

***La vida loca* (the crazy life):**  
**an exploration of street kids' agency in relation to the risk of**  
**HIV/AIDS and governmental and non-governmental**  
**interventions in Latin America.**

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By  
Francesca Elizabeth Richards  
(francescarichards@postmaster.co.uk)  
University of Sussex  
2005

## Summary

This dissertation seeks to examine the relationship between street kids' agency, HIV/AIDS and government and non-government interventions in Latin America. Part 1 contextualises the relationship between street kids' agency and HIV/AIDS in terms of urban poverty in Latin America and the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Part 2 explores the range of sexual practices rendering street kids vulnerable to HIV/AIDS in terms of broader cultural conceptions of gender, childhood and sexuality. Part 3 critically assesses government and NGO projects seeking to tackle the specific issue of street kids' risk of HIV/AIDS infection, and draws on my own research and communications with particular NGOs working in the field. Finally, Part 4 considers possibilities for future innovation in the context of global HIV/AIDS debates.

## Preface

Over the last decade, the spread of HIV/AIDS among street kids has become a major concern for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with street kids in Latin America, yet recent academic literature focusing on street kids has either mentioned HIV/AIDS only in passing (Boyden 1997, Ennew 1994) or presented quantitative information regarding sexual behaviour and rates of infection (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993). Drawing on a number of ethnographic studies of the region and my own research into NGO and government project material, I wish to argue that particular dimensions of street kids' lived experiences render HIV transmission both likely and difficult to prevent, particularly as NGO and government rhetoric fails to acknowledge the complexity of their circumstances. Street kids jealously guard their autonomy despite the dangers of street life; it is a *vida loca* (a crazy life) but it is "theirs". By recognising that street kids are vulnerable and yet assert a degree of agency, I argue that future work on this issue can be more effective, particularly if situated within global HIV/AIDS debates.

I would like to thank the following: my supervisor, Valentina Napolitano-Quayson, for her invaluable advice during the planning stages of this dissertation; my parents, Chris and Elizabeth Richards, and Jenn Long and Tatton Spiller for their support during the long writing process.

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### Introduction

“...What I want to do I do for myself - after all, I'm in the street! When you're in the street, you do what you want, you know?” Eufrasio, 14, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 46-47).

The testimonies of street kids across Latin America<sup>1</sup> reveal lives which they perceive as not only extremely dangerous, physically brutal and emotionally tragic but at the same time fun, sexy, proud and liberating. *By day*, they roam confidently among the downtown plazas in beggar's rags or strut with street cred in the latest designer gear stolen from a washing line. They meet friends, play in the public fountains, snatch fruit from a market stall, wash car windscreens, drop into a shelter for a shower, set up a deal to buy drugs or smuggle guns to get the cash for a brief visit back to the slums. *By night*, they huddle together in dark doorways, under bridges, in sewers or tunnels and sniff glue, smoke, drink, and have sex to numb the fear of the police or vigilante groups on the prowl.

Street kids are a permanent feature of public and academic debates concerning poverty, delinquency and urban decay in Latin America. Over the last decade, the spread of HIV/AIDS<sup>2</sup> among street kids has become a major concern for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with street kids in the region, yet recent academic literature focusing on street kids has either mentioned HIV/AIDS only in passing (Boyden 1997, Ennew 1994) or presented quantitative information regarding sexual behaviour and rates of infection (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993). This dissertation seeks to explore the relationship between street kids, agency and HIV/AIDS in the context of the structural conditions motivating kids to enter the inner-city streets, popular discourses of childhood, sexuality and gender, the realities of street kids' encounters with government and non-government institutions and street kids' own ranking of perceived threats to their well-being and autonomy. Drawing on a number of ethnographic studies in the region and my own research into government and NGO project material, I will argue that current projects do not adequately take account of the factors affecting street kids' ability and motivation to protect themselves from this disease. Street life is a *vida loca* (crazy life) but it is “theirs” and HIV is just one aspect of a world of unpredictability and pain but also camaraderie and excitement. I argue that by recognising that street kids are social actors with particular capacities, vulnerabilities and perspectives,

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<sup>1</sup> By which I refer to the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries of Central and South America.

<sup>2</sup> HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus which causes AIDS (Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome).

future work on HIV/AIDS can be more effective, particularly if situated within global HIV/AIDS debates.

I define “street kids” as independent young people who travel between the urban slums and central zones of opulence at will, choosing to spend some time on the inner-city streets and identifying with street culture. There are thought to be millions of such kids across Latin America, though statistical estimates vary as street kids do not constitute a constant and permanent group but an ever-shifting population within the urban milieu (Glauser 1997: 149). Although usually referred to as “street children” in English and Spanish<sup>3</sup>, this term is problematic both in regards to conceptions of childhood and the street. Firstly, young people recognised as street children range in age from babies to young people in their early twenties - few know their own birth date and some may wish to conceal this date as under-eighteens tend to receive milder punishments for crimes (Inciardi & Surratt 1998: 10). Secondly, street children are the antithesis of the middle-class construction of children as dependent young people in need of adult care, guidance and control for effective socialisation (Aries 1962). While middle-class children are nurtured and educated in private, street kids independently occupy the inner-city streets, which Latin American middle classes view as the domain of vagrants and loiterers and are thus perceived as deviant or victims of social neglect (Rizzini 2002: 169). This is reflected in the Portuguese distinction between *crianças* (children) and the contemptuous term for street kids, *menores* (minors) (Hecht 1998: 142). I refer to these young people operating independently in the inner cities as street “kids”, a more neutral term which encompasses a range of ages from infancy to adolescence. I keep the focus on the “street” as street kids themselves discursively identify with the *calle* or *rua* (the street).

Street kids, as members of the urban poor, experience a range of social problems including marginalisation, endemic physical and sexual violence, drug abuse, disease, and crime. For governments and NGOs, these form a composite matrix of issues, of which HIV is the element imbued with the most urgency and moral significance. Latin America is not yet ravaged by AIDS to the same extent as Africa, but it is likely that street kids’ sexual lifestyles render them particularly vulnerable to the disease and also likely to transmit it to the wider population through their sexual relations with adults (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993). Street kids’ may also contract HIV through intravenous drug use and mother-baby transmission, though this is comparatively rare (Stillwaggon 2000: 7) and therefore I will focus on kids’ sexual lives as the predominant form of transmission.

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<sup>3</sup> In Spanish, street kids are called *los niños de la calle* (children of the street)

While recognising that each country, each urban centre has its own specific street culture and by no means implying regional consistency, it is useful to present Latin America as a coherent entity for a discussion of the relationship between street kids, agency and HIV/AIDS. Latin American countries share a range of cultural and historical features which impact on this dynamic including gender and sexual ideologies relating to *machismo* and femininity, the dominance of the Catholic Church and its conservative dogma regarding sex education, and histories of conquest, slavery and resistance (Melhuus & Stølen 1996). Street kids are strikingly visible in the social space and cultural imaginary of urban Latin America, whether as objects of pity or hate and Latin American governments have typically been highly ambivalent towards the street kid “problem”. Politicians have indulged in ‘gesture politics’ in response to outside pressures, including the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989)<sup>4</sup> and the international outrage provoked by images of the “destitute waif” commonplace in the global media (Dimenstein 1991: 13). They have been slow to work on HIV issues with street kids who remain one of the most marginalized and despised groups in Latin America<sup>5</sup>. However, there has been enduring NGO activity in the region, with a strong tradition of grassroots activism, well-established religious and philanthropic groups and the ongoing presence of international charities seeking to work with street kids and fill the gap left by governments.

