



Being Houseless in the Global South: An update on Fortaleza, Brazil

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Abstract

This update aims to provide a critical account of houselessness through the last decade in Brazil—a country of the Global South currently under a destabilized democracy state—and, more specifically, in the gravely unequal city of Fortaleza, located in the northeast of Brazil. Through the analysis of reports, news, official declarations and decrees alongside interviews, an investigation has been carried out to understand how the people experiencing houselessness in Fortaleza interact with the state, the third sector and each other. The update reveals planning practices that systematically structure the exclusion, invisibility and potential criminalization of houseless people by public agencies and the private sector—especially during the COVID-19 health crisis. It also sheds light on the strength of the social movements and civil organizations that seek effective and emancipatory actions towards overcoming houselessness.

Keywords

Houselessness, pandemic, criminalization, segregation, Fortaleza

Despite housing being recognized as a universal human right, more than 150 million people in the world are estimated to be houseless (United Nations, 1948, art. 25.1; Chamie, 2017). This phenomenon occurs due to a series of economic, political and social factors—such as extreme poverty, the weakening of housing and welfare policies and social exclusion—that permeate both ethnic-racial and gender dynamics as well as the weakening of family and affective bonds. Understanding that these dynamics can become deeper and more complex based on the particularities of each territory, it is fitting to reflect on the



Brazilian situation as a democratically weakened country in the Global South, and specifically on the city of Fortaleza, the second most unequal city in Brazil and the 13th in the world (UN-Habitat, 2010).

Houselessness is a multidimensional phenomenon of exclusion, expressed not only by the absence of housing but also by restrictions and deprivations in multiple socioeconomic spheres (Somerville, 1992). The denial of access to public and private spaces, for example, enhances the vulnerability of this socio-spatial group, given the increase in difficulty of accessing other basic rights. According to the Secretariat of Information Evaluation and Management of the National Ministry of Social Development and the Fight against Hunger (2009), 54.5 percent of houseless people in Brazil claim to have been prevented from accessing at least one of the following services: health facilities, public transport, commercial establishments and public agencies. Also noteworthy is the alarming statistic that 13.9 percent of these people have already been prevented from registering for official documents. Moura Jr et al. (2013) attribute this fact to the stigma suffered by houseless people. However, the phenomenon of criminalization of houselessness should also be considered as it contributes to their living in a perpetual state of 'limited citizenship' (Rolnik, 1997), firstly due to the denial of housing but also due to the denial of several other rights.

According to Santos (2009), the constitution of urban dynamics based on capitalist and neoliberal trends tend to (re)produce hygienist, punitive and repressive practices based on the idea of developing spaces to attract and retain capital: hiding, punishing, segregating, and exterminating houseless people in order to build a 'positive image' of the city. In Fortaleza, the exclusion of houseless people is, on the one hand, brutally evidenced by a direct policy of hostility, expulsion, and dispersion in public and private spaces. On the other, it is systematically reproduced in the city through hygienist planning practices such as legislative regulations of urban order and control.

The recurrence of aggressive actions of repression of the houseless by public security forces such as the Military Police and the Municipal Guard¹ is reported informally when interviewing houseless people in different areas of the city, but also formally denounced by militants of houseless peoples' defense groups (MPCE Press Office, 2021). As Pessoa (2021) states, the reports made to the local authorities have minimal repercussions, and the meetings organized with the Executive Branch to demand the implementation of public policies to overcome houselessness result in little to no concrete action, described by militants of houseless peoples' as events merely 'for semblance'.

On the night of September 23, 2021, as reported by Viana (2021) in a local newspaper, the houseless people that sought shelter in Praça do Ferreira, one of the most notorious squares and the place of the greatest concentration of houseless people in Fortaleza, were ousted by agents of the Municipal Guard. The action consisted not only of a violent dispersal, but also involved the seizure of personal belongings, including documents. Fortaleza's

¹ In Brazil there are various police and law enforcement agencies, which are differentiated by jurisdiction and functional nuances (Bretas & Rosemberg, 2013). The Military Police is a military organ of ostensible policing submitted to state jurisdiction, while the Municipal Guard is a civil organ of ostensible policing submitted to municipal jurisdiction.

Inspection Agency (Agefis), the municipal department responsible for the action, informed the news team that the action was aimed at ‘bringing order to the public space and allowing free pedestrian transit, in addition to protecting public property, (...) directing homeless people to clear the sidewalk’.

Agefis’ inspecting—and punitive—activities are regulated by the City Code, a municipal law that institutes urban order standards, such as the prohibition of total or partial obstruction of public spaces and sidewalks and the obligation to maintain them ‘in a perfect state of conservation and cleanliness’ (Fortaleza, 2019). A hygienist and technocratic logic of urban planning becomes evident, one that is based on the supremacy of order and ‘discipline’—as described in the law above—of the urban space over the concern with collectivity. Associated with its disarticulation from public policies of social interest, this rationale reinforces and reproduces mechanisms of socio-spatial segregation, in addition to potentially criminalizing groups that resort to informality to survive in the city. In this sense, houseless people find themselves under extreme informality and, consequently, the increased propensity of being criminalized.

Understanding that the stigmatization of houselessness is a social phenomenon that permeates all spheres of urban life, it is important to emphasize that violations against houseless peoples’ dignity are not only carried out by the state but also by the private sector. In Fortaleza, shopkeepers frequently restrict the access of houseless people to their facilities and even to their immediate surroundings—extrapolating the limits of authority and ownership in the private/public spaces interface—often using aggressive measures to remove them.

