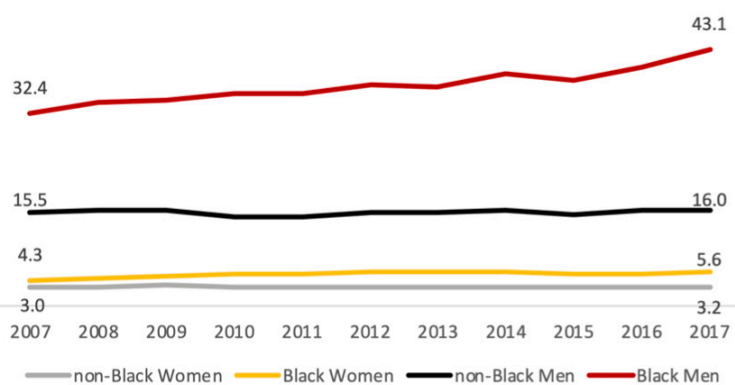


STRUCTURAL RACISM AND NECROPOLITICS IN BRAZIL (*)

Eduardo Gomor dos Santos (**)

In 2017 there were 65,602 homicides in Brazil. The rate of 31.6 murders per 100,000 people is much higher than the global rate of 6.1. In that year, 75.5% of the victims were Black. Among young males (ages 18 to 29), the murder rate reached a staggering 130.4/100,000. From 2007 to 2017, homicides of Black individuals increased 33.1% for men and 60.5% for women, while homicides of non-Blacks grew only 3.3% for men and 1.7% for women (Atlas 2019).

**Homicide Rate Evolution (Deaths per 100,000)
By Race and Gender**



Source: Atlas da Violência, 2019.

The reaction from public safety and criminal justice officials to rising homicide numbers was to resort to violence. However, victims killed in armed robberies, often cited as justification for police violence, represent only 3.3% of deaths. In fact, 11 out of every 100 homicides were carried out by police, the worst rate in the world after Venezuela. The most lethal police forces are in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, where, for every 100 homicides, 23 and 20 were police killings, respectively. Data show no relationship between police lethality and a reduction in intentional violent deaths. In fact, when those reductions have been observed, they are rather related to the consolidation of criminal organizations and their internal mechanisms to control crime (Anuario 2019, p. 59). A tight bond between police and the militarist ideology of the 1964 dictatorship persists. Repression that once targeted the

internal enemy – “subversives” – now sets its sights on urban criminality and the “undesirable”. As Marielle Franco (2014, p. 98) pointed out, “trafficking is cruel and violent and destroys the lives in the communities, but the state should not compete with it to see who is more violent.”

Another cruel aspect of criminal justice in Brazil is mass incarceration. In June 2016 Brazil’s prison population totaled 726,712 people, the third-largest in the world, surpassed only by the United States and China (Depen 2017, p. 7). The occupation rate was 197.4%; roughly 2 prisoners per available spot. Of those, 40% had been incarcerated pre-trial. Prisoner profiles are fairly homogeneous: 55% are between 18 to 29 years old; 64% are black; and 75% completed only middle school.

When gender is taken into consideration, incarceration profiles are similar, but dynamics are much worse. In June 2016, the female prison population in Brazil reached 42,355, which means there were 15,326 women beyond capacity (Depen 2018, p. 10), and representing the third-largest female incarceration rate in the world, only exceeded by the United States and Thailand. Between 2000 and 2016, the incarceration of women increased 455%. In comparative terms, in China it increased 105%, in the United States 18%, and in Thailand 14%. Female inmates deal with issues related to motherhood; less visits compared to men; problems with visits from LGBTQ partners; and a lack of basic products such as pads and toilet paper. Sixty-two percent of female inmates were charged with drug trafficking compared with 26% of men.

In 2006, Law 11,343 attempted to decriminalize drug use differentiating between possession and trafficking. Nevertheless, the law did not quantify the distinction, allowing the police to base their decisions on stereotypes about race, social class, territoriality, age, and gender. In 70% of the cases, the police officer who arrested the defendant is the only one to testify in the trial (Borges 2018, p. 65). This has been a crucial factor in mass incarceration. Between 1990 and 2005, incarceration increased by 271,400 individuals; between 2006, when this law was enacted, and 2016, incarceration increased by 325,500 (Depen 2017, p. 9).



Black people are being targeted and selective incarceration has imprisoned “a huge mass of young people at the lowest levels of crime and at a high cost to society, who will later join the labor force of around 79 different criminal factions created inside prisons” (Anuário 2019, p. 169).

The state plays a pivotal role in this form of social cleansing. Linked to sovereignty, necropolitics resides, “to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003, p. 11). The feeling of fear and insecurity created and reproduced unremittingly by mass media and corporate interests allows for black and poor people to be watched, harassed, violated, incarcerated, and killed. This vicious cycle must end, because if all Brazilians are to be considered fully human, Black lives matter!

Notes

(**) PhD in Social Policy, University of Brasília. Researcher, Center for Studies and Research in Social Policy, NEPPoS, University of Brasília, Brazil.

References

- Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. Ano 13, 2019.
- Atlas da Violência. Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (Ipea); Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. 2019.
- Borges, Juliana. O que é encarceramento em massa. Belo Horizonte: Letramento. 2018.
- Depen. Levantamento Nacional de Informações Penitenciárias. Atualização - Junho de 2016. Brasília: Ministério da Justiça, 2017.
- Depen. Levantamento Nacional de Informações Penitenciárias. Infopen Mulheres. 2. ed. Brasília: Ministério da Justiça, 2018.
- Franco, Marielle. UPP – A redução da favela a três letras: uma análise da política de segurança pública do estado do Rio de Janeiro.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1):11–40