

MASS INCARCERATION AND VIOLENT ORGANIZED CRIME: UNDERSTANDING BRAZIL'S PCC (*)

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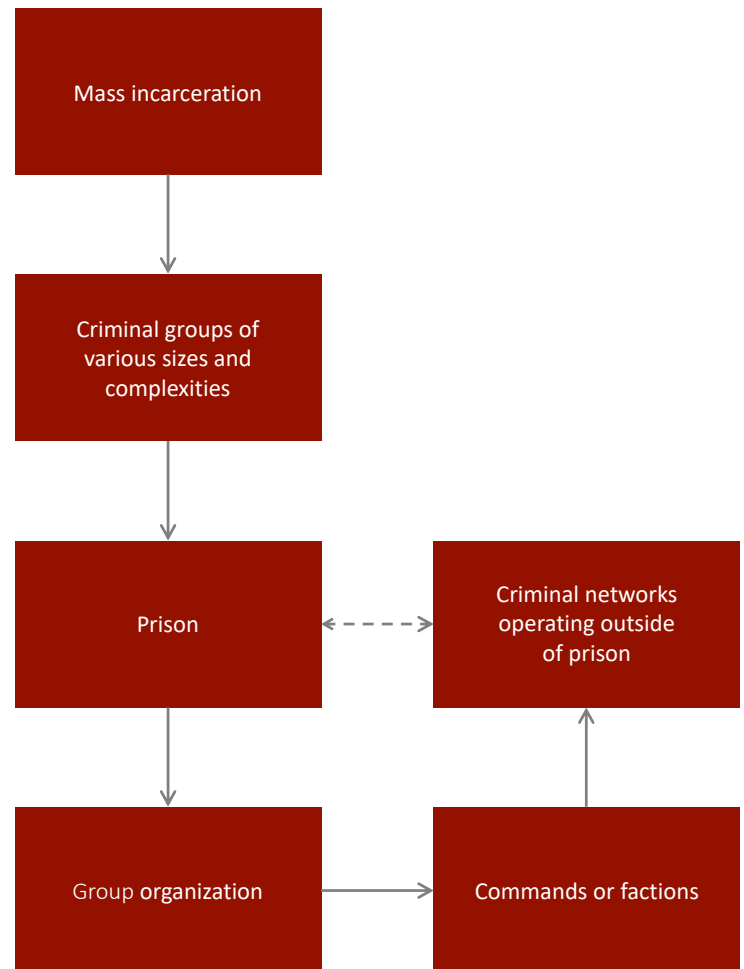
The Brazilian prison population has grown tremendously in the last decades. In July 2019 there were 812,564 people in Brazilian prisons, 41.5% of whom were in pretrial detention¹. The Brazilian prison population now exceeds the capacity of prison facilities by 69.3%². Fifty-five percent of the prisoners are 29 years old or younger; 64% are black; 61% did not complete elementary school; 38% of the male and 20% of the female inmates were arrested for theft; and 26% of the men and 62% of the women were charged with drug trafficking³.

A lot has been written about prison dynamics and the effect of prison confinement on individual behavior with special focus on anti-social and criminogenic behavior⁴. Notwithstanding, prison criminogenic effects in Brazil are seemingly unique. Groups originated in prisons have become major players in organized crime economy and practices. The most notable case is Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Capital Command) or PCC, by far the most structured, stable, and cohesive criminal organization in Brazil.

PCC gained visibility after the events known as the “May 2006 Attacks,” in which the PCC showcased its control of state penitentiaries and the reach of its criminal network. It promoted 74 prison riots and hundreds of attacks on state security forces throughout São Paulo. In 2006, PCC flaunted its hegemony in prisons and in illegal networks. From São Paulo, PCC expanded its presence throughout Brazil. Its members call one another “brothers” and go through an initiation ritual called baptism. They are now to be found all over the country, both inside and outside of the prison system. The “brothers” are bound by loyalty vows and by norms of behavior expressed in statutes, primers, and directives (known as “salves”).

Since 2007, research has helped to outline PCC’s criminal networks and their nodes and to unveil the mechanisms that have built, expanded, and strengthened the organization. In addition, it has helped to delineate the capital flows among its members, tracing the acquisition of their social capital and PCC’s operationalization. Methods used in this research project include the analysis of official state documents (investigations, complaints, inquiries), press materials, materials produced by

PCC members, semi-structured interviews with inmates, both those who belong and who do not belong to the organization, as well as interviews with legal authorities, police, correctional staff, etc⁵.



A core finding from these studies has been that violent organized crime in Brazil has in the prison system its place of origin, its source of strength and its space for reproduction. Prisons are points of high concentration of criminal network nodes, and they provide resources that allow for such nodes to be connected.



PCC was created in a state penitentiary in São Paulo in 1993. The accelerated growth of the prison population, the failures in prison services, the precarious living conditions of inmates, and the disastrous interventions of police forces in prisons, such as in the Carandiru massacre in 1992, encouraged the formation and expansion of this and other “commands” or “factions” in the prison system. These “commands” or “factions” then took control of criminal activities such as drug trafficking, armed robbery, and kidnappings.

These findings highlight the roles of prison confinement and mass incarceration policies in strengthening criminal networks in Brazil. Crime repression through the imposition of harsh prison sentences ends up placing individuals in an institutional context controlled by criminal groups that use prisons as centers of recruitment and operationalization of their practices. Instead of being a deterrent, mass incarceration produces a locus for networking and organizing crime in Brazil.

References

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Notes

(*) Original submission in Portuguese, translation by Leticia Galizzi.

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⁽¹⁾ National Council of Justice (CNJ), <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2019/07/17/cnj-registra-pelo-menos-812-mil-presos-no-pais-415percent-nao-tem-condenacao.ghtml> Accessed 17 Oct 2019.

⁽²⁾ Monitor da Violencia project, <https://g1.globo.com/monitor-da-violencia/>

⁽³⁾ INFOPEN. The latest INFOPEN report was released in June 2016 and counted 726,000 inmates. See, http://depen.gov.br/DEPEN/noticias-1/noticias/infopen-levantamento-nacional-de-informacoes-penitenciarias-2016/relatorio_2016_22111.pdf

⁽⁴⁾ Butler, Slade and Dias (2018); Dias and Salla (2017); Skarbeck (2014) .

⁽⁵⁾ Adorno and Dias (2019); Dias and Darke (2015); Dias and Salla (2013).

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