The state’s discourse and the private sector’s interests are aligned in terms of the imposition of restrictions and denial of rights to houseless people. Such dynamics are evident by the influence of the retail sector in decision-making, exemplified by Pessoa’s (2021) account of an event held at the City Council, in which houseless people, together with entities defending their rights, denounced the recurrence of violence by military police officers. The Military Police, when questioned, transferred the responsibility for the actions to the Municipal Guard, who then affirmed it was by order of the Chamber of Directors and Shopkeepers (CDL)—an influential entity representing the sector—revealing a clear inversion of responsibilities and attributions, in which a private agent directly delegates tasks to a public security agency.

Furthermore, houseless people suffer systematic erasure, perceived in the obsolescence and inaccuracy of demographic data. There are inconsistencies between the number of people measured in the last published census² of this group (SDHDS, 2014) and data collected by agents from the third sector who work directly with the homeless. After surveys carried out at Specialized Reference Centers for Houseless Populations (Centros Pop), for example, Cavalcante (2019) considered the official count of 1,718 houseless people in Fortaleza to be imprecise, since in 2014-2015 only one of the Centros Pop had already

² In the process of writing this update, a more recent census had already been conducted by the municipality, but its results were still being processed and had not been published.

accumulated more than 4,000 records and in 2019, more than 7,000. Although not an accurate measure of the current number of houseless people, the drastic difference between these numbers and the Census demonstrates how the latter failed to account for houselessness in the city.

The insufficiency of governmental interest and investment, associated with the lack of updated data, result in the fragility of public policies aimed at overcoming houselessness and the precariousness of social assistance facilities in Fortaleza. The scarcity of income generation policies and emancipatory initiative also highlights the states' limitations through adherence to palliatives and patronage, failure to promote autonomy and reinforcement of the vulnerabilities related to houselessness. Existing welfare projects are constantly criticized by houseless peoples' social movements, as the facilities don't meet the needs of the users and don't support their numbers. Such are the 'social restaurants',³ which provide an insufficient number of meals daily to a large number of target users, a fact exponentially accentuated in the current pandemic.

The recent deepening of inequalities in the country, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that in addition to sanitary, the crisis is also economic, social, and political. The crisis intensifies the dynamics of exclusion existing in the capitalist system. This is evidenced by, among other factors, the increase in unemployment (Alvarenga & Silveira, 2021), food prices (Pamplona, 2021), and the housing deficit (Vieceli, 2021). Houseless people already faced many barriers in the treatment of any disease due to the difficulty of accessing medical care, the precariousness of housing, and the aforementioned episodes of violence. Their vulnerabilities were further aggravated by the highly contagious nature of COVID-19.

Considering that one of the main initiatives to contain the pandemic has been social isolation, houseless people become especially invisible. Unable to domestically isolate, they suffer from a policy of denial and restriction of the urban space paired with the inadequate direction of public policies and investments. The State Decree No. 33.574 (Ceará, 2020), for example, instituted strict measures of social isolation, such as mandatory confinement in people's homes or a unit hospital for people who are proven to be infected or suspected of being infected by COVID-19. If people did not comply there was the possibility of criminal liability or even the use of police force to ensure isolation. How can an infected houseless person isolate if the health system is overwhelmed and shelter facilities are constantly full? In addition to invisibilizing houseless people through COVID-19 responses, the imposition of mandatory social isolation by obligating people to stay at home without acknowledging the socio-spatial complexities of the city criminalizes their existence. This further accentuates the conditions of segregation to which they are submitted.

³ The municipality of Fortaleza maintains two public facilities, which we have loosely translated as 'social restaurants', that provide cheap or free food for people experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability. The first one, Popular Restaurant (Restaurante Popular) of Fortaleza, offers 1,400 meals daily at the symbolic rate of R\$1 each (Prefeitura de Fortaleza, 2020). The Popular Restaurant had been the only social restaurant in operation in the city of Fortaleza until 2019, when the Social Canteen (Refeitório Social) was inaugurated (Prefeitura de Fortaleza, 2019). The Social Canteen offers 400 free meals daily, exclusively to houseless people.

In the face of these multilayered struggles, popular action is highlighted for the social and political mobilization of demands for integrated public policies that delve into houselessness by understanding its dimensional heterogeneity and complexity. In this sense, social movements representing houseless peoples (such as the National Movement of the People Experiencing Houselessness (MNPR)), civil society institutions (such as Pastoral of the Streets (Pastoral do Povo da Rua)) and university extension and active research groups (such as the Nucleus of Community Psychology at the Federal University of Ceará (NUCOM-UFC)), form a large network of advocacy, knowledge and support collectively constructing strategies to develop and demand intersectoral actions towards overcoming houselessness. The groups carry out affirmative actions on their own, mostly subsidized by donations or third-sector funding, and also dialogue with the government in spaces—such as the Street Forum of Fortaleza (Fórum da Rua)—to debate, propose and demand intersectoral policy-making. Recent accomplishments include the inclusion of houseless people in the municipality’s Social Renting Program (Programa de Locação Social)—which provides a monthly financial aid to covered families in order to assist them with renting expenses (Canal Habitação, 2016)— and the active participation of the Street Forum in the development and implementation of a methodology for the most recent census of the houseless people of Fortaleza, in 2021.

The current scenario of weakening rights and state capitulation to the interests of capital presents multiple challenges to houseless people, who are increasingly pressured by the aggravation of vulnerabilities, by the threat to their permanence and by the criminalization of their existence. However, they also resist in the face of adversity by collectively articulating strategies to combat the vulnerabilities presented and by claiming participation in decision and policy-making spaces.

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⁴ The documentary can be watched in full, with English, Spanish or Portuguese subtitles, through the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxzQ7HhIsTI>.

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