The Brazilian Urban Paradox and Its Tragic Consequences: Crime, Public Insecurity and Collective Punishment

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ABSTRACT

Deadly confrontations between police forces and drug gangs, such as the violent clash in Rio de Janeiro in October 2025, exemplify the public insecurity afflicting Rio and other metropolitan areas in Brazil. An exclusionary model of economic development, which has generated a chaotic urbanization process and vast socioeconomic inequalities, is behind criminality, violence, and a sense of impunity affecting the country.

Focusing on the vulnerable residents of favelas—precarious, informal, and high-risk urban settlements—this essay examines Brazil's "urban paradox," in which economic growth and modernization have produced unintended consequences, including destitution, criminality, police violence, and collective punishment.

Keywords: Urban Paradox, Brazil, Favelas, Criminality, Police violence.

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Introduction

The brutal confrontation on October 28, 2025, between the police forces of the State of Rio de Janeiro and dozens of accused and suspected drug dealers—along with several innocent bystanders—resulting in 122 deaths, including five police officers, highlights not only the staggering levels of urban violence but also the many shortcomings of urban development in Brazil's second largest city and elsewhere in the country. Home to six million people, the city of Rio, capital of the state of Rio de Janeiro, is at the center of a metropolitan area that encompasses 22 municipalities and more than 12 million residents. According to a 2022 governmental report, the State of Rio de Janeiro has 1,724 favelas, with 2,142,466 inhabitants, representing 13.07% of the total number of *favela* dwellers in Brazil (Governo do Estado, 2022, p. 6).

In the city of Rio de Janeiro alone, 1,350,000 residents live in shantytowns, corresponding to 21% of the city's population. It was in Complexo do Alemão, one of Rio's largest *favelas*, where the violent police raid took place. The horrific images of corpses on the roads, the desperation of relatives attempting to identify family members, the national commotion, and the ensuing political battles between the federal and state governments have reinforced the Brazilian urban paradox: while slums across the country have been praised as vibrant spaces for culture and entrepreneurship, they also harbor a darker side. These informal, substandard urban settlements prevent the improvement of their residents' living conditions, pose a threat to their human security, and are the locus of the most egregious human rights violations. This raises a crucial question: Why do *favelas*, with their potential to foster economic growth, contribute instead to undermining it?

The public insecurity that afflicts Brazil's metropolitan areas is emblematic of the urban paradox described by Tracey Burns (2014). According to the author, the contradiction is fundamental: "Along with increased opportunity come larger threats. In densely populated regions, poor social cohesion and rising inequality can lead to conflict and tension." Expanding on the topic, Harvey (2003) connects the urban paradox to neoliberal economics, stating that "market liberalisation – the credo of the liberals and the neoliberals – will not produce a harmonious state in which everyone is better off." For him, neoliberal policies generate higher levels of socioeconomic inequality.

Crime, Inequalities, and Collective Punishment

The October police operation in one of Rio's largest slums, and its consequences, reveal Brazil's stark reality: vast socioeconomic disparities force millions to live in makeshift housing, lacking basic public services and enduring environmental decay. With few job opportunities available, many young residents, seeking income, have turned to illicit activities, such as drug dealing and weapon smuggling. While shantytowns are widespread in Brazil, with an estimated 16 million residents (Censo, 2022)[1], the problem is particularly acute in Rio, where dwellers in about 1,000 informal settlements have experienced erratic government presence. The main exception are the frequent police interventions confronting drug trafficking suspects. These encounters are invariably deadly, often resulting in the loss of innocent lives.

[1] Brazil's population reached 212.6 million people in July 2024 (Secretaria, 2024).

To compound the problem, Rio's *favelas* and even the city's low-income neighborhoods have also been affected by militias—paramilitary groups illegally created, supposedly, to combat urban violence. Composed mainly of former police officers and ex-firefighters, the Rio militias are involved in various criminal activities: extorting small business owners for protection, illegally charging residents fees for internet and electricity connections, and even engaging in real estate by illegally selling plots for housing construction. The current militias, inheriting the methods of the death squads responsible for extrajudicial killings during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), act in the black market of services with impunity. Heavily armed, they dispute control of territories with drug trafficking groups, such as the Comando Vermelho (Red Command). There are an estimated 16 militia groups in Brazil, whose authorities—despite their declared intent to combat organized crime—are unable to restrain them. As stated by Luiz Eduardo Soares, an anthropologist and considered the prime expert on public security in Brazil, "[P]ublic security was not affected by the transition to democracy. The past coexists, as strong, resistant, and intractable as ever, alongside the democratization of Brazilian society. It is a paradoxical design, a dichotomy, and a duality" (Lima, 2024).

