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Urban violence, naturalization and psychological distress: implications for psychological practice

Violência urbana, naturalização e sofrimento psíquico: implicações para a prática do psicólogo

Violencia urbana, naturalización y sufrimiento psíquico: implicaciones para la práctica del psicólogo

Cristiano Lourenço da Silva – Faculdade Maria Thereza – kikoloureno@gmail.com
Supervisor: Prof. Celso de Moraes Vergne, PhD in Clinical Psychology

Abstract:
This article seeks to understand how frequent exposure to urban violence in Brazil influences the way people perceive danger, organize their routines and deal with psychological distress. To this end, a narrative literature review was carried out, bringing together books, scientific articles, reports and documents, mostly Brazilian, as well as a North American study on exposure to news about violence. Throughout the research, two meanings of the naturalization of violence were considered. The first relates to inequalities and injustices that, having been part of society for a long time, end up no longer being recognized as forms of violence. The second concerns everyday coexistence with risk, when people need to adapt their habits and decisions to protect themselves. The studies analyzed show that this coexistence can cause psychological distress, change people's bonds with the place where they live and limit everyday choices. They also indicate that, in health services, the complaints presented are not always related to experiences of violence, so that this distress is seldom recognized or is addressed only through diagnoses and medication. In light of this, the study highlights the importance of psychologists knowing the social reality and the territory of the people they assist, considering the principles of expanded clinical practice. The analysis supports the hypothesis that learning to live with danger and following certain rules for self-protection does not mean agreeing with violence or ceasing to suffer from it. At the same time, living under these conditions for a long time may cause emotional exhaustion and hinder the ability to react to this reality.

Keywords: Urban violence; Naturalization of violence; Mental health; Subjectivity; Professional practice.

Resumo:
Este artigo busca compreender como a convivência frequente com a violência urbana no Brasil influencia a maneira como as pessoas percebem o perigo, organizam sua rotina e lidam com o sofrimento psíquico. Para isso, foi realizada uma revisão narrativa da literatura, reunindo livros, artigos científicos, relatórios e documentos, principalmente brasileiros, além de um estudo norte-americano sobre a exposição a notícias de violência. Ao longo da pesquisa, foram considerados dois sentidos da naturalização da violência. O primeiro está relacionado às desigualdades e injustiças que, por fazerem parte da sociedade há muito tempo, acabam deixando de ser reconhecidas como formas de violência. O segundo diz respeito à convivência cotidiana com o risco, quando as pessoas precisam adaptar seus hábitos e decisões para se proteger. Os estudos analisados mostram que essa convivência pode provocar sofrimento psíquico, modificar os vínculos com o lugar onde se vive e limitar escolhas do dia a dia. Também apontam que, nos serviços de saúde, nem sempre existe uma relação entre as queixas apresentadas e as experiências de violência, fazendo com que esse sofrimento seja pouco reconhecido ou tratado apenas por meio de diagnósticos e medicamentos. Diante disso, o trabalho destaca a importância de o psicólogo conhecer a realidade social e o território das pessoas atendidas, considerando os princípios da clínica ampliada. A análise permite levantar a

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hipótese de que aprender a conviver com o perigo e seguir determinadas regras para se proteger não significa concordar com a violência ou deixar de sofrer com ela. Ao mesmo tempo, viver durante muito tempo nessas condições pode trazer desgaste emocional e dificultar a capacidade de reagir diante dessa realidade.

Palavras-chave: Violência urbana; Naturalização da violência; Saúde mental; Subjetividade; Prática profissional.

Resumen:
Este artículo busca comprender cómo la convivencia frecuente con la violencia urbana en Brasil influye en la manera en que las personas perciben el peligro, organizan su rutina y afrontan el sufrimiento psíquico. Para ello, se realizó una revisión narrativa de la literatura que reunió libros, artículos científicos, informes y documentos, principalmente brasileños, además de un estudio estadounidense sobre la exposición a noticias de violencia. A lo largo de la investigación se consideraron dos sentidos de la naturalización de la violencia. El primero se relaciona con las desigualdades e injusticias que, por formar parte de la sociedad desde hace mucho tiempo, dejan de reconocerse como formas de violencia. El segundo se refiere a la convivencia cotidiana con el riesgo, cuando las personas necesitan adaptar sus hábitos y decisiones para protegerse. Los estudios analizados muestran que esta convivencia puede provocar sufrimiento psíquico, modificar los vínculos con el lugar donde se vive y limitar las decisiones cotidianas. También señalan que, en los servicios de salud, no siempre se relacionan las quejas presentadas con las experiencias de violencia, lo que hace que este sufrimiento se reconozca poco o se aborde únicamente mediante diagnósticos y medicamentos. Ante ello, el trabajo destaca la importancia de que el psicólogo conozca la realidad social y el territorio de las personas atendidas, considerando los principios de la clínica ampliada. El análisis permite plantear la hipótesis de que aprender a convivir con el peligro y seguir determinadas reglas para protegerse no significa estar de acuerdo con la violencia ni dejar de sufrir por ella. Al mismo tiempo, vivir durante mucho tiempo en estas condiciones puede generar desgaste emocional y dificultar la capacidad de reaccionar ante esta realidad.

