

POLICE KILLINGS AND VICTIMIZATION: GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHENOMENON IN THREE BRAZILIAN STATES^{1,2}

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1 INTRODUCTION

According to a survey conducted by the Brazilian Public Security Forum (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública – FBSP), 21,910 people died due to police interventions in Brazil between 2009 and 2016 (FBSP, 2017). During the same period, 2,996 police officers were also killed (both on and off duty). Such numbers not only rank the Brazilian police among the most lethal force organizations worldwide but also confirms their staff among those who die the most due to the performance of their duty and/or police identification (Misse et al., 2013; Nunes, 2018). Today, police killings and victimization are part of two major public security issues in Brazil, not only because of the large number of human lives lost they entail but also because they project deleterious effects on the processes of consolidation of institutions and democracy in the country (Chevigny, 1991; 1995; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Monjardet, 2002; Adorno, 1998; Neme, 2000).

Aiming to contribute to the debate, this article presents a diagnosis of the police killings and victimization phenomena for three Brazilian states: Minas Gerais, Pernambuco, and Goiás. Here, we seek not only to scale the problem of deaths resulting from police interventions and violent deaths of police officers in those states but also to know, more in-depth, the circumstances and institutional and criminal contexts that characterize such episodes. For this purpose, the work rests on a database comprising 659 incident records registered between 2009 and 2015 by the police forces of those three states and related to the violent deaths of police officers or deaths resulting from police interventions.⁴ Moreover, FBSP's statistical data were also used.⁵

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4. The data analyzed in this article were collected when conducting the research *Diagnosis of the Conditions and Consequences of Policing*, developed between 2014 and 2015. The study was funded with the resources of Public Call for proposals of the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada – Ipea)/National Development Research Program (Subprograma de Pesquisa para o Desenvolvimento Nacional – PNPd) No. 43/2014 and part of the program *Pensando O Direito*, the result of an association between the Secretariat of Legislative Affairs of the Ministry of Justice (Secretaria de Assuntos Legislativos do Ministério da Justiça – SAL/MJ) and Ipea.

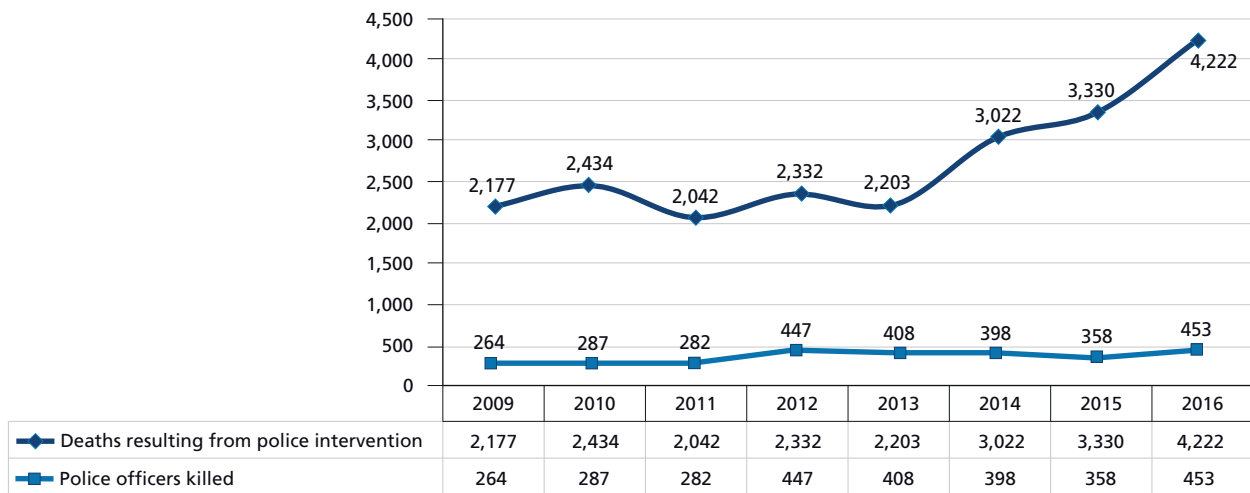
5. Since 2008, the publications edited by FBSP have worked with the concept and methodology of “quality groups” to classify the data levels of accuracy and reliability provided to the institution by the state Secretariats of Public Security. For this classification, the state are allocated into four quality groups: group 1 (highest quality); group 2 (intermediate quality); group 3 (lowest quality); and group 4 (no condition to assess data quality). For this article, both Minas Gerais and Pernambuco are classified as group 1 and Goiás as group 2.

