal logging, and expansion of monocultures that demands “unoccupied” lands). In social contexts like these, where there is little or no access to dispute resolution structures or agents of dispute mediation (e.g., lawyers), violence may be seen as the only possible means by which to solve a problem. Moreover, areas such as at borders (with smuggling of goods and/or weapons, piracy, and drug trafficking) would be particularly violent because border regions in particular offer offenders the possibility of a quick escape to other countries’ jurisdictions, a condition that does not exist in other parts of the country (Ceccato, 2007). States and municipalities with fast economic development, high employment, and intense immigration would be more vulnerable to crime, including in rural areas. The state of São Paulo and the municipality of Rio Claro are expected to exemplify these processes. The section below explains more in detail the motivations behind the selection of this state and this municipality.

## The Case Study

### *Area of Study*

In this study, we discuss trends and patterns of urban–rural violence at three distinct geographic levels: national/country (Brazil), state (São Paulo), and local/municipality (Rio Claro). Brazil is the largest country in South America and the fifth largest in the world (the third largest in the Americas) with one federal district and 26 states. Its territorial extension is 8.5 million square kilometers, and its population is greater than 204 million inhabitants, 14.57% of which live in rural areas (IBGE, 2016). In economic sense, Brazil is one of the most unequal societies in the world (Gini coefficient of 51.9 compared to 32.4 for the United States in 2012). During the 1980s and 1990s, rapid, unplanned urban growth was accompanied by soaring crime rates and parallel public dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of the criminal justice system in the decades that followed (Adorno & Cardia, 2000; Caldeira, 2013; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 1997, 1999, 2009a, 2009b). Criminal justice varies throughout the country, as some states have a public affairs office, but others do not, similarly the availability of an ombudsman’s office and how much is spent on public security or invested in police training. Brazil, with its rate of 20.7 homicides per firearm for every 100,000 inhabitants, occupies an uncomfortable 10th position among the 100 countries in the World Health Organization Statistical Information System (WHOSIS, 2012). Although crime is not a merely an urban phenomenon, most crimes happen in urban areas, both in absolute numbers and rates. Brazil has above-average levels of violent crime and particularly high levels of gun violence and homicide. According to the Mortality Information System of the Ministry of Health (Ministério da Saúde 2014), there were 59,627 homicides in Brazil, equivalent to a homicide rate of 29.1 per 100,000 inhabitants. These deaths represent more than 10% of homicides in the world and place Brazil as the country with the highest absolute number of homicides, and among the 12 countries with the highest homicide rates (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [Institute of Applied Economic Research]/ Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública [IPEA/FBSP], 2016), with a differentiated geography (Figure 1) that is further discussed in the fourth section. Figure 1 also shows the locations of São Paulo state and of the municipality of Rio Claro. It is worthwhile to emphasize that São Paulo is the namesake of a state composed of 645 municipalities and a metropolitan region, Greater São Paulo (IBGE, 2016). Historically, São Paulo is the state with the highest gross domestic product (GDP) in Brazil. The state has 42 million inhabitants and is the largest economic and industrial hub in the Southern



**Figure 1.** The study areas: Brazil (by average homicide rates, 2013–2014), São Paulo state and municipality of Rio Claro. Adapted from National Public Security System Information–SINESP—Sistema Nacional de Informações de Segurança Pública/FBSP (2016).

Hemisphere, the largest business center in Latin America, and also the capital of innovation and technology in the region (Latin America), generating about a third of all the wealth produced by Brazilian economy (IBGE, 2016).

Rio Claro municipality has 201,000 inhabitants and an area of 498,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Rio Claro is a relatively rich municipality, having the 34th highest economic index among 5,570 Brazilian municipalities, with a Human Development Index of 0.803 in 2010 (IBGE, 2016). Historically, the municipality flourished with coffee plantations in the late 19th century and expanded along the railway system. The industrial sector started in the 1970s and 1980s, attracting large amounts of rural labor force to the urban area (in 2010, less than 2.4% were living outside the urban area, IBGE, 2016). It was also during this time that sugar cane plantations in the municipality and the region received a large inflow of labor force from Northeast Brazil, leading to the formation of slums in the outskirts of the city. Since the 1990s, the industrial sector became more established, dominated by small- and medium-sized enterprises (Garcia, 2005). Nowadays, the municipality has two

universities but a large proportion of the economically active population is still employed by industry (40.9%), followed by service sector 38.9%, commerce 18%, and agriculture with only 2.2% of the labor force (IBGE, 2016). As many other middle-sized towns with recent rapid population growth, Rio Claro has experienced an increase in police-recorded crime (for a comparison, see Waiselfisz, 2016). Most reported crimes are property crimes, yet in 2015, there were 15 homicide cases (including 4 cases of robbery followed by death), nearly all in urban areas. Half of the reported crimes in Rio Claro's rural area were thefts and robbery, often with the use of a weapon.

### *Method and Data*

A mixed-methods approach was used to explore trends and patterns of urban–rural violence. In mixed-methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they complement each other to provide a better understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2013). This approach was chosen since a single method may not adequately shed light on the development and patterns of violence, so multiple methods can facilitate deeper understanding of the phenomenon from different data sources. Another reason was that results from a more quantitative approach can feed into a more qualitative approach and vice versa. Finally, the mixed-methods approach can bring forth different perspectives of a problem, for example, through media coverage, the research can report the voices of marginalized groups. Triangulation, using multiple data sources in an investigation promotes a better understanding of a phenomenon by corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013). This study utilizes secondary data (police data); reports based on health statistics, analysis of news articles, and media coverage.

