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## REDUCTION OF HOMICIDES IN PORTO ALEGRE: FIGHTING CRIMINAL FACTIONS

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**Abstract.** *The homicide rates rose sharply in the city of Porto Alegre between the years 2011 and 2016. This situation was compared to the “Barbarian Age” by the local press. However, due to the actions conducted in the public security sector from 2017 onward, the homicide rate went down 19% in the municipality and maintained this reduction throughout 2018 and 2019. Thus, this article aims to present the actions that were taken to fight the high homicide rates in Porto Alegre, mostly by describing Operation Firm Hand (Operação Pulso Firme), which took place in July of 2017. With this in mind, the exploratory study used bibliographic and documental review techniques and took into account scientific articles and media publications from public agencies and from the local press. The article exposes the main actions that were implemented in order to modify the scenario, comparing them with other successful cases in Brazil and internationally, presenting the aspects that had to do with actions focused on repressing criminal factions, thus reducing homicide rates.*

**Keywords:** *Homicides, Public Policies, Public Management, Public Security.*

### Introduction

The issue of public security is one of the main worries for Brazil’s population, considering the reality of high rates of criminality and violence. Thus, it is fundamental to conduct research on the matter in search of solutions and actions that reverse this scenario, which is a complex issue due to the various factors it involves.

Therefore, public security has shown itself to be a vital element for life in society. Its insufficiency causes fear, shifting people’s attention from their activities to protecting their own integrity. This condition leads to social chaos, with a constant conflict pitting all against all [1]. In this sense, homicide rates are the main index for measuring public security [2] and they have recently undergone a large increase in our country, leading to generalized fear.

In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, especially in its capital, Porto Alegre, there was a significant increase in the number of homicides between 2011 and 2016, generating a feeling of insecurity in the population and ample repercussion in the press so much that on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, one of the city’s main newspapers, Zero Hora, published a special feature with the headline “Porto Alegre in the Age of Barbarism” [3]. However, the homicide rate underwent a reduction from 2017 onward thanks to various actions conducted by the public security agencies.

Thus, this study used the dialectic inductive method, considering the knowledge based on experiences and generalizations stemming from concrete cases and sought to conduct a dynamic and ample interpretation of reality since social facts, in this case the occurrence of homicides, must not be considered separately. As for the study's nature, it is applied research, which consists of using knowledge to solve specific problems present in reality [4].

Regarding its objectives, this study is exploratory and uses technical bibliographic and documental review procedures [4] in order to identify the measures that were developed to avoid the occurrence of homicides, considering the statistical data and the references for the containment actions used in the public security sector.

### **Public Security and the Homicide Issue**

Public security is one of the “conditions for the development of human personality” and its object is public order, which is defined by a situation of “peaceful social coexistence”, with the preservation of political, social, economic, moral, and even religious values and principles [1].

According to Gussi, public security is security in its most mundane aspect, being one of the first functions of the Modern State regarding the maintenance of constitutional order since “in the end, public security's whole purpose is to avoid social disturbance par excellence: crime. (...) we can see that Penal Law contains a basic nucleus that has to do with three values: life, freedom and property” [5]

However, in the recent years, crime and fear have become routine events in the Brazilian population's life, especially in the large urban centers. They have become “omnipresent and omnipotent” in each person's life, stemming from the “fear of being the victim of a violent crime” and amply disseminating generalized fear [6]. Within this scope, Murray *et al.* [7] emphasize that crime and violence have generated social costs with intense impacts in peoples' quality of life, such as injuries, fear and psychological health problems.

Waiselfisz states that although defining violence is a difficult task due to an expansion of its comprehension, two of its essential elements can be defined: the notion of coercion or strength and the damage it causes to an individual or a group thereof. Thus, “there is violence when, during an interaction, one or many actors act (...) causing damage to one or more people in varying degrees (...)” [2].

In this aspect, there is the matter of how the press treats the issue of public security. Regarding this, Dias and Morigi [8] point out that “the feeling of insecurity in urban centers, the strengthening of certain violent actors, the increase in common criminal practices, new categories of crime and delinquency, and impunity” have stimulated and worsened a “social non-conformity”, making the theme a priority for Brazilian society and, thus, for the press.

In this context of insecurity and growing violence and criminality, there is an emphasis on sharing the increase in homicides, a crime that is used as a “public security indicator”, since “violent death is the most cruel expression of the violence that occurs at the level of individual or collective interpersonal relationships” [9].

Furthermore, Waiselfisz exposes two main arguments as justification for using homicide rates as a “general violence index” for studying violence. The first one is that death counts as violence of extreme gravity, so much that the potential damage of an epidemic is usually determined by the number of deaths it causes: “also, the intensity of various types of violence is strongly related to the number of deaths caused” [2]. The second argument is that the statistical coverage of other types of violence is limited due to the under-registration of police reports.

A report published by the United Nations Organization (UNO) on global violence prevention contained the alarming fact that 10% of the homicides committed around the world that year had occurred in Brazil [10]. Similarly, according to the “2016 Atlas of Violence” from the Institute for Applied Economic Research, there were 59627 homicides in the country in 2014, corresponding to a rate of 29.1 homicides per every 100 thousand inhabitants [11].

