Original article

"Hands up!": Police stop-and-frisk, racism and structural violence among black youth from three capitals in the Brazilian Northeast[1]

"Mão na cabeça!": abordagem policial, racismo e violência estrutural entre jovens negros de três capitais do Nordeste

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Abstract

The intersection between race, social class, territorial belonging and age profile has been decisive in producing the criteria of suspicion employed by Brazilian police. Young blacks who are poor and inhabit favelas are a prime target for police control actions such as the stop-and-frisk. This article presents the results of a study exploring the experiences and perceptions of police approach as voiced by young blacks from neighborhoods that are socially vulnerable and/or have high levels of violence. The study was carried out in the cities of Salvador, Recife and Fortaleza. The research was guided by the following questions: how do young blacks experience and (re)signify their relationship with the police and, more specifically, the police approach? To what extent do social belonging markers, such as racial profile, class and territory, influence the stop-and-frisk process? A qualitative study was carried out by means of focus groups, conversation circles and semi-structured interviews with black youths aged 15 to 29 living in peripheral neighborhoods of the three aforementioned capitals. The data revealed that racial segregation and racism present in the structure and relational dynamics of Brazilian society – as well as its denial and/or naturalization – influence the police's "decision-making" and way of dealing with black youth in the three investigated capitals.

Keywords: Black Youth; Police Controls; Institutional Racism; Structural Violence.

Resumo

A intersecção entre raça, classe social, pertencimento territorial e perfil etário tem sido determinante na produção dos critérios de suspeição na prática policial brasileira. Jovens negros, pobres e moradores de favelas configuram o público alvo das abordagens policiais. Propõe-se, neste artigo, apresentar os resultados do estudo que explorou experiências e percepções de jovens negros(as) pertencentes a bairros socialmente vulneráveis e/ou com altos índices de violência nas cidades de Salvador, Recife e Fortaleza, relacionadas com abordagem policial. A pesquisa foi guiada pelas seguintes questões: como jovens negros vivenciam e (re)significam a relação com a polícia e, mais especificamente, a abordagem policial? Em que medida marcadores de pertencimento social, tais como perfil racial, classe e território, influenciam no processo de abordagem? Foi realizado um estudo qualitativo através de grupos focais, rodas de conversa e entrevistas semiestruturadas com jovens negro(as) de 15 a 29 anos, moradores de bairros periféricos das três capitais referidas. Os dados revelaram que a segregação racial e o racismo, presentes na estrutura e dinâmicas relacionais da sociedade brasileira, assim como sua negação e/ou certa naturalização, influenciam a "tomada de decisão" e o modo de atuar da polícia frente à juventude negra nas três capitais investigadas.

Palavras-chave: Juventude Negra; Abordagem Policial; Racismo Institucional; Violência Estrutural.

Introduction

Youth is not necessarily defined by age, comprising factors that are related to intense biological, psychological, social and cultural changes, which vary according to different social classes, cultures, historical periods, ethnicities, gender and other determinants (Unesco, 2004). In this sense, it would be more appropriate to adopt the notion of "youths" (plural), considering that, although this category may encompass individuals who share a certain age group and stage of life, they differ from each other by their different social and cultural belonging (Pais, 1996).

It is important to consider the extent to which varied material and symbolic configurations affect the lives of young people, including markers of social belonging such as gender, race, social class, and their intersections. The reality of Brazilian young blacks in particular paints a picture of extreme social vulnerability. They appear at the top of familial poverty rankings and are also majoritary among indexes of unemployment, illiteracy and school evasion, besides being the main victims of urban violence and the preferential targets of murders and police excesses (Bento; Beghin, 2005).

According to a survey conducted by the National Youth Secretariat (SNJ), the Brazilian youth is large, diverse and marked by severe inequalities, highlighting the need for an understanding of the different contexts that make up the reality of this public, comprised by people in the 15 to 29 years old age bracket (Brasil, 2013). Studies reveal that civil rights violations fall preferentially on the young, the poor and the black. These social groups are deprived of the immunities granted to citizens in Brazilian society's middle and upper strata (Adorno, 1996). Between 2005 and 2015, for example, the homicide rate of individuals between 15 and 29 years of age in Brazil increased by 17.2%. Meanwhile, although non-black individuals' mortality decreased by 12.2%, there was an increase of 18.2% in the homicide rate of blacks (Cerqueira, et al., 2017).