Health-related statistics can be used as a source for violent crime in Brazil, as data on homicides, for instance, can be obtained from the Ministry of Health. In this study, we report rates for the whole country calculated from health statistics by municipality (Waiselfisz, 2016; see Results section). Homicides, for instance, are extracted by selecting only the deaths from external causes and under intentional circumstances, although no information on the intention is provided. There are indications that these data are more accurate than the police statistics since they are based on the reporting of deaths and not on whether or not a crime occurred; however, the two are highly correlated (Carneiro, 1999).

The most common source of data on crime is the police, so-called *Boletim de Ocorrência* (BO), is the record that comes from the civil police and refers to the first record made by the police. Despite keeping an offense register of their own, the military police strictly deal with street policing and crime prevention. The civil police produce the records on which the statistics are based and investigate occurrences that may be sent to the judiciary. In theory, violence can be described as follows: by the nature of the aggression (e.g., psychological, physical, or sexual); in terms of the individuals who suffer the violence (e.g., young people); by the relationship between offender and victim (relatives, friends, acquaintances, or strangers); by the agents of the violence (e.g., gangs); and by the motive, for example, political, racial, economic, instrumental, and emotional (Buvinic, Morrison, & Shifter, 1999). Although violence can be categorized in different ways, in practice, police recorded data or health statistics often provide a limited picture of these events (Ceccato, Haining, & Kahn, 2007; Scorzafave et al., 2015). Police records include information on the place where the victim was found in the case of homicides, but this location may be where the killing took place or where the body was dumped. Despite these problems, the way that the police systematize the statistics has greatly improved in recent years (for details, see Ceccato et al., 2007). In this study, data on homicides from *Sistema Nacional de Informações de Segurança Pública—SINESP/FBSP, 2013–2014*—were used to create a map of rates by state (Figure 1) using geographic information systems.

In order to analyze urban–rural differences in crime, and in detail by state and municipal level, the Infocrim database was used. The Infocrim system was created in the early 2000s by the Secretary of Public Security of the State of São Paulo, initially gathering data for the whole metropolitan area of

São Paulo, and since 2009 for the municipalities of the state of São Paulo as well. In order to collect data from Rio Claro, Infocrim was used with police authorization, and the total number of occurrences on urban and rural areas from Rio Claro was calculated from 2010 to 2015. All violent crime reports from rural areas for 2015 were downloaded from the police records as pdf files and later analyzed by crime type.

A search of newspaper articles in national and local media for violent crimes in rural areas was performed from January 10 to March 5, 2017, and the results comprised articles published between January 1, 2010, and February 28, 2017. Key words used in the search included but are not limited to the following: “cattle herding,” “theft/robbery in rural areas,” “land conflicts,” “environmental crime,” and “domestic violence in rural areas.” The articles refer to violent crimes that occurred in Brazil, São Paulo state, and Rio Claro municipality. A selection of articles was performed, and the resulting articles were used as references in this article in order to characterize its theoretical background and the area of study. They describe crime occurrences, police efforts to solve or to prevent crimes, the rural community’s concern about the crime rates in the area, the history of crimes in a region, among other topics.

## Results

### *Trends and Patterns of Violent Crimes in Rural Areas: Official Statistics*

*Brazil: the country profile.* Crime rates in rural areas, especially for violent offenses, have been increasing in recent decades both for Brazil overall and for São Paulo state (Table 1). Scorzafave, Justus, and Shikida (2015) analyzed data from two Brazilian national household surveys and showed that theft and robbery, physical assault, and attempted theft or robbery rates had grown 16%, 94.1%, and 296.3%, respectively, from 1988 to 2009 in the sampled rural areas.

This increase in violent offenses has been followed by a redistribution of these violent encounters throughout Brazil. If we take homicide rates by firearm as an example (Table 2), the most distinctive pattern is that the highest homicide rates by firearm no longer occur predominantly in larger urban areas as was the case in the 1980s (Andrade & Diniz, 2013; Scorzafave et al., 2015; Waiselfisz, 2011, 2016). Waiselfisz (2011, 2016) indicated that until 1996, the growth of homicides was concentrated in capital cities and large metropolitan areas, but between 1996 and 2003, homicide rates practically stagnated and the economic dynamism of these areas was transferred to the municipalities in the states’ interiors. This trend continued up to mid-2014. Since early 2000s, significant changes in the patterns violence have been witnessed in the country, as a result of several but distinct economic, demographic, social, and economic processes that led to the *interiorization* and *dissemination* of violence. The first process, *interiorization*, would be marked by the reduction of homicide mortality in the capitals and metropolitan areas and expansion in other Brazilian municipalities. The process of *dissemination* would be associated with the fact that several Brazilian states, without strong histories in the occurrence of homicides, begin to experience substantive increases in this type of violence. The shift in geography of homicides by fire weapon from capitals and metropolitan areas towards other Brazilian municipalities is illustrated in gray in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that by the mid-1990s, municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants led the growth in homicides. However, from 2003 onward, lethal violence in these municipalities stagnates, or tends to fall dramatically, as in the case of municipalities with more than 500,000 inhabitants (note a drop of 22.4%). Heavy economic investments in new parts of the country, until then excluded from the “blessings of development” (e.g., Camaçari in Bahia state or Ananindeua in Pará state), attracted all sorts of resources, including greater population and criminal opportunities and conflicts. Since 2003, the national average rates of homicides in the capital cities and metropolitan regions have declined, while those in the interior continued to grow.