While detailed differentiation between street kids according to age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or nationality is outside the scope of this dissertation, I will draw attention to the broader issues influencing Latin American street kids’ risk of HIV infection which have implications for the success of projects seeking to help them. Part 1 contextualises the relationship between street kids’ agency and HIV/AIDS in terms of urban poverty in Latin America and the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Part 2 explores the range of sexual practices which render street kids vulnerable to HIV/AIDS in terms of broader cultural conceptions of gender, childhood and sexuality. Part 3 critically assesses government and NGO projects seeking to tackle the specific issue of street kids’ risk of HIV/AIDS infection, and draws on my own research and communications with particular NGOs working in the field. Finally, Part 4 considers possibilities for future innovation in the context of global HIV/AIDS debates.

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as the UN Convention

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Shaw, Director of Shine A Light: The Program for Street Children’s Health, Personal Communication (26th July 2005)

## PART 1: Structure and Agency

### Structural analysis

Structural analysis seeks to explain social behaviour and institutions by reference to *relations* among concrete entities such as persons or organisations (Granovetter 2001). In this context, a structural analysis of street kids' risk of HIV infection incorporates a study of the relationship between street kids, government departments and NGOs in their various guises. In this approach, relations are governed by the interaction between agency and structure. I define "agency" as the potential to make individual choices, influence decisions and possibly intentionally or unintentionally transform structure, where "structure" is the organising medium which enables or constrains these choices. As Prout (2000) reminds us, agency is not an essential attribute, but the effect of connections on which individuals can draw. In focusing on street kids, I will explore how they experience subjugation and autonomy within the relations they form on the street with individuals and institutions.

### Urban poverty in Latin America

I will first examine the structural conditions in which Latin American street kids are motivated to take up residence in the inner cities. Though Latin America is a complex and diverse region in terms of politics, language, climate, industry and culture, Gilbert (1994) argues that the nature of economic development in each country has produced comparable social and economic inequalities. Massive rural-urban migration throughout the twentieth century plus cuts in public spending in line with the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s have contributed to high levels of urban poverty (*ibid*: 30)<sup>6</sup>. In the late 1990s, 55.00% of the urban population were below the urban poverty line in Colombia, 29.9% in Argentina, 27.10% in Guatemala, and 14.65% in Brazil<sup>7</sup>. The sprawling metropolises of Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City and Bogotá have become infamous; millions live in basic shacks without access to clean water, electricity, sewage facilities, health or education and with little or no prospect of legal, let alone rewarding, employment. Such high levels of urban poverty across Latin America have created the conditions for substance abuse, deteriorating health and violence, producing communities overwhelmed by frustration and despair (Green 1998).

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<sup>6</sup> Structural adjustment programmes or "counter-urbanisation" strategies have been imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in response to Latin America's debt crisis.

<sup>7</sup> USAID, "USAID Poverty Statistics for Latin America and the Caribbean based on World Bank, World Development Indicators" <[www.usaid.gov/locations/latin\\_america\\_caribbean](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean)> (9th August 2005).

As members of fluid and shifting extended kinship networks, typically based around matri-focal households with transient male presence, poor kids are required to be active, productive and ‘nurturing’, supplementing the household income and caring for younger or vulnerable family members (Hecht 1998: 237). Yet in the absence of an accessible and effective welfare system for the poor in most Latin American countries, families struggle to survive (Green 1998: 13). Faced with hunger, domestic violence, little opportunity and the desperation of their parents, kids may venture into the centre of the urban landscape, attracted by the “bright lights”, impressive skyscrapers, consumer goods and the prospect of earning enough to eat (Taylor 2001). Yet on the streets, the kids face exploitation, sexual abuse, violence and even murder. Each day is a struggle to survive and many end up involved in criminal activity. The kids come into contact with a range of government and non-governmental actors and institutions, including the police, juvenile court officials, children’s home workers, religious groups, domestic and international NGOs and death squads who all make it their business to target street kids for purposes as diverse as control, rehabilitation or extermination. In this context, street kids are not only subordinated because they are poor but because they are young. Street kids are kids “out of place” to use Douglas’s phrase (1966); as unaccompanied minors they threaten the middle-class construction of childhood discussed earlier and as poor kids, they challenge the economic apartheid which delineates the slums from the affluent inner city areas. Street kids are thus perceived as polluting agents, justifying actions to remove or eradicate them.

### Structure and agency

Sympathetic commentators tend to draw on the poor population’s history of economic dislocation, political subjugation, marginalisation and large-scale migration to present street kids as simply victims of structural oppression (Boyden 1997, Tierney 1997). Yet how kids deal with structural forces is a more complex and interesting question. Vulnerability and agency are both vital elements to street kids’ lived realities and rather than make an historical apology and simply blame the situation of Latin America’s street kids on repressive structures, it is important to understand how social actors negotiate and, to some extent, constitute relationships among themselves and with “outside” agencies. The degree of vulnerability or agency at any particular moment or in any particular interaction is contingent on relationships of power but also on networks of solidarity. This is supported by Foucault’s argument that power is not concentrated at the apex of social hierarchies but diffused across social interactions (2001).

Street kids collectively assert their agency through their symbolic presence on the streets. By travelling from the peripheries to the city centre, street kids actively continue the migration by the poor and marginalized towards the elite strongholds and challenge the economic apartheid which would otherwise allow their plight to go hidden and ignored. Street kids' occupation of the inner-cities can be viewed as a subversive statement; their high visibility has provoked international outrage at the poverty of young people and while street kids enjoy the media attention (Taylor 2001: xiv), governments have been obliged to respond with new legislation to protect them, in line with the UN Convention. While this seems to be predominantly 'gesture politics' as state officials continue to perpetrate violence against street kids, this is at least a positive opportunity for the plight of the urban poor to be recognised (Dimenstein 1991: 12).

Though benefiting from the stereotype of street kids as destitute victims, street kids also strive for self-determination at an individual level. Kids visible on the streets are a heterogeneous population with diverse personal histories which influence their decisions and experiences in the cityscape. While they operate within the structures of poverty and subjugation in which they find themselves, street kids create their own niche and form new relationships and networks to support their urban lifestyles.

### HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a useful focus for an exploration of relations between and among street kids, NGOs and government departments in terms of structure and agency. HIV/AIDS is a global "moralising panic" (Weeks 1995) and as such has the capacity to transform these relations and expose the underlying ideologies which govern them. The virus has surpassed familiar infections such as syphilis or gonorrhoea in its potential to create a moralising panic due to its association with sexual promiscuity and deviancy and its real political and economic effects through the decimation of communities and work forces. HIV/AIDS is discursively constituted as the modern plague, surreptitiously flowing between permeable bodies in the fluids of blood and semen. Epidemiologists have labelled homosexuals and prostitutes as key transmitters, identifying these groups as a moral and morbid threat to the hegemony of heterosexual monogamy, the dominant sexual regime of the Judaeo-Christian world.