One might find it pertinent to question the relationship between a specific group of youth and the state's institutional security agents: the military police. The statistics available in Brazil

suggest their criteria of suspicion combine racial identity with other discriminatory markers, such as class, territorial belonging, and age profile. In this scenario, blacks who are young, poor and live in favelas are among the most vulnerable to police violence.

This is how racial profiling – a term used in the United States to describe "racially biased suspect-identification practices" (or, more specifically, the fact that skin color is a determining factor in policemen's decision to effect a police approach) – (Amar, 2005, p. 236, our translation). It is worth emphasizing that racial profiling is a form of police-perpetrated violence, a phenomenon that has rarely been dealt with in Brazilian research. Nonetheless, the black youth of urban peripheries has been the phenomenon's preferential target.

There is no doubt that violence is a consolidated theme in public health research, where the process of specialization has led to an emphasis on specific cross-sections of people affected by the issue, as seen in gender violence or domestic violence, with the victimization of women and children being particularly prominent in the latter. However, the low visibility, within this production, of the theme of violence directed at youth – and especially black youth – stands out. The silence regarding the mortality of these young people due to violent causes involving the action of state agents, in proportions that make it permissible to speak of a black youth genocide, reaches the point of embarrassment. At the beginning of this decade, studies already pointed out that "141 murders are committed each month by state agents. The murders committed by the police follow the logic of violence in general: 70% of the dead are young people between 15 and 29 years of age" (Mariz; Rizzo, 2011, p. 6, our translation).

Based on these premises, we propose an analysis of the results of a study situated at the interface between public health and public security. This research targeted experiences related to police control and to the perceptions of low-income blacks from neighborhoods (in the cities of Salvador, Recife and Fortaleza) that are socially vulnerable and/or have high rates of violence. Our research questions were the following: how do young blacks experience and (re)signify their relationship with the police and, more specifically, the police approach? To what extent do social belonging markers, such as racial profile, class and territory, influence the police approach?

The police stop-and-frisk is considered a basic instrument for crime control and the maintenance of social order. It can be described as an encounter between a police agent and the interpellated subject; such an encounter takes place on the basis of a suspicion that should, theoretically, be grounded on technical and/or discretionary standards (Pinc, 2007). It is particularly important to highlight the discretionary nature of this police practice. Discretionary action refers not only to decision-making autonomy, but also to its permeability in the face of external influences: "A police decision is characterized as discretionary when policemen or the police hold the power to execute it […] This does not mean that discretionary police decisions are not influenced by other powers or forces outside the police" (Muniz, 2008, p. 3-4, our translation).

The concept of social representations – defined by Roger Chartier (1991) as the historically determined attribution of meanings to things, people and phenomena – is especially opportune to understand the mechanisms underlying the building of 'reasonable' suspicion and the discretionary dimension of police practice. The production of meanings in such a way is also a reflection of the asymmetry at the core of power relations and processes of social domination, the effects of which can be decisive in the stigmatization of certain social groups.

Since we are concerned with the incidence of racism in a type of police action that is inexorably linked to a state institution, we cannot but evoke the category of institutional racism. This form of racism refers to an institutional modus operandi that contributes to the naturalization and reproduction of racial inequality. In bringing up this concept, we intend to confer visibility to the processes of indirect discrimination that occur within institutions, resulting from mechanisms that, to a certain extent, operate in spite of individuals (López, 2012).

Institutional racism is also recognized as an expression of structural violence, a notion that Paul Farmer (2005) attributes to institutional violence – an expression of racial and gender discrimination (among other discriminatory forms). Institutional violence is generated in contexts of inequality in the historically constructed political, economic and institutional power relations. This inequality is manifested both at the macro-structural – encompassing the economic, cultural and political systems responsible for processes of oppression and exclusion that aggravate social vulnerability – and microsocial levels, such as in the family (Boulding, 1997, p. 268).