Palabras clave: Violencia urbana; Naturalización de la violencia; Salud mental; Subjetividad; Práctica profesional.

1 Introduction

When urban violence is discussed, attention commonly focuses on homicide figures and incidents recorded by the police. Although these data are important for understanding the seriousness of the problem, they cannot reveal everything that happens in the lives of those who experience insecurity daily. Fear can change how people relate to one another, weaken trust in others, affect their sense of belonging to where they live and even influence their expectations for the future. This article reflects on precisely these experiences, which do not always appear in statistics, from the perspective of Psychology.

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The expression “urban violence” brings together very different events, such as homicides, robberies, assaults, territorial disputes between groups, illegal trade such as drug trafficking, and actions by government agencies such as the police. Sociologist Misse (2006) warns that putting all these events into the same “basket” can conceal important differences. According to the author, social perceptions and the media group events as different as crimes of passion, personal revenge, drug trafficking, kidnappings and clashes between football supporters under the same label of “urban violence,” despite their very different motivations (Misse, 2006). In this study, therefore, the term is used broadly to discuss situations that affect urban life and alter relationships among people and with places, without claiming that all such situations are alike. Furthermore, insecurity does not affect everyone in the same way: some groups and territories suffer more than others. How institutions respond to violence also influences how people experience danger.

This study draws on two important ideas for understanding how urban violence affects people's lives. The first is subjectivity, which concerns how each person feels, thinks and gives meaning to their experiences. According to González Rey (2003), subjectivity develops throughout life through individual experiences and the social, cultural and historical conditions in which each person lives. Drawing on psychologist S. L. Rubinstein, the author stresses that the social “is not outside, but inside” each person's subjectivity (González Rey, 2003, p. 264). This helps explain why feelings such as fear, insecurity and mistrust arise not only from individual issues but also from neighborhood experiences and everyday relationships. The second idea is the naturalization of violence, understood here in two ways. The first concerns inequalities and injustices that, because they have existed for so long, come to be seen as a normal part of society and cease to be recognized as forms of violence. The second concerns everyday life with danger, when people must adapt their habits and consider risks when making decisions, such as which route to take or when to leave home. In this sense, becoming accustomed to living with risk does not mean agreeing with violence. People may recognize the seriousness of events around them yet still need to organize their routines around the possibility of further violent incidents.

Another important concept in this discussion is psychological distress, which may manifest as fear, anguish, sadness, sleep difficulties and persistent fatigue. These manifestations, however, do not necessarily indicate a mental disorder. In the context of urban violence, such distress must also be understood through people's living conditions and experiences. Schmid and Serpa Junior (2025) discuss this relationship through the concept of

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social suffering, which makes it possible to consider how social conditions may relate to each person's suffering.

The question guiding this research is: how does frequent exposure to urban violence in Brazil relate to the naturalization of violence and psychological distress, and what implications does this have for psychological practice? The general objective is to understand this relationship through previously published research. The specific objectives are to distinguish the different meanings of “naturalizing” violence; discuss the psychological effects of different forms of exposure to violence, whether direct, indirect or through the media; analyze the relationship between place of residence, the unequal treatment of certain groups and the ways people protect themselves; and discuss what these issues mean for psychologists' work.

This study addresses urban and community violence in Brazilian cities. Most of the studies analyzed that collected data directly from people or services were published within the past ten years, and many were conducted in Rio de Janeiro. To address the research question, a narrative literature review was undertaken, based on reading and critically analyzing published studies, without field research. The selection and analysis of the materials are explained in the Methodology section.

This topic matters because fear and insecurity can only be properly understood by examining the reality in which they arise. When danger is real, remaining alert and protecting oneself are useful, expected responses. Nevertheless, constantly living with danger can cause emotional exhaustion, restrict daily life and change people's relationship with where they live. If these experiences are viewed merely as each individual's “way of being,” the social dimension of suffering becomes hidden.

For universities, this study is useful because it brings together texts from fields that often remain separate: Psychology, Collective Health, Sociology and Criminology. For society, it matters because many Brazilians live in unsafe cities and because health facilities, mental health services and social assistance services receive people every day whose suffering is linked to violence. Understanding this suffering without treating it as illness, while also acknowledging its existence, is essential for psychologists to work in ways connected to people's lived realities.