The October confrontation, the deadliest in Brazilian history, generated an impressive amount of media exposure—nationally and internationally—due to the 15-hour shootout and shocking loss of life. However, it was not the first violent police operation in Rio de Janeiro *favelas*. For at least the last thirty years (Betim, 2018), police raids into shantytowns to combat drug gangs have been marked by controversy, high death tolls, and human rights concerns. From the perspective of the Rio de Janeiro state authorities, the primary objective of these occupations is to regain territorial control, as slums have historically been controlled by criminal organizations, with the *Comando Vermelho* being the most notorious (Funari, 2025).

The only relative pause to the sequence of highly militarized raids occurred during the implementation of the Unidades de Polícia Pacificadoras (Pacifying Police Units, or UPPs). The UPP was a state public security program adopted in 2008 in 32 of Rio's *favelas*, in which police agents were deployed to interact with communities, building trust between law enforcement and residents. The expectation was that friendly contacts between police and civilians would deter criminal activity. While the UPPs contributed to reducing urban violence in the city for several years, by 2013, Rio de Janeiro state policymakers and police officials began to highlight the program's shortcomings: administrative deficiencies, lack of resources, corruption within police ranks, and inadequate police training. These pitfalls destroyed residents' trust in the pacifying units. The most evident sign of the UPP's collapse was the growth in criminality and homicides in Rio, affecting both civilians and police officers. According to a State of Rio de Janeiro Police report, its agents in the city "die in numbers higher than soldiers in many wars" (Duarte, 2017).

In the absence of a pacifying police force, Rio de Janeiro's crime is mainly combated by punitive measures and, more seriously, collective punishment, leading to a vicious cycle of violence. Killings of criminals or innocents by the police inside the shantytowns invariably result in the assassination of police officers, generating new police raids and more deaths. According to Soares et al (2025), between 2023 and 2024, 22,361 people were killed in police operations in Rio de Janeiro State. Noting that the police raids are always carried out in poor communities where young black people are killed and police officers are exposed to unnecessary risks, the authors emphasize the authorities' failure in their fight against crime: "In the deadly confrontations of October 28, the State did not control the territory even for a single day. Immediately after the killing of suspects and the death of four police officers, the previous criminal dynamics resumed their course and the territorial control of drug trafficking remained unshaken" (Soares et al, 2025).

For years, Soares has been "preaching in the desert" about the public security debacle in Rio, in the face of public policies that are not producing results. He has denounced the state government's disregard for arms trafficking, indifference to the need for coordination between law enforcement institutions, and lack of attention to police corruption. Mass incarceration has contributed to the appalling conditions of an already degrading prison system. Coupled with the disregard for police officers' professional well-being, health, and safety, these factors are only worsening public security conditions in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere in the country.

The Urban Paradox

The disorganized Brazilian process of urban development is well known. Starting in the 1960s, the fast pace of urbanization quickly evolved into a massive urban crisis, which Edesio Fernandes described as "a combination of sociospatial segregation, a substantial housing deficit, environmental problems, and the difficulties arising from informal access to urban land and housing by the poor" (2010, p. 56). The chaotic urbanization is a multifaceted process resulting from the Brazilian political elites' undervaluation of urban planning, and, perhaps most importantly, the country's political economy, characterized by an exclusionary model of economic development, which is the genesis of vast socioeconomic inequalities.[2]

At the end of the 19th century, huge disparities led to the creation of the first *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, when recently freed enslaved African descendants were left alone in the streets by their former owners. Free and destitute, men and women fled to the city hills where they could build shacks to live. In São Paulo, the country's largest city and today a global metropolis, *favelas* emerged in the 1940s and accelerated with the rapid process of industrialization. Looking for better living conditions, migrants from the impoverished Northeast flooded São Paulo to live in irregular, substandard settlements located on public lands in the metropolis's peripheral areas. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) indicate that there are 1,500 *favelas* in the 39 municipalities of the São Paulo metropolitan region, with 2.1 million residents, representing about 10% of the metro population (Moreira, 2011).[3]