In public security, institutional racism acts on the basis of three main mechanisms: (1) via segregation-promoting legislation and the direct action of legislative agents; (2) via omission, when actors reproduce practices and instruments that impede the consolidation of social protection networks, generating socio-racial and territorial distortions; and (3) via the actions of individuals or groups driven by forms of prejudice that have been instigated by an institutional setting conducive to civil rights violations, stigmatization and discriminatory processes (Andrade; Andrade, 2014).

Methodology

This study was part of a broader research analyzing the phenomenon of violence and other indicators of social vulnerability that affect black youth (15 to 29 years of age) in the Northeast region of Brazil, considering the role played by institutional racism as well as the limits and possibilities of social protection devices.

The results presented here are derived from one of the qualitative segments of the aforementioned research. This specific segment focused on the issue of police approaches, racism and social vulnerability in three capital cities of the Northeast region: Salvador, Recife, and Fortaleza. Listening to young people living in popular and/or peripheral neighborhoods was paramount among the employed research methods. Data regarding this population were produced through focus groups, conversational meetings and semi-structured interviews, with the narratives of young men and women from 15 to 18 years of age, residents of peripheral neighborhoods, as the main object of analysis.

It is worth noting that, from 2004 to 2014, the three selected states had the highest rates of external-cause mortality in the Northeast, especially deaths associated with Violent, Lethal and Intentional Crimes. Most of these crimes' victims were self-declared black and brown youth.

Neighborhoods in the three capitals were selected based on the following characteristics: peripheral or blue-collar areas with high levels of violence, outstanding social vulnerability, and precarious social-services infrastructure. Also decisive was the presence of mediating agents able to promote the research team's insertion. With these criteria in mind, the following locations were selected: in Salvador, the neighborhoods of Calabar and Engenho Velho de Brotas; in Recife, the neighborhoods of Santo Amaro and Casa Amarela and, in Fortaleza, the neighborhoods of Mondumbim and Jangurussu.

The support of a network of local partners was fundamental for the development of field work, notably: in Fortaleza, the Laboratory of the Youth, the Violence Studies Laboratory, and the Human Resources in Health Observatory, all from the Universidade Federal do Ceará; in Recife, the Racial Equality Office of the Secretariat of Social Development and Human Rights, the Municipal Secretariat of Health, and the Factory Social Project; in Salvador, the Municipal Health Secretariat and community leaders from the Calabar neighborhood, especially members of the Calabar Ideology Association.

Following the suggestions of local partners (including youth leaders) and the availability of young people participating in the research, the data collection process presented certain variations when comparing the three capitals. In the first stage of collection, a total of seven focus groups (each composed of a maximum of 15 and a minimum of 10 participants) were carried out with young men and women, with a predominance of blacks and browns, residents of popular (and highly socially vulnerable) neighborhoods. These focus groups had the following distribution: two in Salvador,

two in Fortaleza, and three in Recife. In the second stage, an attempt was made to individually listen to the male and female participants. This was possible in Fortaleza and Recife, where three additional focus groups were carried out in each city, per the following distribution: one with young males, another with young females (in both cases regardless of sexual orientation), and another with mixed sexes, preserving the sample size and ethnic-racial profile of the previous FGs.

In Salvador, however, the second phase of data collection went according to a different configuration, given that young people had difficult adhering to focus group meetings. The upsurge of police violence in the city's popular neighborhoods prevailed as an explanation for this resistance by the local youth. The importance of this circumstance was read between the lines when potential young participants declared they were afraid of being involved, at that moment, in a research on the patterns of police control. After several attempts, we managed to organize a mixed focus group with fifteen young students from a state school in one of the selected neighborhoods. Its age, socioeconomic and ethnic-racial profile was similar to that of the other FGs.

One of the central strategies to approach the youth of the other selected neighborhood was to build a rapport with the local leaders by means of an agenda of cultural activities – graffiti, dance, poetry, etc. In all events, conversation circles were held with the young participants, addressing the set of themes contemplated by the project. After analyzing the content produced by the conversation circles, two were selected due to their similarities (in terms of duration, dynamics and themes) with FGs carried out in the other capitals.

The focus groups and conversation circles were guided by the same basic script, which covered the following topics: (1) identity and the experience of "being young"; (2) participants' experiences of violence and racism; (3) the relationship of young people with the police in situations of potential police approach; and (4) aspects related to social vulnerability and social protection mechanisms. In this article, our focus lies on the data regarding topics 3 and 4.

