

Brazil's Prison Population Almost Doubles in 8 Years. It's World's Highest Rate.

Contributed by Daisy Nascimento
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The situation of the Rio Interstate Police (Polinter), a police precinct that agglomerates prisoners in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, reflects a reality affecting the country's entire prison system, says Marcelo Freixo.

Freixo is a historian and researcher with the non-governmental organization, Global Justice. "Jails nowadays are a very expensive tool. So, to deprive somebody's freedom in the prisons, only if they really pose a danger to society," he said.

The researcher represents one of the four organizations that endorsed a report containing accusations that Polinter inmates are obliged to sign a declaration assuming full responsibility for their own physical integrity, when they choose to remain in cells dominated by the criminal faction known as the "Red Command."

The report, forwarded to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Center, also reveals the "subhuman conditions and cruel and degrading treatment" to which inmates are submitted.

According to Freixo, the country's prison population grew 93% between 1995 and 2003, compared with the international average of 30%. It is the highest rate in the world. He called for a profound debate on the application of alternative sentences in the country. These sentences currently represent 10% of the total.

He cited as examples the experiences of some Latin American and European countries and what has been done in the state of São Paulo - which concentrates 40% of Brazil's prisoners - in which there are smaller prisons in the interior of the state, administered in a partnership between the government and the community, that have managed to reduce the degree of criminal recidivism and the instances of violence.

According to data that appear in the report, the 21 cells in the precinct house approximately 1,200 inmates, an average of 60 prisoners per cell.

The Global Justice representative considered the case extremely serious, and he said that Rio de Janeiro's prison system has assumed the character of a social death penalty instrument, beginning the moment in which there are no prospects or project for the reinsertion of these individuals.

The report was produced by the organizations Global Justice, Torture Never Again, the Rio de Janeiro State University's Laboratory for the Analysis of Violence, and the Rio de Janeiro Prison Reform Association.

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