Hunger and financial ruin see the return of renting children in Brazil
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Starved of financial prospects, parents use their children to beg for money — and "lease" them to other panhandling families

AT JUST FOUR YEARS OLD, BRENO CAUÊ is fearless and determined to get what he wants. He is always seen well dressed, wearing brand-name sneakers and carefully braided hair. Breno lives in the wealthy São Paulo neighborhood of Brooklin, named after the New York City borough. But he doesn't reside in any of the luxury condos, charming townhouses, or expensive mini mansions nearby — his home is underneath the Viaduto Santo Amaro overpass, along with a host of children and families.

And no one earns more money from begging than Breno.

When traffic lights turn red at one of the busiest crossroads in the area, he scurries around the fancy cars, singing, telling jokes, and doing somersaults — all in the name of earning some loose change. When anyone tells him they don't have any money to help, he reaches out his hand, puts on his puppy dog eyes, and says: "Yes, you do."

He almost always comes away with at least a coin or two.

People passing through the crossroads are moved by Breno, because they see him as someone who could be their own child. This is because, unlike the other children that live with him under the overpass, he comes across as being well turned-out, he speaks well, and he is instructed to look like a "normal child" — in other words, someone who goes to school and could have a future to look forward to.

Breno doesn't yet properly understand, but he is the main breadwinner of at least four adults. Begging for money, in his eyes, is the same as playing with his dog Neymar, or scribbling drawings of Japanese manga character Naruto. It is nothing more than a big game.

[Photo: Julia Laüer/TBR]
As he is the top earner in one of the most profitable regions for begging, Breno is sometimes "leased out" by his family to other adults. His 'family,' in this case, is his street family, people with whom he has no blood relation but who help take care of him. Breno has a 'grandmother' and a 'father,' as well as some sporadic 'uncles.'

After renting him, the adults carry Breno around in their arms to elicit sympathy from pedestrians. At the end of the day, they split their take with his mother. The system is straightforward: the smaller and more captivating the child, the more money they earn.

This phenomenon of renting children was noticed for the first time by social workers in São Paulo city back in the 1990s. With the devastation and financial hardship caused by the Covid pandemic, more and more instances of renting children have appeared.

Audio
"What doesn't hunger do?" asks Itamar Moreira, the head of an institute that provides services for the São Paulo city hall's social work department. "And where there's hunger, there's child labor."

Mr. Moreira himself started work when he was just a child. At eight years old, he carried shopping bags for women at fruit-and-veg markets in São Paulo's wealthiest neighborhoods. He received help from social programs, managed to graduate, and has been carrying out academic research on child labor ever since.

The first time he came in contact with renting children was during a headcount at an impoverished area, when he noticed his numbers didn't add up. "There were lots more children in the records than we were actually seeing. It was then that we realized that each child was being counted several times, as they were always with different 'parents."

Having worked with the homeless population for 30 years, Mr. Moreira knows how to tell when a child has been 'rented.' "We get close to them, and they run off, they know they are doing something wrong. Often we see the same children with different adults."

Audio
During the process of researching this story, in October 2022, The Brazilian Report took the subway in the center of São Paulo. A man entered the carriage with a small child in tow, saying that he had been robbed and needed money to buy food for his daughter, who looked visibly bored.

One woman in the carriage whispered that the man could be found at the same station every day, always with a different child. "He must have 15 daughters," she joked.

The number of unhoused people in São Paulo city rose 31 percent in the last two years alone, reaching a total of 32,000 people. Approximately 10 percent of this population are children, according to the municipal social welfare and development secretariat. The vast majority (73 percent) live off begging and other irregular jobs.

The homeless population is double that of 2015, when the country endured what was — until the pandemic — its worst recession in history.

But São Paulo city hall data may well be out of date. A recent survey from the Brazilian Public Policy Observatory of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) shows that the numbers could be even larger still. After increasing gradually before hitting its peak in 2020, the number of homeless people began rising once again in 2022, and there were a total of 42,000 until May of this year.