In Latin America, the first identified cases of AIDS appeared in 1983<sup>8</sup>. Governmental response was slow: as the disease was associated with wealthy, globetrotting homosexuals

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<sup>8</sup> Avert, "The history of AIDS 1981-1986" <[www.avert.org/his81\\_86](http://www.avert.org/his81_86)> (31st August 2005)

and celebrity cases, HIV was not deemed a health risk to the “normal” heterosexual population (Larvie 2003: 300). Parker (1999a) has criticised this view on the grounds that bisexuality is a fundamental part of Latin American culture, especially in Brazil, and is practiced by those self-identifying as heterosexual. Under pressure from domestic and international NGOs, contemporary Latin American governments are starting to recognise the risk to the general population, though most offer limited state provision for welfare or medical services and are hampered by the anti-condom stance of the Catholic Church. Responses have been varied, with the Brazilian and Mexican governments promising free anti-retroviral medication for all infected individuals while others such as the Colombian government do not provide even the basics such as viral load tests (Hoskins 1998: 3). For street kids with little access to health care, such promises or failures have little import, as there seems a notable lack of government projects seeking to work specifically with them on HIV issues.

Street kids are particularly at risk of contracting HIV through sexual contact in comparison with other young people due to their high number of sexual partners and infrequent use of protection (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993, Lyons 1998). The current level of infection is hard to ascertain: street kids are reluctant to seek medical help, they fear testing and AIDS symptoms such as coughing, fever, headache and skin sores are similar to other diseases endemic in Latin America (Nunez cited in Cevallos 2003: 2). Drawing on a number of ethnographic studies of the region and both NGO and government project material, I will go on to argue that particular dimensions of street kids’ lived experiences render HIV transmission both likely and difficult to prevent, particularly as NGO and government rhetoric fails to acknowledge the complexity of their circumstances.

## PART 2: Street culture and the sexual lives of street kids

### The Reality of Street kids’ Lived Experience

Street kids venture into the cityscape, seeking to leave behind poverty, hunger and abuse in favour of the adventure, camaraderie and perceived freedom of the street life and street culture. Street kids are rarely “abandoned children” in the sense of being left behind or cast out by negligent parents.

“I ran away from home because of my stepfather. He beat me with a wire cable”  
Eldivado, 13, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 86).

“I like being in the street - you have fun, jump cars... It’s more fun than being at home. I beg and find places to sleep. People give me a few *centavos* now and then. I

hang out with the others. We buy food - rice and beans - and all sleep together”  
Arturo, 11, Honduras (Green 1998: 59).

Kids thus emerge from the poorer suburbs, slums and *favelas* to intrude into the domain of the elites - the cosmopolitan plazas and financial districts dominated by symbols of wealth and status - and develop their own street culture. As Bourgois suggests, street culture is ‘a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity’ (1995: 8). The ethnographic research of Hecht (1998), Taylor (2001), Aptekar (1988) and Green (1998) indicates that the street culture of kids in Latin America shares common themes based on territorial identities, risky recreational or income-generation behaviours, relations of dominance and subordination and networks of solidarity and support.

In this context of urban poverty and youthful self-reliance, children create new networks on the street which may take a multiplicity of forms. In their friendship networks, kids develop strong emotive ties with other individual kids, relying on their street “families” in lieu of consanguineal relationships (Hecht 1998: 47, Taylor 2001: 18). While engaging in seemingly “adult” or aggressive activities, young people still need and express affection and are loyal and protective towards their friends on the streets. In Mexico, the children of the gang “Barrio Libre”, have a particular unique style which creates a sense of belonging to the group (Taylor 2001: 69). They wear baggy T-shirts, shorts and pristine white trainers, sport tattoos including the three dots on the wrist for *la vida loca* (my crazy life) and greet each other with the Barrio Libre hand sign. This combination of gestures, tattoos and street wear asserts an independent and defiant identity and lifestyle.

Street kids also rely on income-generation networks which incorporate a variety of legal and illegal activities, from washing car windscreens and begging to theft, drug running, prostitution or, in the case of the Mexican tunnel kids, guiding illegal immigrants across international borders (Taylor 2001). Exchange networks based on trust are even more vital to survival. The tunnel kids are constantly exchanging information, assessing local opportunities and spreading news of potential hazards (*ibid*: 35). If working in gangs, older kids may collect and distribute earnings from work, begging or theft among the gang members or exchange the earnings for food from a market seller or to secure a safe place for the gang to sleep from a night watchman (Aptekar 1988: 125). At shelters, kids can take a shower or have lunch by acquiescing to the demands of the staff; they may agree to take school lessons or spend time with counsellors, nuns, priests or medical professionals (Taylor 2001: 41).

While individuals operate in networks of interdependency linking both young people and adults, there is a danger of romanticising their lives as wheeling and dealing urban pirates with friends on every corner and a sympathetic shop owner to bail them out if they get in trouble. Street kids are susceptible to respiratory and gastrointestinal complaints and sexually transmitted diseases due to a lack of access to clean water, inadequate shelter and limited knowledge about hygiene and bodily processes (Ennew 1994: 97). They participate in a range of dangerous activities including glue sniffing, smoking crack or marijuana, and may attack each other in acts of jealousy or revenge (Hecht 1998: 40). They are usually highly involved in the criminal under-world, often out of choice but also because they are selected and groomed by adult drug traffickers, gang leaders, or people smugglers. Street kids are easy to eliminate should they become too dangerous as potential witnesses or provide unwelcome competition (Taylor 2001: 26). Street kids are also at risk from the police and vigilante groups engaged in “social cleansing” (Dimenstein 1991, Tierney 1997, Human Rights Watch 1994).

#### Street kids, bodies and sexuality

Young people’s embodied experiences are often at odds with the adult discourses which describe them as vulnerable and weak or wild and uncontrollable (Christiansen 2000, James 2000). Street kids respond to their environment with fear, uncertainty, daring, and humour and attempts to label them as either vulnerable or delinquent ignore not only the heterogeneity of the street kid population but also the multiplicity of experiences, motivations and desires of each individual. This is particularly true of street kids’ sexual lives, which incorporate a remarkable range of interactions. Although kids who engage in sexual acts are typically presented as depraved or abused in conservative and religious discourses, it is important to recognise that childhood and sexuality are not diametrically opposed if an adequate response to the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS is to be achieved.

Street kids are sexually active from a young age and sex is intrinsic to their daily experiences as work or play, pleasure or violence, domination or submission. The reality of sexual activity relates to a) consenting hetero- and homosexual practices among street kids, b) coerced hetero- and homosexual practices among street kids, c) prostitution and d) sexual coercion by known or unknown adults. While there may be other forms of sexual interactions, these categories seem to adequately represent the current ethnographic research and I will discuss each in turn and how they relate to broader ideologies of gender and sexuality.

a) Consenting sexual practices among street kids:

Children in all societies gradually become aware of their own and each other's bodies through play, touch and experimentation (Jackson 1982: 70). While in domestic settings, adults tend to discourage any sexual behaviour from children, reinforcing the dominant taboo of childhood sexuality, children living without parental supervision are free to explore their own sexual feelings and desires without restraint (Aptekar 1988: 136, Lockhart 2002: 303-4). Street kids relax and sleep in groups for warmth and safety and stroking or caressing is a reassuring and soothing expression of trust and intimacy. The mean age of first sexual intercourse for street kids in Belo Horizonte, Brazil is 11.2 years, with boys reporting earlier initiation than girls (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993: 664) but it is likely that prior to intercourse, kids have already become familiar with their own bodies and sexual feelings as well as those of their companions.

When consenting, hetero or homosexual relations can be a positive form of bonding among close friends. Jackson (1982: 69) argues that it is important not to assume that children's sexual experiences are governed by adult motivations or understandings and it is likely that children do not view such behaviour as sexual. This may be the case for homosexual acts in particular as sex is generally presented to young people as a heterosexual activity in line with conventional orthodoxies on "normal" sexual behaviour, particularly as advocated by the Catholic Church. Parker states that boys in Brazil play a game called *troca-troca* (exchange - exchange) in which boys take turns at inserting their penises into each other's anuses (1999a: 259).