This study also contributes to psychological practice by showing the importance of understanding both people's social reality and their individual experiences. When violence is part of everyday life, the suffering presented during consultations cannot be understood solely as a personal issue, since it also relates to each individual's life history and social conditions (González Rey, 2003). Without considering these aspects, psychologists risk treating such

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suffering only as illness or failing to recognize its relationship with violence (Rabelo; Pacheco, 2021). The perspective of expanded clinical practice is therefore important, since it enables listening that considers not only symptoms but also each person's experiences and life context.

2 Methodology

This study consists of bibliographical and documentary research based on reading and analyzing books, scientific articles and documents related to the topic. It is a narrative literature review with a qualitative approach, bringing together contributions from different authors to understand the relationship between urban violence, naturalization and psychological distress. Its main theoretical foundation is the cultural-historical perspective on subjectivity presented by González Rey (2003), which understands how people feel, think and interpret their experiences as developing throughout life in relation to their social, historical and cultural context.

To broaden this discussion, the study also draws on sociological research on urban violence in Brazil (Caldeira, 2000; Machado da Silva, 2004; Misse, 2006), Chaui's (2017) reflections on the naturalization of violence, and Martín-Baró's (2017) contributions on the relationship between mental health and social conditions. González Rey's perspective remains the central reference, since it enables psychological distress to be understood in terms of both individual experiences and social reality. Jurandir Freire Costa's (1986) reflections are also used, particularly his criticisms of the naturalization of violence and the tendency to treat suffering as illness.

Searches were conducted between April and November 2026 in SciELO, PubMed Central and Google Scholar, and on the websites of institutions producing data and documents on the subject: the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), the Brazilian Forum on Public Security (FBSP), Instituto Sou da Paz, the Center for the Study of Violence at the University of São Paulo (NEV/USP), the Ministry of Health and the Federal Council of Psychology. The Portuguese descriptors “urban violence,” “community violence,” “exposure to violence,” “naturalization of violence,” “mental health,” “psychological distress” and “expanded clinical practice” were used individually or in combination, along with their English equivalents (“community violence,” “exposure to violence” and “mental health”). The references of the retrieved texts were also consulted.

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Texts published in Portuguese or English addressing urban or community violence and its effects on mental health, suffering, subjectivity or care practices were included, with priority given to Brazilian research. For empirical studies, preference was given to those published within the past ten years. Classic works forming the study's theoretical foundation, official documents and a reference study on acceptance of violence were included regardless of date because of their relevance to the topic. Texts focusing exclusively on domestic or gender violence, studies on perpetrators of violence and texts without full-text access were excluded.

The final material comprised 22 sources: seven books or book chapters, ten scientific articles, three reports and texts from research institutions, and two normative documents. Of the ten articles, nine were Brazilian and one was produced in the United States.

The content was divided into three main themes guiding the article's development: urban violence, territory and selectivity; the two meanings of the naturalization of violence; and exposure to violence, psychological distress and services. The analysis sought to understand and compare the contributions of different authors, identifying common ground, divergences and the limitations of each study.

Throughout the work, an artificial intelligence tool (Claude, from Anthropic) supported four tasks: suggesting books and articles related to the topic, reorganizing the text's structure, checking cited pages and references, and correcting spelling and adapting the text to academic writing standards. All suggestions were checked: the proposed sources were located in the original texts and included only when they met the criteria described above.

3 Urban violence, territory and selectivity

According to Misse (2006), urban violence does not occur in the same way everywhere and can be understood in different ways. The author uses the concept of “criminal subjection” to explain how certain people and social groups come to be viewed as suspects or associated with criminality, often because of their social position or where they live. In these cases, individuals are already regarded as linked to crime before anyone examines what they actually did. People living in areas marked by violence may therefore face two problems: insecurity and prejudice based on where they live.

Chaui (2017) helps explain how this suspicion is constructed in Brazilian society. According to the author, one way of maintaining Brazil's image as a peaceful country is to treat violence primarily as a matter of criminality. Certain social groups, especially poor people,

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Black people and favela residents, thereby come to be seen as violent, helping justify police action against these populations (Chaui, 2017, p. 40). In this context, the author states that the popular classes “bear the stigmas of permanent suspicion, guilt and criminal accusation” (Chaui, 2017, p. 48).

Other Brazilian authors also show that violence can affect people's everyday lives even when they are not direct victims. Machado da Silva (2004) uses the concept of “violent sociability” to explain situations in which force ceases to be occasional and becomes part of social relationships, becoming a “principle regulating social relations” (Machado da Silva, 2004, p. 74). According to the author, this form of relationship does not replace society's rules but comes to coexist with them, primarily affecting populations in poorer areas such as favelas (Machado da Silva, 2004, p. 62, 77). Studying São Paulo, Caldeira (2000) shows how conversations and accounts of crimes and dangerous situations can heighten people's fear and sense of insecurity. The author calls this phenomenon “the talk of crime,” explaining that these stories, shared in everyday life, reinforce fear and create a cycle in which it is continually fueled and reproduced (Caldeira, 2000, p. 27). Consequently, people change their habits to protect themselves, avoiding certain places, restricting their movements and seeking security through walls and bars. This reflection helps explain how fear of violence can influence not only feelings but also choices, relationships and movement through the city.