A study mentioned by Murray [7] that had the purpose of establishing the number of years lost by the population due to violence highlights that the largest number of healthy years of life lost was in Brazil. In the year of 2004 alone, approximately 2.5 million years of life were lost, since most of the homicide victims were young.

The repercussion of homicides in the country brings damaging consequences to “health, the demographic dynamics and, consequently, to economic and social development” [12]. The author points out that in 2014, 46.4% of deaths in men with ages between 15 and 29 years were due to homicides and the percentage becomes even more relevant when examining the deaths of men between 15 and 19 years of age, since 53% of the deaths in this age group were caused by homicide. It is important to note that young people between 15 and 29 years of age represented, in 2014, approximately 26% of the Brazilian population; however, 60% of firearms-related homicides occurred within age group [13].

Therefore, with the problem’s identification through statistical data and the description of reality, it is vital to identify the causes of the large number of homicides and the resulting population insecurity.

### **The Main Causes of Homicides in Brazil**

To establish the main causes for homicides is, in its own right, a large task. However, various studies have sought to comprehend the individual motivations and the processes that lead to committing crimes, especially homicides, based on statistical analysis [10, 11, 14]. In this sense, it is a complex phenomenon and the analysis must identify “certain statistical regularities that vary according to the region and criminal dynamics, in particular” [15].

Following the same line, the study conducted by Frota [9] states that “there are many factors linked to homicides. However, we cannot stop seeing them as being interconnected because although they are part of a vast context, they also possess particular aspects”, pointing out that most of the available studies focus on social, demographic and economic indicators, with an emphasis on social inequality as an influencing factor for the increase in the number of homicides.

In this context, a study published by the Ministry of Justice considers some sets of macro causes for homicide in Brazil, of which the highlights are: transversal factors (firearm availability and the accumulation of social vulnerability); gangs and drugs (illicit drug consumption and trafficking, especially crack; a high percentage of young people compared to the total population; sexual abuse and domestic violence; rivalries and violent conflict resolution patterns); property violence; interpersonal violence (accumulation of vulnerabilities, urban disorder, violent sociability, absence of mediation and peaceful conflict resolution, potentializing agents – alcohol and drugs, hate crimes); domestic violence, conflicts between civil society and the police; and the scarcity of State presence [10].

From the analysis of the conditioning factors presented in the aforementioned study, despite the identification of groups of factors and causes, it is necessary to consider the dynamics of criminality in a systemic manner, as proposed by Cerqueira *et al.* [16], who point out the existence of “a strongly structural component” in face of the enormous socioeconomic vulnerabilities and inequalities associated with impunity, due to the “failure of the criminal

justice system”. Therefore, the study mentions five “key elements” in the “Brazilian hyper-criminality” process: 1) the growth of urban population, 2) exclusion allied with socioeconomic inequality, 3) the proliferation and indiscriminate use of firearms, 4) the virtual failure of the criminal justice system, and 5) the historic absence of a consistent public security policy.

Gelinski Neto and Silva [17] summarize the literature on which their research is based, citing a list of the five main causes of criminality: (a) unemployment, (b) education, (c) income, (d) age, and (e) drugs. Thus, it is possible to note that the studies connect crimes and homicides to the aspects of social inequalities and vulnerabilities and the gangs/firearms/drugs relationship as well as the deficiency of the criminal justice system (due to impunity and the system’s inefficiency). Table 1 summarizes the findings of Cerqueira, Gelinski Neto and Silva and Engel et al. regarding homicide causes.

**Table 1. Main homicide causes**

<b>Cerqueira (2005)</b>	<b>Gelinski Neto and Silva (2012)</b>	<b>Engel et al. (2015)</b>
1) growth of urban population; 2) socioeconomic inequality; 3) indiscriminate firearm use; 4) failure of the criminal justice system; 5) absence of a consistent public security policy.	1) unemployment; 2) education; 3) income; 4) age; 5) drugs.	1) Transversal factors; 2) gangs and drugs; 3) property violence; 4) interpersonal violence; 5) domestic violence; 6) conflicts between civil society and the police; 7) scarce presence of the State.

Source: Created by the authors.

It is important to point out that the available research highlights the existence of a victim profile for intentional homicide throughout the past few years: “the average homicide victim in this country lives in a large urban center, is male, has black or brown skin, is between 15 and 29 years old, has a low education level, was wounded by a lightweight firearm and murdered in a public thoroughfare” [14]. Besides the profile, there is also the location of the facts in big cities, highly concentrated “in areas with high social vulnerability, little or no provision of public services and intense urban deterioration” [14].

Along with this reality of homicide concentration in poorer regions and neighborhoods, there is also the addition of youth involvement in gangs and illegal armed groups. According to Frota [9], in big cities, most homicides occur due to the presence of criminal organizations as was the case in Colombia in the 1990s, where the connection between homicides and criminal organizations reached 93% in 1995.

Furthermore, the author emphasizes that the drug trafficking market “would be present in precisely those areas where poverty, the drug manufacturer and distributor, was located near wealth, the consumer” [9], describing that in Colombia, the rapid evolution of violence occurred due to organized crime, leading to the drug traffickers’ dominance.

