




Covid-19

Impacts of the pandemic on a virtual community of prisoners' family members

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Abstract

From a virtual community, we aim to understand the pandemic's psychosocial impacts on prisoners' family members. We seek to know the news articles shared within the community and analyze likes, shares, and commentaries of these texts among its participants. For 15 weeks, we collected data, finding 65 news articles, which were divided into three analytical categories. We observed that, without access to the prison, families suffered, with greater intensity, previously experienced concerns. We also realized that the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic are not uniform among participants. Family income and the possibility of communication with the arrested relative should be taken into account in this analysis. The virtual interactions show the strength of this group, consolidating the virtual community as a support network. The struggle involves structural transformations, in which the State would fully assume its role in penal treatment.

Keywords: families; prison; COVID-19; psychosocial impacts; social network.

IMPACTOS DA PANDEMIA EM UMA COMUNIDADE VIRTUAL DE FAMILIARES DE PESSOAS PRESAS

Resumo

Buscamos compreender, a partir de uma comunidade virtual, os impactos psicossociais da pandemia em familiares de presos. Procuramos conhecer quais são as reportagens compartilhadas na comunidade, bem como analisar as curtidas, compartilhamentos e comentários dessas notícias entre as participantes desse espaço virtual. Por 15 semanas, realizamos a coleta de dados e encontramos 65 reportagens, as quais foram divididas em três categorias analíticas. Observamos que, sem acesso ao cárcere, as famílias sofreram, com mais intensidade as preocupações que anteriormente eram vividas por elas. Percebemos também que os impactos psicossociais da pandemia não são uniformes entre as participantes. Renda familiar e a possibilidade de comunicação com o parente preso são aspectos que devem ser levados em conta na análise. As manifestações promovidas mostram a força desse grupo, consolidando a comunidade virtual como uma rede de apoio. A luta envolve transformações estruturais que exigem que o Estado assuma plenamente seu papel no tratamento penal.

Palavras-chave: famílias; prisão; COVID-19; impactos psicossociais; rede social.

IMPACTOS DE LA PANDEMIA EN UNA COMUNIDAD VIRTUAL DE FAMILIARES DE PRESOS

Resumen

Buscamos entender, desde una comunidad virtual, los impactos psicosociales de la pandemia en las familias de los reclusos. Buscamos conocer cuáles son los informes compartidos en la comunidad, así como analizar los “me gusta”, compartidos y comentarios de estas noticias entre los participantes de este espacio virtual. Durante 15 semanas, recopilamos datos, encontrando 65 reportajes, que se dividieron en tres categorías. Observamos que, sin acceso a la prisión, las familias sufrieron, con mayor intensidad, las preocupaciones que antes experimentaban. También notamos que los impactos psicosociales de la pandemia no son uniformes entre ellos. Los ingresos familiares y la posibilidad de comunicación con el familiar son aspectos que deben tenerse en cuenta en este análisis. Las manifestaciones promovidas muestran la fuerza de este grupo, consolidando la comunidad virtual como una red de apoyo. La lucha implica cambios estructurales, en los que el Estado asuma plenamente su papel en el tratamiento penal.

Palabras clave: familias; prisión; COVID-19; impactos psicosociales; red social

1. Introduction

The ongoing pandemic taking place since March 2020 in Brazil is a global phenomenon, affecting everyone directly or indirectly. The novel coronavirus has already infected millions of the world’s inhabitants, and COVID-19 has caused the death of thousands of them. Despite being set up as a global humanitarian and health crisis, the effects of the pandemic are not equal in all continents and countries, nor in all population segments, in such a way that some are more vulnerable to infection by the coronavirus than others, as is the case of indigenous peoples in the Americas (Pan American Health Organization, 2020). This is also the case of prisoners confined in detention spaces favorable for spreading SARS-CoV-2 due to limited ventilation and the excessive number of people put together in each cell (World Health Organization, 2020).

The pandemic imposed restrictions on people’s movement, with profound implications on the forms of interaction and communication between them. The issue is especially felt by the imprisoned population, who, being already confined, began to experience another form of social isolation. Shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the ongoing epidemic in China, Italy, and

other countries was a pandemic of COVID-19, still in March 2020, the Brazilian federal government determined the suspension of visits to prison units, a measure that was subsequently adopted by all 27 states of the Federation (Brasil, 2020). On occasion, the National Council of Justice (NCJ) recommended that this restriction of visits should be temporary, adding in a single paragraph: “In the case of visit restriction, the supply of food, medicines, clothing, hygiene and cleaning items brought by visitors cannot be limited” (Conselho Nacional de Justiça, 2020a).

By doing that, the NCJ points out that lack of material provision resulting from the suspension of visits impacts those deprived of liberty. For its part, the WHO highlights the psychological impacts of this interruption for those who are confined, recommending caution in adopting this measure (World Health Organization, 2020). Thus, the consequences of interrupting prisoner visits are expressed in documents from legal and scientific entities, demonstrating the relevance that family members have in prison daily life. And what would be the implications of such restriction for those who are outside the prison and have an incarcerated relative?

According to the study conducted by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (GVF) with family members of imprisoned people in the State of São Paulo, approximately 70% of the interviewees reported that they had no information or contact with the imprisoned relative in this period of the pandemic, more than 30% experienced food insecurity, and less than half – 44% – had the emergency basic income of R\$ 600 as their main source of livelihood (Magri, Mello, Haddad & Lotta, 2020).

Therefore, the lack of information reaches a huge contingent of family members of people deprived of liberty. From the scenario outlined by the GVF study, we can think that the search for news from inside the prisons seems especially relevant for this social group at the moment. In order to obtain them, families rely on both media coverage and in the exchange of personal experiences, finding important sources of information on social networks.

One of the ways in which family members of prisoners group together for the purpose of obtaining information is virtually, in internet communities that function as informal support networks. In a previously conducted study, Barcinski, Lermen, Campani, and Altenbernd (2014) investigated the roles played by a virtual community, located in a social network, aimed at family members of imprisoned people. The authors observed that material, legal and emotional support was obtained among the thousands of members of this non-face-to-face exchange

space. Reports of violence and state absence prompted the construction of informal support networks among the participants of the virtual community, trying to overcome the difficulties imposed to them in the prison system.