**Table 1.** Victimization in Rural and Urban Areas by Crime Type, Brazil and São Paulo State (%).

Regions	1988			2009			Δ%		
	Theft or Robbery	Physical Assault	Attempted Theft/Robbery	Theft or Robbery	Physical Assault	Attempted Theft/Robbery	Theft or Robbery	Physical Assault	Attempted Theft/Robbery
Brazil									
Urban	6.38	1.20	2.00	8.11	1.65	5.95	27.1	37.5	197.5
Rural	2.63	0.51	0.54	3.05	0.99	2.14	16.0	94.1	296.3

Note. Adapted from Scorzafave et al. (2015).

**Table 2.** Homicide Rates by Fire Weapon in Brazil by Municipality Size, 1980–2014.

Municipality Size (Thousand Inhabitants)	Homicide Rates by Fire Weapon per 100 Thousand Inhabitants					Growth Rates (%)				
	1980	1994	1997	2003	2014	1980/1994	1994/1997	1997/2003	2003/2014	1980/2014
Up to 5	1.4	2.4	2.9	3.8	5.1	71.5	20.5	30.2	34.7	262.4
5–10	1.7	3.0	3.7	4.6	7.7	81.3	21.3	25.8	66.1	359.6
10–20	2.1	3.8	5.0	6.3	10.1	78.1	29.6	28.0	59.5	371.0
20–50	3.0	4.8	6.4	9.1	14.9	58.6	34.0	42.6	64.2	397.6
50–100	3.5	7.6	9.8	14.0	19.7	115.6	28.7	43.5	40.6	459.9
100–200	4.7	13.5	15.7	20.8	22.4	185.7	16.5	32.6	7.7	375.5
200–500	6.9	17.1	20.1	28.6	26.4	149.0	17.0	42.8	–8.0	282.8
More than 500	10.2	23.8	29.7	35.5	27.6	132.0	24.9	19.8	–22.4	169.4

Note. Adapted from Waiselfisz (2016, p. 38).

Researchers are unanimous that the dynamics of violence are far from being the same across the country. Andrade and Diniz (2013, p. 172) contested the thesis of *interiorization* and *dissemination* of violence, suggested by Waiselfisz (2011, 2016). They suggested the reorganization of violence in the homicide records reveals a complexity that goes beyond these processes, namely that “there is a reorganization that obeys some logics of agglomeration, with the presence of contagion effects and the formation of homicide clusters in areas that, in the last years, presented some economic dynamism or reorganization of the space due to changes in land use and functions.” These authors exemplify by indicating that the major causes of increase in violence in the North, Northeast, and Midwest regions of Brazil have been a result of land and environmental conflicts. In the border regions, especially with Paraguay and Bolivia, there has been an explosion of cases of homicides due to drugs, weapons trafficking, and smuggling, while in the coastal regions from the Southeast to the Northeast—the most populated and developed regions in the country—the homicides rates, despite a recent decrease, still remained relatively high. Similarly, Waiselfisz (2016) after observing decades of data on violence patterns in Brazil suggested a typology of violence for municipalities with the highest homicide rates:

- (1) *border municipalities*—they are generally small sized or medium sized but, due to their location, become a magnet for transnational organizations dealing with the smuggling of goods and/or weapons, piracy, and drug trafficking;
- (2) *new poles of growth* are municipalities within states (often inland municipalities) that have, since the 1990s, experienced fast economic development, high employment, and intense immigration, but with limited investment in welfare and public security;

- (3) *municipalities in areas of “new frontier,”* characterized by deforestation, illegal logging, slavery, land stealing, and killing indigenous people, often due to the expansion of monocultures that demand “unoccupied” lands, with the support of political and financial interests;
- (4) *municipalities of predatory tourism,* located mainly on the Western coast of Brazil, attracting large amounts of temporary population, summer, and weekend tourism; and finally,
- (5) *municipalities of traditional violence,* which exist and subsist throughout time, such as the “marijuana polygon” of Pernambuco.

Andrade and Diniz (2013) also pointed out other clusters of violent municipalities detected along state boundaries, especially the borders between Pernambuco and the States of Bahia and Alagoas, but also the borders between Minas Gerais and the States of Bahia and Espírito Santo.

In order to look at the dynamics of the increase in violence in more detail, we now focus our analysis to a particular state (São Paulo) and municipality (Rio Claro). From the typology previously presented by Waiselfisz (2016) and Andrade and Diniz (2013), Rio Claro, located in the State of São Paulo, fits into the group of municipalities that belong to *poles of growth*. However, little is reported about the changes in police-recorded crime and whether these records show indications of statistical increases in violence, by urban and rural areas, in São Paulo state and in this single municipality. Focus is given to more recent police-recorded statistics, namely 2010–2015, the nature of which is further discussed in The Nature of Violence in Rural Areas: Media Coverage subsection.

