

Brazil has a new biggest favela, and not in Rio de Janeiro

By Carla Bridi | AP

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Streets are flooded by rain in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasília, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023. The number of households in Sol Nascente, which means Rising Sun, has swelled 31% since 2010 to more than 32,000, surpassing the hillside Rocinha favela in Rio that had been Brazil's most populous, according to preliminary data from the ongoing census. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

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A resident walks between concrete structures after it rained in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Tuesday, March 21, 2023.

Sol Nascente, which means Rising Sun, suffers poor public transport and has unpaved, impassable roads, which flood frequently during the months of summer rains. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

SOL NASCENTE, Brazil (AP) — The buzzing main avenue of this poor Brazilian neighborhood is filled with people popping off buses after work or grabbing a bite. Teens attend an open-air rap battle and gymnastics class. Hymns and prayers from tiny church services spill into the night.

Its an ordinary Wednesday in Brazils biggest favela, or low-income neighborhood. And for the first time since poverty, lack of opportunity and economic inequality caused favelas to mushroom across many of the nations cities, that superlative doesnt belong to a favela in Rio de Janeiro.

Sol Nascente (Rising Sun, in English) is just 21 miles (34 kilometers) from capital Brasilia in the Federal District, whose GDP per capita is by far higher than any Brazilian state, underscoring the inequality between affluent public servants neighborhoods and the districts outskirts.

The number of households in Sol Nascente has swelled 31% since 2010 to more than 32,000, surpassing Rios hillside Rocinha favela that had been Brazils most populous, according to preliminary data from the ongoing census. Rocinha has almost 31,000 households, the data show.

Along Sol Nascentes unpaved dirt roads of self-built homes and inside the main strips busy stores and restaurants, no one The Associated Press spoke welcomed the new ranking,

“We still need lots of things, like basic sanitation and infrastructure, but people nowadays have better conditions. Some even have a car,” said street vendor Francisca Célia, 43.

Célia added that, despite its challenges, Sol Nascente isnt nearly as disorganized nor dangerous as the favelas she saw when visiting Rio three years ago. Plus, available plots of land are much bigger.

“Its a paradise here,” she said.

The growth of Sol Nascentes population reflects new arrivals searching for cheap or unoccupied land to build homes, whereas elsewhere in the Federal District poor people often pay relatively high rents. It also mirrors the surge of people living in working-class neighborhoods nationwide, driven by a generalized housing crisis caused by deep recession and higher rent prices, the effects of which were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Marcelo Neri, an economist and social researcher at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university and think tank.

The number of people living in areas the national statistics institute classifies as “subnormal agglomerates” jumped 40% to 16 million people since the 2010 census, according to the institutes preliminary data, reviewed by the AP. Brazils population as a whole grew less than 9% in that period.

Subnormal agglomerates include not just favelas, but also other terms used in Brazil to describe urban areas with irregular occupation and deficient public services. Residents of Sol Nascente acknowledge that it once was a favela, but told the AP that many areas of the community have outgrown that term.

The statistics institute ceases to consider communities subnormal agglomerates once most residents gain legal title to their properties or all essential services are available, according to the institutes geography coordinator, Cayo Franco.

Favelas grow as settlers move onto unoccupied public and private land, whether on steep hillsides or flatland, like Sol Nascente.

Sol Nascente still has poor public transport and unpaved, impassable roads, which flood frequently during the months of summer rains. Only some residents have obtained legal title, and services arent universally accessible.

“I pay electricity, water, taxes, but theres no sewage nor asphalt here in front,” said Débora Alencar, 39, who moved to Sol Nascente 15 years ago after finding the opportunity to buy land and build a house.

“This is where I gained dignity,” she added.

Alencar runs a collective that receives food, clothing and school materials for the needy. It also provides vocational training for manicurists

and make-up artists, as well as dance and theater classes.

She has also been a community representative since 2019, negotiating with the Federal Districts government for investments. She said she has secured some improvements, but not enough.

A common characteristic among favelas is that the stigma lingers even after residents obtain titles and services, according to Theresa Williamson, executive director of non-profit Catalytic Communities, a Rio-based non-profit that studies favelas.

That sentiment is familiar to Nayara Miguel, a housewife with two kids in a tidy area of Sol Nascente that now has electricity and water, and where the local government recently paved streets and installed public lighting. The federal governments cities ministry has earmarked funds for a housing project there.

“For me, this isnt a favela; its a city,” said Miguel, 30. “Of course, its lacking a lot: I couldnt get a spot in daycare for my daughter, so I cant work; we can get to the hospital, but theres no doctor there to attend to us.”

Neighboring areas still feature shacks. Bruno Ferreira and his wife have been carving out a life in a destitute area of Sol Nascente for the last seven years. They found a place where, with their own hands, they could build a one-bedroom home to call their own and escape the rent trap.

Ferreira, 39, works odd jobs and his wife has a formal, full-time job at a lunch counter. They are raising five children, with a sixth on the way, and saving to put in tile atop their homes earthen floor.

Neither desires to leave.

“Its very good here,” he said. “Its just lacking infrastructure to be beautiful and legal.”