

Abyss between rich and poor is reflected in deaths from coronavirus

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"I'm in the bathroom alone. There is no one to push the chair. Daughter, help me ". The plea, sent on April 23 by voice message on the cell phone, was made by Verônica Maria de Lima, 44, a resident of Complexo da Maré. She was admitted to a municipal hospital suspected of Covid-19 and, three days later, would die, without ever having the test to confirm whether she had the disease. This is a right that, in Rio, has been given only to patients considered very serious admitted to public units. Or those who have health insurance or between R \$ 210 and R \$ 470 to pay for an exam in private laboratories.

As the pandemic progresses, the gap between those who have greater or lesser purchasing power deepens, and Veronica multiplies in poor regions. If the coronavirus arrived in noble areas like Barra da Tijuca and Leblon, today it spreads and is deadly, especially in the suburbs.

The lethality rate of the disease (relation between deaths and cases) is higher in the planning areas (PAs) of the West Zone. Last Wednesday, it reached 20.8% on AP5.3, which includes neighborhoods like Santa Cruz and Sepetiba, and 16.9% on AP 5.1, in Bangu and Realengo. In the North Zone, AP3.1 (where the Maré and Manginhos complexes are located) reached 13.7%. While in AP4 (Barra, Recreio and surroundings) and AP2.1 (South Zone), the rates were much lower: 8.5% and 7.4%, respectively.

- Lethality exploded in the poorest regions, with a lower Social Development Index (IDS)
- notes the economist André Luiz Marques, coordinator of management programs and public policies at Insper.

In Maré, Veronica's ordeal began on April 20. First, she knocked on the door of the Municipal Hospital Evandro Freire, on Ilha do Governador, which was overcrowded. Then she went to a family clinic close to home, where she was medicated and released. After two days, she got worse and was admitted to UPA da Maré. From there, she was transferred to the island unit she had sought before, where she ended up dying.

– My mother was interned, but I only got information from 3pm to 4pm. People were crowded in the sun to find out about their relatives – says Tainá de Lima da Silva, daughter of Verônica.

The NGO Redes da Maré organized a group to help residents with Covid-19. There are already 80 suspected or confirmed cases monitored. Among them, Luiz Lopes, 67, who died after spending three days in the region's UPA and was discharged on the grounds that there was a lot of demand and that the environment was not ideal for him.

Also in Maré, Michele Araújo lost her father. Without health insurance, Olavo Araújo died at the Ronaldo Gazolla Municipal Hospital in Acari, a reference for Covid-19 in Rio.

“He stayed in a chair for 24 hours until he got a bed,” said Michele.

Despite the fact that part of the deaths of Maré are recorded in neighboring neighborhoods, the lethality of the disease already reaches 30.8%, against 2.4% in Leblon, for example.

– Some areas of Rio have rates higher than that of Italy (13.5%) – compares Daniel Soranz, professor and researcher at Fiocruz. – This is mainly due to the lack of access to adequate health services.

One of the bottlenecks is access to testing. While on the private network, Richet, one of the 15 laboratories authorized to perform tests, had already performed, on Wednesday, 18 thousand RT-PCR tests (through respiratory secretion), the state counted, on the same date, ten thousand analyzes throughout the territory of Rio de Janeiro. And it informed that, through partnerships with universities and institutes, it would expand the capacity to 900 samples per day.

Regarding the difficulties faced by the residents of Maré mentioned in the article, the health departments of the municipality and the state stated that, in their respective units, patients received all due assistance.

“The virus is not democratic”

For academics, the intense social inequality in Brazil made the migration of the virus to the periphery and the interior an even more worrying characteristic than in developed countries.

– The way the epidemic spreads to the poorest population is the most cruel dimension of the tragedy. There is nothing democratic, the virus is not democratic – warns Heloísa Starling, professor of history at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG).

Ligia Bahia, a public health specialist at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and a columnist for the newspaper O Globo, points out that, although everyone is at the same risk of contracting the disease, the difference is in access to diagnosis and treatment:

– The richest live near medical centers of excellence, they arrive by car. The journey of the poorest begins with the difficulties of transportation. Being served in a well-equipped hospital with well-trained professionals makes all the difference.

Economist Marcelo Neri, director of FGV Social, points out that, in Brazil, class E (the lowest) has much less access to health than classes A and B. On the other hand, the poor get sicker and need more hospitalization.

– There is a difference in relation to Europe because, in Brazil, more young people are dying. This indicates that structural inequalities in income and race are influencing the pattern of mortality – analyzes Ligia Bahia. – In the USA, the number of deaths of Latinos and blacks was also higher than that of whites.

Income inequality in Brazil is directly associated with the lack of access to formal work, says economist Marcelo Neri, director of FGV Social. And, in this specific pandemic, he points out, informality is a factor that increases the risk of infection.

– These workers usually work in contact with people. It's Sofia's choice: either they are more likely to be contaminated or lose their income – says Neri, highlighting another negative factor: poor housing, which makes social isolation and hygiene even more difficult, crucial in combating the new coronavirus. – Brazil has become a great laboratory, in the bad sense of the word, to understand the impact of the disease on the lives of the poorest.

For Marcelo Medeiros, visiting professor at Princeton University, in the United States, investing more in social protection would even be a way to guarantee compliance with the isolation. The federal government's emergency aid, in the economist's view, could have been applied more quickly, since Brazil had a few weeks to plan the action:

– Social protection is more than a matter of justice, it helps to ensure collective social well-being.

(Dimitrius Dantas, Elisa Martins and Evelin Azevedo collaborated)