



ADOLESCENT WORK IN THE WORLD OF DRUGS: FROM USER TO TRAFFICKER

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to know the experiences and trajectory of adolescents working in drug trafficking. **Method:** descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, developed in a public school located in the south of Minas Gerais. Data were collected during the two-year academic period, from discussions and records made during group meetings and submitted to content analysis. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (Opinion n.1725520) and following all ethical-legal precepts. **Results:** 60 Integrative Community Therapy were performed with the participation of an average of 15 adolescents per meeting, totaling 256 participants aged 12 to 18 years. Only the therapies whose theme addressed directly or indirectly drug trafficking among adolescents were considered. From the analysis emerged the category: "Traffic in the backyard of the house at the entrance to the toe: from user to a traffic agent". **Final considerations:** the experiences and trajectory of working adolescents were anchored in a context of illegal work and surrounded by informality, violence and risks, given that the particularities of drug trafficking point to a complex social phenomenon, possible to be explored from different social actors and looks.

Keywords: Child Labor. Child Advocacy. Drug Trafficking.

INTRODUCTION

Official statistics, although with underreported data, reveal the early inclusion of children and adolescents in the labor market⁽¹⁻²⁾. In Brazil, child labor is considered to be performed by children or adolescents under the age of 16 years, except as an apprentice, when the minimum age allowed becomes 14 years. However, when it comes to night activities, dangerous or unhealthy the minimum age limit is set at 18 years⁽³⁾.

This legal framework aims to protect the health of children and adolescents, since when they enter work it is possible that they will spend long hours in often unhealthy environments and performing activities in the worst forms of child labor, such as drug trafficking⁽⁴⁾.

The participation of children and adolescents in this type of "work" is a reality in

several countries of the world, especially in places marked by social inequality and vulnerabilities, having relation with economic and social problems^(1,5). The increase in the labour force of adolescents involved in drug trafficking is attributed to issues related to poverty, unemployment and changes in the drug trade⁽⁶⁾.

It is important to consider that the family is the nucleus of support for adolescents⁽⁷⁾. However, most of the family members have low schooling, work informally, with little stable income, live in violent areas, experience the phenomenon of parents incarceration and all its impacts on life such as family restructuring and new forms of survival⁽⁸⁾.

The functions performed in drug trafficking are among the worst forms of labour exploitation⁽¹⁾. Children and adolescents in this

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environment are often deprived of access to the mediations fundamental to their development and education. Oblivious to their own condition, they do not recognize themselves as workers, they are exploited and often incarcerated but, paradoxically, they see in this work the concrete possibility of realizing their life projects⁽⁴⁾.

All these factors both create and add to the conditions of vulnerability in which they already live and prevent the construction of links with references from outside the illicit world, imposing an obstacle to the right to a healthy adolescence, with the guarantee of family and community ties⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

Given the above and considering that school environments can be spaces promoting health due to their potential to raise healthier and more creative forms of existence in the world and sociability⁽⁹⁾, also through the contact of the authors with young people in school environments that experience this type of reality, the objective of the present study was to know the experiences and the trajectory of adolescents working in drug trafficking.

METHOD

A descriptive and qualitative study, developed in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)⁽¹⁰⁾. It was conducted in a public school in a vulnerable area of a municipality located in the south of Minas Gerais. The adolescents, parents and guardians were instructed by the researchers about the objectives of the study in a meeting, obtaining their consent. For those who did not participate in the meeting, the guidelines were given only to the adolescents in the classroom and, subsequently, the consents and consent signed by the parents were handed over to the researchers.

For the collection of data among young people, Integrative Community Therapy (ICT) was used, one of the strategies that, through interpersonal encounters and sharing, in a horizontal and circular way (ICT wheels), have contributed to the restoration of self-confidence and broadening the perception of problems, which may favor the resolution and coping from local competencies. It is a mental health care technology, being configured as a valuable instrument of psychosocial intervention in public

health; this strategy accommodates, listens and cares for the individual and his suffering allowing the direction of demands⁽¹¹⁾. ICT is configured in the development of six steps, namely: reception; celebration; choice of theme; contextualization of the theme; problematization and closure⁽¹¹⁾.

The Informed Consent Form and the Consent Form were delivered to 450 adolescents, with only 285 signed returns. There were 60 ICT wheels conducted during school hours in the school itself, with participation of an average of 15 adolescents per meeting, totaling 256 participants aged 12 to 18 years.