Here, “territory” is understood not simply as where people live but also as the space where they build relationships, interact with others and find support. Even in areas marked by violence, people's experiences may differ. While some can count on neighbors, friends and relatives, others face the same difficulties with less support. It is therefore important to consider not only where people live but also their individual histories and experiences. Furthermore, violence should not be the only characteristic used to define a community, since these places also provide spaces for interaction, work, friendships and emotional bonds. Violence can, however, change how people feel about where they live. In Schmid and Serpa Junior's study (2019, p. 11), two women who lost relatives in shootings reported intense fear and the loss of affection for their own homes. One wanted to move but lacked the means to do so. The authors relate this experience to “affective deterritorialization,” a concept that helps explain how violence can weaken people's sense of belonging and emotional attachment to where they live.

The idea of selectivity, referring to the unequal treatment of certain social groups by the criminal justice system, also helps explain this reality. According to Santos (2018), a scholar of critical criminology, power relations influence how society defines crime, who is monitored

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more closely and who receives greater protection. Drawing on Alessandro Baratta, the author explains that crime is not naturally defined but is a "constructed social reality" created through the enactment and enforcement of criminal laws (Baratta, 1978 apud Santos, 2018, p. 44-47). For Santos, a person's likelihood of being criminalized depends more on social position than on the seriousness of their actions (Santos, 2018, p. 44-47). In Brazil, this selectivity is also connected to racism. Costa (1986) explains that racism manifests not only in individual attitudes but also in the pressures society places on Black people. According to the author, being Black in Brazil means suffering violence "constantly, continuously and cruelly, without pause or rest" (Costa, 1986, p. 104). This violence also appears in the imposition of beauty and behavioral standards associated with white people, which may lead Black people to reject their own appearance and identity. This helps explain why lethal violence and suspicion do not affect all groups equally. According to the Atlas da Violência 2026, 32,820 homicides of Black people were recorded in Brazil in 2024, accounting for 77% of all homicides nationwide. The rate among Black people was 27.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, 170.3% higher than the rate of 10.1 per 100,000 among non-Black people (IPEA; FBSP, 2026, p. 87).

How institutions function also matters. According to the eighth edition of Instituto Sou da Paz's (2025) report Onde Mora a Impunidade? [Where Does Impunity Live?], in the 17 states providing complete data, only 36% of homicides committed in 2023 had at least one perpetrator identified by the end of 2024. Since 2015, this figure has remained around 35%, peaking at 44% in 2018. These data reveal a situation in which serious crimes can remain unanswered for long periods, potentially increasing uncertainty and diminishing people's trust. The same survey shows that only 13% of the country's 670,792 prisoners were imprisoned for homicide, whereas most faced charges for property crimes (40%) and drug-related crimes (31%). For the institute, this reflects the priority given to visible policing and to how people are identified as threats (Instituto Sou da Paz, 2025). The findings reinforce the selectivity discussed above: the criminal justice system is more concerned with certain crimes and certain people than with crimes against life (Misse, 2006; Santos, 2018).

4 The two meanings of the naturalization of violence

In this study, the naturalization of violence is understood in two ways that, although different, may be related. The first is structural naturalization, which occurs when inequalities, injustices and relations of domination are so pervasive in society that they come to be seen as

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normal. One example is when the frequent deaths of young Black people cease to provoke outrage, as if they were a normal part of reality. The second is the everyday meaning, the main focus of this study. It concerns each person's daily life: becoming accustomed to an ever-present risk and organizing routines around it, for example by changing the route home or avoiding going out at night, without regarding violence as right or acceptable. In the structural sense, violence ceases to be seen as violence; in the everyday sense, it remains visible but is taken into account as part of life.

Philosopher Marilena Chaui (2017) helps explain how violence can become naturalized in Brazilian society. She criticizes the “myth of Brazilian nonviolence,” that is, the idea that Brazil is a peaceful country. According to Chaui, situations such as inequality, exclusion and domination are often viewed as normal features of society and cease to be recognized as forms of violence. In this sense, naturalizing violence means accepting these situations as if they had always existed and could not be otherwise, disregarding their historical, social and political origins. Such naturalization therefore depends not only on individual experiences or frequent contact with violent news and events, but also on how society understands and accepts these inequalities.

For Chaui (2017), violence is not limited to physical aggression. It is also present in attitudes and situations that disrespect human dignity, remove rights and treat people as worthless. The author defines violence as “every practice and every idea that reduces a subject to the condition of a thing” (Chaui, 2017, p. 41). However, because Brazilian society does not always recognize these situations as violence, problems such as inequality, exclusion and racism are viewed as part of social reality. Violence thus comes to be perceived only as an isolated occurrence, or “as a sporadic surface event” (Chaui, 2017, p. 41). Misse (2006) presents a similar idea, explaining that violence occurs when someone's integrity is violated, they lose the possibility of reacting and they are treated as an object.