Many kids have full, positive sexual relationships and internalise narratives of romantic love. Boys and girls frequently have the names of their current or ex-lovers tattooed on their bodies and graffitied pairs of names decorated with hearts adorn their hangouts (Taylor 2001: 25). In Taylor's ethnography of the tunnel kids in Nogales, Mexico, two couples, Jesús and La Flor, Romel and Veronica, enjoy enduring romances (2001). Sexual expressions of affection can be an escape and the main source of pleasure in street kids' lives.

b) Coerced sexual practices among street kids:

Street kids can use sex to exert power over others. The rape of girls by boys is commonplace and girls' first experiences of sexual intercourse are frequently under circumstances of coercion by older males (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993). This behaviour by male street kids reflects a culture of denigrating the female, subordinating her and treating her as a vehicle for sexual satisfaction. It can also be a means for some boys to assert their masculinity by discussing their sexual prowess and rejecting feelings of love (Jackson 1982: 94). Hecht (1998: 57)

recorded a conversation between Jocimar, a street educator and Carioca, a street kid. Hecht asked Carioca if he would accept a girl into his gang:

Carioca: Of course I would. To do it.  
Jocimar: What kind of “it”?  
Carioca: Man, grab her and fuck her.  
Jocimar: Oh yeah?  
Carioca: [laughing] yeah, stick it in her twat.  
Jocimar: Is that what girls are for?  
Carioca: Yeah, stick it in and ciao!  
(*ibid*)

Such talk is not simply macho boasting:

“When I was thirteen and new in the street I ran away [from a shelter] with Fátima. Marcos, they say he’s nuts, he grabbed me and yelled at me to take off my clothes. I told him “No!” He hit me in the forehead and pushed me. I fell on the ground. He ripped off my clothes and hopped on. Fátima stood there, telling him to stop, but he didn’t” Margarete, 17, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 37).

Girls may stay with a hated or feared boyfriend for the protection he offers from other boys: “If you don’t have a boyfriend, all the other boys want to hop on” Street girl, Brazil (*ibid*: 58).

Male street kids may also rape younger or weaker boys (Hecht 1998: 139). Aptekar argues in the case of Cali, Colombia that such abuses are rare because younger boys’ “cute” appearance makes them successful beggars and they may take their earnings elsewhere if abused by older boys (1988: 130). Yet younger boys may not have the agency to simply leave a gang and this rational economic theory might be reductionist. Boys may use anal intercourse to humiliate and exert power over younger members of the gang who are forced to stay through a threat of retribution from the group as a whole or because they cannot afford to lose the group’s protection, support and access to resources and networks (Lockhart 2002: 303). There is a symbolic significance to penetration as the male subject asserts masculine power over a subordinated and feminised object (Prieur 1996: 94). In a world of limited upward mobility, older kids may express their frustration through exerting sexual dominance over members of their own stratum.

Newcomers to the streets of both sexes may be subjected to a specific form of gang rape which forms a part of the initiation process. This reinforces the power and solidarity of the group and tests the newcomer. In Brazil this is known as the *ronda*, the “round” (Rafaelli *et al* 1993: 666).

“A group of boys got me out there in Caxangá. They grabbed pieces of broken glass, bottle necks, sticks and right there they forced me to have sex with every one of them...There were fourteen...They got me when I was alone. I suffered it with every one of them” Ismael, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 135).

Aptekar argues that the *recocha* (initiation ritual) in Colombia does not involve rape (1988: 133). He describes the scene of a group of boys in the courtyard of a state children’s institution; a new boy is passed along between older boys being hit and slapped by each in ‘a passionate, almost violent mixture of friendship and aggression that combined a seemingly paradoxical form of intimacy and hostility’ (*ibid*: 131). The presence of guards and employees in this institutional setting may have restrained the perpetrators of this violence from including a sexual element during the day and I would suggest that based on Aptekar’s account, we cannot rule out gang rape as a form of initiation among street kids in Cali. In the state children’s homes in Brazil, homosexual rape in dormitories is common: “When you go in there you have to go in being a man otherwise you’ll come out a faggot” (Hecht 1998: 135). Understandably it may be hard for ethnographers to face the prevalence of rape in street culture and adolescent socialisation, particularly as they are reluctant to portray this behaviour in culturally essentialist terms (Bourgois 1995: 207). This behaviour is not exclusive to the Latin American culture of *machismo* and is evident in other contexts such as Lockhart’s study of street kids in Tanzania (2002: 303). Street kids feel a strong repulsion for those street kids who do not prove their courage in the streets (Da Silva 2004: 15).

The *ronda* is also described as a way to make girls sexually available to the group, preventing one boy laying claim to her (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993: 666). This relates to the dichotomisation of femininity in Latin American culture; women are portrayed as either virgins or whores (Melhuus & Stølen 1996: 27). By subjecting a girl to gang rape, she is transformed into a whore and thus made available to all.

“Here in Sao Lourenço there’s a girl, she wasn’t of the street, but she hung out with us, at night she’d always come. One day she snitched on the boys and the boys caught her and dragged her to the cane fields. Fifteen boys got to her. She spent two weeks at home before she could walk straight. Her uncle took care of her, but I think she liked it so much that she went back to the street.” Edson, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 134).

In this case, the boys justify rape as a punishment but also view it as having a transformative potential by rendering the girl more promiscuous because she is supposed to have “liked it so much”. Bourgois argues that gang rape of women is a form of male bonding with their peer group and there may be a homoerotic dimension to gang rape as males enjoy watching each other perform (1995: 208).

c) Prostitution:

Street kids may choose to prostitute themselves, usually to adults, in exchange for cash or services. Typically this is the domain of girls but boys also sell sex, as rent boys or transvestites. While child prostitution is generally presented as “survival sex” (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993: 661), male and female street kids may choose prostitution because the earnings are much higher than from other income-generating activities, particularly with the rise in sex tourism. Kids also appreciate the attention they receive from the more benevolent sector of their clientele:

“In Boa Viagem there are *gringos* who like us. They prefer dark women...sometimes they give you a *banho de loja*...that’s when they dress you up, fix you all up, buy you shoes. Street girls who never had those things call it a *banho de loja*.” Margarete, 17, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 38)

“I got to Pereira and switched to being a woman - you earn more that way. Anyway, I loved dressing as a woman. I loved standing on the street corner, with the cars going past, men whistling at me. I realized I was gay when I was eight...Most of the customers are nice people...mainly the upper class - business men, professionals, police. They’re people with a weakness for *travestis*, then they go back to their wives and their important jobs. With the rich ones you can charge \$100. You can make good money if you’re pretty and so can the ugly ones if they steal!” Johnny, 17, Colombia (Green 1998: 99).

d) Sexual coercion by adults:

Street kids report a lifetime of sexual abuse from adults at home and on the street, frequently from those in positions of authority.

“When I was six, a policeman caught me. He said I had to have sex with him - jerk him off. I did what he said. The next day he came back with five other guys and I had to do the same thing to all of them” Luiza, 20, Brazil (Green 1998: 97).

“El Chino the homosexual took me to his room various times. He never even paid me. Afterwards I felt bad. One day, he came at me with a knife - put a knife to my throat to make me, so what could I do?” Augusto, 12, Honduras (Green 1998: 76).