The difference is that the UFMG study is based on government databases for social programs, while city hall figures come from a census carried out by social workers. The survey also shows that more than 1.5 million São Paulo residents (12 percent) live in extreme poverty, often one step before living on the street.

Currently, more than half of the Brazilian population suffers from food insecurity and 33 million go hungry every day, either by lacking money to buy food, only having one meal a day, or going without food for more than 24 hours.

The total is close to figures recorded at the start of the 1990s, when a series of campaigns were launched to raise societal awareness about the poverty epidemic. Only in 2014 did Brazil manage to leave the United Nations' Hunger Map. The map no longer exists under the same parameters, but if it did, Brazil would now be back on it.

SHE DREAMS OF BECOMING A MODEL, believing that she could be spotted by a talent scout if she is able to move out from under the overpass. "Have you seen Breno's eyelashes?" she asks. "They're just like mine."

Ingrid has a vain streak, saying she refused a contraceptive implant offered by the city government because it was for "drug addicts and prostitutes." She knows how to read and write and plans to resume her studies at an adult high school next year.

Mother and son once had a real chance at a life out from underneath the overpass. Ingrid's mother, born and raised in the same place, began building a makeshift house in a favela on São Paulo's outskirts after she was hired by a beauty salon in the city center. Breno's braids and Ingrid's well-cared-for curls are the matriarch's work.

Audio
During this time, shortly before Breno was born, things seemed to be working out, and the family was set to leave the street. But Ingrid didn't get on well with her stepfather, and her mother was opposed to her relationship with Breno's dad — a drug-addicted youth whose current whereabouts are unknown.

With the pandemic, the salon job went up in smoke, construction on the house was interrupted, and Ingrid's mother went to live with her boyfriend. The teenage parent and her baby son sought shelter with Solange, an elderly woman considered the "street grandmother" of all the young people living under the Viaduto Santo Amaro.

Breno is part of the third consecutive generation to live and work in the same hazardous place. "I wish they would give me an opportunity to get out of here," says Ingrid. "But it's hard, no-one trusts people who live on the street." For them, dreams are in no short supply. The same cannot be said for daily meals.

SHE LIVED THERE WITH HER MOTHER DURING HER INFANCY. Then, she was raised by a foster parent while her biological mother remained on the street. She says she was always a combative and argumentative young woman, but that her eldest daughter, Rafaela, saved her. "She's my arms and legs," she says.

Rafaela is 12 and looks just like her mother. The pair learned how to sing by watching the Brazilian version of American Idol on television, and now they use their craft to earn money from the public. They prefer to sing evangelical Christian music, which they say has more of a chance of captivating those who hear it.

"Yesterday, we sang a hymn in a bakery. I looked around, and three people were in tears. Then a lady came over to us and said: 'We worry about little things in life, and you who are the neediest still adore God."

The majority of the seven children Carla cares for frequent school for a few days a week at most. They don't go daily, as they need to work, begging on the streets during peak times.

The family sets up its tent underneath the overpass on Thursday nights, hoping to catch the cars driving toward the beaches on São Paulo's coast. With the money earned from begging, they are building a small one-room shack in the southern neighborhood of Grajaú, where they return to on Tuesdays.

The most profitable times of year come around red letter days, such as Children's Day or Christmas. During these periods, the kids work double shifts, and can go up to two weeks without attending school.

Carla, Rafaela, and the rest of the children hope to one day have their potential acknowledged. One man filmed Rafaela singing and posted the video on Instagram. "It's got more than 6,000 views," Carla boasts.

The family's story is all too similar to those of their neighbors under the Viaduto Santo Amaro.

Carla has completed courses in IT and eldercare. She managed to find a stable job in a retirement home, where she was able to take the kids along in tow. But she was fired at the beginning of the pandemic, and everyone went back to living on the street. A social worker says that Carla contracted HIV after being raped, in an incident that was never investigated.