The existence of *favelas* in the metropolitan regions of all Brazilian states is the most visible result of socioeconomic inequalities. Lacking appropriate public policies and without a consistent government presence, these urban territories are lawless tracts of land where millions of low-income families reside in poor housing settlements, most built on public lands, where there are no property titles. In each one of the thousands of irregular tenements, contingents of poor, primarily male, young laborers are willing to work for drug-trafficking gangs, militias, or engage in other illicit activities. Organized crime and its different groups—called factions in Brazil—control *favela* territories and run their businesses there. Thus, the violence afflicting vulnerable poor Brazilians is spread throughout the country. While the media have romanticized life in *favelas*

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[2] Measuring by the Gini coefficient, Brazil is the sixth most unequal country in the world, behind South Africa 63.0, Namibia 59.16, Botswana 54.9, Swaziland 54.6 and Colombia 53.9. Here a view of Western Hemisphere's levels of inequalities (the Americas; sample in alphabetical order): Argentina 42.4, Brazil 51.6, Canada 31.1, Chile 43.0, Mexico 43.5, Uruguay 40.9, United States 41.8, (World Bank, Gini Index, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2024&start=1963&view=chart)

[3] As it occurs in Rio, Sao Paulo is also deeply affected by a powerful organized group - the Primeiro Comando da Capital (Capital's First Command). It is Latin America's largest drug trafficking organization with ramifications in other areas of the country.

as places of art, culture, creativity, and religiosity[4] (which, in several cases, do exist), the reality is much more complex than what is presented by the world-famous Brazilian *telenovelas*. Residents are exposed to varied risks, among them: poor housing conditions subject to collapse due to floods, landslides, and fire; imminent family evictions due to lack of property titles; diseases resulting from open sewage and industrial waste pollution; precarious public transportation; and a lack of public safety due to the large amount of criminal activities in these areas and, often, the violent police response.

While glamorizing the *favela* and *favelados* (its residents) prevents a better understanding of the harsh realities and naturalizes violence and gross violation of human rights, demonizing slums equally masks reality, and above all, precludes the adoption of more efficient responses to the problem. Portraying slums as dangerous and their residents as criminals contributes to erratic government policies. It overshadows the fact that most residents of poor communities are working-class people, navigating the complexities of life in *favelas* with a great deal of resilience in the face of adversity. The urban paradox resides in this: while millions of *favelados* could join both the consumer and housing markets through better education and job opportunities and thus contribute to greater economic activity and socioeconomic development, they are instead relegated to undignified human conditions, marginalized from most public services, abused by organized crime, and are targets of prejudice and aggressive police tactics. The result is the perpetuation of poverty.

Past Urban Interventions and Innovations

Even if urban planning in Brazil for a long time was not a high priority for policymakers, city and state governments have, albeit erratically, during the last quarter of the 20th century, intervened with public policies to address the precariousness of *favela* living.[5] Starting in 1994, Rio de Janeiro's City Hall, with financial assistance from the Inter-American Development Bank, developed and implemented the Favela-Bairro program in 140 poor communities. The program aimed to upgrade shantytowns to the level of formal, regulated neighborhoods in terms of services and infrastructure. The program was among the first responses to the Federal Constitution, promulgated in 1988, which, among other clauses, stipulates that cities with over 20,000 inhabitants should have a master plan (Cabral, 2014). In a few years after implementation, however, *Favela-Bairro* reached an impasse: due to high costs, infrastructure work and even the provision of services such as garbage collection could no longer be maintained. According to Meninato and Marinic (2024, pp. 55-56), another program shortcoming was the lack of public policies to educate residents about preserving urban infrastructure, which has slowly deteriorated. Without denying some *Favela-Bairro* contributions to urban improvements, the authors observed that the escalation of urban violence has been highly detrimental to public initiatives.

About 400 km south, São Paulo City Hall, starting in the early 1990s, implemented various

[4] Although Brazil is home of the world's largest Roman Catholic community, the number of Evangelicals and Neo-Pentecostals have grown considerably in the last decades, representing now about 30% of the country's population. Most of the growth is taking place in favelas (Arsenault, 2017).

[5] The most well-known urban planning initiatives in Brazil are: the construction of Brasilia (founded in 1960) replacing Rio de Janeiro as the nation's capital and the pioneering and ongoing urban development process of Curitiba, capital of Parana State, based on an innovative Master Plan put in place in the early 1970s. For its innovations in public transportation, and sustainable practices (urban parks, flood control, cultural programs and garbage recycling), Curitiba is considered a city laboratory for urban reform.

projects to upgrade *favela* infrastructure. During the Mayor Luiza Erundina administration (1989-1992), programs were implemented for improving *favelas*, focusing on basic infrastructure such as electricity, running water, and sanitation. Her most innovative policy, however, was the adoption of participatory planning, which promoted public participation in the urban planning process. During the 1990s, participatory budget initiatives at the municipal level mobilized thousands of residents in many Brazilian cities, including São Paulo and Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The core aspect of the program, initiated by city halls, was to engage the population in public policy deliberations, giving city residents, especially the poor, a voice in urban development decisions. However, by the beginning of the 21st century, the participatory budget lost relevance due to a variety of factors, including the residents' fatigue, their lack of trust in the municipal institutions, and policy discontinuity—a standard *modus operandi* in Brazil where groups arriving to power after elections usually annul public programs initiated by the previous administration.