There is also a sexualised element to the torture and murder of street kids by vigilante groups and death squads. In Brazil, kids’ corpses are frequently found castrated or subject to other genital mutilation (Dimenstein 1991: 50).

### Protection Implications

Street kids engage in sexual activity of various kinds with varying levels of choice in the matter, though it seems generally agreed that they tend to have a very high number of sexual

partners (Green 1998: 75, Rafaelli *et. al* 1993: 661). In situations of consent, there continues to be a reluctance to use barrier or contraceptive methods. Girls tend to be resigned to pregnancy as inevitable and both sexes, while aware of sexually transmitted disease, do not seem concerned enough to protect themselves. In coercive situations, kids are unlikely to be able to protect themselves should they wish to.

“AIDS...I’ve heard about it. It’s a disease you get through syringes and sex. A guy told me that AIDS is the rich people’s disease, we don’t get it, only rich folks do. I’m not afraid of AIDS, but the disease I did get was the “ooze”. Have you heard of it? It’s this yellow stuff that oozes out of your vagina and wets your underwear. It’s not just women that get it, men do too” Margarete, 17, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 38-39).

“I first had sex when I was 11, with another street girl. She never got pregnant - she used the pill. I don’t use a condom - I know about AIDS but I don’t think about it much. Having sex is when I’m happiest” João, 13, Brazil (Green 1998: 64).

All forms of sex frequently take place under the influence of alcohol or drugs, often to “raise courage” before sexual encounters or numb the pain (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993: 667). This is also likely to affect street kids’ ability or desire to use protection.

“At fourteen I was pregnant and at fifteen I had my child...We had sex the first time in a train car. We were half-crazy on spray... Then I was pregnant.” Veronica, 16, Mexico (Taylor 2001: 54).

The symptoms of AIDS emerge in the long-term and seem less important than the immediate pleasure or pain associated with sex. I will go on to explore the implications of this reality for current HIV/AIDS-focused interventions.

### PART 3: NGO and government interventions seeking to limit the spread of HIV/AIDS among the street kid population

Although street kids have been the focus of NGO and government attention for many years, the international and domestic concern with the potential spread of HIV/AIDS has produced an explosion of clinics, shelters and outreach programmes. These seek to combat HIV transmission among street kids by providing a range of services including shelter, education, testing and treatment. Organisations working with street kids have previously been categorised as either following a “rescue” or a “rights” approach (Pattison 1999, Dunford 1996). This dichotomisation may be too simplistic in view of the complex discourses about street kids’ behaviours and risk.

#### Institutional facilities for street kids at risk of HIV infection

The traditional “rescue” approach has been associated with international NGOs and religious groups, though this is by no means definitive. They present street kids as highly vulnerable and seek to remove individual street kids from the streets altogether. The street is viewed as inherently pathological and the root of social problems, reflecting a Northern public/private divide which is not relevant for the urban poor in many areas of Latin America, where everyone from the young to the elderly habitually socialise on the streets (da Silva 2004: 10). One example is Casa Alianza, the Latin American branch of New-York based Covenant House, which provides residential centres for street kids including those suffering from AIDS. They send outreach workers to encourage the kids to visit the day centre and then move through a series of transitional hostels, before taking up residence in a “home” until their eighteenth birthday. The organisation claims to be a ‘leading advocate of child rights in the region’, reflecting the language of the UN Convention which sought to force a paradigm shift from the discourse of child rescue to child rights. Yet as Casa Alianza claims to help kids in ‘the arduous journey from despair to self-sufficiency’<sup>9</sup>, something street kids have already achieved, this US-funded organisation presents redemption as subordination to adult power. The emphasis is clearly on removing a limited number of kids from the streets, to “save” them from disease and destitution, according to conservative and religious discourses of childhood and sexuality. Street kids are transformed from “nurturing” to “nurtured” to use Hecht’s terminology (1998: 70). This approach denies the agency, adaptability and capacity of kids who have rejected life in the slums and the meaningful relationships and networks they have developed on the street.

The discourse of HIV/AIDS as an urgent, moral panic serves to legitimate this style of intervention and limits the criticism levelled at such organisations. Projects often quote the poem by Chile’s Nobel Prize winning poet, Gabriela Mistral, ‘Many things can wait. Children cannot... To them we cannot say “tomorrow”, their name is “today” (cited in Ennew 1994: 50). As Christensen (2000) has remarked, the construction of kids as vulnerable, particularly in terms of health, reinforces adult power and control.

There is evidence to suggest that street kids reject this subjugation and treat the hostels and shelters run by such charities as just another contact they can draw on within their multiplicity of networks:

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<sup>9</sup> While Casa Alianza is a religious organisation, it is not the case that all religious groups seeking to work with street kids take the rescue approach. Some groups take a more accepting position and work with kids in their own environments providing affection and support (Berryman 1996).

“It’s good [at the centre], there’s a house for us to live in, a bunch of *maloquieros* [term used by other street kids to describe themselves]... I only spent a week there, then I left...Whenever you want to leave you can. So I left and came back here” Robson, 12, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 177).

“I didn’t spend much time [at the centre]. About two or three months... I didn’t like them because you can’t smoke, there’s no coffee, just tea, you eat only yam and cassava, because they say that if you eat meat it makes you want to smoke...I got fed up so I left. I didn’t like it. I went back to the street to steal, smoke pot, take Rohypnol” Cheira, 17, Brazil, (Hecht 1998: 177).

These institutions are ineffective at limiting the sexual transmission of HIV because they fail to engage with the realities of street kids’ sexual lives. By seeking to rescue individuals, they fail to assist the majority of kids suffering sexual abuse or coercion (Dunford 1996: 37). By ignoring the pleasures of the street, including sexual relationships, they fail to win the trust of street kids and tend to support their risky behaviours inadvertently by giving them the space and resources to recuperate and return to the street.

Street kids are particularly aware of threats to their autonomy due to the wider history of street kids’ encounters with state institutions such as children’s homes, juvenile detention centres and medical services. Although the UN Convention, Article 24 declares that the state should provide safe care for homeless children, street kids view children’s homes as child prisons and the sites of child abuse and even murder (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 241).

“...if the *monitor* [supervisor] catches you, it’s *cafua*. The *cafua* is a hole in the ground. You go down steps. Down below there’s a tunnel, that’s where the *cafua* is...We went into a room without light, to sleep with the cockroaches, with the mosquitoes, with the lizards... it makes you really scared...it’s very dark...you sleep on the ground, without a sheet, without anything” Nego Nic, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 125).

There is also a widespread mistrust of medical services which seems prevalent across the poor populations of Latin America. Cuts in government health spending in the 1980s have resulted in demoralised, under-resourced and ineffective health care systems and while richer clients can afford to pay for private treatment, both the rural and urban poor have suffered. Scheper-Hughes recounts tales of horror in Brazil where she encountered impoverished victims of ‘ugly and botched repair work’ and rumours of body theft for medical experimentation (1992: 246-7). Hecht reports that when street kid, Bonérgio, fell off the back of a bus in Recife and was sent to hospital, he did not die of his injuries but of the hepatitis he contracted there (1998: 140). In view of the discrimination, cost and poor treatment that street kids receive along with the rest of the poorer members of society, it is unsurprising that they are reluctant

to use medical services. Mexican street girl La Flor, for example, refuses to go to the doctor to have a dangerous cyst removed (Taylor 2001: 147).