She left school, she says, because she was bullied for her afro hairstyle. Now, the same is happening to young Rafaela, who cries most mornings because her classmates make fun of her. “Her hair is beautiful, you have to see it when it’s wet, the curls are really well defined. But when it dries it ends up like this,” her mother explains.

A study by think tank Fundação Getúlio Vargas from the beginning of this year showed that truancy figures during the pandemic regressed 14 years. The highest prevalence of school absenteeism was among children aged between 5 and 9, rising from 1.4 to 5.5 percent between 2019 and 2020 — an increase of almost 200 percent from one year to the next.

“We’re seeing the biggest losses among the younger kids, which is the age group with which we’ve had great educational advances over the last 40 years,” says researcher Marcelo Neri, in charge of the study.

Even those children who continued frequenting school during the pandemic saw significant drops in learning, the result of the precarious management of online teaching and the lack of access for poor families.

A study from the Education Ministry released in September shows that the proportion of illiterate children more than doubled between 2019 and 2021 — from 15 percent to 33 percent. Per household surveys, that rate tops the 40 percent mark. Up to four in every ten children at the age of seven do not know how to read and write.

At the end of 2020, Unicef calculated that at least 5 million Brazilian children and teenagers had no access to formal learning. Studies show that, the earlier children leave school, the lower the chances of them returning one day.

The effects go far beyond education and are typically felt for decades. According to the International Monetary Fund, the educational deficit caused by the pandemic in Brazil should leave this generation 9.2 percent poorer on average throughout their lives.

Inequality and labor informality are also set to rise, productivity will fall, as will the skill level of the labor market — factors expected to affect Brazil’s economy in the medium and long term.

Alongside sleek office buildings, fancy restaurants, and high-street stores, entire families huddle in tents, cook over small stoves, and wear tattered clothes.

Tayla, aged 25, is one of these anonymous faces who has been forced to call the concrete her home.

With no job, three children, and a fourth on the way, Tayla owns one of the tents set up in an open-air gallery on Paulista Avenue, located between two immense glazed buildings.

In her view, things “got much worse in recent years,” making an already tough reality even difficult, as she was unable to keep her children in school during the pandemic.

Audio
According to a study from the Todos Pela Educação organization, released in December of last year, more than 244,000 children aged 6 to 14 were not in school in the second quarter of 2021 — 171 percent more than pre-pandemic figures.

The situation clearly hit harder for the poorest and most vulnerable populations, which the UN has already described as the “Covid generation” due to the links between the educational deficit and the health crisis.

“I’m against putting [the children] to work, even in our situation. Their place is in school,” Tayla says. “I’m working on enrolling them for 2023, because they went without school these years [due to the pandemic]. Now I’m waiting to see whether it works out.”

As she speaks to The Brazilian Report, her daughters Emily, 7, and Esther, 5, run and play on the sidewalk. They were among the thousands of Brazilian children forced to stay away from books during the pandemic.

Several studies show that living in a situation of vulnerability, especially during the post-pandemic years, increases the chances of children carrying out some form of activity in exchange for money.

To avoid Emily and Esther entering the statistics of child labor, Tayla is adamant they should stay in school. But managing that is a challenge in itself. A study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and Unicef projects that, by the end of 2022, more than 8.9 million children risk falling into such working conditions.

“We have hope that things will get better. But that’s what it’s like living on the street: you never know what will happen. That’s why I try to keep my family close, each one helping the other, and I want my children in school if possible,” says Tayla, alongside her husband Gilson, who works odd jobs to bring in some income.

ALL THREE ARE UNEMPLOYED, though Lucas, 27, earns a meager living as a waste picker. Marcelo worked for nine months in a candy shop, but was fired at the height of the pandemic. More than 15 million Brazilian workers were unemployed at the start of 2021.

The trio belong to the same family and live on the street with two children, whose names have been withheld at the request of the adults. They fear that the exposure could attract the attention of child services. “They really do come and take them away, you know,” says Bruna, who has been homeless for four years.