*São Paulo state and Rio Claro municipality.* Violence expressed as physical assault, robbery, sexual violence, or homicides all showed significant increases in rural areas in the last three decades at the state level for São Paulo (Table 3). Although violence rates continue to be larger in urban areas, Scorzarfave et al. (2015) indicated that major rises in rates from 1988 to 2009 were found in rural areas after analyzing victimization data from two national household surveys. While urban areas saw an increase of 20.1%, 25.0%, and 223.5% for theft or robbery, physical assault, and attempted theft or robbery, respectively, rural areas experienced even larger increases of 52.1%, 146.9%, and 681.3%, respectively.

In addition to spatial variations of violence, there has been a change in the nature of violence as well. Of importance to note are the types of violence experienced in the mid-2000s and in particular 2006, when 439 people were killed by gunfire in São Paulo state (which is an exceptionally high number of deaths over a short period of time) by the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), which is considered the largest Brazilian criminal organization, with more than 13,000 members. PCC’s drug faction launched a series of assaults against police posts in São Paulo, gunning down 43 police officers (HRW, 2009a, 2009b). These deaths were accompanied by waves of violence including rebellions in 73 prisons in the state, aggression and attacks against public agents (primarily police officers and penitentiary agents), civilians, private buildings such as banks, and public buildings such as police stations, as well as arson against public property, especially public transportation. Also, in 2012, violence was triggered by conflicts between police and organized crime in the state of São Paulo. Police statistics indicate that about 100 police officers were targets of violence and a total of 41 police were executed.

There exist multiple causes of this violence at the national level. There have been a number of social, political, and institutional conditions that, together, supported the emergence of organized crime inside Brazilian prisons that consequently led to massive waves of violence in the country and in particular in the southern parts. Moreover, organized criminality flourished within the prisons due to the massive incarceration policy executed by the state governments in the 1990s and 2000s (Adorno & Salla, 2007). At the same time, generalized impunity has led to corruptive measures. Police in Rio and São Paulo were accused several times of “planting evidence,” such as guns or drugs, on police shooting victims (for a review, see Ceccato, Melo, & Kahn, in press). Caldeira

**Table 3.** Victimization in Rural and Urban Areas by Crime Type in São Paulo State (%).

Regions	1988			2009			Δ%		
	Theft or Robbery	Physical Assault	Attempted Theft/Robbery	Theft or Robbery	Physical Assault	Attempted Theft/Robbery	Theft or Robbery	Physical Assault	Attempted Theft/Robbery
São Paulo state									
Urban	6.01	1.12	1.79	7.22	1.40	5.79	20.1	25.0	223.5
Rural	2.86	0.49	0.48	4.35	1.21	3.75	52.1	146.9	681.3

Note. Adapted from Scorzafave et al. (2015).

**Table 4.** Police Recorded Crime in São Paulo State and Municipality of Rio Claro, 2010–2015.

Year	State of São Paulo			Rio Claro Municipality			Theft and Robbery in Farms	Violence in Conjunction With Theft and Robbery
	Offenses in Urban Areas	Offenses in Rural Areas	Total	Offenses in Urban Areas	Offenses in Rural Areas	Total		
2010	2,440.212	49.536	2,489.748	16,316	230	16,546	72	17
2011	2,700.853	48.756	2,749.609	18,110	310	18,420	78	26
2012	2,949.906	50.596	3,000.502	19,912	360	20,272	99	24
2013	3,005.631	50.464	3,056.095	23,094	356	23,450	136	29
2014	2,906.816	52.717	2,959.533	20,554	273	20,827	149	33
2015	2,778.772	48.775	2,827.547	18,670	309	18,979	96	9
Δ%2010–2015	13.87	1.56	13.57	14.43	34.35	14.7	33	–47.06

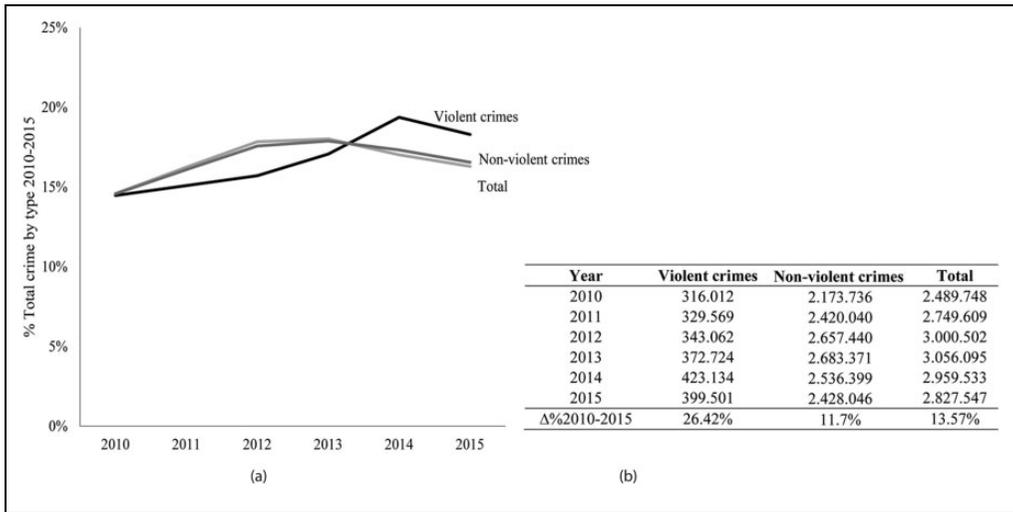
Note. Adapted from Police of Rio Claro database (Infocrim) and Secretary of Public Security of the State of São Paulo, 2010–2015.