The lack of faith in Mexican medical services among the general population has led to a growth in popularity of alternative therapies with both religious and scientific foundations (Napolitano 2003: 97). Street kids, too, talk about such alternatives:

“There’s the virgin of Zapapan - you must have heard of her, of all her miracles. The people come to her from everywhere, some come even on their knees. I received a cure. Many lakes there are miraculous.” Guanatos, 17, Mexico (Taylor 2001: 42).

Negative contact with medical institutions and professionals has undermined efforts to provide medical services specifically for street kids. Clinica Ammor seeks to provide sexual health care for street kids in Brazil including advice, testing and treatment on HIV<sup>10</sup>. However, studies suggest that kids believe testing infects them and are reluctant to visit such centres run by unfamiliar medical professionals (Perez cited in Cevallos 2003: 2). While Clinica Ammor represents a positive move towards better access and care for kids at risk of HIV infection or already infected, it seems unlikely that the centre will be very successful at attracting the kids most at risk.

### Street education

Other NGOs, both domestic and international, advocate strongly for an *anti-asistencialista* approach which draws on the philosophy of self-help and empowerment (Shaw 2002). Fear regarding the spread of HIV/AIDS among the population of street kids has motivated such organisations to engage in constant innovation to educate kids about the risks while respecting their rights to make choices about their lives. They recognise that kids will remain a permanent feature of the street due to macro structures of inequality in Latin America, as kids born into a troubled social milieu will need and want to turn to the streets for work and play.

As street kids do not watch television or read newspapers and rarely attend school, it can be more productive to work with them on their own territory. Street kids International has produced a 22-minute cartoon giving information about HIV/AIDS and its prevention which is shown on video screens around the city centre of Rio de Janeiro<sup>11</sup>. El Caracol, a Mexican NGO based in Mexico City, sends outreach workers to kids’ *baldios* (hangouts) with individualised curricula and a variety of technological aids. Significantly, El Caracol has

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<sup>10</sup> Clinica Ammor <website [www.ammor.org.br](http://www.ammor.org.br)> (9th August 2005)

<sup>11</sup> Streetkids International <[www.streetkids.org](http://www.streetkids.org)> (9th August 2005)

examined how street kids learn and designed their teaching methods accordingly. Use of particular inhalants such as *activo* (a PVC pipe cleaner) gradually destroys brain tissues, starting at the auditory area. Therefore, sex education initiatives incorporate visually stimulating teaching aids to encourage responsible sexual behaviour and self-protection such as condom use. El Caracol also recognises that it is important to teach kids in situ; learning about safe sex where they live, hang out and have sex (in the back streets, under bridges or in tunnels), makes it easier for them to remember and act on the information they are given.

El Caracol's PREVESIDA CALLEJERO workshop series was awarded a prize in 1997 by the Mexican Secretariat of Health and CONSIDA and is now implemented at a national level. It is currently being introduced to Guatemala by Médecins Sans Frontières. The series includes the following sessions:

1. What is happening to me?: Developing knowledge on one's own body, its development and function, from birth to adulthood, and why it is important to protect it.
2. Desire and other stories: understanding desire, how to satisfy it and its possible consequences
3. '*La Banda del Virolo*': the most prevalent STDs, including AIDS, its methods of transmission and symptoms and when to ask for medical help.
4. Pleasure without risk: responsible sexual behaviour, contraception methods, the importance of planning and carrying out sex in private places, in moments which are sensible and always of mutual accord. We emphasise the importance of sex being an informed choice and something to share, to overcome gender discrimination<sup>12</sup>.

This approach avoids judging street kids and equips them with knowledge about their bodies and sexuality.

While these approaches are radical and exciting, there persists a certain inconsistency with what such organisations try to do and how effective they can expect to be. Perhaps the most tragi-comic aspect is the fact brought up at a conference on Street kids and HIV/AIDS; condoms don't fit children! (Lyons 1998: 6). There is also the issue of expense - NGOs cannot hope to provide enough free condoms.

Aside from practical issues, it is clear that information and knowledge do not automatically motivate protection. Parker (1999a) has argued that the rejection of condoms in Brazil relates to a broader cultural emphasis on the eroticism of transgression. Brazilians use the phrase '*fazendo tudo*' (doing everything) and the scintillation of forbidden or taboo practices heightens the eroticism of the act (*ibid*: 259). Therefore 'safe sex messages, translated from a

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<sup>12</sup> Juan Martin Perez, Director of El Caracol, Personal communication (11th May 2005)

US idiom and based on the simple equation that knowledge = protection are doomed to fail' (*ibid*).

The education approach also fails to deal with the power dimension of sexual relationships. While emphasising mutual consent, El Caracol's workshop series does not include a session on sexual coercion. By presenting kids as rational decision-makers, it underestimates the contexts in which kids cannot act on the information they are provided with, that is, where power inequality limits the terms of negotiation regarding protection from sexually transmitted diseases. While aware of the possibility of catching HIV, Augusto is unable to protect himself from the man who raped him:

“They put him in prison for a while, but when he got out he came looking for me and wanted to hit me because I wouldn't let him - I was worried about AIDS. We buried a friend once who died of AIDS - he said his whole body ached. Enrique was his name.” Augusto, 12, Honduras (Green 1998: 76).

It is evident from the range of street kids' sexual interactions that street kids frequently do not have the power to dictate the form that sex takes. In relations of exploitation and abuse, the victim cannot ensure protection and it appears that those in positions of power have yet to fear infection from their victim to a degree motivating protection on their part. Similarly, for prostitutes the economic imperative to maximise the number of clients may limit the terms of negotiation regarding protection. Rather than concentrating on the vulnerability of street kids, educational approaches perhaps over-emphasise their agency and fail to deal with sexual abuse or protection for sex workers. Despite this criticism, it is important to recognise that NGOs are dealing with a demanding reality and demanding donor agendas which may prevent them gaining a broader perspective or adequately reflecting on their work.

#### Governmental approaches to street kids and HIV/AIDS

While NGOs have been particularly dynamic in approaches to street kids and more sympathetic to their circumstances, there have been significant differences in the way Latin American governments have approached the issue. Until recently the Colombian government has refused to fund work on sexual exploitation as interference in “private things”, a domain vehemently protected by the Catholic Church<sup>13</sup>. In contrast, in Brazil, the turn around on government willingness to engage with the issue of street kids and HIV has been remarkable.

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<sup>13</sup> Kurt Shaw, Director of Shine A Light: A Program for Street Children's Health, Personal Communication (26th July 2005)

In the 1980s, the director of a Brazilian children's home was forced to resign for distributing condoms to the kids in her care, accused of "encouraging promiscuity among minors" by the head of the Child Protection Service (Dimenstein 1991:67). The director of FUNABEM, the national agency for juvenile remand institutes and schools, stated: "if we distributed condoms... we would be conniving with homosexual activity inside the schools" (Carvalho, cited in Long 1989: 2). He also expelled any infected kids from the institutions. Psychologist, Silvia Ramos, argued that "Street children are afraid of being sent to FUNABEM because they think they will get AIDS there. In FUNABEM, they are obligated to have sex without protection because FUNABEM doesn't permit the means" (cited in Long 1989: 2).