At the Federal level, a comprehensive bill—the City Statute—was approved by the Brazilian Congress in 2001, aiming to regulate urban development, promote democratic management of metropolitan areas, combat urban inequality, and ensure housing, mobility, and adequate infrastructure for all citizens (Rolnik, 2014). Developed in the context of Brazil's democratization enshrined in its 1988 Constitution, the City Statute was born to promote an urban reform grounded in the "right to the city" paradigm conceived by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. For him, urban spaces should not be controlled solely by market forces: it should be shaped and governed by citizens (Lefebvre, 1968).

Focusing mainly on municipal public policies, the City Statute primarily supports city governments under pressure to address challenging urban, environmental, and socioeconomic issues that directly affect millions of Brazilians living in cities large and small (Fernandes, 2010, p. 56). Themes such as social justice, active public participation in urban planning, and the recognition of *favelas* as special zones of social interest towards their regularization are at the center of the City Statute.[6] In the past two decades, the City Statute, as a federal program, has made progress in providing Brazil with a constitutional framework for urban reform. By now, a generation of municipal authorities in the 5,570 cities in the country's 27 states have become informed about the statute's urban planning requirements with penalties in the case of non-compliance. However, a quarter of a century later, after receiving international acclaim[7] and despite the approval of thousands of Master Plans by many Brazilian municipalities, the City Statute's shortcomings remain evident. Urban Brazil is still seeking better living conditions, and the precariousness of public services, poverty, and a lack of public security are nowhere more visible than in the country's thousands of *favelas* and its more than 16 million residents.

A Wicked Problem?

In public policy theory, a wicked problem is a complex policy issue that cannot be fully resolved. According to Johnston and Gulliver (2025), "because wicked problems exist within pluralistic societies," it is hard to determine what constitutes a public good, and it is equally challenging to

[6] The regularization of favelas seeks to integrate shantytowns in the formal city through socioeconomic policies, and urban planning instruments providing basic services and property rights. As explained by Hernan de Soto (1989) in *The Other Path* (a study of the political economy of slums in Lima, Peru), formalizing property and creating titles can open economic opportunities for residents and positively impact economic growth and social development in a country.

[7] The City Statute inscribed Brazil in the UN-Habitat's 2006 Roll of Honor.

evaluate the fairness of policy decisions. Further, the authors stress that wicked problems "are typically surrounded by disagreement, inadequate or conflicting information, large numbers of stakeholders and webs of interconnected interests" (2025). One of the most significant challenges of wicked problems, as Johnston and Gulliver stress, is their own nature: wicked problems are not true or false, nor good or bad; tentative solutions for them can have unintended consequences; they are usually a symptom of another problem; their causes are multiple; and they are insoluble, often. As emphasized by Camillus (2008, p. 1), "[A] wicked problem has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn't have a right answer . . . Environmental degradation, terrorism, and poverty—these are classic examples of wicked problems."

Brazil's urban landscape, in sum, is a complex equation: socioeconomic inequalities, *favelas*, organized crime, and violence. Tentative solutions to address the challenge have, in many cases, produced unintended consequences. From a public policy perspective, Brazil may be facing a wicked problem. However, as the 21st century evolves and, with it, the fourth industrial revolution, the third millennium could bring responses to some of the world's most intractable problems.[8]

Considering the amount of urban violence and the intense actions of organized crime in Brazil, part of the solution must be in the hands of law enforcement. However, to be effective, law enforcement must be overhauled if the goal is to address the country's high levels of criminality resulting from activities of drug trafficking and militia organizations operating in favelas and also inside the prison system. Experts in public security have envisioned an ambitious and multidisciplinary plan that would have to be adopted by the states, as, by constitutional mandate, they have power over the police. The far-reaching policy proposed by Soares et al (2025) is the following:

- Establish the authority of the state's secretaries of Public Security over the police forces.
- Promote the independence of the Forensic Science Department.
- With the support of the Federal Police, prevent police officers from engaging in the informal and illegal management of private security.
- Build a pact with civil society and the authorities around the reduction of homicides as the center of a security policy capable of protecting essential assets.
- Develop the policing strategy known as "Focused Deterrence" for the reduction of homicides, successfully applied worldwide, and already with concrete experiences in some Brazilian municipalities. The strategy presupposes the qualification of the investigation and forensics areas and requires their independence.
- Define a policy of qualified repression against arms trafficking, intercepting its flow, preventing it from reaching criminal bunkers, and replacing military-type incursions with intelligent surgical actions outside the *favelas*.
- Initiate reforms in the prison to reduce recidivism.
- Implement a program of assistance to convicts aiming at abandoning crime and focusing on

[8] The first industrial revolution (end of the 18th century to mid-19th century), with the mechanization of production, coal extraction for energy and vapor engines; the second industrial revolution (late 19th century to the 1920s) with new sources of energy such as electricity, gas, oil, fossil fuel engines, automobiles, airplanes and telephones); the third industrial revolution (mid-20th century to the first decade of the 21st century) with electronics, satellites, computers, internet and information technologies and the fourth industrial revolution (ongoing) with smart phones, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and biomedical technology (IDE, 2019).

young people linked to trafficking.

- Implement a serious policy of using body cameras in policing that records all police interventions and their contacts with residents.
- Define, with civil society, specific policies for the protection of groups in greater social vulnerability, such as women, the LGBTQIAP+ community, and people with mental disorders, developing particular protocols for approaching these groups.
- Produce an anti-racist policing strategy and develop an effective racial literacy policy in the civil service, challenging procedures and methods that tend to reproduce racist bias and social selectivity in police actions.
- Suppress the use of technologies that, under the guise of neutrality and mere operational effectiveness, reproduce bias based on race, class, and territory, as is the case with facial recognition.
- Establish an independent Police Ombudsman's Office, based on nominations from civil society, similar to those implemented by Public Defender's Offices, with a mandate, resources, and authority to receive complaints against police officers and from police officers against their institutions, and to pursue administrative and judicial accountability.
- Coordinate intelligence and investigative work (of the Civil and Federal Police) with municipal administrative actions, aiming to identify money laundering, extortion, and monopolization flows in access to energy, real estate, and other assets.
- Temporary removal from external duties of police officers involved in confrontations and provide them with psychological care, extending therapeutic attention to those who demonstrate psychological distress, related (or not) to drug addiction (abusive use of alcohol and other drugs, legal or illegal).
- Given the context of Rio de Janeiro, it is essential to suppress the principle that the word of the police officer must unconditionally prevail over that of witnesses.
- To invest in incarceration resulting from investigations – especially of murderers, femicide perpetrators, sex offenders, and corrupt individuals – reversing the irrational dynamic of arrests based on presumed flagrant offenses, which, in addition to being inefficient, overcrowd prisons and strengthen criminal factions.
- Implement initiatives to reduce school dropouts.

Finally, the authors emphasize the need for a national discussion about changes in drug policy. Governmental responses to drug trafficking have resulted in mass incarceration of young sellers of narcotics who, in jail, are forced to join criminal factions to survive—factions that are a force inside the prison system. As is well-known in Brazil, most of the crime in urban centers originates inside the prisons, where the conditions are inhumane. A change in drug policy—for example, the decriminalization of individual use—will require actions from the Federal government in coordination with the state governments and the input of the national congress.

Even if comprehensive, a law enforcement overhaul won't, by itself, be the response to the Brazilian urban paradox. The complex equation comprising inequalities, *favelas*, organized crime, and violence variables is rooted in an exclusionary, neoliberal economic development model that has split the urban centers into well-to-do areas and precarious, irregular settlements where poverty and violence prevail. Slum dwellers are victims of multiple shortages—from food to soap, from

water to garbage collection, from transportation to green areas—and are deprived of adequate housing and regular income. Crime and human rights abuse are widespread.