2 POLICE KILLINGS AND VICTIMIZATION: MEASUREMENT CRITERIA AND SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

According to data from the 11th Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security (FBSP, 2017), 4,222 people were killed in Brazil due to police interventions in 2016. During the same year, the number of police officers murdered (both on duty and off duty) reached 453, indicating a ratio of over nine people killed for every police officer murdered for incidents usually classified by the forces as “confrontations” between police officers and suspects, or even “executions” of police officers. Those numbers place the Brazilian police among the most lethal security forces in the world, with an average of approximately eleven deaths per day, but also among those with the highest mortality rates of their agents due to violence, with an average of over one police officer murdered per day.

To get a better view of the scale of this problem in Brazil, one can just compare the national numbers with the ones from other countries that also face severe public security issues. In 2016, while Brazil had a rate of approximately two deaths resulting from police interventions for every 100 thousand inhabitants, South Africa’s rate was just above one death. In Mexico, it was not even 0.3. Even in the United States, a country with approximately 900 thousand active police officers (in Brazil, there are just over 500 thousand), this rate reached 0.13 death for every 100 thousand inhabitants (Zimring, 2017; Nunes, 2018). Figure 1 shows the evolution of cases of police killings and victimization in Brazil between 2009 and 2016.

FIGURE 1
Police killings and victimization in Brazil – number of deaths (2009-2016)



Source: FBSP (2017).
Author’s elaboration.

On the one hand, the public perception that police forces systematically overstep their legal prerogatives to the use of force fosters low levels of trust in the work done by police forces and casts doubt on their own legitimacy as institutions of social control. On the other hand, the observation that Brazilian police officers are subjected to very high rates of victimization also contributes to consolidating, among civil society, organizations, and police officers, a “war culture,” meaning a continuous call for extrajudicial types of conflict resolution and whose most vivid demonstration are the high fatality rates of police actions observed in the country (Skolnick, 1966; Souza and Minayo, 2005).

Aside from measuring the fatality issue and police victimization, studies that aim to understand such phenomena better also face conceptual matters. Empirically, “police lethality” is usually associated with all deaths resulting from police officers’ interventions, only motivated by the exercise of the prerogatives and guidelines that support the police mandate. In the opposite direction, all cases in which there was a violent death of a police officer, as the only result of their concrete or potential exercise of the prerogatives and guidelines supporting the police function and mandate, are classified as occurrences of “police victimization” (including cases in which officers were murdered only because they have been identified as police officers). That is why, traditionally, most studies on the subject include incidents involving both police officers on their regular duty schedule and officers who were off duty or not active (Cano, 1997; Loche, 2010).

Although such definitions seem obvious and intuitive, it is crucial to define them because they help to separate – at least conceptually – the “police lethality” issue from other types of deaths caused by police officers, such as, e.g., crimes connected to activities of “extermination groups,” even if, in practice, there is, in some cases, a relative confluence between the phenomena and the lack of transparency of the classification limits (Misse et al., 2013).

Besides the conceptual issues, the study of police lethality and victimization also faces parametric problems. Authors such as Skolnick and Fyfe (1993), Cano (1997), Bittner (2003), and Nunes (2018), among others, observe that there is no consensus criterion to determine whether the use of force by police organizations in certain situations was necessary, reasonable or appropriate, mainly because lethal force is, to a greater or lesser extent, a resource of social control and maintenance of order used by police organizations worldwide (Geller and Scott, 1992; Chevigny, 1991; 1995; Oliveira, 2012).

There are three criteria often used by specialized studies and also by government agencies to measure the use of lethal force by police: i) the ratio between civilians injured and civilians killed in incidents involving firearms; ii) the ratio between civilians and police officers killed; and iii) the proportion of civilians killed by the police compared with the total of voluntary manslaughters (Cano, 1997; Loche, 2010; Nunes, 2018).

The first criterion rests on data from all incidents, including the use of firearms by police officers. Ideally, police actions in which firearms have been shot would typically result in more civilians injured than killed. When the death toll is higher than the number of people injured, we can infer that the police are making disproportionate use and abuse of power.