We observed that, at the time of writing the article, the virtual community revolved around the visitation activity. Since the suspension of these in March 2020, this cyber group has taken on another focus. Information spreading gained a notorious space, especially news articles, which are shared in the community and generate reactions among its participants. Thus, journalistic content and interactions in the virtual group became relevant sources of information about the prison system during the pandemic, since families cannot get news directly from prison, as they did when visiting.

Lack of information adds to other psychological and social implications of the pandemic, which affect society as a whole. Recurring thoughts about the health of our family are among the most common reactions to the humanitarian crisis in which we find ourselves, as well as the fear of losing the people we love and the feeling of helplessness in the face of events so that the psychosocial impact of the pandemic involves these and other “normal reactions in the face of an abnormal situation” (Melo et al., 2020, p.2).

Although the stress posed by the novel coronavirus has been felt throughout society, we note that family members of prisoners are in a very vulnerable situation. We think that the understanding of these impacts among family members of prisoners in Brazil can benefit from an analysis of the virtual world, and not only from face-to-face interactions, since, in this cyberspace, it is possible to investigate the circulation and content of information about the pandemic inside prisons, as well as the repercussions of these texts on the group. We emphasize that the type of impact we are investigating does not necessarily involve diseases, symptoms, and pathologies, although it can unfold into “profound difficulties in family, social or working life” (Melo et al., 2020, p.6). In this study, therefore, we aim to understand, from a virtual community, the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic on the families of imprisoned people. For that, we aim to apprehend the news articles being shared in a virtual community and analyze likes, shares, and commentaries of such texts among participants of that virtual space.

Based on previous research, we know that the lives of family members of imprisoned people have always been rather painful, very focused on visits (Barcinski

et al., 2014; Cúnico, Pizzinato, Strey & Costa, 2020). Family members needed considerable investment of time and money to carry them out, besides being subjected to institutional violations, which take place often in body search rooms (Barcinski et al., 2014; Lermen, 2019). Suspension of visitation could represent important and necessary changes in the way the prison system works, unburdening families of state responsibilities assigned to them, such as providing their incarcerated relatives with basic goods. This is not our supposition. We will work with the hypothesis that the restriction of movement within prison imposed by COVID-19 made the life of the family members of prisoners even more difficult, increasing the intensity of previously experienced concerns. The pandemic has important psychosocial impacts on this group.

2. Method

This research was structured through a qualitative approach. The method adopted by us resembles, in part, that of the previously mentioned study, conducted in a community of a social network on the internet (Barcinski et al., 2014). The community has existed since 2012, intending to be a channel for information and exchange between family members of prisoners. There is no information on who created it, but we conjecture that it was someone who had a relative in prison. The community also has no administrators, allowing anyone to post. It is a virtual space open to the public, without any restriction of access to the published content. Even people who do not follow or like the community may read what is shared within it. We highlight that this study is covered by the National Health Council Resolution 510/2016, which defines the rules for research in Human and Social Sciences and authorizes researchers to use publicly accessible information, as is the case with the analyzed virtual community.

2.1 Participants

The analyzed virtual community has family members of incarcerated people as its target audience. Although it does not distinguish gender, we noticed that this is a collective of people formed almost exclusively by women, who call themselves “warriors.” Therefore, the participants in this study are the participants of this virtual community, a group that has grown a lot since the first conducted study. In 2014, the community had 14,000 followers (Barcinski et al., 2014), having grown

more than ten times over these six years, totaling more than 140 thousand followers in 2020.

2.2 Instruments

As Barcinski et al. (2014), we also performed a search in this virtual space, but our scope became restricted to the news articles that were shared in the group. We also sought to locate, in the posts, the reactions and interactions of participants towards the shared journalistic content. From the engagement activities – likes, comments, and shares – we sought to understand how the news pieces published in the virtual community echoed among its participants.

2.3 Data collection procedures

If in the previously conducted study, posts from the virtual community were gathered during one week, our search period exceeded three months, from March 12 (date of the first community post about COVID-19 in prison, a day after the WHO announced the novel coronavirus pandemic) until June 26, 2020 (International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, an important date to the prisoner family activist movement). On that date, in the middle of the year, measures to make quarantine more flexible had already been adopted in several states and municipalities throughout Brazil, even with the curve still rising in number of cases and deaths all over the country. That is, we sought to address different moments of the pandemic in the national territory.

Throughout this period, we followed the community, saving all news articles that were shared and that addressed families of imprisoned people at the time of the pandemic. To analyze participants' engagement, we captured screenshots of the news, so we could subsequently analyze the reactions to them. To preserve confidentiality and privacy, neither the name of the community nor the participants or the penal institutions they used to attend are revealed in the study.

2.4 Analysis procedure

According to the themes that they addressed, the news articles collected in the virtual community were read and separated into three analytical categories. Thus, we used qualitative categorical content analysis (Bardin, 2010), in which we performed the agglomeration of content within the categories that we defined

after data collection. The choice for categorical analysis was also made because it favors the study of opinions and attitudes, such as the comments posted by the *warriors* about the collected news articles. Therefore, in each of the three analytical categories, sets of comments from the participants concerning the news articles were added as a means to complement and deepen our analysis on the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic on the group.

3. Results

During the period of analysis, 65 news articles addressing different issues related to family members of imprisoned people during the COVID-19 pandemic were shared in the virtual community. Among these articles, 19 presented national content, while the remaining 46 covered some states' specific issues. All five regions of Brazil were contemplated, although we observed a greater input of articles addressing the Southeast (17) and South (14), followed by the Northeast (6), Midwest (5), and North (4) regions of Brazil. The articles reported events from 17 states, ten from São Paulo (SP), ten from Rio Grande do Sul (RS), and four from Paraná (PR). Distrito Federal (DF), Espírito Santo (ES), and Minas Gerais (MG) had three news each. Acre (AC) appeared in two articles, as well as Rio Grande do Norte (RN). All others – Alagoas (AL), Amapá (AP), Ceará (CE), Goiás (GO), Mato Grosso do Sul (MS), Pernambuco (PE), Piauí (PI), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), and Roraima (RR) – were addressed only once.