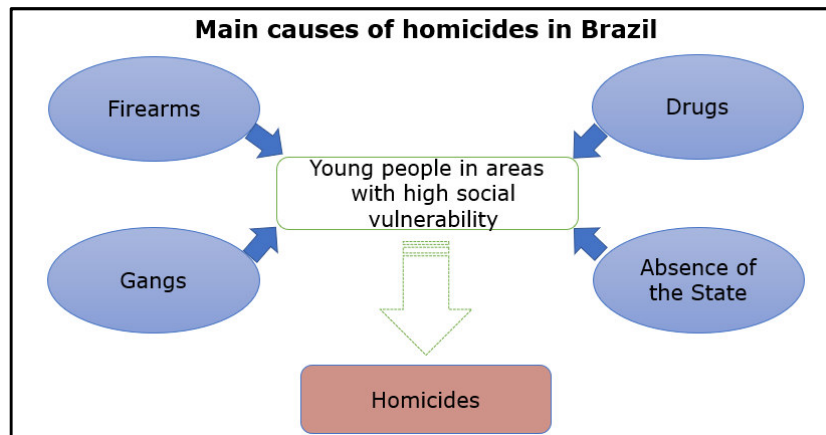
(...) ultimately, this implies that violent crime, especially homicides, is strongly associated with drug trafficking and linked to the social aspect, perpetuating a perverted scale of values that will be accepted by the community as morally acceptable behavior, which will tend to perpetuate the violence (SCHNEIDER apud FROTA, 2014, p. 75).

For Zaluar *apud* [17], “the main reason why young people in particular commit homicide is due to drug trafficking and firearms” an issue that, added to the scenario of extensive unemployment, low education levels, the absence of social programs and family breakdown, presents itself as the available pathway. This agrees with the vision of Goldstein (*apud* [18]), in which there are three contexts for the connection between drugs and homicide: the

psychopharmacological effect of drugs, the formation of economic compulsion, and systemic violence. The author further mentions, as a factor in the relation between drugs and violence, the “effect of community disorganization”, adding that “the rules and standards of conduct that are typical for drug trafficking tend to influence attitudes and behaviors”, culminating in the “violent solution of everyday conflicts” [18].

In addition, Zilli and Beato cite, when referring to the use of violence by young gang members that “violence is not only a means of action that is regulated by the ends that one wishes to achieve (...) it is a principle that commands the action itself and the relationships between subjects, becoming an end itself, unable to be separated from its fundamental function as a resource for action” [14]. In the same scope, Engel *et al.* [9] consider that “a part of the deaths end up having an adversarial culture and violent conflict resolution patterns as background, making deaths caused by gangs and by drugs similar, in various aspects, to deaths caused by interpersonal conflicts”. In short, it is possible to present a summary of the mentioned aspects in the following figure:

Figure 1.



Source: Created by the authors

Next, the article goes on to investigate actions geared towards reducing the amount of homicides, mainly considering recognized success cases, such as the measures taken in Colombia, in the United States, in Minas Gerais, Pernambuco and São Paulo.

### Successful Cases of Actions Taken to Reduce Homicides

It is possible to note that in the past few years, public security agencies have sought to conduct a result-oriented management, perfecting the previous administration pattern [19]. As such, the “Sou da Paz” (I’m with Peace) Institute conducted an analysis of result-oriented management experiences in the field of public security in Brazilian states, identifying five common elements in the analyzed experiences:

the establishment of specific objectives and priorities; defining goals based on performance indicators; specifying goals and plans of action based on integrated territories; strengthening statistical production and criminal analysis; the monitoring, by the leadership, through systematic analysis and accountability meetings [20] (p. 36).

Thus, at the end of the study, the aforementioned institute presents twelve proposals, from which it is possible to highlight the ideas for prioritizing operational and integrated plans; integration with agencies from the social domain, the Prosecutor's Office and the Judiciary; the use of goals; and the use of a results system with a methodology for the definition and monitoring of indicators and goals [20]. Beato Filho, in turn, points out that some modifications in police activities do not have to do with "structural macro solutions", but actually with alterations "in the habitual working style" within the institutions [21].

Through an ample analysis, it is possible to perceive that efficient and efficacious public security actions cannot consider simplistic measures, but must instead seek to comprehend the circumstances that involve the objective of public security promotion. Faced with the complex treatment of this subject, Cerqueira states that it is possible to develop efficacious and efficient public security policies and programs based on socioeconomic prevention and an efficient criminal justice system with coordinated, organized and directed actions, considering a precise diagnostic in order to properly apply the resources [16].

The comprehension of this manner of seeking homicide reduction measures can be perceived in various national and international examples. Although each case is different, the studies pertaining to successful experiences in confronting homicides demonstrate that there must be a clear strategy in order to develop the actions, with short and long-term goals, focusing on the places, the people and the behaviors that are related to the police reports, reducing the risks of urban violence [17].

### **The Colombian case**

One of the most emblematic reduction processes occurred in Colombia, where the applied actions focused on two different but complementary dimensions: repressive actions and social prevention. In this sense, punishment and penalty invigoration measures were implemented and, simultaneously, an ample program consisting of social improvements and youth inclusion was developed to serve the population living in the city's outskirts [15, 17].

Based on these guidelines, various actions were developed in Bogota, with an emphasis on the mediation and conciliation units and on the domestic violence committees, from which specific actions resulted, such as the reoccupation of public parks, the establishment of a closing time for nightclubs, a disarmament program, and the creation of a vast criminal and violence data analysis system [17].