(2013) suggests that the problems of enforcing police accountability remain a challenge in new democracies, such as Brazil, with a long history of authoritarianism. Despite democratic advances, the country still struggles to control police violence, impunity, and corruption.

Several violent events of public disorder and riots, with burned buses and cars on important roads, took place in the 2000s in several municipalities, including in Rio Claro. These violent events were associated with protests by criminals against the police, often orchestrated by the organized crime (PCC) and drug-dealing groups that are present in Rio Claro and other municipalities of the region (e.g., Guia Rio Claro, 2006; Piranot, 2016).

From 2010 to 2015, although similar increases in violence continue to be observed in the police-recorded statistics across São Paulo state, the trends in increase in violence by urban and rural areas are not the same. Table 4 indicates that the rise in violence in the state of São Paulo was dominated by what was happening in cities (more than in rural areas) during these 5 years. Note also that violent crimes increased 26.4% in the overall state of São Paulo, while overall crime rates increased only by 13.6% (Figure 2).

Police-recorded statistics from Rio Claro are in accordance with the national trend of an increase in violent crime in rural areas. In this particular municipality, there has been a 34.5% increase in crime in rural areas in 2010–2015 versus 14.4% in urban areas. The rise seems to be more related to an increase in property crimes, especially thefts, than to violent crimes, which has been the focus of media reports (see The Nature of Violence in Rural Areas: Media Coverage subsection). Violent encounters in 2015 encompassed 11% of total police reports in rural areas in Rio Claro, excluding property crimes



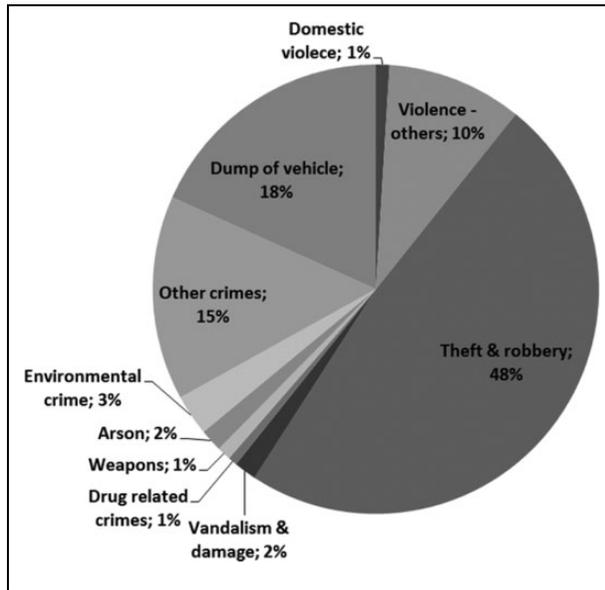
**Figure 2.** (a) Total crime by type 2010–2015, percentage, and year. (b) Police recorded offenses by type in the State of São Paulo: 2010–2015. Adapted from Secretary of Public Security of the State of São Paulo (2016).

followed by violence (Figure 3). As illustrated in the last column of Table 4, rural areas in this municipality have experienced a 94.1% rise in robbery/theft followed by violence from 2010 to 2014 but an abrupt decrease in 2015. According to the local police, this decrease in reporting likely reflects the implementation of new portable police offices in Ajapí and other rural districts of Rio Claro. The local police officers suggest that this increase in formal social control in rural areas is responsible at least partially to this crime drop. However, this of course can also mean that as police officers were deployed to Ajapí, people who were victims of crime in other areas were not able to report crimes, pulling reporting rates down. In 2015, most crimes reported in rural areas were property crimes associated with some sort of violence, often with the use of weapons (49%), and not unusually with kidnaping the farm owner and family. Criminals search for money, cars, appliances, electronics, but also farm equipment. Examples from other records include vehicle dumped along roads and forests, these vehicles are abandoned by people for different reasons (18%), and other crimes, such as economic crimes (15%) and other types of violence (11%; Figure 3).

### The Nature of Violence in Rural Areas: Media Coverage

Levels, patterns, and the nature of violent encounters in Brazil vary across the country (see Figure 1 as reference). We discuss below relevant written media and Internet accounts to exemplify some of these most urgent types of violence in the country, in the state of São Paulo, and, to a lesser extent, in the municipality of Rio Claro. Media reports indicate the complexity of violence in the Brazilian countryside, stretching from fights between spouses or neighbors to armed robbery, cargo theft along roads, violence against people in land conflicts, murders of people involved in environmental causes, to child labor and sexual assault, among others.