For the selection of young people to integrate the semi-structured interviews – which had a script covering the abovementioned topics, exploring them in-depth – priority was given to emblematic cases (notably young FG participants who had problematic experiences in their encounters with the police). Based on this criterion, a minimum of four and a maximum of six interviews were defined for each capital.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Public Health Institute of the Universidade Federal da Bahia. In addition to following Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council, we are also in compliance with Resolution No. 510, April 7, 2016, which deals with research ethics in the Human and Social Sciences, and with the Code of Ethics for Anthropologists of the Brazilian Association of Anthropology, created in 1986/1988 and updated in 2011/2012.

Results and discussion

"Not a day goes by when we don't stumble upon the police": reasonable suspicion and the police approach according to young blacks

Firstly, it is worth noting that there is a great convergence between the results found in the three municipalities, despite differences in their respective ethnic-racial patterns. These differences, as we will discuss, seem to explain some distinctions observed in the perception of youth regarding the weight of race and social class over discrimination and, therefore, over their ability to recognize manifestations of racism in police practice.

The narratives of young people in Recife, Salvador and Fortaleza highlighted the tension that precedes and accompanies the police encounter, which we term Ground Zero. Generally, the most direct encounter between young people and police takes place during approach procedures, in contexts in which young people are identified and considered according to degrees of suspicion. At this point, they are exposed and subjected to the legal power of police

agents in the exercise of their official function, as shown in the following excerpt:

> *As I was saying, even with this school uniform here, with a backpack on my back and a book in my hand, if the man* [the police] *crosses paths with me, it's a sure thing: I know I'm going to be stopped. I get frisked,[2] my backpack is opened, and they keep looking for shit inside, like drugs, weapons, or stolen stuff. I'm not even involved with crime, but they treat me like a thug and stay right behind me, like they want me to play the snitch, so society can have an answer.* (GFJ-Misto 1_J3_SSA)

In the three capitals, it became clear that the police's decision-making process, as well as the specific configuration of individual actions themselves – including their mandatory technical-operational protocol – is strongly influenced by social representations of crime, violence, the suspicion profile, the police authority, and the maintenance of social order, among other categories.

According to Pinc (2014), "reasonable suspicion" relies on the conjunction of three main factors: place, situation, and subject behavior. However, our findings indicate a broader spectrum, covering five basic criteria of suspicion, described in Chart 1 in decreasing order of importance, according to young people's perceptions.

Chart 1 – Criteria that substantiate reasonable suspicion according to research interlocutors, in the three capitals

	Criteria	Elements	Situation
I.	Phenotype	Race/color and other ethnic traits	Focus on phenotypic traits, with emphasis on black or brown skin color, flat nose and curly or 'black' style of hair.
2.	Territorial belonging/ economic situation	Belonging to communities (*favelas*) configured as territories with high levels of violence and crime, besides being located in peripheral areas of their respective cities.	Belonging to or traveling through this territory is also preponderant, since this demonstrates, in and of itself, a connection between the subject and the space that has been aprioristically determined as the "place of crime." Economic situation also characterizes someone as a suspect: if they are circulating in an upscale neighborhood, their profile will contrast with that of the resident and passerby who is expected to be in that location.
3.	Appearance	Aesthetic aspects	Marks and signs associated with the imaginary of criminal trajectory: certain types of clothing, accessories and shoes, tattoos with specific designs, marks and scars on the body that resemble firearm or melee-weapon injuries.
4.	Attitudes/behaviors	Way of acting and behavior in the face of 'ground zero'	The subject's way of walking, their language, gestures, reactions in the presence of a police officer ("looking away," "running," "turning around," "hiding," "throwing something on the floor," "sudden change of behavior" etc.); or even to be known to the police as having a previous connection with crime, i.e. a "rap sheet."
5.	Exterior features	Contextual features of the location	Poor lighting, alleyways, proximity to drug trafficking spots, late night etc.; type of vehicle, such as scooters and bicycles; to carry objects such as packages, backpacks, bags etc.

2 In Brazil, one slang for abusive police frisks and searches is 'baculejo,' a term used by young people. The 'baculejo' is usually accompanied by some kind of violation regarded as police truculence.