The good practices employed in Bogota made the homicide rate per 100 thousand inhabitants decrease from 89.99 in 1993 to 22.8 in 2004 [15]. It is important to note that the measures stemmed from institutional stability and citizen coexistence. The Citizen Culture Program, formalized in 1995, established a new culture of preventing and fighting criminality that contained 16 essential topics, from which it is possible to highlight: a) the use of trustworthy criminality and violence information, b) the institutional management of the issue at a municipal level, c) the recovery of public spaces, d) strengthening the Metropolitan Police, e) community participation, f) restricting the consumption of alcoholic beverages (in specific places and times), g) the disarmament plan, h) giving attention to the youth involved in violence and drug consumption, and i) combating police corruption [15, 17].

### **Some local cases in the United States**

It is possible to perceive many models of homicide containment actions that consider aspects used in the Zero Tolerance Program, which was developed in New York and was also

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based on having the population reoccupy the public spaces by dealing with petty crime and gang action [17].

Furthermore, another contribution of the model that was developed was the use of criminal statistic analysis instruments that guide police action planning towards points with higher crime rates, introduced in New York through the use of computerized statistics (Compstat), an effective police work management tool that compiles data from criminal statistics [15]. It is necessary to point out that information is a fundamental product for planning public security policies and actions in order to achieve the goal of reducing violent crime [22].

Beyond this, Cerqueira summarizes some crime prevention practices that are considered the best, which were applied in five north-American cities resulting in higher reductions in violent crime rates per 100 thousand inhabitants (between 1986 and 1996). The author presented the measures applied in Fort Worth, New York, Hartford, Denver and Boston. Among the main actions, it is possible to identify: (a) supervising and advising juvenile offenders and youth that are at risk, (b) combating gangs and arresting their leaders, policing the neighborhoods and conducting community outreach actions, (c) the statistical analysis of criminal dynamics and (d) fighting drugs in schools and in the surrounding areas [15].

### **The cases of Minas Gerais, Pernambuco and São Paulo**

Although the number of homicides in the country is still alarming, there were some successful experiences in Brazil, especially in the reduction of this type of crime, including actions to recover urban spaces with the establishment of integrated data systems to identify areas with criminal occurrences, activities directed towards the vulnerable youth and a community approach with solutions for citizen security [23].

Among the successful models, the case of Belo Horizonte comes to mind, with the implementation of the “Fica Vivo” (Stay Alive) project. The project is based on “two operational pillars”: the first one takes into account the execution of police actions concentrated in the zones with the highest crime rates, focusing on arresting organized crime leaders, apprehending firearms and inhibiting open drug trafficking; the second focuses on the development of social inclusion activities for youth in a situation of social vulnerability, especially those aged between 12 and 14 years with a history of criminal practices [18, 23]. Also, an important aspect is the involvement of different agencies in a coordinated and integrated manner in which the coordination is divided among “two main groups in charge of operating Fica Vivo”: one for community mobilization and social inclusion and the other for strategic police intervention [23].

The actions that were developed were fundamental for reducing the amount of homicides in the capital of Minas Gerais, despite the scenario of drug trafficking dissemination.

The available evidence points to a self-regulation of violence within the crack trafficking structure, stemming from the decisions made by the bosses and managers of various crack house networks to avoid murdering as much as possible (...) The succession of homicides began to attract police presence to the main clusters, which directly affected the profitability of illegal drug sales. Stronger police presence near places where drugs are sold is not desired by the crack house bosses and managers. [18] (p. 65).

In Pernambuco, the “Pacto pela Vida” program (Pact for Life), launched in 2007, “a public security policy that is transversal and integrated, constructed in the form of a pact with society” that articulates with agencies from different spheres, led to a plan that aimed to reduce the occurrence of intentional violent and lethal crimes (intentional homicide, larceny and

physical harm followed by death). The program adopts “six lines of action: (a) the qualified repression of violence, (b) institutional improvement, (c) knowledge information and management, (d) education and training, (e) social prevention, and (f) democratic management”, involving the participation of various agencies [20, 24].

The Pernambuco program “contemplates strategic actions and management procedures inspired by experiences that led to a steep decrease in violence and crime rates in places such as Belo Horizonte, New York and Bogotá” [20, 24], focusing on fighting “violent death production networks, such as gangs and vigilante groups” through integrated and articulated actions led by the criminal justice system agencies. This occurred in such a way that 27 months after the program’s implementation, an accumulated 39.22% reduction in homicides was observed in Recife, the capital of Pernambuco.

Another relevant case is that of the state of São Paulo where, between 1999 and 2010, the number of homicides went down 66.7% [25]. During that time period, various measures were employed, with an emphasis on the intensive use of technology, operational management improvement (through indicators) and municipal participation in the search for public security solutions (through legislation and through the action of the local municipal guard chapters). Furthermore, a series of actions was developed in the social domain, with the use of a criminal georeferencing system with Business Intelligence (BI) resources for managing and employing police resources based on statistics, as well as the deployment of efficient measures by public security agencies, neutralizing the main criminal organization [25].

