

City & Society

Neighborhood Effects and Urban Inequalities: The Impact of Covid-19 on the Periphery of Salvador, Brazil

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On March 29, two weeks after the first Covid-19 case was confirmed and on the same day of the first pandemic-related death in the city, Salvador turned 471 years old. However, the streets did not showcase the celebrations that distinguish one of the most culturally active cities in Brazil. From the confinement of our homes, we witnessed an empty, suspended city. The isolation measures taken by local authorities, essential to reduce the virus' transmission, have shaken the dynamics of sociability as well as disrupted the use of public spaces in Salvador, recognized by UNESCO as the “city of music” and “national capital of Afro-Brazilian culture”.

Besides changing socio-cultural patterns, isolation has economic implications in a city that essentially depends on commerce, tourism and services. Commercial sector organizations estimate daily losses in the millions in a scenario in which only key services remain open. Tourist activities are paralyzed, beaches are closed, and cinemas, theaters, museums and nightclubs are suspended. At the same time, the number of flights that usually reach the

city during this season has decreased dramatically. According to the Brazilian Hotel Industry Association of Bahia, in the last week of March the hotel occupancy rate was 4%. Such a slowdown has a more severe impact on the lives of informal workers, who constitute 1/3 of the employed population. Much of this population lives in the urban peripheries.

In view of the pandemic context that threatens a city with high rates of urban and socio-racial inequalities, we aim to offer a brief diagnosis about the potential impacts of Covid-19 on the peripheries of Salvador in terms of *neighborhood effects*. We address the following question: to what extent does urban location determine health and socio-economic risks in the current pandemic?

A poor, uneven and peripheral city

Salvador is one of the oldest cities in Brazil. Its foundation in 1549 consolidated the project of the Portuguese crown to create a “fortress-city” that could host the new General Government in the Brazilian territory. As the country's first capital, Salvador became the main pillar of the colonial agro-mercantile economy, profoundly based on sugar and tobacco plantations, as well as on the intense slave trade. The city prospered over the next two centuries as a commercial, religious and administrative center, until it lost its political influence when Portugal transferred the capital to Rio de Janeiro in 1763.

The city experienced solid modernization processes only in the 1950s, when it received investments in infrastructure, oil exploration, and petrochemical industrial sectors, with the development of its metropolitan region in 1973 (Gordilho-Souza 2008). Despite the impact of investments on the city economy and the social structure, the industrialization process was tightly linked to the flows of the south-southeast regions, with a robust supply of unskilled labor and precarious occupations. This condition worsened in the 1990s, when the city suffered a disruption of its labor market.

Currently, the third sector constitutes the most important activity of the economy in Salvador. About 20% of the population is unemployed, whereas informality represents 35%, and the average income is US\$430 per month¹. According to Census data, 37% of citizens have a per capita income of up to ½ minimum wage (US\$100), an empirical condition of poverty. Precariousness is even more perverse when we consider race: unemployment and informality are higher among the black population, which is 83% of the city (Carvalho 2018).

In the 1970s, Salvador underwent rapid changes that culminated in the development of three vectors of territorial expansion: “Orla Marítima Norte”, “Miolo” and “Subúrbio Ferroviário” – which added to the old central region close to the port. The first is a “noble”

¹ See report by Inaiá Carvalho and Cláudia Monteiro: <cutt.ly/atDF9jh>. Access: 8 April 2020.

area, where wealth, investments, facilities, opportunities, and services are concentrated. The second, in the city geographic epicenter, was initially composed of housing estates for the working classes, expanded through popular allotment programs (*loteamentos populares*), and presents today an area with limited availability of goods and services. The latter, which emerged along with the construction of the railway line, in 1860, grew in the 20th century, and became the most deprived region of Salvador, with irregular occupations, precarious housing, high levels of violence, and deficiencies in infrastructure, transportation and services (Carvalho & Pereira 2014). Nowadays, Salvador maintains a pattern of urban segregation so uneven that 1/3 of its citizens live in “subnormal agglomerates”, such as slums or *favelas*. In these areas, population density may exceed 27,000 inhab/km², whereas the municipal average is 3,859 inhab/km² (Carvalho & Pereira 2014).

Pandemic's impacts on the peripheries

Initial reports show that Covid-19 arrived in Brazil via wealthy people who were in Europe during the epidemiological outbreak. If we consider the residential patterns of the infected so far, we notice a concentration in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, including in Salvador. Notwithstanding, the current concern turns to the peripheries, as projections indicate that in the coming weeks there will be an alarming spike in cases and deaths in poorer neighborhoods.

According to a report published by the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation², Brazilian regions will face the peaks of the disease at different points: first, major urban centers such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro; then, other decentralized cities like Recife and Salvador. Freitas, Napimoga and Donalisio (2020) sustain that it is necessary to consider the heterogeneity of the current indicators among different Brazilian regions, as they depend on political actions, availability of supplies and equipment, structure of health services, and inequality indices.