Domestic violence, and specially violence against women and children, is far from being an exclusively rural problem, but it may take a special dimension in the countryside because of geographical isolation and social norms. In addition, contrary to urban areas, there are no women’s police stations in rural areas or women’s shelters within a short distance. Websdale (1998) suggests that certain actions by the abuser, such as disabling vehicles and unplugging and removing phones, have even greater implications, isolating women in rural environments and increasing their



**Figure 3.** Total police crime reported crime in farms/rural area in the municipality of Rio Claro, São Paulo state in 2015. Adapted from Reports from the police of Rio Claro (Infocrim, 2016).

vulnerability to violence in ways that do not happen in urban areas where public transportation and help may be more accessible. Drawing from evidence in Canada, DeKeseredy, Rogness, and Schwartz (2004) state that it is difficult to quantify the amount of domestic abuse in rural communities based on official data, and many believe that official data for rural areas are significantly problematic in this context; thus, media coverage of these events might shed more light on the levels and nature of this problem, as the one provided below from the Brazilian context:

The victim was found by a neighbor in a rural area on the banks of a highway in Fernandópolis, São Paulo. The Military Police was deployed and had access to the victim’s home. At the scene, police found blood marks on the floor and walls of the bathroom. The victim was beaten several times with an ax and police suspect that the perpetrator was the boyfriend. (Globo, 2016e)

Violence against women is not limited to the private sphere and spousal relationships. Violence in the context of prostitution is well-documented by the Brazilian media in places of tourism, especially *predatory tourism* on the coast of Brazil (Waiselfisz, 2016), with links to children exploitation and violence (BBC, 2010). Knowledge about violence against children in rural areas is also problematic. There is a large gap in knowledge about the situation of children and adolescents in rural areas in relation to issues of child labor, gender-based violence (including sexual exploitation), and inappropriate working conditions (whether with the use of pesticides on licit crops, such as sisal, sugar cane, or grapes, or whether with illicit crops or other illegal activities). Accidents and unhealthy conditions are common in industrial production (e.g., in Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil; fruit plantations in São Paulo; coal production in Minas Gerais, Southeast Brazil; and in Espírito Santo), where children and adolescents are in many cases used to apply toxic chemical products (Iulianelli, 2005).

People may take justice into their own hands if they feel their safety needs are neglected. The cases below may be an example that lethal violent outcomes (either among criminals or between individuals and the police), can be related to the context of having little or no access to dispute resolution structures. Even if dispute resolution structures exist, many may perceive them as inefficient and/or corrupt, thus

violent assault, revenge, and retaliation are regarded as the only possible means by which to solve a problem.

Man was arrested after attempted homicide against neighbor in rural area in Meridiano, in São Paulo. Various types of weapons and ammunition were seized with suspect. (Globo, 2016f)

An elderly man who passed near a rural property was surprised by two men who took care of the small farm. They would have started a discussion because they thought the old man would steal the pigs from the property. According to police, during the fray the old man was hit in the head by a piece of wood and then an ax. One of the suspects was taken to the jail in Guarani d'Oeste, São Paulo. The other suspect fled and is wanted by the police. (Globo, 2016h)

Violence associated with economic development is exemplified in municipalities belonging to *poles of growth* (Waiselfisz, 2016). An example is violence associated with cargo theft. In Brazil, cargo theft is a highly violent crime since many of these property crimes result in death, almost always with the use of firearms. The country has the highest cargo security risk in the world (FreightWatch, 2014). There are indications that this crime is not distributed homogeneously across the country but is concentrated in the most economically developed regions, especially in the state of São Paulo, where half of all cases currently take place (National Public Security System Information, SINESP, 2016). Justus, Moreira, Ceccato, and Kahn (2017) indicate that although the capital of São Paulo shows the highest levels of cargo theft since 2010, it is in nonmetropolitan areas that records of this offense are on the rise. This fact was observed in three areas in particular: Campinas, Santos, and Piracicaba—these municipalities together constitute a strong economic corridor that canalizes products from the interior to the international harbors for shipment to foreign markets and vice versa. (Note that Rio Claro municipality neighbors the municipality of Piracicaba and is located in Campinas region.) These criminal operations count on large groups of individuals, including farm employees, drivers, and technicians, to intercept the lorry as well as the legitimate buyers of the cargo. The example below illustrates the case in Goiás state:

The Military Police went to the countryside of Porangatu, Goiânia, after a report of cargo theft. The exchange of gunshots resulted in the death of one of the suspects while the other one was shot but escaped into the forest . . . . (MaisGoiás, 2016)

Robbery of livestock (cows, pigs, and chickens) from farms is a recurrent problem in the southern and center east states, where most of these economic activities are concentrated. The quote below exemplifies the violent nature of these crimes:

A squad of eight hooded men, two of them carrying firearms, stormed a farm in Itatiba; São Paulo. The thieves kidnapped the couple, and their daughter, along with other family members while others took 16 cows and 40 sheep . . . According to police, two other robberies were committed in the interval of five days in the same municipality. In one of the crimes, criminals had many weapons, stayed for 10 hours and took 15 hostages. (Globo, 2016g)

In areas of *new* and perhaps also *old frontier* (Waiselfisz, 2016), violent conflicts for different reasons (e.g., access to land, keeping land, exploration of resources) are very common. The violence between different groups of criminals and the war between police and bandits (the police, not always repressing crime and enforcing law) create a culture of violence in which the importance of shared values (violence as a way of action) is perhaps common. In the case of land conflicts, Alston, Libecap, and Mueller (1999, p. 135) suggest, “landowners use violence as a means of increasing the likelihood of successful eviction of squatters, and squatters use violence to increase the probability that the farm will be expropriated in their favor as part of the government’s land reform program.” However, these mechanisms are not that simple. Albertus, Brambor, and Ceneviva (2016) show using municipal-level



**Figure 4.** Environmental movement and land reform movement fused into one. Adapted from Camila Benac (2015).

data from Brazil's large land reform program from 1988 to 2013, that the relationship between land-holding inequality and rural unrest is not straightforward, yet both generate violence.