Yet times are changing. In 2003, the government commissioned a team from the John Hopkins School of Public Health and Hygiene and the Federal University of Minas Geras to develop an intervention campaign in Belo Horizonte. The project recognised that kids do not identify with the typically adult, middle-class subjects of public health messages and recommended printed materials depicting street kids' lifestyles, including comic books to be passed from youth to youth. The project also recognised that kids do not fear death:

Due to the youth's daily struggle for survival in the streets, they saw death as an enemy to fight daily, not something they would prevent... Because of this, it was decided that linking AIDS to death would be an ineffective tactic for this population...The message that was used stressed preventing HIV in order to remain healthy and strong, and in this way to survive on the streets. The methods promoted were ones that were acceptable to the youth - condoms and reduction of partners<sup>14</sup>

While this project recognises the rights and choices of street kids, it demonstrates similar flaws to NGO street education approaches such as neglecting issues of access to condoms and economic reasons to maximise number of partners. It also fails to address the government's role in street kids' premature deaths.

Public health messages are often undermined by other government sites (Lupton 1995: 134). Government departments may attempt to thwart a real discussion of street kids' sexuality as it must implicate members of the dominant regime (Rafaelli *et. al* 1993: 661); state children's homes have been the sites of abuse and neglect and most governments have allowed their police forces to harass, abuse and torture street kids.

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<sup>14</sup> John Hopkins University, "Vida de Rua in Belo Horizonte: educating street youth through entertainment" 2003 <<http://www.jhuccp.org/la/brazil/vidaderua.shtml>> (10th August 2005)

“[The Police] hit me in the back, in the belly, in my face, in the leg. Those clubs they carry around, they use them to hit us...[or] they hit you in the head with the butt of the revolver, or with the barrel. There’s a girl who passed out because of that and because of being kicked. Sometimes the police beat up on pregnant girls. Sometimes they hit them in the stomach because they don’t know the girls are pregnant but sometimes it’s to be evil or because they feel like it” Margarete, 17, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 39).

The Brazilian, Colombian and Guatemalan governments have all supported vigilante groups and death squads which seek to systematically exterminate these young people (Dimenstein 1991, Human Rights Watch 1994, Tierney 1997).

“I said, “Leila, come here, look who’s coming.” It was seven guys, all with black hoods on their heads and guns in their hands. It was what you call the death squad, the ones who kill street children, glue sniffers. They don’t feel sorry for anyone they just kill. They started shooting at us. Leila got shot in the head, the bullet went in one side and out the other...She lost a lot of blood...I got hit in the arm, here. I thought I was going to die...” Margarete, 17, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 37).

This aggression has received much popular support with government officials winning extra votes for verbally condemning street kids:

“Should you kill delinquents? What can I say? If there’s no other way to clean up the world, even though it’s cruel, I agree with social cleansing - and I think most people support it”, Ana Maria, 34, Mother of four, Colombia (Green 1998: 103).

In his successful campaign for state representative in São Paulo, Erasmo Dias, former head of the Justice Department, suggested ‘We should create concentration camps’ (Dimenstein 1991: 47). Ivanildo Freitas, one of the most notorious and prolific *justiceiros* (avengers) in São Paulo, stated ‘An exterminator is not a criminal...I think I am a representative of the people’ (*ibid*: 46). This disturbing language evokes images of the holocaust as a specific group are stigmatised, scapegoated and persecuted by those in power.

In the 1990s. the government promised investigations into death squad killings and created a new children’s agency, the *Fundação Centro Brasileiro para a Infância e Adolescência*, the Central Brazilian Foundation for Infancy and Adolescence (Dimenstein 1991: 13). Yet according to kids on the streets, conditions have not improved and it seems that the government lacks the political will to act decisively. The public health department’s efforts to limit HIV transmission among street kids are thus simultaneously undermined by other government sites which place little value on street kids’ health or well-being. This contradiction reveals an attitude towards street kids which is ambivalent at best and may relate to governmental determination to be seen to be combating the spread of HIV effectively, rather than any desire to save street kids’ lives.

“When I die, no one will cry” Street boy, 14, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 145).

### “Career” expectations

State violence is not always direct but relates to the broader social issues the state fails to combat such as the drug trade, poverty and inadequate health and welfare provision. Street kids’ lack of concern or interest in HIV transmission may be linked to their expectations of the future. While many aspire to the bourgeois dream of a family and a home, street kids recognise that few will ever realise this:

“Street children only have three futures: prison, insanity or death” Camilla, 19, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 209)

Kids are murdered by other street kids, drug dealers, people smugglers or the death squads. They are killed in accidents, especially on buses and trains. Drugs such as *bazuko* and *coca pasta* (by-products of cocaine processing) and rohypnol and *activo* (chemicals) gradually destroy their brains. In Tunnel kids, El Boston interviews the rest of his gang and asks them where they think they might be in ten years’ time (Taylor 2001: 10). None can imagine surviving that long. Hecht gives a depressing report of the situations of the kids he befriended in Rio - three years after his research they are all dead, locked away or on drugs (1998: 202). Of those kids’ whose testimonies appear here, Margarete ended up in a mental hospital and her babies were put up for adoption (*ibid*), Cheira was murdered (*ibid*: 204). Street kids’ extremely contracted time perspective is at odds with the construction of childhood as a period of preparation for adult life, a stage supposedly imbued with potential. As street kids implicitly rank threats to their well-being, in this situation of immediate perils, long-term health concerns are unsurprisingly a low priority and there are currently few enough identified cases of HIV/AIDS for it to be a minor feature of the urban sexual landscape.

## PART 4: Future innovation

### Structure and agency

Street kids’ testimonies reveal a life of highs and lows, but it is a remarkable comment on the plight of the urban poor in Latin America that kids prefer the violence and insecurity of the inner-city streets to the abuse and hunger suffered by kids in the slums. Life in the streets is viewed as liberating and empowering; street kids can exert what power they do have to assert

independent identities, challenge social norms, resist unwelcome interventions and subordinate those less powerful than themselves. The street culture of defiance and autonomy shifts the focus from their experiences of persecution, physical and sexual abuse and marginalisation, denying a sense of victimhood. They discursively construct a life of glory, of self-determination versus a lifetime of drudgery and despair:

“We are all equal. No one of us is chief. No one tells the others what to do or where to go. That is the way we are.” Guanatos, 17, Mexico, (Taylor 2001: 132)

“By the time I start regretting it, my feet’ll be tied together and I’ll be floating face down in the river” Picolé, Brazil (Hecht 1998: 145)

In terms of the risk of HIV/AIDS infection, street kids are frequently unable to protect themselves in contexts of unequal power relations and practical obstacles and are unlikely to be motivated to do so because they ultimately choose the life of the streets, the life of sex, drugs and death. HIV will never have the urgency for them which medical professionals and NGOs insist on, rendering current preventative measures ineffective. Despite this conclusion, I do not wish to imply that attempting to limit HIV transmission among Latin American street kids is a futile project. It does, however, need to be linked to a valuing of kids’ futures by all parties.

#### Future possibilities

I would suggest that Latin American street kids’ relationship with the HIV/AIDS epidemic needs to be placed within the broader, global HIV/AIDS debate. Street kids are more vulnerable to HIV than less mobile and less sexually active sectors of the population and ethical issues must be considered in the design and implementation of government and non-government strategies to limit rates of infection. As street kids have been subject to a disproportionate degree of interest from all quarters, there is a risk that lobbying for increased state recognition of street kids’ risk of HIV/AIDS infection could stigmatise them as key vectors of the disease. This may result in further discrimination against an already vulnerable sector of the population. The precedent for this is the epidemiological focus on female prostitutes in some areas of Africa who were subsequently harassed, beaten and in some cases killed (Seidal & Vidal 1997: 65).