**Table 2. Actions for homicide reduction**

Location	Main actions
<b>United States</b> [15]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Supervising and advising juvenile offenders and at-risk youth;</li> <li>b) combating gangs and arresting their leaders;</li> <li>c) neighborhood policing and community outreach;</li> <li>d) statistical analysis of criminal dynamics;</li> <li>e) fighting drugs in schools and in the surrounding areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Colombia</b> [15, 17]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) using trustworthy criminality and violence information;</li> <li>b) institutional management at the municipal level;</li> <li>c) public space recovery;</li> <li>d) reinforcing the Metropolitan Police;</li> <li>e) community participation;</li> <li>f) restricting the consumption of alcoholic beverages;</li> <li>g) disarmament plan;</li> <li>h) giving attention to youth involved with drug consumption and violence</li> </ul>
<b>Minas Gerais</b> [18, 23]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Qualified repression in the zones with the highest crime rates;</li> <li>b) social inclusion activities for vulnerable youth;</li> <li>c) urban space recovery and community-based approach;</li> <li>d) establishing integrated criminal indicator data systems.</li> </ul>
<b>Pernambuco</b> [20, 24]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) qualified repression of violence;</li> <li>b) institutional improvement;</li> <li>c) information and knowledge management;</li> <li>d) education and training;</li> <li>e) social prevention;</li> <li>f) democratic management, with the participation of various agencies.</li> </ul>
<b>São Paulo</b> [25]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) intensive use of technology;</li> <li>b) operational management improvement;</li> <li>c) municipal participation in public security;</li> <li>d) actions in the social domain.</li> </ul>

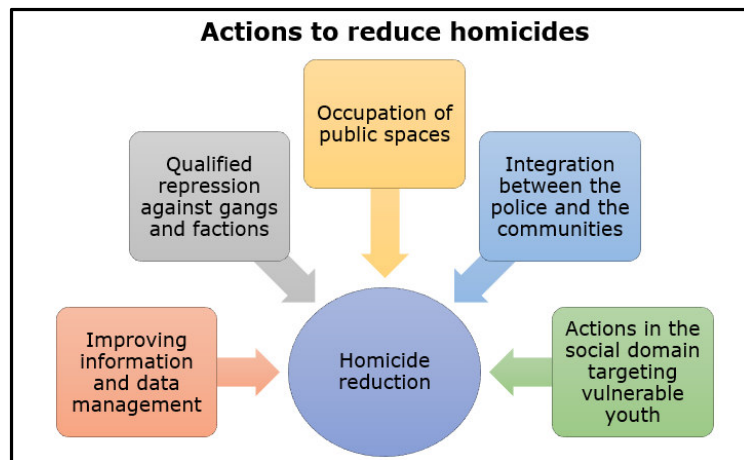
*Source: Created by the authors.*



It is important to note that Justus *et al.* conducted a study rejecting the hypothesis that the decrease of homicides in São Paulo could be related to the establishment of a “cartel” by the criminal organization Primeiro Comando da Capital (Capital First Command), thanks to an analysis of various factors and variables. On the other hand, the authors consider other studies that indicate reasons for the reduction of crime rates, correlating the following factors: improvements in the job market, demographic changes, the use of the Infocrim tool, a reduction in firearm circulation (Disarmament Statute), an increase in school attendance and the introduction of the Dry Law (which restricted the sale of alcoholic beverages) [25].

Despite the complexity of the matter, policies, programs, projects and actions were developed in various locations with diverse realities and generated a decrease in crime and violence, including homicides. Although the measures were adapted to the specific circumstances present in the locations, many of the actions are similar, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Figure 2.



Source: Created by the authors.

### Homicides In The Municipality Of Porto Alegre

Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, has exhibited an increase in crime rates during the last few decades, especially homicides, with the number of reports climbing 78% between the years of 2011 and 2016, according to data from the State Department of Public Security. Between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, the problem was more emphatically exposed by the media due to the worsening crime scenario.

In September of 2016, *Veja* magazine, one of the country’s main magazines with national distribution, published the headline “Gaúcho disaster: airport murder exposes the crisis in RS” on its cover. The report covered the murder that occurred on September 19<sup>th</sup> of that year in the Salgado Filho Airport’s lobby and discussed the conflict between criminal factions in the state’s capital as well as the sensation of impunity:

What is certain is that the execution by gunshots in the lobby of the Salgado Filho, the first crime of the sort occurring in an airport, conferred unbearable dimensions upon the epidemic of insecurity that has been going on for at least ten years in Rio Grande do Sul and has led to an overflow in fear levels. The large caliber message was understood by 10 out of 10 gaúchos: the criminals now act anywhere, anytime and even on the eve of the most

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important date for gauchos, September 20<sup>th</sup>, which celebrates the beginning of the Farrroupilha Revolution [26].

In October of the same year, the newspaper Zero Hora produced a special series with the headline “Porto Alegre in the Age of Barbarism”. The feature mixed the reports of homicide and larceny cases with analyses conducted by specialists, who emphasized the actions’ increase in brutality and violence, with the actions of criminal groups becoming increasingly evident in relation to the phenomenon.

Decapitated heads, an execution at the airport, mothers killed in front of their children, a body run over and dragged through the streets of Cidade Baixa: crime has exploded not only in quantity, but also in brutality and the savagery has spilled over to the entire city of Porto Alegre [3].

The factions’ activity, especially stemming from their organization in the old Porto Alegre Central Prison (currently Porto Alegre Public Jail), can be observed beyond the reports, in studies on the subject. In Cipriani’s work about criminal factions in Porto Alegre, the author states that with the increase in conflicts among the criminal groups, the “community loyalty” relationship has come to an end and the leaderships (from other communities) began to gain space through the use of force and threats. In addition, there is the multiplicity of criminal groups which have, within the jails, which are one of their focuses of expression and in the neighborhoods, the other focus, intensified the logic of the territorial expansion sought by the factions, using “explicit violence as a central method” [27].