The sources of information used by the *warriors* were quite varied. The articles were shared from 45 news websites, 11 of them from newspapers that call themselves independent, and 34 from traditional media. Nineteen of the 65 articles were produced by independent journalism, while the other 46 were produced by hegemonic media vehicles and smaller newspapers, which usually have a more restricted circulation, since they cover issues concerning specific states or inland regions.

From the 65 collected news articles, three categories of analysis were created: I – Suspension of visits; II – Communication between family members of imprisoned people in pandemic times; and III – Family members struggling with duties, rights, and complaints. Each of them covered a different set of articles and reactions from the participants of the virtual community, as will be shown below.

3.1 Suspension of visits

This category included 12 news articles, very similar to each other, from different media vehicles. In general, all articles dealt with the problem of the suspension of face-to-face visits due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. News articles dealing with this issue were found in different states of Brazil, namely, RS (4), SP (3), MG (1), CE (1), PE (1), and DF (1).

The article with the most likes (424), comments (213), and shares (218) in this category was a news piece from March 2020, which was about a suspect case of coronavirus in a male prison in the inland region of SP and the consecutive prohibition of visits by the town hall. The *warriors'* comments showed that the vast majority of them agreed with prohibiting visitors from entering the prison. The following comments were illustrative in this regard:

"It's better to miss them temporarily than forever. May God protect them all. I think that who loves cares and protects. If you love your husband, son, brother, father, or someone who is imprisoned, avoid visits. Stay at home... If one catches it, it will be chaos!"

"You have to forbid visits for the safety of the prisoner and the families... one has to have conscience and stay at home, to not go".

Some of the participants used tuberculosis as a tool for argumentation. A disease which – despite having an effective treatment – continues to be a public health issue and, especially, a prison health issue in the country (Godoi, Campello & Mallart, 2020).

"God have mercy, the lack of visits in the system is for the welfare of everyone inside. They die from tuberculosis, which already has a treatment. Imagine a virus that doesn't have a cure yet. God protect them."

In several news articles, it was possible to identify that the support of the *warriors* towards the suspension of visits was accompanied by criticism of the women who continued to go to the institutions where the visits had not yet been suspended. In an article published in March 2020, which addressed the case of a woman who entered the prison despite being tested positive for coronavirus, the criticisms of the *warriors* became even more evident:

“Applause for his wife, these chicks are all excited and don’t see the risk they pose to the relative and others!”

“Either she doesn’t have, or she pretends to misunderstand collective conscience.”

In this same article, which had 56 likes, 19 shares, and 43 comments, the virtual community participants opened space for discussion about the possibility of releasing prisoners as a way to control the spread of the virus. In a comment, one of the *warriors* questions whether the secretariats of prison administrations would wait for all prisoners to become infected and only then release them, and she is answered that not even then – with all of them infected – they would be released. In response to this last comment, one of the participants of the virtual community pleaded “in the name of God” for that not to be true, to which she received in response:

“Unfortunately, it is true, my angel, watch Atila Iamarino’s video from 03/20 on YouTube. He is a Brazilian scientist, and he studies only this, what will take place in Brazil is much worse than in Italy, they will have to choose who will die, and you can be certain that prisoners will not even reach the hospitals.”

The previous comment pointed to the use of published scientific information about the pandemic as the main source of argumentation about the situation in Brazil and, in particular, the prison system. Therefore, the *warriors* demonstrated that the acceptance of the sanitary recommendations of isolation – which, in the context of prison, mean the interruption of face-to-face visits – did not occur naively or uncritically, but based on the recognition of the seriousness of the current moment we are going through.

Although suffering from the lack of contact with family members in prison, many women expressed their agreement with the extension of the suspension of visits, as could be seen in the article’s reactions from April 2020. This news piece had 201 likes, 78 shares, and 141 comments:

“People, the truth is that they will not risk allowing visits and then let the State be blamed for such irresponsibility if someone gets infected. Unfortunately, it hurts not seeing them, but it is necessary for their sake”.

The analysis of the previous comment allowed us to point to an interesting problem. According to the visitor, the main reason why competent authorities care about the spreading of the novel coronavirus in prisons is not the appreciation of life, but a concern for later accountability in case deaths happen. In fact, the maintenance of prison order and public security always seems to overlap with the value of the life of those who are in custody in prison institutions and those who work there. In this sense, we can affirm that the context of health catastrophe that has been worsened by spreading the novel coronavirus in Brazilian prisons precedes the current facts. That is, the collapse in the health system and the poor effectiveness of disease control efforts are part of a regular performance of the prison system in the country (Godoi, Campello & Mallart, 2020).

The comments in news articles in this first category also pointed to what the *warriors* called incoherence of the prison administration's state secretariats, since they continued to transfer prisoners to other prisons, while visits remained suspended. The *warriors* also questioned that prison officers were following their normal work routine, entering and leaving prison facilities, leaving the convicts exposed. In news articles published in June 2020 that reported another extension of the suspension of visits, this dissatisfaction became evident:

“And so they extend and make fools out of us. Better speak out the truth already”

“What is the point of extending, since cases are advancing in prisons? The officers go out and come back, of course they bring them the virus.”

“It's not recommended, but you're allowed to transfer prisoners? Officers come in and out of the unit every day, is that right? Alright, they are there to work, but they have been victims of COVID-19 too, just like many prisoners the SAP hides...³ But a cold meal can get there, which often comes sour, the prisoner can take a cold shower, which can cause flu and other diseases because of the low immunity, not to mention the number of people who need medical assistance and appropriate and specific medicine. Let's look at the convicts. I AM AGAINST THIS OPPRESSIVE AND FILTHY SYSTEM #RapidTestInPrisons #WeHaveTheRightToKnowAboutWhoWeLove

³ SAP is an acronym for Secretaria de Administração Penitenciária (Secretariat of Prison Administration).