It became clear that determining the degree of suspicion involves a progressive combination of these five criteria. Negative adjectives differ between men and women and are prevalent in police agents' behavior: when the suspect is a man, attention is doubled and, generally, one acts more energetically.

Having one of the characteristics associated with the five criteria, especially phenotype-related characteristics, goes a long way towards placing a young person under suspicion. If their phenotypical characteristics are associated with some other marker or more than one marker, the young person incurs a greater risk of being recognized as a: for young males, criminal/marginal/thug/'element'/young offender; for young women, 'piriguete'/'maloqueira'/thug wife (women suffer greater sexual harassment violations).

The data confirmed what has long been discussed in Brazil by academia, political sectors and other social actors. In the three capitals, all self-declared young blacks participating in the research had already been approached at least once in their lives, and the vast majority went through this experience very frequently. It became clear that the frequency of stop-and-frisk approaches – which ranged from just once to daily – depended heavily on the intensity of subjects' black skin tone: the darker the tone, the more frequently one was approached. Among young brown people, the majority had gone through an approach. Among those who declared themselves white, there was only one report (in Recife). Regarding gender, men were approached more frequently than women. Stop-and-frisk cases involving the latter were usually less violent.

This result confirms the findings of Barros (2008), who showed that black/brown skin color played a major role in the stop-and-frisk decision-making of Recife's military police officers. His conclusions point to the existence of racial profiling based on the use of biased discretionary perceptions in police officers' suspect identification procedures.

However, some differences were observed between the three cities regarding people's perceptions as to what degree each of the five criteria influenced the decision to stop and frisk. In Salvador, reported episodes of police excess were mostly directly associated with ethnic-racial markers, combined with territorial belonging factors, as seen in this excerpt: *Man, I'm not a criminal. But I do look like one, because I'm black, poor and live here in this place, which they say is a place for bandits, right?* (GFJ-Misto 1_J3_SSA).

In Recife, alongside the phenotype, the issue of appearance, especially clothing, was often highlighted in young people's reports. Being a young black man wearing clothes that are characterized as "criminal fashion" would be sufficient to qualify one as a suspect. When dealing with this issue, young people's discourse expressed a mixture of criticism and naturalization:

If you saw me, black like I am, walking down the street at night, the way I'm [dressed] *right here? Riding around all smooth like that, with a John cap and these cyclone shorts?* [...] *If I were in the policeman's shoes, passing by on the street, and saw a guy like me, all easygoing, walking at night, yeah, I would stop and frisk the guy, because surely he was going to do something wrong. This is pretty much written on the stone: if you're black, poor and from Santo Amaro* [a vulnerable neighborhood in Recife]*, walking around at night on the street, yeah, you're a criminal.* (GFJ-Misto 1_J10_ REC)

In the case of Fortaleza, socioeconomic status – or, in the words of young participants, being poor and residing in the periphery – emerged among criteria pointed out as determinants of one's likelihood of being targeted by police approaches. The first report, reproduced below, emphasizes territorial belonging. The second, on the other hand, makes it clear that, even from an individual standpoint, police approaches are a daily occurrence, following a pattern similar to that reported by young people from the other two municipalities.

Depending on the place, things happen differently and, apart from the place, it also depends on the person it is happening to [...] *So, yeah, the baculejo depends on the place you find yourself in.* [...] *but it will also depend a lot on who you are, your hair style, the clothes you're wearing, the color of your skin.* (EF_J2_ FOR)

After the police themselves, we are really the ones to talk about approaches, 'cause the stop-and-frisk thing is a part of our lives. Not a day goes by we are not stopped; not a day goes by we are not afraid; not a day goes by we are not facing the police. (GFJ-Misto 3_J7_FOR)

For Muniz and Paes-Machado (2010), the tendency towards stereotypization of behaviors, groups or contexts contributes to strengthening the discretionary component in the legal use of police power. Considering the negative and pejorative images often associated with youth, notably those related to violent behavior, the young black man becomes a preferential target in the construction of reasonable police suspicion. The rules of the game must be followed. Black youth are seen as deviant and as standing in direct breach of these rules and, therefore, they must be contained. The objects of restraint are those "who 'let themselves die,' or 'make themselves' die: those who [have to] answer for their [purportedly] marginal or deviant conduct, presenting themselves as a danger to respectable citizens" (Vianna; Neves, 2011, p. 31, our translation)

Based on this labeling process, the target of the reprimand is selected, and the space of criminality is determined, segregating not only the environment, but essentially the people who are part of it (Werneck, 2014). By recognizing the attribution of this negative adjective as legitimate and expanding its magnitude through the process of cultural socialization, the legal apparatus prescribes an entire way of acting, legalizing this institutional behavior in the name of an overarching purpose: promoting public security for some and total marginalization for others.