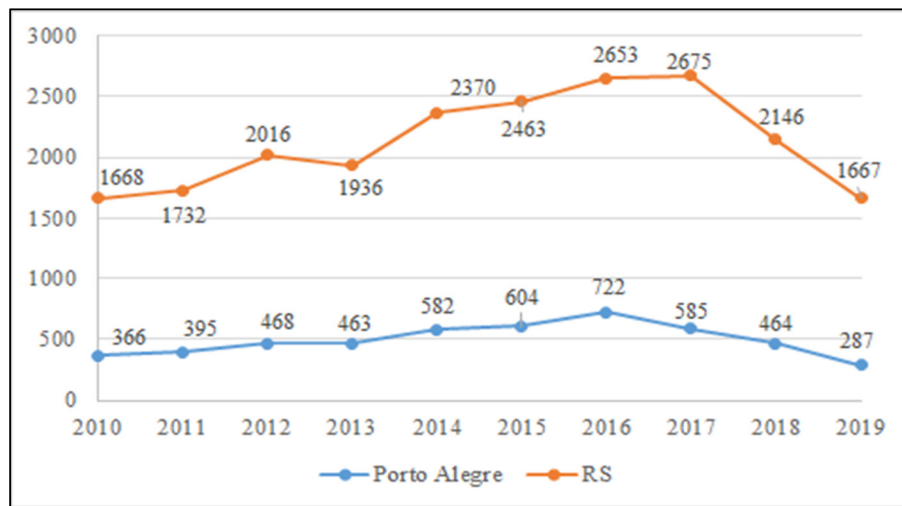
However, it is important to consider the role played by the media in spreading and amplifying the climate of insecurity. In a study regarding the thematic axes and the most recurrent sources on public security in Porto Alegre covered by the main newspapers circulating in the city, Dias and Morigi identified that the local press identifies the capital as a city that has major urban security problems. Thus, “it is possible to observe that there is a news construction that reinforces the sensation of insecurity and leads people to believe in the imminent risk of becoming victims of the criminality, as well as in a geolocation of violence”. In addition, they point out that the media prioritizes issues that involve violence, criminality and imprisonment. Thus, they barely divulge the positive actions stemming from the security agencies, projects and criminality prevention and repression programs [8].

Upon analyzing the information from homicide reports in absolute numbers provided by the Department of Public Security (Graph 1), it is possible to note the increase in occurrences over the last decade. The numbers demonstrate a 97% increase in the occurrence of homicide events in the Municipality of Porto Alegre between the years 2010 and 2016.

However, on taking the previous year into account, the increase did not occur gradually. In 2011, there was an 8% increase, with an 18% increase in 2012, 25% in 2014, 4% in 2015 and 20% in 2016. In 2013, there was a 1% decrease when compared to the numbers from the previous year.

Thus, there was an accumulated increase of 59% between 2010 and 2014 and the number of homicides climbed 24% between 2014 and 2016. However, Graph 1 demonstrates that in 2017, the number of homicide occurrences did not follow the increasing trend in the municipality of Porto Alegre, with a reduction of 19% in the number of cases when compared with 2016, bringing the numbers close to the levels reported in 2014, although the statistics continued to climb at the state level. Also, said reduction continued throughout 2018 (21% decrease) and 2019 (38%).

**Figure 1. Total homicide occurrences in Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul – 2010-19**



*Source: Public Security Observatory-SSP-RS (2020).*

Upon taking a closer look at the numbers, it is notable that even in 2017, the homicide numbers had a tendency to increase in the gaúcho capital. According to data from the Department of Public Security, there were 226 reports registered in the first three months, 13% more than the 200 occurrences registered during the same period in 2016.

Faced with this situation shown by the general occurrence numbers, the following section contains an analysis of the actions that were adopted with the intent to reduce homicide numbers in Porto Alegre in 2017 and in the following years, contradicting the trend shown in the previous years and in the first few months of 2017.

### **Actions Taken to Reduce Homicides – Operation Firm Hand (“Operação Pulso Firme”)**

As demonstrated, 2017 showed a reduction in homicide cases compared to 2016 and this decline is even more representative because the numbers returned to the levels shown in 2014 after a series of constant increases throughout the current decade. Thus, this study goes on to analyze the measures that were conducted by the public security agencies in 2017, based on exploratory documental research, official information and data from the press.

First, it is important to observe that there was no publicity regarding any strategic or systematic public security planning that was effectively implemented, despite the fact that the execution of activities focusing on reducing the amount of homicides was obvious, as described below. Various actions were adopted in accordance with different axes, many of which have already been noted in models that showed efficiency and efficacy in the previously mentioned cases. Thus, it is possible to note the execution of qualified repression actions, as well as those directed towards management improvement (result-oriented management), social prevention and integration.

However, the main actions promoted by the public security agencies during that time period can be associated with the line of qualified repression actions. The work of the state public security agencies alongside the National Public Security Force, which culminated in the Firm Hand Operation, stood out according to the State Department of Public Security and the press.