If social bonds and social control are weak, people may resolve conflict through violence. In the Amazon state, in addition to homicides, there are records of assassination attempts, death threats, peasants' imprisonment, physical assaults, and other conflicts. In Planaltina, in the central region of Brazil, social movements are becoming highly organized, and the mobilization of members of opposing groups is often done through social media (in this case, those who want to occupy the land, on one hand, and farmers, on the other). For example, about 100 people were occupying farms while about the same numbers of landowners were trying to restrict their stay. More interestingly, land occupiers are combining land reform principles with claims of more environmental and sustainable use of land (Figure 4). The "social cause" is becoming the "environmental cause" and that is perhaps why Brazil is becoming the most dangerous country for environmental activists. In 2014, according to Global Witness (2015), 29 homicides related to environmental causes were registered in Brazil, the largest number in the world. This nongovernmental organization suggests that "most of these crimes go unpunished and they are carried out in the name of a powerful combination of corporate and government interests." Among them are large landowners, private groups, politicians, and members of organized crime. According to Global Witness, the crimes are practiced by paramilitary groups, police, and private security companies.

Northeast Brazil was the region where there were more land conflicts in 2015, representing 35% of the cases throughout the country. Figure 1 shows deaths in land conflicts through the concentration of homicides in Northeast Brazil. The Northeast was followed by the North with 27% of occurrences, the Center-West with 17%, the Southeast with 15%, and finally the South with 5.5% (Comissão Pastoral da Terra [CPT], 2016). Most of the conflicts in 2015, both in Pará and in Rondônia, occurred in areas in which the Public Land Disposal Contracts (CATPs) were canceled. Areas which, by law, should have been destined for land reform, but which ended up in the hands of "Grileiros," that is, people who illegally appropriated the land. In the North alone, the death toll exceeds 40 out of a total of 50 homicides of this type in the entire country (Globo, 2016c). Another factor that, according to the CPT, explains the violence concentrated in the Amazon is the non-regulation of land. The quote below shows, however, that even in areas belonging to the "old rural frontiers," land conflicts can become violent, here in Paraná state, in southern Brazil:

A confrontation between members of the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and military environmental police at a campsite in Quedas do Iguaçu, Southwest of Paraná, left at least two people

dead. According to the Military Police (PM), six people were injured. Initially, the MST had reported that about six landless were injured and that the exact number had not yet been confirmed because the police were preventing journalists to approach the MST members on the spot. (Globo, 2016b)

Agribusiness, especially with the expansion of soybeans and livestock to the region, combined with mining and timber extraction, requires the public sector to provide the necessary infrastructure to guarantee their large profits. Hydroelectric plants and their lines, ports, and airports are built; waterways are planned; and roads are paved. All these factors lead to the valorization of the land, which under these circumstances escalates rural conflicts.

Another hotspot area of lethal violence identified by Waiselfisz (2016) is *border municipalities*, which become an attractor for violence due to their location, for example, transnational organizations dealing with smuggling of goods and/or weapons but more often drug trafficking. Since the circulation of money feeds drug trafficking, smuggling, and weapons (Adorno, 2013), it becomes a fuel for more violence specially in smaller municipalities dominated by organized crime (Gagliardi, 2012). As an example, Bolivia is one of the world's top three cocaine producers, behind Colombia and Peru, while Brazil is an important drug-crossing point, but the problem goes beyond cocaine trafficking (ZeroHora, 2016). Between Brazil and Paraguay, violence takes place in small towns. It is believed that 5–25 people are murdered each month in Pedro Juan Caballero (a city 550 km northeast of Asuncion, on the border of Brazil and Paraguay), which has been transformed into a center of the drug business, with links to organized crime (e.g., PCC) over the whole country, including Southeast Brazil (Terra, 2013). Signs of links between organized crime and drug trafficking are witnessed far way from the Brazilian border, in Rio Claro municipality, Sao Paulo, where the number of homicides increased drastically in 2016 following a similar trend in other municipalities in the region. The availability of weapons on the streets has made drug conflicts lethal. As the police jails more individuals involved with drug trafficking, violence tends to increase on the streets, as illustrated by an example from the local police officer:

Tr trafficked inmate is indebted to his supplier and in the end of it, that debt is his death. When you arrest the trafficker, a space is left open and there may also be a dispute over that space. (Globo, 2013)

Although the link between drug trafficking and robberies in rural areas is not always obvious, people living in the rural areas of Rio Claro municipality and region are afraid to spend time on their farms. Some residents who are victims of crime are examples of the process of counterurbanization that is taking place in this region, in which people escape big cities and move to the villages, ironically, motivated by the need to escape violence. Rural residents express their fear as described below in newspaper and video sources:

My farm was victimized five times, only twice this year. The bad guys always came in at night and they've taken refrigerators, tractors, boats and even fish from the lake. That's why no one else lives there, explains a former rural resident. (Globo, 2016d)

The victim (retired physician and property owner) left the capital to live in the interior of São Paulo...he wanted tranquility and to breed horses and beef cattle. The victim's daughter says: "he moved here to escape São Paulo's violence"...Five assailants came with firearms while we were sleeping...they wanted to steal a truck but the property owner reacted to the robbery and was killed. (see video, in Globo, 2014)

