

The Favela Wants to Live

Information, mobilization, and solidarity to confront the impacts of the pandemic in the favelas and peripheries of Rio de Janeiro

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| Brazil |

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“**T**he sun rises on another day and everything is exactly the same.” Mano Brown

coined this verse in *O Homem na Estrada* (The Man in the Street) in the 1990s. In an analogy, the song reflects, lucidly, on the mishaps residents of the favelas and peripheries experience daily. Since the beginning of March, the Brazilian population has suffered through a surge in the number of Covid-19 infections and deaths. Residents from popular territories, however, are forced to deal with not only the invisible virus, but also with Brazil’s latent social inequality. Faced with this reality, organized acts of solidarity have sprung up around the country to reduce the impacts caused by the pandemic.

In Rio de Janeiro, the state’s public security policy has continued, like a sharpened knife, to cut through Black and poor communities. According to data from the [Network of Security Observatories](#), police operations increased in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2020, surpassing 2019 levels. In April alone, the state registered a 28% increase in relation to the same month last year. With the growth in the number of police operations, police lethality increased as well, rising 58% in comparison to April 2019. Among the victims were João Pedro, age 14, Rodrigo Cerqueira, age 19, and João Vitor, age 18.

Without access to sound care at health units (in addition to overcrowding) residents have faced a lack of resources for sufficient testing, medications, and equipment. Decreed by the governor in the Official State Bulletin on March 17th, the state's social isolation measures added to public abandonment. Without strategies to guarantee basic rights, social inequality has deepened. Of the 1,019 favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro, only 11 possess basic health units. This statistic is elucidated in the seventh edition of the Corona Social Map, a biweekly bulletin produced by the Urban Policy team at the Favelas Observatory in order to develop a picture of the unequal impacts of the pandemic in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The bulletin has also served to set a priority agenda of meaningful practices for confronting the current health crisis in order to intervene in the public debate and in public policy.

The edition also demonstrates that the highest levels of Covid-19 mortality in Rio coincide with skin color and address in peripheral regions. "This perverse reality, composed of a mix of structural elements, possesses racism as one of its pillars. Far from hoping to fully elucidate this theme in the context of the pandemic's impacts in Rio de Janeiro, we hope to, rather, contribute with concepts, data, and analysis capable of shining a light on the problem in the sense of adding to numerous other efforts working to overcome the crisis," emphasizes Lino Teixeira, coordinator of the Urban Policy Group at the Favelas Observatory.

The results are clear: richer, majority-white neighborhoods account for 5% of total deaths to Coronavirus in the state of Rio. Compare this to 26.9% in a single favela in Campo Grande (located in the city's West Zone). In relation to race, in the favelas of Maré, 43% of Covid-19 deaths were Black, and only 26% white. Similarly, in Rocinha 46% of deaths were Black, and 37% white.

Access to Health is a Right

"The exercise of research and teaching allows us to be continuously connected with what is going on, including health situations that need more attention and Public Health 'problems' that need to be confronted. I also contemplate, constantly, our health system training, the planning of public policies, and the planning and implementation of care for the population,"

says Andreza Rodrigues, nurse and professor at the Anna Nery Nursing School at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Rodrigues, who holds a Ph.D. in Collective Health from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), has dedicated herself to training nurses and other health professionals.

Rodrigues also participates in the “How to protect yourself from Coronavirus” campaign, a communication initiative of the Favelas Observatory, undertaken with support from Fiocruz. The campaign, based in dialogue with specialists in diverse areas, seeks to produce content on protection and care, and is developed by and for residents of favelas and peripheries. The graphic pieces, texts, audios, and videos produced in the campaign are shared on the organization’s social media platforms and WhatsApp.

The UFRJ professor points out that recommendations for care and prevention must be transmitted to the population in an objective manner. “Thinking about professionals in general, the closer they can be to where people are, the greater the chance of them successfully disseminating information. For this reason, primary care professionals are the ones who can most effectively conduct this communication with residents, giving them a fundamental role in this process,” she says.

Made up of a multidisciplinary team, the Primary Health Care system (APS) has seen itself slowly dismantled since 2017. According to the Ministry of Health, as of 2019, approximately 90 million people were registered for APS services, though the number may be higher owing to recent improvements in registration processes. “In this moment in the pandemic, we have come to understand that access to primary care is fundamental for people to receive adequate care, as around 80% of cases can be resolved through primary care services. Though the system finds itself gutted and drained of professionals, it is still our best chance to reorganize and guarantee healthcare to a large part of the population,” says Rodrigues.