Thus, stop-and-frisk actions targeting these young people are an external, coercive and recurrent encroachment on their private lives. *Actually, I don't even see police approaches as* [legitimate] *approaches, but as a violent abuse of power, an absurd invasion, and a disrespect against our basic rights to come and go as we please* (GFJ–Misto 3_J5_REC).

However, in Recife's FGs, the perception of the problem as limited to the personal sphere prevailed: racist practice was regarded as somewhat individualized, with responsibility solely attributed to the police officer who had personally practiced it. The difficulty of recognizing institutional responsibility for the criticized conduct became evident. In this sense, for these young people, approaches would be technical activities conditioned only by police subjectivity. There was no precise association between racism and institutional, legal, technical and operational procedures. Thus, participants attributed a greater weight not to racism in the institution, but rather in institutional agents, who would be passive byproducts of a racist, exclusionary and discriminatory society. For this reason, they referred to the idea that young people like them – black and poor – are more frequently stopped because the police, like the rest of society, sees them as prime suspects in the world of crime, a comprehension summed up in the saying: "police for those who need it" (Muniz; Paes-Machado, 2010).

Participants from Salvador and Fortaleza, on the other hand, had a firmer grasp of the notion that the problems of this practice are not limited to the police and, therefore, did not exempt the institution from responsibility for employing rules based on racist practices to characterize suspicion. They also saw the institution as responsible for the excesses committed by individual policemen, with specific references to limitations in agents' training, and spoke about how Brazilian society's representation of black youth is constitutive of the structural violence to which they are subjected on a regular basis.

It is noteworthy that young people from the three capitals demonstrated familiarity with the procedures of a technically adequate police control action. In Recife and Fortaleza, many recognized it as a necessary instrument for the establishment of public security and social order in the country. Some testimonies identified the police approach as a legitimate activity, arguing that there is no other way to contain and prevent crime; however, they questioned the violence used in stop-and-frisk procedures. Conversely, some reports pointed to a certain degree of empathy regarding the police's conduct. This was brought up in more explicit terms in one of the Salvador FGs.

You have to be decisive. My brother, he is an authority here and he has to be assertive, otherwise folks won't respect him. These guys are only doing their job and nothing else. This is the role of the police. (GFJ-Misto 1_J3_SSA)

This enunciation suggests a willingness to put oneself in the policeman's shoes and understand his behavior. It might be fair to say that, if they were to be incorporated into a police institution, these young people would reproduce the very attitudes they criticize the agents for, given the institutional need to follow a technical-operational protocol and pay heed to the social stereotypes that continue to stigmatize black youth.

Public security institutions are expected to fulfill the role of ensuring social order and citizen security. From this perspective, policemen can even be represented as heroic, insofar as, in the exercise of their function, they would be risking their own lives for the promotion of the greater good. However, for those who often become targets of police approaches due to their racial, social or territorial belonging, among other distinctive features, the image of the police is mostly associated with fear and violence. For these subjects, the police represented a threat first and foremost: they were acutely aware of the power that has been conferred on them, not only to reprimand, but also to kill.

The social function of the police is repression. [...] By arming someone, you're giving them a lot of power. The power, for example, to take someone's life; the police, they have that power, right? The policemen become a threat from the moment they are given their guns. I feel so insecure near them. (EF – J2_FOR).

Abusive practices directed at the black, young and peripheral population were strongly criticized. In Salvador and Recife, reports of police abuse during stop-and-frisk actions were more comprehensive. In the case of women, complaints focused on the fact that they were frisked by male agents, even though the law says they have the right to be searched by female police.[3]

Among the most extreme situations, the case of a young black man from Recife stood out. He was the victim of a radically violent approach by the police. His head bandaged during the interview, he told us that he had gotten a 25-point suture in the Emergency Care Unit, after being approached by a garrison within his own community and hit by a gun butt.