It is interesting to note that, although the suspension of visits continued to have support from the *warriors* – support expressed since the beginning of the pandemic – over the months, questions about the effectiveness of the measure and the dissatisfaction with the delay to re-establish face-to-face contact with their incarcerated family members have gained space in the virtual community. This situation seemed to reflect a movement that has become stronger in the general population, which is gradually becoming less attentive to the dangers of spreading the virus and less likely to make people remain at home, fulfilling the social isolation recommended by international scientific entities (Barifouse, 2020). It is worth remembering that, in the case of the prison system, the recommended isolation measures mean incommunicability of prisoners with their family members, which brings additional challenges for all those who have trajectories marked by the prison.

3.2 Communication between family members and imprisoned people in times of pandemic

This category consisted of 13 news articles, also very similar to each other in terms of content. The vast majority (11) addressed the possibility of implementation of virtual visits in Brazilian prisons as an alternative way to maintain contact between prisoners and family members as long as the restrictions of face-to-face contact remain. We found news articles dealing with the issue of virtual visits in several Brazilian states, namely RS (3), PR (2), SP (1), MG (1), RN (1), MS (1), AC (1) and AP (1). The articles reported that some states had acquired computers or cell phones to ensure such communication. It is worth noting that none of the journalistic articles addressed the female prison population.

The possibility of contact through video-conference was not very well received by the *warriors*, who feared that the implementation of virtual visits would serve as a pretext to end face-to-face visits once and for all:

“I don’t think that’s good, after all they can claim to take away the visits for good”

“It must be a scam to take away the visits once and for all.”

“My God, I think this is just the beginning of ending the visits.”

In an article published in April 2020, the content of which referred to the virtual visits made via *Skype* by inmates of three prisons in RS, the virtual community

participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the measure. According to the article, 260 convicts were registered for the virtual visit, which featured audio and video, and was accompanied by prison officers, a psychologist, and an administrative prison officer. Of the 260 enrolled prisoners, only eight had already talked to their family members, in 10-minute calls, although the article mentioned that all of them would be attended to, as long as the appointments were made. The target of the *warriors'* complaints was the small number of family members who were contemplated with such a measure, in addition to the short duration of the calls and their low frequency (usually once a month). This article had 57 likes, 5 shares, and 17 comments, some of which stand out below:

“Eight prisoners only, and 10 minutes. Please, total neglect, that is the case.”

“Detail, of the 260 prisoners, only eight have succeeded so far, see the news.”

The article with the highest number of likes (298), comments (70), and shares (38) in this category, released at the beginning of June, mentioned the decision of a judge from the State of SP of considering unconstitutional the incommunicability between prisoners and their family members, and that the State should ensure on-line meetings in all prisons while the pandemic lasts. The lack of virtual visits in SP was a recurring complaint of the *warriors*, especially in news pieces concerning this practice in other states. The comments about this article, however, pointed again to the fear the *warriors* had that virtual visits could replace face-to-face visits permanently:

“In a little while there will be only video conference visits. This is not going to be good for us.”

Some states reported that they intended to maintain this type of remote communication in prisons, even after the pandemic. This was the case of RN, broadcasted in June 2020, informing that the virtual visits would be permanent in its prison units (G1 RN, 2020). Although there was no mention of the permanent suspension of face-to-face contact, the article had repercussions, generating 69 likes, two shares, and 27 comments, and triggering reactions of the *warriors*, such as the ones we reproduced below:

“If this shit comes to stay here in SP we are screwed, it would be the end of the visits because they will adapt, they will claim several things, it will be a turmoil. #ImAgainst”
“In my opinion, I don’t care about virtual visits, I want to see in person, embrace, see with my own eyes. That’s all they really want, to take the intimate visit for once, in my opinion.”

The fear of family members that virtual visits could be a strategy to end face-to-face visits in Brazilian prisons may have arisen from the fact that family members, not rarely, are seen as an extension of the prisoner, in an idea of transgenerational crime (Guimarães, Meneghel, & Oliveira, 2006). This situation makes the entry of people close to the prisoner in the prison space be seen as a privilege granted to those deprived of liberty, instead of a legally constituted right (Cúnico et al., 2020), causing discomfort in all those who dedicate themselves to preventing ties with the family and the outside world from being broken due to the prison sentence.

In addition to the fear that restrictions on face-to-face visits would persist in post-pandemic times, there was another subject that generated apprehension and complaint among the *warriors*. It concerned the express mail service (Sedex), which, besides being expensive, did not always arrive at the destination. Through Sedex, women send hygiene items, food, clothing, and other utensils, which, before the pandemic, were often brought personally to the prisoner. The sending and the concern that the selected items would reach the incarcerated person demonstrate that visiting is much more than just maintaining emotional contact. Being a visitor means taking responsibility for the care and survival of the imprisoned individual in the face of the neglect of the Brazilian prison policy.

3.3 Family members struggling with duties, rights, and complaints

This was the category with the highest number of news articles, 40 in total. They were news pieces that demonstrated how the intricate interrelationships established between the State and the family members of imprisoned people had been affected by the pandemic. The set of journalistic articles showed that the families of prisoners were at a crossroads struggling with duties, rights, and complaints.

Although the prison population is in the custody of the State, their family members are the main providers of the prison. This is a tacit agreement, a duty

assumed by families in the face of the precariousness of the national prison system (Barcinski et al., 2014; Lermen, 2019). The suspension of visits, previously discussed, interrupted the flow of people and made it difficult for materials to enter prisons. Two news articles highlighted how these impediments had implications in everyday prison life. In one of the articles, a prison officer revealed his fear that rebellions could begin to become routine, just like protests against the suspension of visits and the lack of supplies otherwise brought by family members. In the second article, a researcher pointed out that the absence of visitors drastically reduced prisons' supplies, a problematic issue, especially due to the lack of hygiene materials.

Both news articles had little impact on the virtual community. Together they had 27 comments, some of them requesting information about the situation of some prisons, others complaining about the non-delivery of items sent through Sedex, in addition to the price charged for the mail service.

“If we are killing ourselves to send food and hygiene material to the prisoners, why don't these cretins deliver it to the prisoner? They keep dragging their feet to deliver the Sedex sent by the family, who kills itself to be able to send it... Because the post office is also a rip-off!”