Inequality also impacts the way in which health care is offered to certain populations, as not all favelas contain health units. In the future, it will be fundamental to learn from the errors of the past, and that includes health care. “It is only with the recognition and guarantee of rights for all may we come out of this in some way,” she adds.

Care and Protection

Popular communication presents itself as an important ally for health care, forming a bridge between quality information and residents of favelas and peripheries. With the growing number of coronavirus infections in the peripheries, local productions have overcome difficulties imposed by Covid-19 in order to dialogue with territories about health and prevention. For Michel Silva, a journalist trained at Rio's Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-Rio), founder of *Fala Roça*, and editor of *Favela em Pauta*, "If it weren't for favela media outlets, many of these topics wouldn't be shared." *Fala Roça* created a separate section on its website to share information exclusively about coronavirus.

At the beginning of the year, Rio de Janeiro was affected by a potable water supply crisis. A few months later, with the pandemic's onset in March, residents of favelas continued to see their access to water compromised — an issue that directly impacted their ability to comply with the first prevention recommendation emitted by health organs: washing your hands. A March study by the State Public Defender's Office counted 397 complaints of lack of water. Of these, 27 were in Rocinha — close to 6.8%. In July, the situation returned, and the favela had to deal with seven straight days without water from the tap.

One topic that has gained particular attention in the media is the underreporting of Covid-19 cases. In Rocinha, in June, a "Death Commission" was created with a decree in the Official City Bulletin, ostensibly to monitor possible deaths from the virus in the region. However, the organ's creation was not widely shared. "[The Commission] was created in a very quiet way. I ended up finding out about it by reading the City Bulletin, which is one of my regular habits. There was not a single community leader involved in this work," says Silva. Faced with this reality, many organizations have worked to publicize the real numbers

of people infected and dead from the virus. One example is the “*De Olho No Corona*” (Eyes on Corona) bulletin by Redes da Maré. Another is the *Covid-19 Nas Favelas* dashboard produced by *Voz das Comunidades*, in the favelas of Complexo do Alemão.

In naming challenges for communication during the pandemic, Silva points to a lack of commitment from authorities in relation to lives in the favelas, as well as a combination of a lack of preparedness and stigmatizing practices of some journalists in more traditional media outlets in their reporting on peripheral regions. “What public authorities say reverberates in the favelas. One example of this was when [president] Bolsonaro said that few people would die because of coronavirus. After this speech, many people returned to the street and reduced their level of care. A second aspect is big media. What they say also reverberates in the favelas,” Silva adds.

As an alternative, Silva cites a need for production of TV journalism in the favela, as it is a form of media with the ability to reach publics from diverse social contexts. “It may seem unreal, us thinking about communication from the favela as having its own station, as you need to have the license granted and the equipment is all very costly. But one solution for this might be to have a fixed hour on existing channels, because licenses are public and we have rights to these spaces,” defends Silva.

In March, according to a poll by DataFolha, TV news channels led in indicators of trust from the population in terms of information about coronavirus, with 68% of respondents reporting trust. Private communication companies saw their audiences soar to a level unseen since 2009. For such results to be reflected in favelas as well, Silva points to a need for education and the use of available free tools.

For the post-pandemic period, the journalist defends the need for collaboration between communicators in different territories in order to grow their action network and deepen the impact of their productions, principally in health promotion. “One thing that has changed in my vocabulary is the question of ‘community’ or ‘popular journalism’. Now I talk about ‘favela journalism,’ because it involves popular mobilization, engagement with people, and it is journalism that is used as a tool for change,” he closed.

In the Absence of the State, Increased Solidarity

For historian Nivia Raposo, resident of the city of Nova Iguaçu and member of the

Network of Mothers and Family Members of the Victims of State Violence of the Baixada Fluminense, fighting for justice and the memory of family members killed by the State is just one of the activities she has dedicated herself to over the last several years. With the arrival of Covid-19, efforts are now directed towards guaranteeing that families have food on their tables as well. Together with other mothers, the collective connects people engaged in changing the realities of families that have had their income affected by the crisis. The distribution of food-stamp cards and food parcels are just some of the actions undertaken. “Joining together in the pandemic was a bit difficult. However, we have mothers in various territories and this helps in the distribution of food parcels. The network possesses previous partnerships, and these partners came together to act in this context,” she says.