The second criterion is based on the assumption that there must be a relatively reasonable ratio between the number of civilians and police killed, above which would be considered a misuse of power by police organizations. Although this indicator could be a good measure of police lethality and victimization, specialized literature has not reached a consensus regarding what should be the boundary line setting the limit of the indiscriminate use of lethal force. Chevigny (1995), for example, assumes the ratio of ten civilians killed for each police officer. Cano (1997), in turn, argues that the ratio of four civilians killed for each police officer would be the reasonable maximum limit.

Both studies proposed their parameters of “tolerable values” based on the observation of the average value that the ratio of civilians/police killed reaches in a group of countries. Nevertheless,

the authors consider the arbitrariness that characterizes the limits considered for this indicator, defined more empirically than conceptually.

The third and last criterion is grounded on the idea that deaths caused by the police cannot represent a significant percentage of the total voluntary manslaughter registered in a given district. Still, the literature has also not reached a consensus regarding what should be the boundary line setting the limit of the abuse of power by the police. In Mexico, for instance, deaths resulting from police interventions represent about 2.4% of the total murders registered in the country (Vivanco, 2015); in the United States, they are approximately 3.6% of the total homicides (Loche, 2010). In turn, in Brazilian states such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, this percentage reaches 9.7% and 8.9%, respectively (Nunes and Rodrigues, 2014).

The significant disparity in data and the methodologies used to measure police lethality and victimization make it difficult to establish clearly defined parameters for classifying these phenomena. So much so that several studies have chosen to simultaneously use more than one measurement criterion to understand the problem of police violence. Even so, a substantial part of these classifications and proposed parameters are still more empirically guided by the average of incident patterns verified in several countries than by technical/conceptual references (Nunes, 2018).

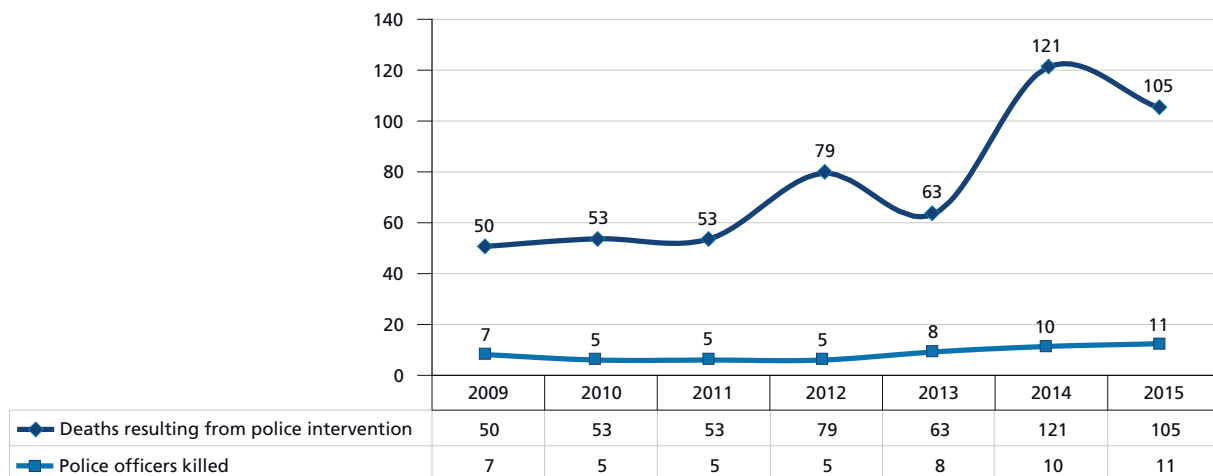
3 POLICE KILLINGS AND VICTIMIZATION IN MINAS GERAIS, PERNAMBUCO AND GOIÁS

3.1 Minas Gerais

Over the last few years, police lethality indicators have significantly increased in Minas Gerais. Between 2009 and 2015, for example, there was a gross growth rate of 110% in the number of victims of police lethality in the state, jumping from fifty deaths resulting from police intervention in 2009 to 105 in 2015. The number of police officers executed or killed in confrontations showed relative stability over the same period, ranging from seven murders in 2009 to eleven dead officers in 2015. Over the studied period, the police killed 524 citizens, and 51 police officers were killed (a ratio of 10.2 civilian deaths for each police officer killed). Figure 2 illustrates these patterns.