Domestic and international NGOs have sought to rescue individual street kids or educate the vast number of kids appearing at some point on the street. By focusing on self-protection, they may have failed to adequately emphasise kids’ *responsibilities* to avoid infecting others.

This criticism may also be levelled at anthropologists who may fear losing the co-operation of their informants should they attempt to advise about responsible sexual behaviour or HIV testing. No authors I encountered mentioned the extent to which they debated protection issues with their informants, except Hecht who states that he particularly avoided it: 'it made little sense to ask eight-year-old boys whether they had ever used condoms' (1998: 14). This assumption that eight-year-olds are not involved in sexual behaviour is surprising for while they may not be biologically capable of achieving an erection, they may have been the passive partner in a consenting or coerced homosexual encounter.

NGOs have also failed to tackle head-on the power dynamic of sexual relationships. AIDS prevention programmes elsewhere have experimented to empower those who do not have the capacity to refuse sexual contact. South African women have been provided with "femidoms" (female condoms) to protect themselves against infected sexual partners who refuse to use condoms (Seidal & Vidal 1997: 70). Street kids need to have access to similarly appropriate protective methods, not least including cheap, appropriately sized condoms. Parker (1999b) advocates re-vamping the image of condoms by integrating the sensual into protection messages. He suggests utilising the erotic evocations of Brazilian terms for condoms such as *camisinhas de Venus* (Venus' little shirts) (*ibid*: 333). These innovations do not challenge overarching power inequalities based on such factors as gender but provide some hope for the vulnerable in the present reality of prostitution, sexual coercion and abuse.

Treatment for infected individuals has made evident vast social and economic inequalities at a local and global level. In the First World, HIV sufferers may live for twenty years before developing AIDS symptoms. In squatter camps in South Africa, infected persons live less than two years (UNAIDS/WHO 2004). In Latin America the response of governments has been diverse with Brazil and Mexico guaranteeing antiretroviral medication to all children while Colombia does not (Acosta 2001: 1). Whether therapies are available or not, street kids are unlikely to receive early diagnosis or treatment:

'It is difficult to receive continuous treatment when there is no money for the bus fare to reach the hospital', Elba Gomez, The Argentine Foundation to help Children with AIDS, (cited in Acosta 2001: 2).

It is ethically dubious that some governments, such as Brazil, find the funding to act against HIV, their proactive stance a statement of modernity to the global community and an act of reassurance to their own middle-classes, while placing a low value on street kids' lives - whether dying from AIDS or torture by the police. In other countries where work on HIV/AIDS is less well-funded, the presence of NGOs can be viewed as reducing the pressure

for government to act decisively and effectively to allocate resources for street kids' health and education programmes. NGOs also distract attention from other urban children living in poverty who may be at risk of HIV infection, the problem of street kids' enduring appeal to Northern donors (Dunford 1996: 35). Co-operation between NGOs and government programmes, a sharing of lessons learned, is vital for a productive dialogue on street kids and HIV issues. NGOs also need to lobby governments effectively to render them accountable for the promises they make and reveal the discrepancies between the treatment of street kids by different departments.

Latin America can contribute to the global debate in terms of its innovation in participatory approaches, which may offer the way forward for street kids who actively reject the top-down dictates of adults. In the 1970s, Paulo Freire argued that enlightened teachers must work to bring about '*conscientização*' (conscientization) by encouraging "the people" to engage in reflective participation; '[the oppressed] must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting and therefore challenging' (1970: 66). Freire calls for the disadvantaged to become self-aware and initiate their own action. In Brazil, the *Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua* (the National Movement of Street Kids), consisting of kids and adult educators, has been successful in representing kids' interests and demanding recognition for their needs, particularly in fighting against the death squads (Green 1998: 86). Their increasing engagement with HIV/AIDS issues may offer hope for kids to actively protect themselves, support others and access appropriate medical services.

Some local agencies have established peer education programmes. The De Joven a Joven programme operating in rural Mexico trains peer educators, mainly girls, in teaching about adolescent sexuality, STDs, contraception and, most notably, prevention of sexual abuse. As this involves kids with shared experiences informing each other and exploring the issues that arise from the realities of their lives and interactions, this would be a highly valuable programme to introduce into the urban context. This could also be a forum for challenging broader sex and gender ideologies to encourage street kids to respect each other and avoid manipulating hetero- and homosexual encounters to exert power. By uniting such peer education with youth activism, there may be the potential for horizontal links between youth-led initiatives which recognise the potentials and limits of street kids' agency from a bottom-up perspective.

HIV prevention efforts have the potential to empower street kids through recognising their lives as worth living. This cannot be simply at a micro-level; to see hope for the future and not just the bleak poverty of their parents in the slums, kids need to see opportunities. The

above issues demonstrate the need to work within existing power structures but simultaneously challenge them. Peer education and street kids' activism encourages kids to work together and value their own and each other's lives. In this complex situation there is no easy answer and problems may emerge with youth-led initiatives. As in any participatory process, it is likely that kids with more forceful personalities or specific agendas may dominate these groups. Furthermore, participation in the Freirian sense demands the full transfer of power from the powerful to the oppressed, and the full transfer of power from adults to kids is highly unlikely and potentially undesirable. However, this innovation is processual and future work must recognise that if no one else really values street kids' lives, why should they?

### Conclusion

Street kids who wish to avoid contracting HIV may be prevented by practical problems of access to appropriate protection methods and limited terms of negotiation in sexual relationships. Yet protection from HIV is not a top priority: on the streets of Latin America, sex and death are an integral part of street kids' daily experiences. Being raped by a gang, gunned down by the police, high on drugs or sexually intimate with a friend are all part and parcel of male and female experiences. Bodies may experience pleasure or pain but are certainly not invincible and the testimonies of young people from across Latin America reveal that many are convinced that their days are numbered. In this context then, it is difficult for the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS to be a serious cause of concern when there are more immediate threats and sex may be one of few pleasures.

The rhetoric of NGOs and government departments fails to acknowledge the complexity of street kids' circumstances and the contradictions inherent in current policy. In attempting to limit the spread of HIV among street kids across Latin America, agencies need to confront a number of challenges revealed in recent ethnographic research in order to achieve any sustainable impact on HIV transmission. These include the taboos surrounding childhood and sexuality which limit understandings of street kids' range of sexual interactions; the sexual ideologies which reproduce power relations in heterosexual and homosexual interactions; the pity of NGOs which deny kids' autonomy and therefore fail to gain their trust; the widespread mistrust of medical services; the failure by street educators to adequately consider problems of access to protection methods and power relations in sexual encounters; the gesture politics of governments which present inconsistent approaches to street kids and finally, kids' own "career" expectations. While seeking to explore these challenges and how they relate to structure and agency, I have tried to avoid presenting a defeatist view of street kids' lives by

placing these issues within broader debates about solutions to this global “plague” and exploring the advances that have been made within Latin America.

Street kids are social actors with particular capacities and particular vulnerabilities, influencing their responses to HIV. They are aware of the risks inherent in their *vida loca* but would rather live fast, die young than surrender their autonomy. Emerging from poverty and a culture of sexual and physical brutality, and joining a world of further violence it is unsurprising that they do not value their lives and reject those who try to control them further. If we support participatory initiatives which reveal the real issues at stake and refuse to impose adult solutions, kids may be able to find a safe space for themselves in which to create new, positive possibilities. Adults may learn to value street kids as they are, not according to stereotypes of victimhood and delinquency.

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