They tied us up, torture us heavily, and threw alcohol on us, threatened to set us on fire... It does not give us courage to stay; it is getting difficult! laments a farmer. (Globo, 2016d)

The rise in violence in rural areas in Rio Claro but also at the state and national levels has to be seen just as the tip of iceberg of other problems in a society that “accepts” violence as part of daily life. Both criminals and police kill, as violence is seen as a possible means for problem-solving. Rural crime has not only increased but has also become more violent, and this knowledge has affected people’s perception of the rural as a safe place. Those who still remain in the countryside consider leaving it. In order to tackle crime, the police together with rural communities have during the last decade been implementing a number of initiatives. Since long distances are a limiting factor for the police work, new technology (GPS, drones, and social media) has been tested across the country. In some areas in Brazil, there has been a dramatic decrease in rural crime after the local population started to use social media groups to report suspecting activities (Canal Rural, 2016). There are records that drones have been used to combat slave labor in rural areas (Reuters, 2015). In São Paulo, these include the standardization of rural properties with a digital code by coordinates which allows easier identification by GPS (Record News, 2011), policing and patrolling, the use of drones, and social media.

## Conclusion

This article has reported trends and patterns of violence in rural areas in Brazil in recent decades using both official statistics and examples of violent reports from the media. Assuming the hypothesis of an increase in violence rates, urban–rural violence rates are compared at three geographical levels: national (Brazil), state (São Paulo), and municipality (Rio Claro). Based on the evidence gathered in this study, we draw the following conclusions:

1. Areas classified as “rural” in the literature have experienced greater increases in violence than urban areas since the 1980s. For homicides with the use of firearms in particular, a rise has more recently been observed in municipalities with 50,000–100,000 inhabitants, while large cities and metropolitan regions have experienced a reduction.
2. Areas with high violence (in particular homicides with the use of firearms) can be categorized by its root causes, varying across the country. Violence is triggered in border regions, for instance, by conflicts between transnational criminal organizations dealing with smuggling of goods and/or weapons, piracy, and drug trafficking. Other foci of violence are the ones triggered by fast economic development, high employment, and intense immigration but with limited investment in welfare and public security. Another type of foci of violence are in areas of “new frontier”. They are characterized by areas with deforestation, illegal logging, slavery, land stealing, and killing indigenous people, often due to expansion of monocultures that demand “unoccupied” lands. There are also areas where violence exist and subsist throughout time. It is important to note that the rise of violence in some rural areas is related to changes in the nature of conflicts, for instance, when fighting for land. Nowadays, it is common that the land occupation movement makes use of environmentalist ideals and violence to legitimize land occupation, while landowners adopt a developmental discourse to justify removing occupiers from their land using often violence. Conflicts get more complicated when indigenous territories are disputed between these groups.
3. Sao Paulo is a good example of a state where the metropolitan area has experienced a relative stagnation in homicide rates while Rio Claro municipality, an interior municipality, has become more violent. Increases in violence in Rio Claro are facilitated by its location, namely in the middle of a zone of intense economic and demographic growth as a result of industrial decentralization. More recently, the spread of organized crime outside of the capital city and coastal areas has shown signs of violence in Rio Claro and other inland municipalities. Changes in the nature of violence are observed by the types of crimes

committed (e.g., drug-related crime, cargo thefts, kidnaping, and torture associated with robbery and homicide). Violent acts trigger fear in both those who live in the countryside and in the urban core.

This analysis shares limitations with other analyses of this kind. First, the study is based on official data and media coverage. Although the quality and reliability of the data (police and health data) have improved since the beginning of the 1990s, still very little is documented about how improvements in the recording system have affected the recording of violence in Brazil. Moreover, organized crime and criminal networks are a reminder that regions are not sealed units and possibly a criminal organization in one region may trigger higher rates of violence in other areas. Media coverage is limited to the most dramatic types of violence and can also be problematic as data source. Second, the in-depth analysis of São Paulo state and Rio Claro municipality cannot be taken as representative of the whole country. Data permitting, future research should try to replicate this analysis to other states and/or municipalities to check whether the rise in violence can be found in other similar Brazilian rural contexts.

A remaining question is whether rural areas that are experiencing rises in homicides and other serious crimes might manage to break this spiral of violence. Our study has provided examples of the complexity of rural violence across the country. There is no such thing as a single solution for violence in the Brazilian rural context. Any national program to tackle rural violence has to be sensitive to the local conflicts in which crime and violence take place. As for São Paulo and Rio Claro, future research should be devoted to better understanding the links between societal changes in regional conditions (socioeconomic and demographic contexts, police organization and corruption, impunity, availability of weapons on the streets, and involvement of civil society) and increases in violence. Future research should also devote time to better understand the process of counterurbanization and violence in some of São Paulo's inland municipalities. In particular, there is also a need to assess the drastic increase in cargo theft and its nature along major road corridors and, as Rio Claro is concerned, to assess the types and effectiveness of rural crime prevention measures that are in place, especially for violent crimes. It is possible that new prevention strategies involving new technologies (e.g., drones, information technology, social media) and residents may have more solid and long-term effects than those of traditional policing, as has been already suggested in other parts of Brazil.

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