FIGURE 2

Police killings and victimization in Minas Gerais – number of deaths (2009-2015)



Source: FBSP (2017).
Author's elaboration.

If we analyze the incident records in more detail, a “typical profile” of the state’s lethal events and police victimization can be built. Geographically speaking, only 30% of the deaths resulting from police interventions registered in Minas Gerais occurred in *favelas* – a different pattern from other studies of this type, especially those carried out in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Almost 80% of those deaths occurred in public spaces, involving, in 77% of cases, police officers who were “on duty.” Nearly 60% of police deaths involved officers working in area units (rather than special units).

In 55% of the records, the officers claimed that the confrontations would have occurred during regular patrolling or while handling incidents. In 32.8% of the cases, lethal force was used during the approach of suspects; in another 44.6% of the incidents, to intervene in crimes in progress, with an average of nine shots fired by police officers and two shots fired by opponents in those incidents. Officers reported the apprehension of firearms in 88% of the incidents and arrests in 48%.

One thing that draws attention to the deaths resulting from police interventions recorded in Minas Gerais is where victims were shot: 32% of the dead were shot in the head and back. This pattern is in blatant disagreement with what is dictated by the different use-of-force regulations adopted by local police forces, suggesting recurrent abuses or misuse of lethal force by police officers.⁶

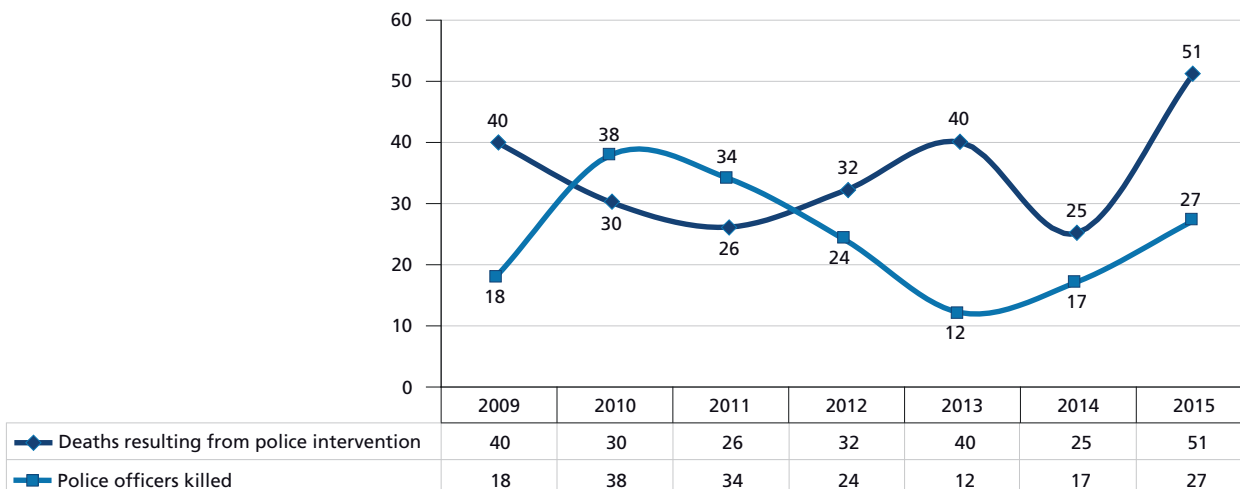
Another aspect worth noting is that, in the state, there is a disproportion between the number of police officers and citizens killed. As previously indicated, between 2009 and 2015, Minas Gerais recorded an average ratio of 10.3 “non-police” killed for each officer killed. This ratio surpasses metrics commonly used by several studies to indicate the abusive or disproportionate use of force by police organizations (Bittner, 2003; Nunes, 2018).

3.2 Pernambuco

Over the last few years, the indicators of police lethality in Pernambuco have also been showing an increasing trend. Between 2009 and 2015, there was a gross growth of over 27% of victims of police lethality in the state, jumping from 40 deaths resulting from police intervention in 2009 to 51 in 2015. Throughout this period, 244 deaths were registered due to police interventions, and 170 police officers were killed: an average ratio of 1.43 citizens killed for each police in Pernambuco during those seven years. Figure 3 presents those numbers.