The articles also publicized family members as people whose rights were violated, both by the judiciary and the executive. Three news articles dealt with the pandemic implications among imprisoned women and their family members, more specifically mothers who remained imprisoned, even with legal predictions that could remove them from prison. One of the news pieces highlighted an action by the Federal Supreme Court, which granted collective *Habeas Corpus*, replacing pre-trial detention with house arrest for pregnant women or mothers of children under twelve years of age. However, the news articles showed that not even the pandemic seemed to have sensitized the judges, who kept more than 5,000 women incarcerated, even though they met the requirements to be confined at home. This issue has a huge implication in the lives of imprisoned women and their children, who are born and/or raised in prisons. The three news articles have not caused many interactions, with 101 likes, 5 shares, and 16 comments. However, the *warriors* congratulated data disclosure on women deprived of liberty, which was not common in the analyzed virtual group.

Very different were the reactions to the three news pieces about emergency basic income and the barriers imposed by the Federal Government to 39 thousand family members of prisoners and former prisoners, which were subjected to an “additional procedure.” According to the articles, the Ministry of Citizenship restricted the “granting of emergency aid to an applicant or member of a family group included in the base of the National Department of the Penitentiary System.” In other words, all those who had been in prison or had their names linked to a relative in prison could not be contemplated with the benefit. The decision, which had no legal support, constituted a clear discriminatory action by the State against those who had or have any connection with a prison. One of the articles explained that the accumulation of government financial aids is forbidden by law, except for the “bolsa família,” so family members could not apply for the emergency basic income if they were already receiving a seclusion aid. However, the latter benefit is provided to about 4% of the families of imprisoned people, a very small number. The article in question received 156 likes, 67 shares, and 209 comments. Some community participants corroborated what has been reported:

“I myself, my aid has not yet been approved, and it’s now stated that the CPF⁴ is invalid. Huge bureaucracy.”

“I think it’s true; mine hasn’t come out yet, bastards!”

However, it was noticeable the large number of *warriors* who distrusted the news or denied what was written, reporting that they had received the benefit or knew someone who had managed to obtain it. Some even reported that they had accumulated the emergency basic income and the seclusion aid, which is not permitted by law:

“I don’t believe it! My friend received the aid”.

“People, I receive the seclusion aid, and I received the BRL\$ 600 (Reais) without a problem”.

4 CPF is an acronym for Cadastro de Pessoas Físicas (Natural Persons Register), a register attributed by the Brazilian Federal Revenue.

In the virtual community, we still found a large set of news articles dealing with complaints. Informers and means of disclosure varied. Five articles dealt with letters written by imprisoned men to their families. They have also reported the consequences of the lack of inputs provided by families, especially the hunger they felt in prison. The few goods sent through the post office that arrived inside prisons were disputed among inmates.

Accusations did not stop there. Family members of arrested people received letters in which multiple human rights violations were narrated. These were reports written by men who claimed to be in small, crowded places, with infected individuals, or with suspect cases of COVID-19. In addition to the lack of personal protective equipment, the letters informed of insufficient or no health care inside prisons. Despair was so big that some prisoners even wrote farewell letters to their family members. The impact on the community was enormous, of course. A single article had 395 likes, 229 shares of 242 comments. In their interactions, the *warriors* sought to articulate a request for help and to carry forward the denunciations.

“Visitors have to unite and call internal affairs urgently.”

“If anyone has the number of internal affairs, give me, and I shall call.”

They also asked for divine mercy and shared what they knew about the unhealthy prisons they used to attend:

“I was there in 2015, and the drinking water was full of larvae. I had to put a cloth on the tap to get water without larvae.”

“This prison is garbage, my husband is there, and I have no news, the last letter is from 23. I call there and they don’t give me information; they’re waiting for the worst to happen, not even the envelopes and stamps that the family sends are being handed over. Rascality.”

This last comment showed that, in addition to sending food and cleaning products inside the prison, families still tried to find ways of contacting their imprisoned family members by sending them envelopes and stamps, although communication did not always occur. That being so, family members remained

primarily responsible for the flow of goods in and out of prison, even after the suspension of visits.

The scarce or non-existent means of communication led family members to make complaints, reported in seven news pieces shared in the community. They dealt with the lack of information or the delay to obtain news from inside the prisons, which produced suffering, anxiety, and revolt. In some articles, the former convicts, who had witnessed and survived the current situation of national prisons, were identified as the only source of information about what occurred inside the prison during the pandemic.

This set of seven news articles generated huge repercussions in the virtual community, with 1587 likes, 157 shares, and 220 comments, most of which were outbursts and requests for divine mercy. In the comments, there were also reports of women who made phone calls to prisons in search of news, but the information obtained from prison officers was considered insufficient or unreliable:

“it’s been a month since I’ve heard from my beloved brother. I call (the prison), and they say that everything is fine, but still I remain worried and distressed”.

One of the articles dealt precisely with this form of communication between families and prison, presenting a report of a woman who had a partner in prison. According to the interviewee, there were reports on social networks saying that there were suspected cases of coronavirus in the prison where her husband was confined. Fearing for the worst, she called the institution, and only then she was informed that he had been hospitalized six days earlier, with suspicion of COVID-19. The case is quite illustrative of the forms of communication that we are investigating in the present study, in which social networks are an important means of access to information for families, especially in a time when visits are suspended. The number of comments on this news article was 723, in addition to 278 likes and 34 shares. There were several reports about the omission of information to family members or lack of adequate health care for prisoners, such as this:

“It happened with a family from (city name), the person was arrested, stayed ten days in (prison name) and five days hospitalized, and no one told the family. When

the family found out, the person was already brain dead. This is absurd, it's a human being, not a beast."

Family members of prisoners find in activists and entities important support to denounce violations of rights in prison. In June 2020, seven news articles shared in the virtual community showed the connections between the families and these social actors. The lack of transparency of the state secretariats of prison administration and the incommunicability of prisoners raised tensions inside and outside prisons, creating a support network around the rights of prisoners and their families. The little information available gives an idea of the terrible management of the pandemic in Brazilian prisons, pointing to the uncontrolled spreading of the virus in the unhealthy and overcrowded prison system (Costa, Silva, Brandão & Bicalho, 2020). The understanding that the State is promoting genocide in prison led 213 entities to sign a formal complaint against the Federal Government sent to the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS). Among the signatories of the document, there were seven entities of family members of arrested people.