The National Force arrived in Porto Alegre in August of 2016 after a request from the state government due to a series of violent crimes, with the objective of fighting crime in the gaucho capital [28]. In January of 2017, the Ministry of Justice announced the implementation of the National Public Security Plan, which would be tested in the municipalities of Aracaju (Sergipe), Natal (Rio Grande do Norte) and Porto Alegre, beginning in February of that year. The plan put forward its principles as being integration, cooperation and collaboration, with the objective of reducing intentional homicides, feminicides and violence against women, rationalizing the penitentiary system and the integrated fight against transnational organized crime. One of the goals was a 7.5% annual reduction in the number of homicides [29].

Nevertheless, only the National Public Security Force acted effectively, numbering 200 police officers at the time, focusing on the locations with the highest rates of violent, lethal crimes against life. In 2017, the Minister of Justice was changed three times and measures were not put into action due to the change in focus towards the establishment of a long term national public security policy [30].

In light of this situation, the Rio Grande do Sul Department of Public security put into action a series of measures to modify the scenario of increasing homicides. In the beginning of March 2017, 400 military police officers from the Special Operations Battalions located in the state's countryside (Santa Maria and Passo Fundo) were relocated to the capital with the objective of conducting crime-fighting operations in the conflicted areas of Porto Alegre alongside the soldiers from the National Force [31].

Thus, one can identify the intent to occupy the conflicted areas and the reinforcement of the qualified response officers to fight the existing and amply reported scenario of violence, as mentioned beforehand. Subsequently, in March 2017, an operation was conducted to transfer a leader of one of Porto Alegre's criminal factions from the High Security Charqueadas Prison (PASC) to the Campo Grande Federal Prison (PFCG) in Mato Grosso do Sul. The justification cited a dispute between criminal organizations with the occurrence of various barbaric crimes involving decapitated victims in Porto Alegre and its Metropolitan Area in which the transferred convict was supposedly involved [32]. As stated by authorities, the police reinforcement in Porto Alegre that occurred days before the operation was "vital for choosing the adequate moment to proceed".

In July 2017, it was made public that this series of actions was a part of an even more complex measure for combating criminal factions. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, a search operation was conducted in the Porto Alegre Public Jail (previously known as Central Prison) involving more than 400 police officers. This operation was announced by the press as being one of the largest operations conducted in the prison in the previous years: "MB conducts the largest detailed search in the Central Prison in the past 22 years" [33] after the occurrence of friction and provocations between members from rival factions distributed among different pavilions in the State's largest penitentiary.

On July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Operation Firm Hand was finally put into action by the Rio Grande do Sul Department of Public Security (SSP-RS), being singled out as the largest integrated operation ever conducted in the State, with the involvement of over three thousand police officers and agents from nineteen institutions, culminating in the transfer of twenty seven highly dangerous prisoners considered to be the leaders of the State's criminal factions to federal penitentiaries.

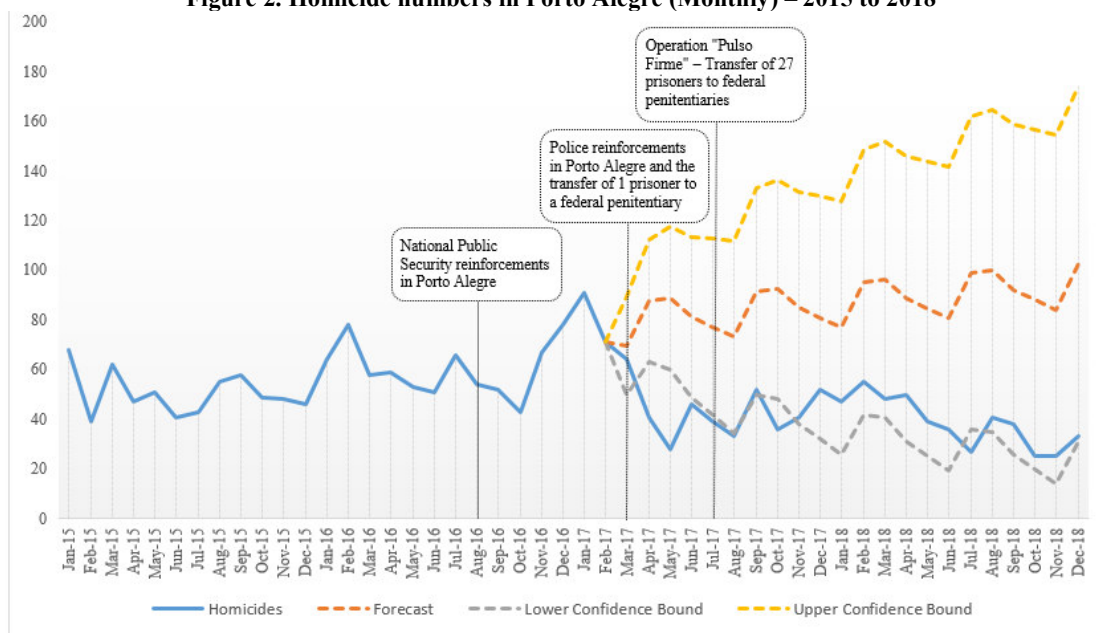
As reported, the action was structured beginning in March 2017 with the perception that the violent crimes mostly stemmed from the faction leaders that were being held in the prisons. The request was put out to transfer forty six prisoners, but the transfer was only permitted for 27 [31, 34]. For this operation, those selected were defined by a joint collaboration between the

Department of Public Security and the intelligence sectors in state and federal security agencies by identifying the criminals with the most influence and command inside and outside of the prison system.