The data collection period included the school months (February to June and August to December) of two consecutive school years. For this study, only the ten ICT that directly or indirectly addressed drug trafficking among adolescents were considered. The meetings were held weekly in a space defined by the coordination (classrooms or external courtyard), lasted from 60 to 120 minutes and were conducted by three of the researchers, who are community therapists, the number of drivers suggested for a ICT. The meetings were recorded with the aid of a digital device and always had the participation of another researcher, acting as an observer, who was also responsible for the records in a field diary.

The guiding question for the conduct of ICT meetings was "Talk about your anxieties, sufferings and achievements".

In the ICT, there has been a previous combination in which the topics addressed and shared experiences would remain among the participants; however, it was stated in the ICF that the results collected during the execution of the wheels could be published.

For the organization of the data, it was adopted the Content Analysis⁽¹²⁾, involving the pre-analysis phases, exploration, treatment of the material, inference and interpretation. In the pre-analysis was performed the floating reading of the transcribed material, constitution of the corpus and definition of the registration units relevant to the objective of the study. In the exploration of the material was made the coding of speeches, categorization of significant elements and grouping into thematic axes that emerged from the speech of the participants. The

treatment of results and interpretation consisted of the elaboration of inferences and reflections in the light of the theoretical framework, highlighting meanings attributed by adolescents to their insertion into drug trafficking and the repercussions on their life trajectories. This analytical strategy allowed us to grasp both the subjective and social dimensions of the work experience in trafficking, giving visibility to adolescents' narratives and allowing us to understand the meanings shared in the group.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Alfnas (UNIFAL-MG), under Opinion 1.725.520 (CAAE 58831216.80000.5142), following all ethical and legal precepts. To preserve anonymity, the participants were named by the letter A of adolescents, and the testimonies were numbered consecutively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the testimonials emerged the category: *"The traffic in the backyard of the house to the entry in the toe: from user to a traffic agent"*.

The adolescents reported on their experience with the drug in the backyard of their home: a place that should contribute to an atmosphere for recreational activities was set up as a strategic point for drug trafficking.

... My house has been pedicure[...] I saw how to divide the marijuana, I have made and used (A1)

I live every day with the drug, my cousins and uncles use and traffic[...] I live with the drugs in the backyard ... (A2)

Each time, in an earlier form, the world of drugs is being inserted into the daily lives of children and adolescents. The home that should be the appropriate place for a healthy growth and development process of the adolescent has become a strategic point for the management and administration of labor activity inherent to drug trafficking. There is an intergenerational process in the engagement of this activity with the insertion of adolescents into trafficking and the cycles that are perpetuated in families⁽¹³⁾.

The adolescent, in the environment of his home, experiences routine issues to any work, consisting of working hours, functions,

hierarchical relationships, remuneration and risks arising from the activity that performs⁽⁸⁾.

The retail drug trade is characterized by its own organizational structure, composed of different functions. Children and adolescents are relegated to lower positions in the hierarchy of this market, performing high-risk tasks that offer the lowest financial returns. In other words, the major drug trafficker is rarely the adolescent apprehended by the police in operations, whether large or small scale⁽⁸⁾.

My brother is from crime and my sisters work in[...] I am a drug user and also seeing... (A3)

The beginning of commercialization usually occurs after the first experiences as users of psychoactive substances, in late childhood or early adolescence⁽¹³⁾. Children and adolescents say that they "they work at the crack house", that is, they experience drug trafficking as a work activity⁽⁸⁾, which is consistent with the results of this study.

However, the designation of "trafficker" does not change the position occupied by the individual within the illicit drug market. Its apprehension and imprisonment have little or no influence on the functioning of this economy, since it will be quickly replaced by another⁽⁸⁾. The taboo surrounding the issue of drugs and the focus on small-time drug dealers obscures this criminal economy, which works and expands, even with all the police repression and ostensible state investment in this market⁽¹⁴⁾.

It is important to consider that, although drug trafficking is classified as a crime according to Law n. 11.343/2006⁽¹⁵⁾, for the adolescent the Article 103 of the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA) is considered an offence, that is, "conduct described as a criminal offense or contravention"⁽¹⁶⁾. Therefore, the country lives a legal-normative imbroglio: if on the one hand the ECA with all the policy of care to children and adolescents under the perspective of Integral Protection⁽¹⁷⁾ provides for the adolescent arrested by the police for selling drugs, a sanction (Internment, Service to the Community, Assisted Liberty and other punitive-educational forms), on the other hand, there are international legislations of which the country is a signatory, whose norms exceed those proposed by the ECA when it comes to

child labor in drug trafficking⁽¹⁾.

If the International Treaties and the Brazilian Decree on the worst forms of child labor are taken into account, this same adolescent is exposed to a specific type of work. In the first perspective, the category "offence", analogous to crime, is emphasized, while in the second perspective, "child labor" occupies a central role⁽⁴⁾.