The seven news articles on complaints made by family members in partnership with entities had a large number of likes, precisely 1516, although the total number of comments and shares was not as expressive, 51 and 86, respectively. In the messages, the *warriors* pleaded for the mercy of God and men in texts that invoke divine protection and the guarantee of rights. Some comments still positioned the deprived of liberty as "citizens" and "humans" who "had a family":

"The prisoner has a family. They are also citizens. They are first of all human. They don't deserve to die because of the epidemic, locked up without visits [...] in their house there is a mother, a father, and children who are praying."

"I pray every day for the prisoners because they are also human. They have a family. This pandemic makes family members unable to visit. God will send angels to protect everyone."

The comments reinforced the rights of those who were in jail and the duties assumed by those who were out of jail:

“Justice be done, because they are already paying for their mistakes, because, for those who say that prisoners are bums living at the expense of the government, this is a lie, because they don’t even eat properly, cold bath. Now without visits, the food is cut by half, and it was already scarce. Clothing, the family has to send, blankets, hygiene products, detergents, even soap, and disinfectants.”

Faced with so many violations pointed out by the present study, it was not surprising that the family members of arrested people have promoted and participated in street protests. Thirteen news articles covered these protests, which began in mid-May and gained more frequency from June 2020 on. The protests shared in the virtual community took place in the five regions of the country, in ten states: AC; PR and RS; ES and MG; DF and GO; AL, PI, and RN. The demands of family members were for more news from family members in prison, greater transparency of the prison system, dignified treatment for the prison population, the resumption of visits, and the guarantee of the delivery of products sent to prisons.

Among the thirteen news articles, nine had no more than three comments, although the number of likes reached the sum of 833, in addition to 81 shares. The news piece that had the greatest impact was about the protest that took place in AL, which, in mid-June 2020, requested the resumption of visits in prisons. Similarly, an article dealt with the protest of a group of women in RS, who, after 82 days without contact with imprisoned family members, demanded the return of face-to-face visits. The group’s proposal, which was received by the prison administrator, was of face-to-face visits, with weekly or fortnightly frequency. Despite having received numerous criticisms from the *warriors*, the mobilization of the RS group had a result. A week after the protest, a request for the permission of monthly face-to-face visits was forwarded to the Superintendence of Penitentiary Services (SUSEPE), the governing entity of the prison facilities in RS. Despite the opinion of the 5th Regional Penitentiary Police not being favorable to the resumption of visits, the entity would wait for a decision of SUSEPE on the case.

The protests in AL and RS occurred precisely in the period when several municipalities began to flexibilize the restriction measures for the general population. However, most of the female *warriors* were opposed to the return of families to prisons due to the risks that such activity represented for imprisoned people:

“Here in RN we are 90 days without news, but we do not ask for face-to-face visits, especially because the situation of our State is critical. There are no hospital places available, not even for those who are on the street. Imagine if one of our people gets sick inside, they will die right there. For the time being, we’re gonna go with virtual visits.”

“What ended was quarantine, but the virus did not [...] only God knows how I miss my husband, but we have to wait for all this to pass.”

Some reinforced the idea that family members were responsible for taking care of those who are confined:

“Who loves cares, protects! Prisoners have the right to life, have the right to survive! The visit is private, and the virus is not! May them remain suspended in all prison units!”

Others tried to show that the health situation is worrying outside prisons and that it could be even worse inside them:

“People are out of it. Guys, things are bad. This virus is killing a lot of people out here, the hospitals are full, no respirators, imagine if you resume the visits, what a massacre it will be! and the State is going to let them die all in there, because they don’t care for our imprisoned family members. The way things are, I think the visit will only resume next year, which will be when this virus will be controlled.”

This and other comments indicated once more the adherence of most of the *warriors* to the scientific discourse addressing the pandemic. While part of the Brazilian population challenged health authorities, the family group seemed to understand the issue and struggled for minimum survival conditions inside prisons and for access to news from those who were imprisoned:

“About the visit, I do not think it should be resumed, but communication with family members should be fixed, ease the entry of hygiene products and food, and also the situation of the letters, which are difficult to get to families.”

In the broad set of news articles addressed in our third category of analysis, we observed how the same State that transferred responsibilities to families, attributing to them the duty of supplying prisons, did not fulfill its own obligations by not guaranteeing family members the rights provided by law. In June 2020, with more than three months since the beginning of the pandemic in the country, families, in partnership with other social actors, began to articulate, going to the streets, demanding rights and denouncing violations. Despite missing their family members very much, most families understood the health crisis. In general, they did not strive for the return of visits, but for the guarantee of human rights.

4. Discussion

The effects of the novel coronavirus go far beyond health issues and reach different populations unevenly. The high transmissibility and considerable lethality of COVID-19 imposed restrictions on movement all around the world. In the case of prisons, the suspension of visits was a measure adopted by several nations, including Brazil. Although recommended from a sanitary point of view, the adoption of such a measure had and has implications for the prison population and their families. In the present study, we focused on the latter, seeking to understand the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic in their lives.

Long before the spreading of the coronavirus, families of imprisoned people already had life trajectories marked by multiple vulnerabilities. The social and economic exclusion that strongly affects our prison population is obviously observed among their families. The criminal selectivity adopted in the country is exposed in numbers, since the majority of the people behind bars are black and poor (Brazil, 2019a). It is this same group that, before incarceration, lived with their families in precarious conditions, without guarantee of realization of their social rights. When placed in prison dungeons, prisoners rely almost exclusively on their families for emotional and material support (Barcinski et al., 2014). Family members are also the main agents in the search for legal and health care for their imprisoned family members (Lermen, 2019).

To fulfill all these tasks that were imposed on them by the omission of the State, families relied on their peers. As summarized by Barcinski et al. (2014, p. 393):

Lost between the disservice of the State and the arbitrariness of prison institutions, these families seek in once unknown people and spaces the information and support they do not find in their daily concrete existences [...] the analysis of informal support networks denounces the precarious way in which family members accompany their imprisoned loved ones, relying on their peers to support the harsh prison routine and to continue to perform the unlikely role of a re-socializing link of former convicts.