Psychoanalyst Jurandir Freire Costa (1986) also contributes to this discussion by challenging the idea that violence is part of human nature. For the author, violence is “an artifact of culture and not its maker” (Costa, 1986, p. 47): it is constructed through social relationships and should not be understood as naturally human. Costa explains that when violence is viewed as inevitable, people may become accustomed to its presence and cease questioning it. In this sense, the author describes this trivialization as “one of the strongest allies of its perpetuation” (Costa, 1986, p. 34). Treating violence as natural therefore helps perpetuate it in everyday life,

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since it obscures the understanding that its causes are also social and that this reality can be changed.

Becoming accustomed to everyday risk raises another question: what changes when the possibility of violence becomes part of what people expect from life? Individuals may continue to regard an event as unacceptable while organizing their lives around the possibility of its recurrence. This notion of becoming accustomed was formulated in this study from Machado da Silva's (2004) and Caldeira's (2000) writings on how routines are reorganized around risk. Machado da Silva describes this process as follows:

> For a long time, assaults, robberies, kidnappings, lynchings, etc., have increasingly ceased to be perceived as deviant and occasional events—by perpetrators, victims and observers—without this allowing us to state that this is merely a process of incorporating these social relationships into the institutional-legal order, prevailing customs or routines experienced as unproblematic (Machado da Silva, 2004, p. 61).

In other words, violence ceases to be viewed as isolated and becomes part of everyday life. This does not, however, mean that people regard it as normal or acceptable. According to Machado da Silva (2004), people's perceptions of urban violence function as a kind of “map” guiding their behaviors and decisions in response to the fear and risks they face (p. 58, 62).

This idea helps explain why accepting certain situations does not always mean agreeing with them. Machado da Silva (2004, p. 58) explains that people come to follow certain rules to protect themselves even when they disagree with what happens around them. This reality also appears in Schmid and Serpa Junior's study (2019, p. 13), in which the rule to “see, hear and keep silent” forces a woman to live with situations she disapproves of but feels unable to challenge. Following certain rules out of fear or a need for protection therefore does not mean regarding violence as right or justifiable. This study's hypothesis concerns the second meaning: living with risk may require practical obedience but does not imply approval of violence. One woman interviewed by Schmid and Serpa Junior (2019, p. 11) summarizes this difference: “Here in the territory I am known, but even so, to me, none of this is normal.”

This distinction does not mean, however, that continually living with violence has no consequences. Studying the effects of war in El Salvador, Martín-Baró (2017, p. 264) observes that prolonged fear and insecurity may weaken people's capacity to resist, leading them to adapt to conditions that should not be considered normal. He calls this reality “abnormal normality.” Although civil war and urban violence are different situations, this reflection helps explain how the constant need for self-protection may, over time, wear down people's ability to react to and question violence.

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It is important not to confuse becoming accustomed with desensitization. In Psychology, desensitization or habituation occurs when people respond with less emotion to something repeated many times, as if they were unaffected by a shocking scene. Becoming accustomed to living with risk, as used here, means that danger enters people's plans and decisions, but does not mean that they suffer less. Whether repetition makes people less affected, more sensitive or produces another response can only be established through research.

A concrete example appears in Almeida, Peres and Fonseca's study (2019) with 13 community health workers at a primary care facility in São Paulo. The workers began following “rules of coexistence” in the territory: suspending visits when rumors of police operations arose, heeding warnings not to enter certain alleys and interpreting these warnings as concern for their safety. Nevertheless, they bore emotional burdens alone that were rarely discussed as a team. The authors also observe that violence does not necessarily destroy bonds, but may produce relationships marked by insecurity and threat (Almeida; Peres; Fonseca, 2019). Gonçalves, Queiroz and Delgado (2017, p. 20) describe something similar among community health workers in Maré, Rio de Janeiro, who learn to recognize the territory's “signs” as a safety measure. In Complexo do Alemão, professionals living in the territory reported fear of leaving home and difficulty sleeping, and could not envisage life without violence (Prata et al., 2017, p. 41, 46).

The two meanings of naturalization can occur together, but they are not the same. When certain places are consistently associated with danger, the violence occurring there may come to be seen by society as “expected” in that reality (Misse, 2006; Santos, 2018). Caldeira (2000, p. 10) shows that the talk of crime contributes to this by dividing the world into good and evil and ultimately “naturalizing the perception of certain groups as dangerous.” Residents may develop their own ways of dealing with real risks without agreeing with that view. Confusing the two meanings may suggest that adapting to danger means agreeing with one's circumstances, which is untrue.