Thus, the action was prepared in stages: 1<sup>st</sup> stage – bringing in reinforcements of military police officers from the Military Brigade from the countryside to the capital and conducting operations with the Civil Police and agents from the National Force; 2<sup>nd</sup> stage – launching the Integrated Security System Alongside the Municipalities (SIM-RS), strengthening intelligence and training operations and perfecting technological systems; 3<sup>rd</sup> stage: the graduation of new civil and military police officers and firefighters, bringing in 1500 new agents; 4<sup>th</sup> stage – breaking up the faction leaderships through the transfers to federal prisons and operations in their areas of action [31].

In this context, the press highlighted the action as an inflection point in the fight against crime. “Government faces the factions” was the first page headline on Zero Hora, a Porto Alegre newspaper with statewide circulation on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The article showcased the operation as “the greatest offensive on crime by the State”. The first page of the Correio do Povo newspaper, another periodical with statewide circulation, portrayed the action as a “historic operation”, with the headline “Dangerous Prisoners from RS go to other states”. It is important to note that the maneuvers needed for the transference were completed thanks to the use of barriers and the area’s saturation by the Military Brigade, especially in Porto Alegre, as well as through warrant fulfillment operations performed by the Civil Police, focusing on breaking up criminal organizations that specialized in property crimes, drug trafficking, homicides and money laundering [31].

**Figure 2. Homicide numbers in Porto Alegre (Monthly) – 2015 to 2018**



Source: Created by the authors

It is possible to find on the official websites for state security agencies as well as in the media that other actions occurred throughout the year with the objective of combating the factions, and the strategy that was used was mainly established and detailed through the previously mentioned operation. Furthermore, besides qualified repression, other measures were also put into action focusing on social prevention, data management and integration,

aiming to reduce the crime rates in the State and, thus, in Porto Alegre, as shown in Graph 2, in which the amount of homicide events per month between 2015 and 2018 is shown alongside the predictions made with Microsoft Excel software and the main actions that led to the operation's onset.

It is possible to observe that this qualified repression strategy that emphasized combating the factions with Operation Firm Hand and other police operations is similar to those found in other successful programs that were mentioned: combating gangs and arresting their leaders (United States), qualified repression in the zones with the highest crime rates (Minas Gerais), qualified repression of violence (Pernambuco), perfecting operational management (São Paulo).

### **Final Considerations**

Public security has shown itself to be highly complex and, simultaneously, highly relevant to life in society. Thus, the national scenario demonstrated, during the analyzed period, a progression in criminality thanks to the actions of criminal organizations that were mostly related to drug and firearm trafficking, generating a context of criminal practices and conflicts that had homicides, which are used as one of the main indicators of violence, as one of their most damaging consequences.

Furthermore, it is possible to identify the main causes of homicides in the country, which take into consideration the profile of youths in a socially vulnerable position in areas dominated by gangs or factions, involvement with drug trafficking, the availability of firearms and the absence of the State. Also, regarding measures taken to fight homicide, it was possible to note their similarity, especially when analyzing effective interventions taking into account qualified repression actions, with the occupation of areas with higher crime rates and the containment of criminal organizations, integration activities, perfecting the data management systems and monitoring social prevention activities and results in the risk areas.

In this scope, the high number of violent homicides in Porto Alegre led to fear and insecurity in the population. The factors involved in this issue are similar to those identified nationally, such as social vulnerability, the availability of firearms, drug trafficking and the action of criminal factions; in Porto Alegre's case, the dispute between factions. However, in light of the increasing homicide rates, in 2017 the public security agencies adopted various measures to fight these incidents, leading to a reduction in the indicators with a 19% decline in homicides when compared to 2016. Also, the reduction sustained itself in the following years, generating a new trend.

Among the actions were the development of a qualified repression operation in higher risk areas (considering the criminal analysis), the strategies for confronting the factions, the transfer of the criminal group leaders to federal prisons and the triggering of integrated operations to repress the groups' actions in their territories. These measures gained more visibility with the beginning of Operation Firm Hand in July 2017 when the tactics were publicized after the activities began.

These were the actions that differed from the other social prevention program development measures considering at-risk regions and youth, the improvement of criminal information management and the structuring of an integrated system involving agencies from federal, state and municipal levels as well as society. These measures proved to be, in the short term, necessary and efficient to break a historic trend of elevation.

Upon verifying that many crimes were directly linked to the conflicts between factions, which acted on their leaders' orders from inside the state penitentiary system, the state sought

to cut off the orders to commit violent crime that were coming from the leaders of said organizations.

However, there was no systematization of the policies, programs and actions on a specific level containing strategies, processes and indicators; that is, there were measures conducted that are supported by previously conducted programs, but that lack the establishment of a security plan and policy, which does not exist, even at a national level, although there have been attempts to establish one. With this in mind, the conclusion is that the actions adopted to change the scenario of insecurity were effective, although there is a need to structure and organize the actions, as well as to establish a plan that takes into consideration the diverse axes that are necessary to control crime through preventative and repressive measures in an integrated and coordinated manner so as to deal with the issue.

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