Since the first confirmed cases, Salvador City Hall and the Bahia State Government decided to ignore President Jair Bolsonaro, who has insisted that social isolation should not be a measure in the fight against coronavirus. Local authorities quickly implemented mitigation protocols indicated by WHO, seeking to “flatten the curve” and help the health system to avoid collapse during the most intense phase of the pandemic. However, even with the adoption of these health procedures, Covid-19's impacts on the peripheries might be horrific.

A study led by the Federal University of Bahia³ analyzed the potential risks faced by different districts of Salvador during the pandemic. The analysis considered the flow of people in the city and the distribution of official reported cases, crossing the variables

² See report by *Observatório Covid-19 Fiocruz*: <cutt.ly/jtDXHhH>. Access: 8 April 2020.

³ See report by the Group *GeoCombate Covid-19*: <cutt.ly/OtDXNZZ>. Access: 8 April 2020.

“potential danger” (where people are more likely to get the virus) and “health vulnerability” (where vulnerable groups live) from each neighborhood. One of the conclusions is that the population that live in the regions of “Miolo” and “Subúrbio Ferroviário” would be exposed to a greater danger due to the rates of poverty and precarious housing. Many of these peripheral neighborhoods have a high population density, deficiencies in health services and a lack of basic sanitation. Recently, there have been complaints of water rationing in some neighborhoods, just now when the recommendation is for everyone to stay at home and increase hygiene measures.

These complaints led us to the idea of “neighborhoods effects”, which constitutes the benefits or losses that potentially may affect socio-racial groups based on location. We argue that “territory” is a central variable to analyze the production and reproduction of inequalities, insofar as it would impact both the available structure of goods and services, and the social capital, networks and resources of each group (Andrade & Silveira 2013; Farber & Sharkey 2015). Therefore, the agglomeration of vulnerable groups in relatively homogeneous and segregated spaces can contribute to dispossession (Carvalho 2018; Sampson 2008). These “potential” effects, which vary from neighborhood to neighborhood, are a real challenge in Salvador, which is one of the most unequal cities in the country (Serpa 2001).

On the one hand, poorer neighborhoods tend to suffer from poor health services; on the other, there are inequalities associated to the place of residence in relation to those who have access to private health plans and those who depend on the Unified Health System (SUS). Accordingly, urban infrastructure implies unequal conditions in the efficient fight against the coronavirus. For instance, in many cases, inhabitants of peripheral areas find it difficult to acquire basic hygiene items, such as soap, hand sanitizer, and masks. In others, they feel obliged to refuse social isolation under threat of not having minimum conditions to survive and pursue informal employment.

The question then becomes: how to adopt strict mitigation protocols, special care for risk groups and their relatives, and quarantine in the most symptomatic cases when we are dealing with an urban reality in which, usually, a large family lives in a single-room house in a slum?

President Bolsonaro has insisted on underestimating the ramifications of inequality, not only in Salvador but also throughout Brazil. Moreover, he denies that we are facing an unprecedented crisis and accuses governors, media and scientists of inciting “hysteria” by adopting “horizontal isolation” (restriction on movement and commerce). Disregarding the president's denial, several local self-organizing actions have emerged across the peripheries

of Salvador, in order to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on unassisted populations⁴. These actions include money, food and sanitary materials donation, crowdfunding, the construction of databases to facilitate the assistance of risk groups, cleaning efforts and disseminating information about the disease. The Salvador City Hall also created a project called “Salvador For All”, which will transfer US\$52 over three months to 20,000 informal workers. The State Government, in turn, will exempt low-income citizens from water and electricity bills for the same period. Nevertheless, these measures may be insufficient to reduce the effects of the crisis on the population most at risk.

In addition to these important solidarity initiatives among residents of peripheral neighborhoods, as well as the health precautions and financial assistance protocols adopted by local government, we urge that specific actions must be taken, at the state and federal levels, so that the urban peripheral populations can survive the pandemic. To avoid a catastrophe that is already on the horizon, the public authorities must work with peripheral communities to offer the conditions for a “safe isolation”. These procedures involve the increase of the number of Intensive Care Unit beds and a more feasible management and distribution of detection tests. In addition, we must have well-designed minimum-income policies in areas whose indicators reveal greater inequalities and vulnerabilities.

⁴ See the article written by Luciene Santana e Monique Evelle: <cutt.ly/EtD0uL1>. Access: 8 April 2020.

Covid-19, although global, is not an “egalitarian” or “democratic” disease. On the contrary, it tends to have an uneven impact on different territories and socio-racial groups that constitute the urban space, which can further deepen the already overwhelming inequalities in a city like Salvador.

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