In fact, prevalent in the researched universe was the perception that "the man in uniform" represents insecurity, arousing strong feelings of fear and revolt. After all, as mentioned in several reports, the target of the most repressive actions is not "anyone." This target's profile has all the same characteristics of people at the top of firearm mortality indicators: being young, black, male, low-income, low-education level and a resident of peripheral neighborhoods.

"We are inferior": young blacks' perception of discrimination and racism in police stop-and-frisk actions

As reported by Pimenta (2014), society sees black youth on dichotomous bases: they are often framed as part of a "social problem," that is, as young offenders deviating from accepted rules, norms and laws. These people are sometimes placed in the category of "risk," since they might become deviant offenders due to lacking the adult discernment necessary for making good life choices.

Perhaps this dichotomous configuration derives from the widespread perception among the young people surveyed that they are in the middle of "a crossfire." Their ethnic-racial, generational or territorial belonging makes them more vulnerable to abusive practices on the part of agents who have been designated by society as responsible for ensuring the safety of the population as a whole. Mistrust towards such a society cannot but increase if it claims responsibility for protecting its youth under the terms of the law while, at the same time, betraying ever-growing signs that it is incapable

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3 If by any chance the garrison that approaches a woman does not have female agents, it is obligated to send a female police officer who is close to the location.

of accomplishing this very role – going so far as viewing a large portion of its youth not as an object of protection, but rather as an existential threat.

As pointed out by many of our interlocutors, having characteristics of what the police considers a "standard suspect" constitutes a factor of social exclusion. A recurrent theme in the narratives was criticism against a process that classifies some as "inferior" or "bad" and others as "superior" or "better." This view is expressed in clear terms in this account extracted from the Recife FG: *This is society's major ignorance: it classifies a group and imposes what is considered good and what is considered bad, always choosing to exclude one or another* (GFJ-Misto 3_JM3_REC).

Another emphatic point was that this process is not restricted to a specific individual, but rather affects an entire group of people who share the same attributes: being black, young, poor, and residing in the urban periphery. As previously mentioned, only in Fortaleza did racial belonging not top the list of elements that influence, in the view of young people, the police's decision to stop and frisk.

These reports by young people in the three capitals are an invitation for reflection on how much the police corporation's practices reflect police agents' distorted socialization process. This process can develop itself only in a society in which racism is a structuring element of institutions and relations. For Almeida (2018), structural racism transcends not only the interpersonal dimension, but also the institutional dimension. It refers to the historical and political dynamics through which political, economic, legal and familial relationships are constituted, forging the social conditions that allow racially identified groups to systematically be discriminated against, whether directly or indirectly (Almeida, 2018).

Once internalized and reproduced within police corporations, racism manifests itself in the behaviors and practices of police agents. Since these agents operate through mechanisms and legal instruments that define their organizational *modus operandi*, this type of racism can reasonably be defined as institutional racism (Wieviorka, 2007). Its existence amplifies young people's feeling of helplessness, as their basic rights are violated by police action on a daily basis. Under these conditions, they cannot help but wonder to whom they can turn to.

We are the most often stopped, and it is not just your average stop-and-frisk procedure. Actually, I don't even see police approaches […] as [legitimate] approaches, but as a violent abuse of power, an absurd invasion, and a disrespect against our basic rights to come and go as we please. Now tell me: who can we turn to when it's the police themselves who, in my view, are committing a crime? (GFJ-Misto 3_J3_REC)

According to the Brazilian social imaginary, the black individual has a propensity to be violent and criminal, because he belongs to the periphery, more often than not regarded as a place of criminality. Young black people experience the consequences of this process in their daily lives, especially during police encounters:

There is a stereotype in society itself that the black guy is really a criminal, due to his shape, the way he walks. He's a criminal because of the chains he's wearing, he's a thug, so this whole thing helps [the policeman] *arrive at the scene kicking and punching, no hesitation, since we're talking about a black man instead of a white man.* (GFJ-Misto 1_J12_SSA)

These are historically sedimented representations that have their origins in Brazilian colonial slavery. At every junction, these historical practices 'presentify' themselves, acquiring new facets. It is fundamental to question what role the police institution plays in Brazilian society's contemporary forms of repression, containment, and, in the last analysis, elimination of the black population (Pires, 2015).