6. In Minas Gerais, the document that technically regulates the police approaches to using firearms is the Doctrine Notebook No. 1, edited by the Military Police of Minas Gerais (Policia Militar de Minas Gerais – PMMG). It states, “In cases where the military police officer fires his firearm at a person, it is important to consider the different circumstances that may interfere with the accuracy of the shot, as described in the ‘variables partially controlled by the military police officer.’ Therefore – and to ensure that this shot is effective (achieves its objective of immediately stopping the attack) – military police officers will point their weapon at the central part of the aggressor’s body (thoracic area). Whenever circumstances allow and as long as it does not present a safety risk to others or themselves, military police officers may shoot in other areas of the body (mainly legs) to reduce injuries to a minimum (however, there is still the risk of causing severe injuries or death)” (Minas Gerais, 2013, p. 92-93).

FIGURE 3
Police killings and victimization in Pernambuco – number of deaths (2009-2015)



Source: FBSP (2017).
Author's elaboration.

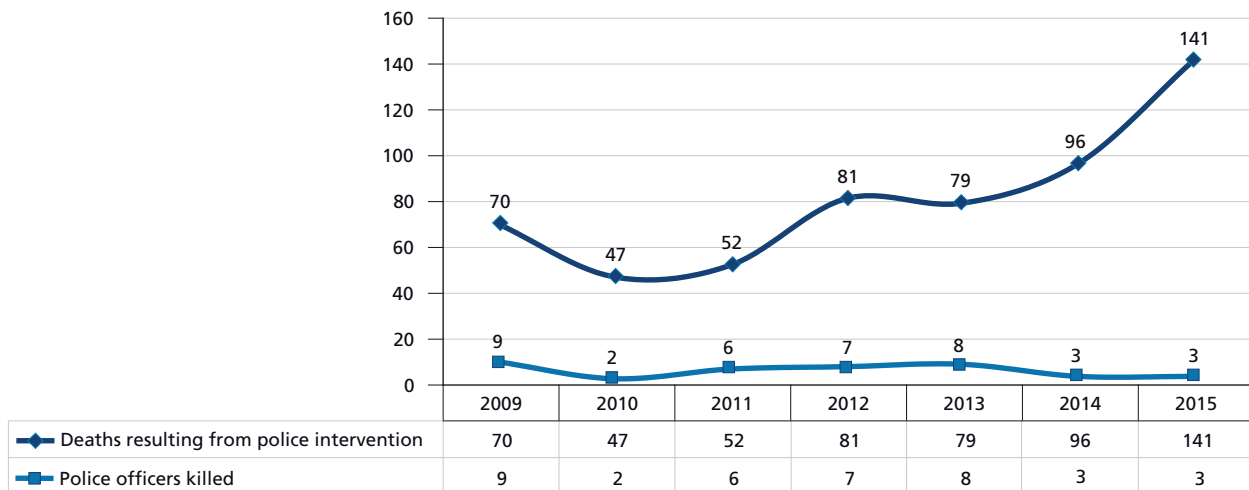
As for Minas Gerais, after analyzing the incident records in Pernambuco, we can also build a “typical profile” of police lethality and victimization in the state. Geographically speaking, 70% of the deaths resulting from police interventions registered in Pernambuco happened outside the *favelas*. Almost 80% of those deaths occurred in public spaces, involving, in 77% of cases, police officers who were “on duty.” In 55% of the records, the officers claimed that the confrontations would have happened during regular patrolling or attending occurrences. In most cases (57%), lethal force was used during the approach of suspects or to intervene in crimes in progress (with an average of two shots fired by both police officers and opponents). It is worth highlighting that over a third of the “non-police” victims were shot in the head and back. Police officers reported the apprehension of firearms in 78% of the cases and arrests in 66%.

One thing that draws attention in Pernambuco – and outlines how complex it is to measure the phenomena of lethality and police victimization – is the relative proportionality between the number of police and “non-police” killed in the state: as previously observed, between 2009 and 2015, there were 1.65 “non-police” killed for each security officer killed. At first, such ratio would place the state within lethality standards recognized as “acceptable” by some international studies. However, it should be highlighted that this proportionality results from more from the extremely high number of officers killed than from an alleged low number of lethal police interventions. For this reason, there is a need to use more than one parameter to measure the problems of police lethality and victimization, as previously observed (Loche, 2010).