5 Exposure to violence, psychological distress and services

Researchers distinguish different forms of contact with violence, and these distinctions must be made before comparing study findings. Direct exposure occurs when individuals themselves are victims of a violent act. Indirect exposure occurs when people witness violence or live with losses and threats experienced by close others, such as relatives and friends.

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Exposure may also occur through the media, when people encounter accounts, images and news of violent situations without experiencing them directly. Today, this contact frequently occurs through social media. A United States study by Ziminski et al. (2026), involving approximately 5,000 adults, found that people more exposed to news and posts about real cases of gun violence also reported more days of psychological distress per month and more depressive symptoms.

These forms may occur together, but one does not replace another. The same news story may carry special weight for someone already living under a real threat, while for another person it is merely one more piece of information among many viewed on a phone.

When considering subjectivity, it is important to understand that the effects of violence depend not only on the frequency of contact but also on how each person experiences and interprets it. González Rey (2003) explains that the same situation can be experienced differently depending on each person's life history, family relationships, losses and social conditions. According to the author, “every human experience is multiply determined in terms of its subjective meaning” (González Rey, 2003, p. 260). This means that how someone feels about a situation is influenced by different aspects of life, such as social conditions, previous experiences and relationships built over time. However, the author also stresses that these conditions do not fully determine people's thinking and actions, since each individual can develop their own resources to face difficulties and find new possibilities (González Rey, 2003, p. 261). This helps explain why adapting to risk does not mean accepting violence. Looking at isolated symptoms is therefore insufficient. Attention must be paid to the meaning people assign to what they experienced, their emerging expectations for the future, and changes in relationships and their sense of security.

In Latin American social psychology, Martín-Baró (2017), studying the effects of the civil war in El Salvador, emphasizes that mental health should be understood not only through individual feelings and thoughts but also through social relationships and living conditions. For the author, mental health must be approached “from the outside in,” considering how these relationships contribute to well-being or suffering (Martín-Baró, 2017, p. 255). He also explains that prolonged exposure to violence can damage social relationships, leaving marks extending beyond individual suffering (Martín-Baró, 2017, p. 260-261). This perspective resembles González Rey's (2003), since both emphasize understanding people within their social contexts. In Brazil, Machado da Silva (2004, p. 78-79) also shows how violence affects relationships among residents of more exposed communities, where the “law of silence” produces fear, mistrust and communication difficulties even as people continue their daily activities. This

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reality also appears in Schmid and Serpa Junior's study (2019, p. 12-13), which analyzes accounts from women in Rio de Janeiro, showing how the rule to “see, hear and keep silent” limits freedom of action and becomes a source of anguish and lost autonomy.

This perspective helps distinguish psychological distress from mental disorder. Violence can alter a person's sense of security, trust in others, belonging, freedom of choice and plans for the future, even when routines continue and there is no diagnosis. Psychology can help precisely in this space between the ability to adapt and the emotional price of adaptation. Schmid and Serpa Junior (2019, p. 2) note that most research linking violence and mental disorder is inconclusive and that the subject cannot be reduced to diagnoses. In a study of three women from a violent Rio de Janeiro community receiving care at a Family Clinic, the authors identified trauma, affective “deterritorialization,” prolonged grief and the loss of autonomy imposed by codes of violence as effects of violence (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2019, p. 15).

Costa (1986) also helps explain that suffering does not necessarily mean having a mental illness. Discussing the relationship between education and mental health, he explains that not following socially expected behaviors “may cause suffering but is not synonymous with mental illness” (Costa, 1986, p. 73). He also stresses that recognizing the harmful effects of a society marked by violence does not mean considering those who suffer from that reality ill (Costa, 1986, p. 185). This reflection matters here because it enables fear, anguish and insecurity among those living with urban violence to be understood as forms of suffering requiring recognition, even when unrelated to a mental disorder.

Nor would it be right to treat all fear as a health problem. Faced with real threats, staying alert and seeking protection are sensible responses. The question is not to separate strong people from weak people, but to understand when the constant need for protection begins to harm rest, freedom, relationships or life plans. Martín-Baró (2017, p. 255-256) provides an example: peasants displaced by war appeared to show signs of paranoid delusion because they remained on alert and distrusted everyone. Given the real dangers they faced, however, this mistrust was the most sensible possible response: “a normal reaction to an abnormal situation” (Martín-Baró, 2017, p. 255).

Marques et al. (2024) show that this protection carries a cost. In a study of 693 high school students from public and private schools in one area of Rio de Janeiro, the most frequent strategies were avoiding places with armed people (55.5%), avoiding walking alone (30.5%) and avoiding returning home in the early hours (24.7%). More than half of the girls (53%) and around one-third of the boys (32%) simultaneously adopted all four types of restriction studied,

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and these strategies were more common among adolescents from poorer families (Marques et al., 2024, p. 1). According to the authors, these strategies restrict freedom of movement and interaction with peers and may impair adolescents' social development and mental health (Marques et al., 2024, p. 7-9).