It should be noted that references to the theme or episodes of racism, including institutional racism, were more frequent in Salvador and emerged with special emphasis when people discussed the truculence of public security agents who approached black youth. On the other hand, young blacks from the three capitals, especially

Recife, converged towards the recognition of a much more comprehensive, rationalized and standardized racism rooted at Brazil's social structure, deeming society – by way of permissiveness – as co-responsible in the police violence against black youth.

With regards to the peculiarities observed in Fortaleza, it is necessary to emphasize that the municipality is located in a state in which the black presence is made virtually invisible. This issue is problematized in an article by Bezerra (2011), who vehemently questions this. Moreover, Santos and Cunha Júnior (2010) call special attention to the lack of recognition of the presence and contribution of the black population in the historical and socio-cultural formation of Ceará, highlighting the implications of this process over this segment's identity formation and in its marginalization.

It is also worth noting that, although the racial issue had less prominence in the reports by Fortaleza youth, we did find reflections of a very sharp consciousness of racial discrimination against local black youth:

> The stereotype is already established, there are no more arguments to be made, they have already put us into suspicion. [The police] have already chosen who the criminal is, no matter how well dressed someone might be [...] When you enter a store, for instance, the identity of the criminal has already been established. Considering the training the military policeman gets today, he already knows who the criminal is – you can't really do anything about it, don't you know? So yeah, it gets complicated. (GFJ-Misto 3_J1_FOR)

This narrative reiterates the issue of stereotypes associated with black men and points out their pervasiveness in police training. In addition, it draws attention to its reverberation across different social contexts. In this regard, it should be noted that the young participants' experiences of racism were not restricted to encounters with the "man in uniform." Racism is also experienced at the school, university, work, in the context of healthcare institutions, among friends and even in the family environment.

In view of the forcefulness of the data presented here, how can one explain the persistence of the myth of racial democracy in the Brazilian social imaginary? This idea has contributed to exempt both state and society from their responsibility for young blacks' vulnerability. It directly contributes to obfuscating the perverse consequences of the continuous and systematic denial of opportunities and basic human rights to young blacks (Fernandes, 2007).

Final considerations

This study reiterates the understanding that reasonable suspicion, a lawful mechanism that precedes the act of approach, is composed of two interdependent dimensions: the technical-operational, which corresponds to institutionalized norms and, in principle, is based on objective criteria; and the discretionary, which clearly depends on agents' judgment and, therefore, has a more subjective character. In a democratic society in which the rule of law prevails, the technical-operational dimensions of reasonable suspicion would be expected to prevail. Nevertheless, we found that the discretionary dimension – which reflects social representations, beliefs and moral values prevalent in society (Trad et al., 2016) – is in fact the main determinant in the construction of the suspicion profile.

Our findings indicate that young blacks and browns are frequent targets of police stop-and-frisk actions in the three investigated Northeast capitals. It became evident that racial segregation and racism, present in the relational structure and dynamics of Brazilian society, as well as their denial and/or naturalization, influence "decision-making" and the police's way of dealing with black youth, as well as young people's reactions.

The lack of effective inspection by the competent public security bodies contributes to the dissemination of discriminatory and racist practices among police officers. The frailties of public policies aimed at youth, as well as the weakness or absence of social protection networks, intensify the vulnerability experienced by young blacks, whose trajectories negatively intersect with the paths of the Military Police in the latter's daily work of social control.

The experiences and perceptions shared by young people who participated in the Salvador, Recife and Fortaleza focus groups, conversation circles or interviews revealed the broader conditions of social exclusion black youth are relegated to in Brazil as a whole. More specifically, the study bluntly demonstrated the context of structural violence to which these young people are subjected, especially in the male segment, as black men are the most frequent victims of truculent approaches.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that these young people's framing as "marginals" has been justifying increased repression, leading them to appear more prominently in the public security agenda than in social protection and youth health promotion agenda.

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