

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

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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.

It's an ordinary Wednesday in Brazil's 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 nation's cities, that superlative doesn't 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 district's outskirts.

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

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



Francisca Celia cleans the glass of her cart where she sells chips, on the main street of the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Monday, March 20, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).



Bruno Ferreira and his son Davi sit on their only bed in their one-room home built by them in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



A resident crosses a street flooded by rain in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Tuesday, March 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



Streets are flooded by rain in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Tuesday, March 21, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).

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“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 isn’t nearly as disorganized nor dangerous as the favelas she saw when visiting Rio three years ago. Plus, available plots of land are much bigger.

“It’s a paradise here,” she said.

The growth of Sol Nascente’s 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 institute’s preliminary data, reviewed by the AP. Brazil’s 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 institute’s 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 aren’t universally accessible.



Debora Alencar, coordinator of the Cultural Collective Sol Nascente that collects food, clothing and school materials for the needy, is reflected in a mirror as she meets with members at the collective's headquarters, in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Monday, March 20, 2023.(AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



A lion sculpture adorns the front yard of a home in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Monday, March 20, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).



Anderson Santana stands next to a wall adorned with Forro themes, a traditional dance from northeastern Brazil, in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).



MCs perform during the Battle of MCs from 02, an open-air rap battle in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).

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“I pay electricity, water, taxes, but there’s 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 District’s 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.



Nayara Miguel and her daughter sit inside their home in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023.(AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).



Residents take a manicure training course at the Cultural Collective Sol Nascente, in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023.(AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



A resident drives his wagon down a street of the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Monday, March 20, 2023.(AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

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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 government's cities ministry has earmarked funds for a housing project there.

"For me, this isn't a favela; it's a city," said Miguel, 30. "Of course, it's lacking a lot: I couldn't get a spot in daycare for my daughter, so I can't work; we can get to the hospital, but there's 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 home's earthen floor.

Neither desires to leave.

"It's very good here," he said. "It's just lacking infrastructure to be beautiful and legal."

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A young woman sweeps the dirt path outside her home in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Wednesday, March 22, 2023.(AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).



A resident walks between concrete structures after it rained in the Sol Nascente favela of Brasilia, Brazil, Tuesday, March 21, 2023.(AP Photo/Eraldo Peres).

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