The risk of turning this suffering into a diagnosis appears in service practices. Rabelo and Pacheco (2021) analyzed 546 records from a Psychosocial Care Center (CAPS) in Quixadá, Ceará, finding references to violence in 95 of them, or 17.4% of service users admitted in 2018 (Rabelo; Pacheco, 2021, p. 235). Notably, the authors use “urban violence” broadly: in 65.26% of these cases, the recorded events were domestic violence or family conflicts (Rabelo; Pacheco, 2021, p. 235-236). Nevertheless, all users were first referred to a psychiatrist, and every record contained a medication prescription. For the authors, treating suffering linked to urban violence solely as a medical issue reduces it and overlooks its social determinants (Rabelo; Pacheco, 2021, p. 244).

Violence can also become invisible as a health problem. Gonçalves, Queiroz and Delgado (2017, p. 19-21) show that it affects mental health, hinders access to services and endangers professionals themselves, yet often goes unrecognized, either because users trivialize its effects or because professionals distance themselves from users' life histories. Prata et al. (2017, p. 47) found an example in family health teams in Manguinhos and Complexo do Alemão, Rio de Janeiro: professionals described patients with diffuse complaints, termed “multiple complainers,” who did not link their symptoms to violent everyday life. For these authors, the challenge is to develop practices that do not produce the “medicalization of violence.” This invisibility shows that naturalization can also occur within health services.

Schmid and Serpa Junior (2025) broaden this picture. In five focus groups with 25 professionals from family health teams and social organizations in Rio de Janeiro, participants described effects of violence extending far beyond psychiatric symptoms: diminished self-esteem, silencing, prolonged grief, victim blaming and suffering manifested physically as muscle pain, headaches and insomnia, worsening in the days following police operations (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025, p. 12). One participant preferred the term “social symptoms,” because she felt that the concept of a symptom individualizes collectively produced suffering (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025, p. 13). Professionals also reported excessive workloads and a lack of training and network support for assisting people affected by violence (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025, p. 14-15).

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6 Critical discussion: adaptation, suffering and psychologists' work

This study began by asking how frequent exposure to urban violence in Brazil relates to the naturalization of violence and psychological distress. The texts analyzed support a two-part answer. First, living with risk may lead people to follow rules imposed by violence, but does not mean approving of it. Second, this adaptation does not make suffering disappear. Research by USP's Center for the Study of Violence helps support this distinction. Cardia (1999) interviewed 1,600 people in ten Brazilian state capitals in 1999 to examine whether continuous exposure to violence was producing a "culture of violence." International literature predicted that those unable to leave violent areas might become desensitized and regard violence as a "fact of life" (Cardia, 1999, p. 12). The data did not confirm this prediction: despite direct and indirect exposure, respondents did not develop a culture of acceptance or tolerance of violence, did not lose trust in neighbors, and rejected violence as a means of punishment, coercion or discipline; the only accepted form was self-protection (Cardia, 1999, p. 27-28). However, the same data show signs of naturalization in the everyday sense discussed here: respondents virtually ignored violence in their own neighborhoods, precisely where exposure was greatest (Cardia, 1999, p. 10), and the author observed less outrage over the homicides of poor young people than over property crimes (Cardia, 1999, p. 2). At the same time, people changed their routines for protection, especially younger people, who avoided going out at night and entering certain parts of the city and changed their routes (Cardia, 1999, p. 12). These findings align with Almeida, Peres and Fonseca (2019) and Marques et al. (2024): adaptation appears in protective strategies rather than approval of violence. The analyzed studies reach somewhat different conclusions that must be considered. Cardia (1999, p. 27) found neither declining trust among neighbors nor increasing intolerance. Machado da Silva (2004, p. 78-79), however, describes fear and mistrust among residents, while Schmid and Serpa Junior (2019) show how violence may weaken people's ties to where they live. These differences may relate to the periods, groups and methods of the studies. The authors' ideas also differ. Santos (2018) emphasizes how power relations and criminalization shape what counts as crime; Martín-Baró (2017) highlights how prolonged exposure to violence may weaken resistance; and González Rey (2003, p. 261) stresses that people can also develop resources for facing difficult situations. These different perspectives do not invalidate this study's central idea, but show that the relationship between violence and suffering is complex. Living with fear and following rules

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for protection does not necessarily mean agreeing with violence, although constant adaptation may eventually impair the ability to react. Another important aspect is the State's own actions, since some research also identifies policing as a source of fear and suffering (Cardia, 1999; Prata et al., 2017; Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025). This shows that the violence residents face is not related only to the presence of armed groups.