There is an inconsistency between protection and criminal laws: the former define the adolescent who works in drug trafficking as a victim; the latter as an offender⁽¹⁸⁾. Thus, the justice system, based on criminal laws, considers trafficking in an analogous way to offenses, making the adolescent apprehended as an offender who must respond to a sanction for the crime committed⁽¹⁹⁾.

As a signatory to international legislation and conventions for the eradication of the worst forms of child labor, Brazil has made an international commitment to eradicate child labor⁽²⁰⁾, especially in its worst forms. Although the Brazilian legislation for childhood and adolescence is one of the most advanced in the world, this does not guarantee, by itself, the realization of rights⁽²¹⁾.

In addition to the legislative inconsistencies, there is the economic issue since the world of drugs is sustained by the pillars of monetary capitalism and violence, as reported by the adolescents of the study.

I lived with drugs in the backyard and violence. I have tried, but do not use because I saw many heavy things... (A2)

I have experience in drug use and trafficking with my family. I do not want this life for me... People who deal with drugs do not live in peace, run from the police and catch... (A10)

My mother is a user, she steals money from my grandmother to buy drugs and then does not have to buy food. My boyfriend welcomes me, but he also plays with it[...] My boyfriend has already been threatened with death... (A11)

My uncle used and went crazy... stole everything, I saw the suffering of my grandmother ... my uncle died because of trafficking... (A1)

On a daily basis, adolescents have to survive the so-called "urban violence", balancing

themselves on the "razor's edge" between life and death. They are subjected daily to police approaches, searches, home invasions, forced confessions, provisional internment, prison discipline and post-disciplinary control⁽¹⁹⁾. Other times, the violence is not directly violated, but they experience a violent environment in their surroundings due to the various vulnerabilities in which they live⁽⁵⁾.

It was evident from the testimonies that the exploitation of child labor is a routine in the life course of these adolescents and their families. The educational profile, the geographic aspects of housing and family history unfold early in the world of informal work; live scenes of humiliation in labor relations, poor pay, unhealthy activities, exhaustive sessions, these elements that contribute to a more advantageous view in the labor market related to drug trafficking, which can promote their achievement of autonomy, social status and access to consumer goods⁽²²⁾.

It is very easy to access the traffic and only talk with the brother who is already in the middle. They prefer the teenager because he does not get arrested. And makes a lot of money. (A7)

Lack of opportunity in society for young people... We want to buy snacks, shoes, go out with mine and have no money. So many teenagers go to the world of drugs and trafficking. (A8)

... I use and also sell, to have a lot of money... (A4)

It was possible to reveal the statements of adolescents, corroborating with the literature findings that work in drug trafficking is also seen as an "inclusive model", by which young people obtain a career, consumer goods and symbolic status⁽⁸⁾.

The occupational structure and roles assigned to children and adolescents in the illicit drug market, combined with the scarcity of formal work, limited access to education and learning programs, as well as the poor living conditions of their families, make the exit of these young people from this type of activity even more complex and challenging⁽⁸⁾.

For the adolescent, drug trafficking is seen as an alternative income. In his view, trafficking provides the only or "easiest" possibility of

social ascension⁽²³⁾. The desire for belonging and social recognition and the situation of psychological, physical, cultural, political and financial fragility further limits their possibilities.

The adolescent experiences the exploitation of drug trafficking at an early age with financial issues as depicted in the following:

I buy and sell the drug[...] Selling to have money. I am in this life since the age of 13, today I am 15 years... (A5)

... selling drugs[...] I am 15 years, I have been in this life since the age of 13... (A4)

Regardless of whether young people use these resources to supplement family income, sustain vices or ensure a minimum level of consumption comparable to that of their peers from other social classes, the reality is that the remuneration obtained in the illicit market, although not excessive, significantly exceeds the legally available job offers for this group. Job opportunities characterized by instability and lack of prospects for long-term professional advancement are not equal to the gains provided by involvement in drug trafficking. In addition, working in the "corner shop" or "little shop", provides adolescents with a rapid rise to positions that offer higher salaries, which encourages continuity in this activity⁽⁸⁾.

Exposure to illegal labor markets during childhood and adolescence puts them on the path of crime, increasing the likelihood of being incarcerated in adulthood for violent crimes related to drug trafficking⁽²⁴⁾.

The adolescents stated that they were not afraid of being caught by the police and the spread of illicit labor activity.

