

Favela Crashers: Lovin' Life in the Ghetto

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Many people in the United States will try anything to avoid entering the ghettos of any city because of the fear of being robbed, shot, or killed by gangs or people trying to break above the poverty level and stay alive. In Brazil, people living in the cities fear entering the favelas for the same reasons Americans fear the ghettos. Rumors spread that areas of low income are crime infested and dangerous places to travel. The fear of entering the favelas entered the minds of our group upon hearing these rumors from the citizens of Ipanema and Rio de Janeiro. After a few hours walking the street of Rio's largest favela, many of the students did not want to leave as quickly as we did. Despite poor economic conditions as well as the lack of educational and health care establishments, favelas are safe and full of life. The favela dwellers work together and have established an incredible sense of community that may be very difficult to find even here in the United States.

Brazil is one of the top ten developing nations in the world, so one can conclude that the nation is not poor. However, a few million people reside in favelas that dot the landscape with most people living on or below the poverty line. The average income for a person living in one of the six hundred favelas surrounding Rio is 382 reais per month. This amount of money is the equivalent of roughly \$140 dollars per person per month in the United States. This average monthly income is well below the minimum wage required in the United States, but the favelas have developed ways of overcoming this lack of income by charging lower prices to the members of the community. The merchants in the favelas are also members of the community in which they sell their products, so they understand that overcharging people will only cause more monetary problems for the entire community. In order to preserve the economic condition, the merchants take lower profits so everyone can obtain necessary products such as groceries and clothing. Very few merchants in the United States would lower prices for the good of the community. Our capitalistic society has created many greedy, selfish, cold hearted people. The favela communities are evidence that even in poverty stricken areas, people can still work together as a community to not only maintain the economic level but also attempt to gradually increase the standard of living.

Because of the unfavorable economic conditions in the favelas, many of the children are forced to work making souvenirs and performing for tourists in order to create more income for their families. These children do not have time to go to school, and the level of education continues to decline. However, efforts are being made to allow children to both work and attend school during the day. Schools now hold half-day sessions to cater to the needs of families for their children to work. The level of education is beginning to rise but at a very slow pace. Even with a low education level, I had to step back and give my respect and admiration to these children. In the United States, it would be unheard of for a child to be out working and making money for his or her family instead of attending a full day of school. Where the United States values education, perhaps Brazilians value having a strong family unit and doing whatever it takes to keep families together. This difference in values does not make either society

better than the other but instead reflects how these values can be successful for both societies despite their differences.

Continuing along with the notion that the favelas represent a sense of community that appears to be lacking in the United States, health care in the favelas is practically nonexistent. With forty million people living on or below the poverty line, only seven percent of those people use public health care. Many people try to use supplementary health care but access to it is under utilized. There is one doctor to every three thousand people, which leads to many people not receiving the health care they need until well after they obtained their sickness. To overcome this lack of health care physicians, some doctors have offered to volunteer their services and take on patients for free during certain hours of the day. This act illustrates an even further display of putting the needs of the community above the needs of the individuals.

Celebrating favela pride is an important event. These events take place during the samba school practices held every few weeks and involve singing, dancing, drinking, and having fun from around eleven o'clock at night until eight in the morning. Community members of all ages, from young adolescents to grandparents, come to socialize, dance, and sing the songs of their favela. Thousands of people litter the streets in an incredible celebration that could only compare to college football games or even the Olympic Games. This display of community pride made me realize that even if you do not have a lot of money or a lot of material things, happiness and pride can be found through developing a sense of community and knowing that there are other people in your situation looking out for your well being.