Despite their vulnerable situation, she says it is possible to survive. She shows off her cell phone and her Instagram account. “But let me tell you, things got a lot worse with the pandemic and [the government of far-right President Jair] Bolsonaro. He says that no-one is hungry in Brazil, right? Tell him to come here to see if we’re lying,” she says.

At the end of August, Mr. Bolsonaro said during a podcast recording that “‘real hunger’ doesn’t exist in Brazil.” His words contradicted not only the perception of the Brazilian population, which has witnessed a visible increase in poverty, but also data on food security.

The children that live with the family seem oblivious to the difficult reality they face. One of them, dressed as a princess, dances, and smiles while she has her photo taken.

Their guardians say the kids are too young to beg for money at the traffic lights, or engage in any other work that could earn them some spare change. Lucas isn’t proud to speak about the subject, but he explains that their reality forces them to make bad decisions. “It’s hard but working, even as a child, is part of life on the street. If you walk around here or the poor neighborhoods of town, you’ll see lots of them picking up trash or selling things.”

Audio
Bruna adds: “At least [the boys] learn how to be men, and [the girls] learn how to be women, that’s the way of things.”

She says that the reality in which they live does not facilitate any interest in education or studies, as the mindset of people living on the street is solely geared toward survival. And if you need to work to achieve that, “that’s life,” she says.

Though official data about child labor has been out of date since 2019, experts believe that the next survey will bring a considerable increase in cases, reverting the trends from 1992 to 2019, when the number of exploited children and teenagers fell from 7.8 million to 1.8 million.

An increase is likely due to a series of factors: a rise in school absenteeism and adult unemployment, which forces children to work to supplement family income, and the impacts of the pandemic health crisis.

Furthermore, a study from the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies shows that the Bolsonaro government reduced spending on programs to combat child labor by 95 percent between 2019 and 2021.

In his first year of government, the total investment was BRL 6.7 million (USD 1.27 million). For 2021, the administration allocated just BRL 1.9 million, and spent less than 18 percent of its budget.

The inefficiency of the government is already reflected in the complaints, inquiries, public-interest civil suits, and consent decrees in the Labor Prosecution Office related to child labor. A falling trend witnessed since 2018 was interrupted in 2021. Data from 2022, which include January to August, indicate a continuous worsening trend.

President Bolsonaro often says that labor, for a child, “is better than thieving,” and has made pleas to “let the kids work.”

In the first two months of the pandemic alone, Unicef in São Paulo estimated that the rate of child labor increased 26 percent. Another study, by the Abrinq Foundation, found more than 1.7 million minors in child labor conditions around the country in 2021. Almost half of the teenagers over 14 had jobs that involve risks to their health and development, such as processing tobacco, street selling, and collecting trash.

These, however, are the most obvious forms of child labor, occupations that anyone can easily recognize as constituting work. But experts warn that the most common jobs are invisible, and thus more dangerous.

This category involves domestic work — mainly carried out by girls in poor regions who are “adopted” by rich families in exchange for cleaning their homes — and begging.

The numbers of the former are practically unknown, as there is no oversight inside homes, and heads of household are unlikely to mention its existence to census takers. The closure of creches during the pandemic also forced many parents working away from home to depend on older siblings to take care of the younger ones.

And begging on the street is another obscure issue. Ariel de Castro Alves, a lawyer specialized in infants’ rights, says that even if the small children or babies carried around by beggars do not actively ask passers-by for spare change, they are in a situation of labor. “The parents or guardians of the children take advantage of the image of a child to gather sympathy, and that constitutes child labor,” he says.

It is important to highlight that not all domestic work or childcare carried out by minors is deemed child labor. Children can and should have roles within the household, but it becomes a problem when chores extrapolate what is adequate for the child’s age and stunt their education and development.

“These children aren’t being treated like children,” says social psychologist Paulo Bueno. “Years ago, I did an internship in a São Paulo favela. We asked the kids what games they like to play, and one 8-year-old girl could not respond. After insisting, she said that she likes ‘playing’ taking care of her sister. She was a girl with a baby in her arms who couldn’t abandon that role of care, she wasn’t a child anymore.”