Starting precisely from the study conducted by these authors, we sought in the virtual community a means of investigating the effects of the new conjuncture among families of those deprived of liberty. In a more specific way, we looked in news articles and responses to them for content that would indicate the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic among family members of prisoners.

We knew beforehand that the suspension of visits had inevitably altered the family-prison dynamic. Our initial conjecture was that, without access to prison, families would suffer, with greater intensity, the concerns that were previously experienced by them. Through shared news and engagement of the *warriors*, our hypothesis was confirmed. Moreover, through the studied material, we noticed that new difficulties were put to the family members, making their concerns and assignments even more disturbing than they were before.

Before the pandemic, families already suffered from the separation from the imprisoned relative, but they could alleviate such suffering with visits to the prison. The maintenance of contact between individuals deprived of liberty and their family is described in the literature as fundamental to mitigate the impact of subjection imposed by the prison for individuals deprived of liberty (Hairston, 2003). The suspension of face-to-face visits due to the coronavirus, reported in several news pieces, substantially impacted all those who wait and yearn for these moments to take care of, talk, and be close to their family members, being this a subject of multiple comments in the virtual community.

Preventing access to the inside of prisons amid a pandemic caused by a potentially lethal virus has important emotional repercussions for families. In their narratives, many describe the conditions of the prisons they visited, which are far from what is recommended to prevent coronavirus. Taking into account that the most effective measures against the spreading of the virus – so far – are social isolation and the adoption of hygiene measures, knowing that your family member

is imprisoned in overcrowded institutions, with precarious infrastructure, and in unsanitary conditions brings additional concerns to the family members.

In the virtual community, there are reports that attest to these and other problems of prison units. The *warriors* also said that prison health care was already insufficient before the pandemic. Most of them are aware that their family members are very vulnerable to the virus and understand that the return of visits would make them even more susceptible to infection by the novel coronavirus. The adherence to the scientific discourse, manifested by a large portion of the *warriors*, shows convergence with the recommendations of the government and scientific entities mentioned in the introduction of this study.

All this emotional suffering could be alleviated if communication between families and people deprived of liberty had been minimally guaranteed, but, according to the news articles and reports by the *warriors*, it occurs insufficiently, when it does. Letters do not arrive or take considerable time. On the other hand, calls seem easier to take place, but not by formal means. We know that, due to the permissiveness for the entry and use of cell phones in Brazilian prisons, in many cases, the contact of the prisoners with their family members is not limited to the time of face-to-face visits. It is a common practice in national prisons, not always used for criminal activities. According to Godoi (2016), mobile phones inside the prison are commonly used for “ordinary purposes,” as a means of contact and rapprochement of the prison population with their family members. However, the cost of this type of apparatus in prison makes it a practice of a part, and not all of the prisoners.

The pandemic caused cell phones to be acquired by the state secretariats of prison administration, institutionalizing this means of communication already widespread in national chains. However, restriction of call duration and the small number of people who were benefited generated huge repercussions in the virtual community. The guarantee of communication between the prison population and their family members is not a favor, but an obligation of the state bodies that administer prison institutions. Since 1994, with the establishment of Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners in Brazil, it has been established that the person deprived of liberty has the right to “contact with the outside world”, whether it is through letters, phone calls, or visits from family and friends (Brasil, 1994).

From the comments generated in the community, we notice that some of the *warriors* do not agree with virtual visits (“televisitas”), because they are afraid that the meetings will not be in person anymore. The question goes against what is advocated in law, since visits to imprisoned family members are an established right. According to the Criminal Execution Law (CEL), in Article 41, it is a right of the prisoner to receive the visit of the spouse, the companion, family members and friends on certain days (Brasil, 1984).

However, since 2017, measures to restrict visits have been adopted in federal prisons. Ordinance No. 718 of August 28, 2017 determined that it is “prohibited the granting of intimate visit to prisoners who have at least one of the following characteristics”:

- I - have played a leading role or participated in a relevant way in a criminal organization;
- II - have committed a crime that jeopardizes their physical integrity in the prison environment of origin;
- III - are subject to the Differentiated Disciplinary Regime (DDR);
- IV - are a member of a gang, involved in the repeated practice of crimes with violence or serious threat;
- V - are involved in incidents of escape, violence or serious indiscipline in the prison system of origin (Brasil, 2017).

The new Ordinance No. 157 of February 12, 2019 establishes new rules for social visits to federal maximum-security prisons. “Prisoners with collaborator or informer profile” are allowed to have meetings in the prison courtyard. The others, who fall into one of the five categories mentioned above, can only have visits in the visiting room or by videoconference. Visitors, in turn, must follow the prison etiquette, dressing according to prison standards and without practicing “obscene acts”, otherwise, they will be removed or prevented from entering the prison (BRASIL, 2019b). Thus, the *warriors*’ fear that face-to-face visits could be replaced by electronic means has some backup if we take into consideration the sanctions that had already been applied in federal prisons.

There is, however, a form of communication between the inside and the outside of the prison that the pandemic has not interrupted. It is a material

provision, which remained a task of families. Instead of delivering the inputs directly to the prisons, as they usually did, now they have to send them through Sedex, which requires even more attention, in addition to raising the cost of the task, considering the high prices charged by the post office for this type of dispatch. All of this without a guarantee that the materials will actually be delivered to the prison or reach the recipient.

Although they commented on the difficulty of ensuring that the items get to the hands of their imprisoned family members, none of the participants complained about the duty of providing the prisons. They seem to understand that this is an inherent responsibility of their condition as a prisoner's family member. For Lermen (2019), families realize that sending goods to prison is a moral obligation, a token that the imprisoned person has not been abandoned.

Therefore, the *warriors* did not question the fact that they were responsible for this task. They only complained about the high cost of sending the products via mail. This issue is very relevant, since the pandemic has not only health, but also economic repercussions, further aggravating the social inequalities of the country. On the top of that, the Federal Government, through a discriminatory action, created bureaucratic means to hinder or even prevent family members of prisoners from accessing the emergency basic income, a benefit created to distribute income and to heal the economic crisis in which the country has fallen.

