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Brazil economist says police takeover of Rio's biggest slum is opportunity for growth

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RIO DE JANEIRO — One of the Rio shantytowns taken over by police this week has a population that is younger, less educated and more cut off from state services than other slums — characteristics that present a big opportunity for future financial growth, a leading economist said Wednesday.

If the peace achieved with the takeover of Rocinha is a lasting one, it could provide an opportunity for better services, access to jobs and education for people living in the steep hillside slum straddling some of Rio's wealthiest neighborhoods, Marcelo Neri said.

The community has little access to state services despite its nearness to such wealth.

Only 5 percent of its residents receive welfare and only 21 percent have running water indoors, Neri, an economist with the FGV think tank, said during a presentation of statistics on Rocinha gathered in 2008 and 2009. Only 12 percent have their trash collected regularly and just 33 percent have mail delivered to their door, he said.

Heavily armed police and military units climbed into the steep hillside communities of Rocinha and nearby Vidigal on Sunday, implementing a permanent police force that is meant to wrest control of the territory from drug dealers. The two shantytowns have about 100,000 residents between them.

The takeover was part of a series of recent efforts to show the world that officials are winning the fight

against drug gangs in Rio, which will host the final soccer matches of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Security experts say the efforts won't succeed without social programs aimed at improving the slum residents' quality of life.

Currently, Rocinha's residents receive very little assistance from the state, Neri's research shows. Bolsa Familia, a transfer-of-wealth program that helps poor families, has aided about a quarter of Brazil's 190 million people — but only 5 percent of the people in Rocinha.

Rocinha's population is younger and less educated than that of other Rio shantytowns, Neri said, noting that violence among young men is a top concern. Another is the lack of childcare in a shantytown where there are many young, working parents.

Because Rocinha is nestled in a wealthy part of Rio, it has long been the picture of inequality, with its crowded shacks standing just yards (meters) from expensive high-rises.

That looks like it might be about to change.

Jose Marino Beltrame, head of Rio's public safety department and chief architect of the shantytown peacekeeping program, toured Rocinha on Wednesday to hear residents' petitions for a health clinic, computer training courses and other improvements.

"We have to get work done, recover the time lost," Beltrame said at a news conference. "The windows and the doors are open. We have to push forward."

Rocinha also will get 100 additional garbage collectors, said Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes, who also visited the community Wednesday.

"The paths are open now," Neri said. "Peace was the initial, essential condition for improvement. Now we have to take advantage of this opportunity."

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