Asked about the importance of such initiatives, she is categorical in affirming that collaborating with others is a noble act, but that this does not excuse public authorities from exercising their role. “I believe that this help is a palliative measure. Our social function [in the Network of Mothers] is a different one. But we understand that this is one of many obligations that the State does not fulfill. We have done just as our ancestors have: help one another. In the favelas and peripheries, that’s how it is. It is the saying ‘Us for Us’ taken seriously. It is as literal as our daily struggle for survival,” she adds.

With collective action at risk, Network mothers have also attended to other neighborhoods in the Baixada Fluminense, including São João de Meriti, KM 32, Duque de Caxias, Valverde, and Belford Roxo. “There is Ilsi, Beth, Jô, Marilza, Elenice, Nem, Cirlene,” says the

historian, listing the names of her companions in the struggle. The Network of Mothers and Family Members of Victims of State Violence in the Baixada Fluminense was created following the Baixada Massacre, which took place in 2005.

Taking Legal Action Against the State

Collectivity in order to guarantee life has also been the maxim of ADPF 365 (Claim of Noncompliance with a Fundamental Order 365), also known as the ADPF of the Favelas. As part of a legal action proposed by the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), the ADPF 365 was built collectively with the State Public Defender's Office, civil society organizations, and collectives and social movements connected to the favelas and mothers of the victims of the State. The claim requests that the grave human rights violations against the Black and poor populations of the peripheries and favelas, attributable to the public security policy of the state of Rio de Janeiro, be recognized and redressed.

The Supreme Court's judgment of the ADPF began on April 17th, when Justice Edson Fachin, rapporteur for the case, ruled on a number of the cautionary measures solicited in the action. Later in the month, following Fachin's vote, the ruling was temporarily suspended on the request of Justice Alexandre de Moraes. At the end of May, a coalition of entities appealed to Justice Fachin, requesting the suspension of police operations in Rio de Janeiro for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the beginning of June, in a preliminary decision, Justice Fachin suspended police operations in favelas for the duration of the health crisis. Once brought before the full bench, the decision was maintained, with the majority of justices voting in favor of the rapporteur. As such, police operations in favelas are suspended for the duration of the pandemic, saving for in exceptional cases duly justified to competent organs and communicated immediately to the Public Prosecutor's office.

The effects of this cautionary measure have been detailed in a [report](#) produced by the New Illegality Study Group at the Fluminense Federal University (GENI/UFF), in partnership with the Fogo Cruzado crossfire monitoring platform. According to the report, in the period

between June 5th and 19th, 2020, there was a 68.3% decrease in police operations in Rio favelas in relation to an average of the same period in previous years. The data point represents a historic low unseen since 2007. Deaths incurred from police operations fell 75.5% in relation to an average of the same period in previous years.

The anthropologist and coordinator of the Right to Life and Public Security Program at the Favelas Observatory, Aline Maia, is clear in her judgment that the ADPF of the Favelas is an historic action, and that it promotes the right to life. "It is the first time that a movement of mothers and family members has made it to the Supreme Court. The whole action, though it has political party authorship, is the result of an intense collective mobilization with many actors," she points out.

The next steps involve a more intense mobilization. Though the suspension of operations during the pandemic is a victory, the ADPF of the Favelas seeks to construct a public security policy that guarantees life in the favelas and peripheries. "Voting on the ADPF as a whole recommences on August 7th. It is another step in the process. During this discussion, we need to remain organized so that all of the specific requests in the ADPF are granted by the Supreme Court. Now is the time for the Supreme Court to demonstrate to society that an effective security policy is one that holds the right to life as a basic and fundamental premise," added Maia.

The Supreme Court completed its ruling on remaining cautionary measures on August 17, imposing new restrictions on Rio de Janeiro's public security policy and prohibiting: the use of helicopters as firing platforms, the undertaking of police operations near schools and hospitals, and police tampering with crime scenes. The Supreme Court also ruled that the Public Prosecutor investigate violations committed by police during police operations and that reduced police killings be reinstated as merit criteria. Different from the decision to suspend police operations in Rio, the measures granted by the Supreme Court on August 17 are not associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. In a note, the allied institutions and movements involved in the creation of ADPF 635 affirmed: "we commemorate the decision of the Brazilian Supreme Court, which recognizes that favelas are part of the city and that the 'shoot-down' policy adopted by governor Wilson Witzel violated fundamental rights and is racist. We will continue our organizing in order to monitor and ensure the fulfillment of

the given resolutions. The struggle continues!"