I'm not afraid to catch me (police), no one catches me[...] I don't think when I'm 18 years about selling the drug and getting caught, I think of today... (A5)

I'm not afraid of the police get me, nobody gets me no... (A4)

In contrast, the literature describes the relationship between the police and adolescents involved in drug trafficking as irregular and complicated: violence and police corruption generate a diffuse feeling of revolt, as well as fear, constant tension and insecurity⁽¹³⁾.

The literature also points out the growing female participation in drug trafficking for different causes: not only by enticement or family influence, but as an act of personal choice for the possibility of occupation of positions inherent to the male universe, obtaining the respect and prestige attributed to men traffickers⁽²⁵⁾.

With 5 reais I buy the pin, it is the price of a tea[...] Seeing fast, once the police passed near me, but did not suspect, for being woman [...] I just want to eat, sleep, smoke and sell... (A12)

I am a drug user and also see, do not need. Seeing why it is good, live in the toe for women is very easy, there are no female police. It's harder to catch us. (A3)

When comparing the participation of boys and girls in the socio-educational system, it is observed that the number of boys is significantly higher. In general, the most common offence among adolescents who comply with socio-educational measures in a closed regime is theft. However, when analyzing this reality from the female perspective, it is found that drug trafficking is the predominant act. This data indicates that, in addition to having a lower propensity to commit offences when girls do so, most cases are associated with drug trafficking⁽²⁵⁾.

Another relevant issue in the testimonies of adolescents referred to the desire to want to leave school to remain directly in trafficking:

If I could stop going to school, I would just sell drugs.... (A6)

... I do not want to stop trafficking and use, all this generates a lot of pleasure. I don't see[...] I don't like studying. (A12)

School dropout occurs due to several factors, among them, work in drug trafficking, which is related to the difficulty in reconciling school activities with those developed in the illicit network, negative experiences and lack of adaptation to the school routine⁽¹³⁾.

In this perspective, the educational institutions where adolescents study rarely present a horizon that can give meaning to their lives and overcome the process of exclusion and vulnerability in which they live⁽¹³⁾.

In addition, the school experience of these

adolescents is impoverished⁽¹³⁾, due to low participation and little involvement of their parents and/or family members in the school context.

... I was raised with my grandparents, wanted to have the presence of my parents and go together at school[...] Everyone had their parents[...] {Cry } (A9)

For the adolescent, school is often seen as an obstacle to drug trafficking. Thus, the impairment in school performance or even school dropout is a mark on the trajectory of their life⁽¹³⁾. However, the promotion of school mental health, related to values such as democracy, participation, partnership, development, social justice and citizenship, is a perspective that evokes an intersectoral action. School institutions are considered privileged spaces for health promotion, also because they are more accessible to adolescents than the health services themselves⁽⁹⁾.

In a study that analyzed the sociodemographic profile of adolescents working in Brazil and the association with risk and protective factors for chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), identified that those who worked were more likely to manifest risk behaviors for NCDs, despite being more physically active⁽²⁶⁾. It is worth noting that the insertion of adolescents in the labor market of trafficking, an illicit activity, exposes them to high risks involving their physical and mental health, increasing the possibility of illness due to work.

Some of these risks identified in the literature were: direct contact with substances that can harm your health and training; mentally, physically, socially and morally dangerous and harmful situations; early work, usually started before 16 years; exhausting working days; potential armed conflict, with risk of death; retardation and low school attendance. In addition, there is exposure to police violence, vexatious situations and the possibility of deprivation of liberty, since it is extremely risky and suffers strong combat from the repressive forces. Physical and symbolic violence is present in relations with the police and the employer, being common threats and psychological pressures⁽⁸⁾.

The adolescent does not always conceive

drug trafficking as an illicit activity. For him, trafficking adheres to the notion of work, as it is an activity that produces goods and allows the distinction of the subject in the social hierarchy proper to its reality⁽⁸⁾.

By projecting themselves among their own, adolescents also feed ideas about its importance, often projecting themselves as protectors, patrons of their community, but also living with an idea of belonging to something much greater than them in the collective plane⁽²⁷⁾, reporting the respect that began to have in their communities after starting illegal activities⁽⁸⁾.

The macro-social structures, combined with the lack of effective government policies, promote the creation of alternative forms of sociability among children and adolescents. In this scenario, illicit activities emerge as cultural practices that characterize certain community contexts, profoundly influencing the interactions among young people and shaping their relationships of belonging and coexistence⁽¹³⁾.

The constitutional text establishes that, in addition to the State, it is also the responsibility of the family and society to guarantee, with absolute priority, all fundamental rights to children and adolescents, in addition to specific rights arising from their peculiar condition of development^(28,29). The set of constitutional and infra-constitutional norms constitutes a comprehensive system of legislative protection aimed at safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents in Brazil⁽³⁾.