3.3 Goiás

Besides its very high levels, police lethality in Goiás showed a substantial increase between 2009 and 2015, jumping from 70 deaths resulting from police intervention in the first year to 141 in the last year under the study scope – a gross growth of over 100%. Throughout this period, there were 566 deaths resulting from police interventions in the state and 38 cases of police officers murdered – a ratio of almost 15 citizens killed for each police officer victimized. Figure 4 shows the evolution of those numbers.

FIGURE 4
Police killings and victimization in Goiás – number of deaths (2009-2015)



Source: FBSP (2017).
Author's elaboration.

Unlike the procedure adopted by the same institutions in Minas Gerais and Pernambuco, the Secretariat of Public Security (Secretaria de Segurança Pública – SSP) of Goiás did not provide copies of the police reports for this research. The authority limited itself to providing a table with the general number of the incidents registered between 2009 and 2015, containing basic annual information on those events. Still, the data allow us to identify some patterns that characterize the phenomena of lethality and police victimization in Goiás. The records indicate, for example, that 85% of police officers killed and 55% injured in the state between 2009 and 2015 were victimized while “off duty.” On the other hand, almost 80% of those killed and 60% injured due to police interventions in this period were victims of officers on a regular work schedule. The typical profile of police lethality and victimization indicates that in Goiás, police officers kill on duty and die off duty.

Another vital aspect to be highlighted in Goiás is the ratio of almost 15 citizens killed for every police officer killed between 2009 and 2015. Although, as previously discussed that the specialized literature has not reached a consensus regarding the limits of a “tolerable” police lethality rate, the proportion of citizens/police officers killed verified in the state far surpasses the metrics observed in countries in which police forces make abusive or disproportionate use of force (Cano, 2014).

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The data collected point to a scenario of high lethality rates and police victimization for the three states analyzed. In Minas Gerais and Goiás, for instance, the disproportion between the number of citizens and police officers killed in events classified as “confrontations” surpass the limits usually considered by the literature, denoting the abusive and disproportionate use of force by police forces. In Pernambuco, on the other hand, the rate of police officers murdered between 2009 and 2015 was 52% higher than the national rate, reflecting the violence and insecurity that affects public security professionals in that state. When comparing the data with international indicators, their severity becomes even more evident. Table 1 summarizes police lethality and victimization in the country, and the three states analyzed.

TABLE 1
Brazil, Minas Gerais, Pernambuco, and Goiás: police killings and victimization (2009-2015)

	Killed citizens/police officers ratio	Deaths due to police intervention per 100 thousand inhabitants	Total of homicides represented by the deaths due to police intervention (%)	Police officers killed per 1,000 officers
Brazil	7.2	1.27	4.50	0.65
Minas Gerais	10.3	0.37	1.73	0.13
Pernambuco	1.4	0.38	0.99	0.99
Goiás	14.9	1.29	3.18	0.34

Source: SSP of Minas Gerais; Secretaria de Defesa Social (SDS) of Pernambuco; SSP of Goiás; FBSP (2017).
 Author's elaboration.

For the states studied, it was also observed that deaths resulting from police interventions involve agents on regular duty in incidents that reach them suddenly (via notifications by passers-by or the police headquarters). In general, homicides are committed by police officers based in area units, outside *favelas*, and involved in lethal confrontations in the “retail” of everyday incidents.

On the other side of the phenomenon, police officers die during their off hours or performing other paid activities other than those typical of policing. They die when trying to intervene in crimes in progress – almost always improvised and without due operational support – while doing odd jobs as private security guards, fighting or reacting to attempted robberies. In common is that they carry guns even during their off hours. Frequently, those guns are used against the police themselves or lead to the victimization of the officers as soon as their aggressors detect them.

All those issues end up connected with elements already discussed by other studies of the same type: insufficient and lack of continuous training for police officers to exercise the types of use of force properly; the need to increase external control of police activity; the discussion of the police function, which imposes to officers carrying of firearms and the obligation to intervene in crimes (even during their off hours); as well as the need to qualify information and records on police lethality and victimization, so that such phenomena are better known.

In Brazil, the historical neglect of those issues seems to be related not only to an “extermination culture” in force among specific sectors of police organizations and public security professionals but also to a set of beliefs and values embraced by a substantial part of civil society that supports and, frequently, encourages police violence practices.

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