In the aftermath of the tragedy in Rio, an idea from the late 20th century was brought to light again by Brazilian urban planners: Social Urbanism as the path to address the country's urban paradox. As an evolving urban planning paradigm, Social Urbanism is a policy approach to alleviate the social consequences of uncontrolled urbanization. Above all, it seeks to address vulnerabilities in low-income urban communities. As a multidisciplinary public policy, Social Urbanism aims to build urban resilience to transform the lives of shantytown residents by enabling them to exercise the "right to the city" in more inclusive cities. Social Urbanism is not an untested policy. Applied in Medellín, Colombia, at the beginning of the 21st century, the program demonstrated the critical role of urban planning instruments in addressing urban violence. The transformation occurred thanks to projects that integrated the construction of high-quality public spaces and facilities, mobility solutions, and continuous investment in education and culture. Explaining the program's success in Medellin, Carlos Leite (2023, p. 36), noted that "the project was not linked to a specific city administration or mandate, but rather has been maintained by successive city administrations."

As presented by a group of urban planners and social scientists (Leite, 2023), Social Urbanism is a multidisciplinary public policy that goes beyond traditional urban planning methods, which focus mainly on infrastructure building and sectoral responses to complex urban spaces. Far-reaching, Social Urbanism calls for a shared-governance model to build more resilient communities. Focusing on peripheral, low-income urban communities, the policy initiative seeks to integrate municipal government action, private-sector support, and citizen participation in public policymaking. Social Urbanism proposes integral (and adaptable) urban development plans for vulnerable territories, focusing on infrastructure, environmental protection, education, and economic opportunities. Intended to go beyond traditional urban planning approaches, Social Urbanism proposes to incrementally secure the well-being of vulnerable shantytown dwellers by territorial integration—slums into the cities—so that shantytown residents can access all urban resources.

Tested in Medellin with positive results, Social Urbanism was less fruitful in Rio de Janeiro when the *Favela-Bairro* program was implemented. Cities are living organisms with diverse cultures and dynamics, and Social Urbanism recognizes these differences through the implementation of different approaches, case by case: it is not a one-size-fits-all policy. According to Bellalta (2020), it is a social policy that considers the cultural values of a given place as interconnected to the geographical landscape. According to the author, the multiple points of view of "experts across differing fields provide introspection on the implementation of Social Urbanism." Therefore, as emphasized by Leite (2023, p. 36), Social Urbanism is not a process free from challenges and criticism. No public policy is infallible, nor does it have the power to solve all the problems it proposes to address completely.

Conclusion

The urban paradox is not unique to Brazil. Rising inequalities and precarious living conditions, working against the opportunities and the promise of prosperity offered by urban centers, are a phenomenon in many countries in the Global South confronting 21st-century urbanization challenges. What is particularly worrying in the Brazilian case is that millions living in irregular urban settlements are deprived of most public services, live in precarious housing, endure

environmental degradation, have few job opportunities, and survive with low incomes. Most grave of all, their human rights are violated, and their daily lives are not peaceful. *Favela* dwellers live in territories controlled by organized crime, where criminal activities flourish instead of economic opportunities. Violence is a daily occurrence, posing a threat to human security. Collective punishment is a tragic consequence, as the battles between police and gang members often result in the death of innocent civilians. The losses are nationwide.

Concerned Brazilians have been soul-searching for an urban development model that could reduce socioeconomic inequalities and poverty. Yet a variety of public interventions in the poorest communities have produced scarce results in improving living conditions, and criminality has not abated. Policy proposals to revamp law enforcement, addressing the brutal conditions of the prison system toward the humanization of incarceration, and a more holistic urban planning approach based on shared governance with the participation of government, the private sector, and residents, embodies the promise of positive change. Nevertheless, the complexity of the problem, the financial resources necessary for public policy implementation, and the conflicts of interest among a significant number of stakeholders could lead us to conclude that in Brazil, the urban paradox is indeed a wicked problem.

However, being insoluble does not mean that the problem cannot be managed. Johnston and Gulliver (2025) assert that the management of wicked problems depends on how we communicate them, observing that different voices must be heard due to the existence of different publics and interests involved in wicked problems. For them, the best approach to managing complex issues without a comprehensive solution is deliberative democracy, a process that focuses on collective action, that is cooperation, to address issues rather than the adversarial, zero-sum approach to public policy.

Since the country returned to democratic politics in 1985 after two decades of military dictatorship, Brazilians have come to appreciate their social democratic-inspired constitution with the guarantees of individual rights and the checks and balances provided by the separation of powers. And even though the participatory processes engaging the population in public policy decisions have lost steam, many Brazilians value popular participation in politics. Although not perfect, Brazil's democracy is progressing, albeit the turbulence that the collapse of the old-world order is causing. Properly managing the urban paradox will therefore require more democracy, not less, in the implementation of rounded urban planning, socioeconomic, and law enforcement public policies. Properly managing the urban paradox will also require a renewed dose of patience.

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