The stigma experienced by those who have an imprisoned relative is not a novelty. Since the 1960s, Goffman (1988) already warned that family members of people deprived of liberty are discreditable subjects, depositories of moral judgments, simply because they have kinship ties with someone who is confined. The government's practice of imposing restrictions and barriers to access to a social benefit that families are entitled to is not justifiable by any legal plan. It is an action that accentuates the deep stigmatization experienced by these subjects.

To our surprise, some of the *warriors* said they had received the emergency basic income, and even managed to accumulate it with the seclusion aid, which is not allowed by law. These were women who classified the news shared in the community as fake, because what has been published in the press did not apply to their own lives or the lives of other people they knew. In this sense, it seems that media content was only validated by the *warriors* when they could find correspondence with what was reported with their own life experiences.

Therefore, we realized that the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic are not uniform among participants. They vary from those who have achieved some kind of communication – whether through institutional channels or not – to those who have not yet had access to any kind of information from inside the prisons. They also vary according to the person's income – whether they were able to keep their job and/or if they receive the emergency basic income. However, the “revolt” in the face of the violation of rights remains constant among the *warriors*, in addition to a “fear” of losing their family members during the pandemic.

We considered large the number of news articles found in the community which dealt with families of people deprived of liberty. According to Lermen (2019), for years, the media, in its own way, devotes space to family members of prisoners. The author conducted an analysis of the journalistic content that was produced about these people. The journal articles were collected by her in news websites months before the emergence of the novel coronavirus and they present a wide set of reported topics, which are summarized here (p. 21):

The bodies of the visitors are searched, controlled, invaded territories. Some few carry inside themselves prohibited materials. Almost all endure the painful day of visitation. These are bodies that find love, pleasure and sorrow on visiting days. These are bodies that carry on their shoulders moral condemnations and that carry forward complaints about the absurdities of the prison system (...) There is, of course, a selection of what is disclosed to the public, as well as the production of a narrative that often positions visitors, especially women, as thugs/villains. But, in general, the media, due to its reach, puts in the showcase what the State wants to hide.

This place of denunciation, of information about those inside and outside the prison, has been amplified in 2020. Media vehicles have frequently reported the worrying situation of those who are confined in the unhealthy national prison system at this time of pandemic, as well as the different repercussions on the life of those who have a family member in prison.

In the virtual community, these news articles did not arouse homogeneous reactions. We noticed that the forms of interaction with the posted content were

not similar. Summed up, the 65 news articles analyzed had 7235 likes, 1592 comments and 1154 shares. That being the case, the news pieces seemed to have elicited many reactions, but not so many manifestations or the urge to spread the content. The State addressed in the journal article seemed to be decisive for the protests of the *warriors*, especially SP, which concentrates approximately 30% of the national prison population (Brasil, 2019a). On the other hand, the dissemination of information seemed to have occurred more often when the *warriors* tagged the names of other women in the comments, so that they also could have access to the news articles published in the community. We conjecture that this preference is a means of self-preservation, since sharing a news piece about the prison system on their own profile could reveal their condition as a relative of a prisoner.

The most frequent subject in the news articles concerned the lack of direct and up-to-date communication from the prison system. The concern of family members was certainly enhanced by the lack of clarity of the competent state bodies regarding the spreading of the virus inside Brazilian prisons. The official data were already problematic because of the delay and low accuracy they had when released. At the time of the pandemic, this situation seems to have aggravated even more, lacking transparency about what happens inside prisons, since the institutions have become more closed than usual (Costa et al., 2020; Magri et al., 2020).

The letters written by imprisoned men, when they successfully arrive at their destination, are important sources of information, as well as worrying reports of denunciation. The writings on human rights violations in the prison system had great repercussions in the virtual group, giving rise to despair and requests for divine mercy. Thus, the virtual community, in addition to being a place for spreading information, is also a place where participants seek comfort, since there they can exchange desires, fears, and hope.

The virtual community still acts as a form of pressure on authorities, where complaints are disclosed. Through the news, we see that families have gained strong allies in their struggles against violations in prisons. They have relied not only on each other but also on a wide range of entities, seeking information and guaranteeing rights. Therefore, new networks of support for family members of prisoners were formed or strengthened with the pandemic.

The struggle is for the recognition that everyone who is in prison – whether behind bars or outside the walls – is a citizen, with rights that must be granted. There is no lack of legal instruments to support the struggle of families. Analyzing the specific regulations on the prison system, Lermen (2019) notes that, in recent years, especially from the approval of the National Policy of Integral Health Care for People Deprived of Liberty in the Prison System, the families of imprisoned people have been included in social assistance, justice and health policies aimed at the prison system. Thus, in the normative field, family members of imprisoned people “ceased to be seen only as protagonists of social reintegration and began to be understood as subjects of rights” (p.19). Although we have made progress in the legal field, in practice, rights seem far from being concrete.

It is essential that the State assume its full role in custody and criminal treatment in the prison system, unburdening predominantly poor families from providing prisons. But changes must occur before incarceration, passing through criminal and penal policies. The mass incarceration we experience in the country has not reduced crime. The profile of those who are confined in the country reveals that the State has adhered to the actions of criminalization of poverty, which affects not only those who are confined, but also their families (Borges, 2019).

The pandemic changed the course of our lives. Prisons and the imminent risk of coronavirus infection in these places mobilized the judiciary to examine its practices. Official numbers tell us that, between March and May 2020, over 32,000 people left jail due to COVID-19 (Conselho Nacional de Justiça, 2020b). We never released so many people in such a short time, but this number is still insufficient, given the magnitude of our population deprived of liberty. There was also no massive adherence of judges to the recommendations made by the NCJ and scientific entities, such as the WHO, to release more people from jail. The issue seems to be especially detrimental for the children of imprisoned people, especially when it is the solo mothers who are incarcerated. The “new normal” cannot be the mere reproduction of what was already going wrong. May the rights provided to all Brazilian citizens –deprived of liberty or not – be guaranteed.

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