There are certainly other experiences and trajectories of adolescents working in drug trafficking that did not appear throughout the study. The debate was limited to the issues that emerged in ICT with a group of adolescents, which explains some of their limitations.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Considering the proposed objective that was to know the experiences and the trajectory of adolescents working in drug trafficking, the study presented a glimpse of the social malaise considered one of the worst forms of work, which children and adolescents are inserted and is supported by an excerpt from a survey conducted with adolescents in a public school institution and permeated by the data that emerged from Integrative Community Therapy.

The experiences and trajectories of working adolescents are anchored in a context of illegal work and surrounded by informality, violence and risks, given that the particularities of drug trafficking point to an extremely complex social phenomenon possible to be explored from different social actors and looks.

Talking about their experiences and pains can become a therapeutic space providing the resignification of suffering that allows to work on psychosocial skills such as empathy, self-knowledge and effective communication.

It is necessary to implement public policies

protecting children and adolescents, as well as the consolidation of support networks provided for in the legal regulations of health, education and social assistance inherent to this public.

It is suggested, in the future, other studies with different methodological approaches, in order to understand the interfaces of the phenomenon of child and adolescent labor in drug trafficking, as well as the creation of strategies that enable the implementation of the doctrine of integral protection to childhood and adolescence.

TRABALHO DO ADOLESCENTE NO MUNDO DAS DROGAS: DE USUÁRIO A AGENTE DO TRÁFICO

RESUMO

Objetivo: conhecer as vivências e a trajetória dos adolescentes trabalhadores no tráfico de drogas. **Método:** estudo descritivo, de abordagem qualitativa, desenvolvido em uma escola pública localizada no Sul de Minas Gerais. Os dados foram coletados durante o período letivo de dois anos, a partir das discussões e registros realizados durante os encontros grupais e submetidos à análise de conteúdo. A pesquisa foi aprovada pelo Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa (Parecer nº.1725520) e seguiu todos os preceitos ético-legais. **Resultados:** foram realizadas 60 sessões de Terapia Comunitária Integrativa com a participação média de 15 adolescentes por encontro totalizando 256 participantes com idades entre 12 a 18 anos. Foram consideradas apenas as Terapias cuja temática abordava direta ou indiretamente o tráfico de drogas entre os adolescentes. Da análise emergiu a categoria: "O tráfico no quintal de casa à entrada na biqueira: de usuário a um agente do tráfico". **Considerações finais:** as vivências e a trajetória dos adolescentes trabalhadores estiveram ancoradas em um contexto de trabalho ilegal e envolto pela informalidade, violência e riscos, dado que as particularidades do tráfico de drogas apontam para um fenômeno social complexo, possível de ser explorado a partir de distintos atores sociais e olhares.

Palavras-chave: Trabalho infantil. Defesa da Criança e do Adolescente. Tráfico de drogas.

TRABAJO DEL ADOLESCENTE EN EL MUNDO DE LAS DROGAS: DE USUARIO A AGENTE DEL TRÁFICO

RESUMEN

Objetivo: : conocer las experiencias y la trayectoria de los adolescentes trabajadores en el tráfico de drogas. **Método:** estudio descriptivo, de enfoque cualitativo, desarrollado en una escuela pública ubicada en el Sur de Minas Gerais/Brasil. Los datos fueron recolectados durante el período lectivo de dos años, a partir de los debates y registros realizados durante las reuniones grupales y sometidos al análisis de contenido. La investigación fue aprobada por el comité de ética en investigación (Dictamen nº 1725520) y siguió todos los preceptos ético-legales. **Resultados:** se realizaron 60 Terapia Comunitaria Integrativa con la participación media de 15 adolescentes por encuentro, totalizando 256 participantes con edades entre 12 y 18 años. Se consideraron solo las terapias cuya temática abordaba, directa o indirectamente, el tráfico de drogas entre los adolescentes. Del análisis surgió la categoría: "El tráfico en el patio de casa a la entrada del punto de venta de drogas: de usuario a un agente del tráfico". **Consideraciones finales:** las experiencias y la trayectoria de los adolescentes trabajadores estuvieron basadas en un contexto de trabajo ilegal y envuelto por la informalidad, violencia y los riesgos, dado que las particularidades del tráfico de drogas señalan a un fenómeno social complejo, susceptible de ser explorado a partir de distintos actores sociales y enfoques.

Palabras clave: Trabajo infantil. Defensa del Niño y del Adolescente. Tráfico de drogas

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