Photographer Léo Duarte speaks passionately about the scars that working as a child has left on him. Hailing from a poor migrant family, he started working at a young age guarding parked cars and selling candy.

“I watched the cars in front of a pizzeria. I’d be there for hours, and I wouldn’t be able to take it, and I’d sleep on the ground. I’d wake up the next day with coins and pizza boxes scattered around me. I’ve thrown out pizza thinking that the oregano was cigarette ash. I was young, I was naïve. I just wanted to take some money home to make my mother happy,” he recalls.

“The traffic, the people, the entire environment of what you are exposed to while working on the street, all of this leaves marks on you that is unlikely ever to be cured. There are things that happened to me that I’ve been unable to tell anyone about, even today.”

THE STATE HAS THE PREROGATIVE TO NOTIFY PARENTS, give advice, and — in extreme cases — send the children to child services and potentially for adoption if the child’s rights are being systematically denied. But, generally speaking, the families are in a situation of vulnerability that pushes them to do whatever they think is necessary to survive.

Parents are notified in cases of child labor in companies or on farms whenever there is someone to be held responsible. In the case of extreme poverty, when the parents are also victims, any kind of penalization is highly unlikely. “Families can’t be blamed for the government’s failures,” says Mr. Alves.

The social approach of NGOs, in Mr. Alves’s opinion, is akin to “mopping the floor with the faucet running.” When social workers go home, the practices keep happening. It is designed more toward damage reduction than effective measures to help the neediest.

Photographer Léo Duarte, who used to live on the street, is an example of someone who benefitted from the work of an NGO.

He gained recognition when he appeared in a story in the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo about a homeless boy who learned how to take photographs. He later worked for the newspaper and freelanced for other outlets. He participated in child services teams to help youngsters who, like him, had lost their childhood.

“Many people want to blame the family or think that any child given an opportunity, like me, will be able to free themselves from the cycle. It’s not exactly like that. The absence of the state doesn’t give any possibilities to the parents and makes things difficult for the kids,” he says.

Indeed, breaking the poverty cycle is anything but straightforward. Studies on the descendants of enslaved workers show that many of them also end up in precarious labor situations, following the footsteps of several generations.

Irina Bacci, from the Pan-American Development Foundation, refers to this trend as a “vicious cycle.”

Audio
“It’s an itinerary of the state abandoning families, leaving them without the possibility of other jobs. It’s an inheritance of slavery.”

And there is no straightforward solution to the problem.

Prosecutor Ana Maria Villa Real, coordinator of the child labor department in Brazil’s labor prosecution service, affirms that the only solution is to guarantee full employment and dignified conditions to adults in a long-term manner.

“There would have to be significant investment from the State,” she says. Furthermore, she calls for a social protection program that goes further than the Bolsa Família scheme, the wealth-transfer initiative President-elect Lula intends to resume as of next year.

In Ms. Villa Real’s view, paying BRL 600 (USD 115) a month to socially vulnerable families is important, but even more crucial are the conditions necessary to receive the benefit, such as keeping children in school and up-to-date with vaccinations.

“We’re talking about very poor families, which often have difficulty keeping children away from work even with help from the government. Adding the risk of losing benefits if they don’t meet the conditions is bad. We need stability and betting on awareness in the long term,” she says.

Furthermore, the expert adds that changes are needed to recent labor laws cutting rights for employees if Brazil has any chance of producing better results.

Ms. Villa Real says that the cases she has worked on have almost always ended in frustration. “I remember one family that put two children to work at a car wash in a wealthy neighborhood in Brasília. It took more than a year to get them enrolled in a school without them continuing their work. There’s no point warning parents and sending kids home, because we know that often this doesn’t solve the situation,” she says.

“I often say that there’s no use solving the problem of one child or two. We have to look at the policies in each area, and that’s something that politicians have never been terribly interested in.”

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