One practical path appears in Schmid and Serpa Junior's (2025) proposal for clinical-social intervention. Developed for physicians and nurses in family health teams, it also helps inform psychologists' work. The authors begin from the following hypothesis:

> [...] we assume the hypothesis that complaints of distress arising from experiences of urban violence and/or forms of violence may not initially indicate physical or mental illness, but rather clinical paths toward finding ways out of social suffering, thus constituting normal rather than pathological conditions (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025, p. 16).

The authors therefore propose placing diagnosis and medication in the background, without rejecting them, until the context of suffering is understood (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025, p. 18). One of their suggested clinical questions directly addresses this article's topic: whether the person has ever felt they should adapt to and normalize violence in their community, with the explicit aim of denaturalizing this experience (Schmid; Serpa Junior, 2025, p. 22).

This proposal resembles expanded clinical practice, advocated by the National Humanization Policy of Brazil's Unified Health System (SUS). According to the Ministry of Health, clinical practice must go beyond diagnosing and treating illness and function as a “tool for coordinating and including different approaches and disciplines” (Brasil, 2010, p. 10). One of its pillars is an expanded understanding of the health-illness process, simultaneously considering each case's organic, social and affective dimensions (Brasil, 2010, p. 14-15). The document recognizes that social circumstances such as isolation and unemployment affect illness (Brasil, 2010, p. 12), warns that the “medicalization of life” diminishes autonomy (Brasil, 2010, p. 30), and notes that diagnoses tend to homogenize subjects and erase their differences (Brasil, 2010, p. 40). This perspective is especially important for those living with urban violence: it prevents fear, insomnia or fatigue from being read solely as symptoms and enables care to consider territory, losses and living conditions. It also responds to the problem identified by Rabelo and Pacheco (2021), where violence-related suffering was referred directly to psychiatrists and medication.

For psychologists, this means that understanding people's social context is a condition for understanding their suffering rather than an optional addition. The Psychologist's Professional Code of Ethics emphasizes that practice must consider both individuals and the

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social reality in which they live. Its fundamental principles include a commitment to socially responsible work, "critically and historically analyzing political, economic, social and cultural reality" (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2005). However, this concern has not always been present in the profession. According to Dettmann, Aragão and Margotto (2016, p. 364), Psychology initially focused more on diagnosis and adapting people to social norms. Particularly from the late 1980s onward, discussion of psychologists' responsibility toward social problems gained momentum, seeking to understand and question the conditions producing these difficulties instead of treating them solely as individual issues. In research with 11 psychologists working in Social Assistance in Espírito Santo, the authors found this perspective in practice: one interviewee argued that "individualizing and decontextualized" clinical practice belongs neither in Social Assistance nor in Health nor anywhere else; another saw psychologists' role as questioning ways of living "in that territory" (Dettmann; Aragão; Margotto, 2016, p. 366).

In clinical listening, this changes the interpretation of what people bring. As discussed, the meaning each person assigns to violence depends on their history and living conditions (González Rey, 2003), and mental health must be understood through the social relationships in which they live (Martín-Baró, 2017). Without knowing the territory, its risks, unwritten rules and support networks, psychologists may interpret as exaggeration, excessive mistrust or lack of motivation what is actually sensible self-protection, as in the peasants described by Martín-Baró. Knowing the context also allows practical obedience imposed by the territory to be distinguished from approval of violence, helping people recognize that following certain rules to survive does not mean considering them just. This enables psychologists to recognize suffering without automatically turning it into illness or ignoring it.

7 Conclusion

This article sought to understand how frequent exposure to urban violence in Brazil relates to how people learn to manage everyday risks and to the psychological distress that may arise from these experiences. To develop this discussion, studies from Psychology, Collective Health, Sociology and Criminology were brought together, with González Rey's (2003) cultural-historical perspective on subjectivity as the main reference, enabling individual experiences to be understood alongside people's social and historical living conditions.

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The literature analyzed made it possible to distinguish two meanings of the naturalization of violence. The first concerns social inequalities, racism and the unequal treatment of certain groups and territories. Having long been present in Brazilian society, these situations often cease to be recognized as forms of violence. The second concerns everyday life with danger, when people must consider the possibility of violent situations in organizing activities and making decisions. Although these forms of naturalization may be related, they should not be confused. Learning to live in an environment marked by insecurity does not necessarily mean considering violence normal or agreeing with it.

This distinction is important for understanding the study's central hypothesis. The consulted studies indicate that in certain territories, following rules imposed by violence may be necessary for protection rather than a choice based on agreement. Avoiding particular places, changing the route home, not going out at certain times or trying to avoid involvement in certain situations are part of many people's routines. These changes show how risk influences decisions that would otherwise be made more freely. Successfully adapting one's routine to insecurity therefore does not establish that one has come to accept violence.

It was also possible to observe that adaptation does not eliminate suffering. Even when people maintain their daily activities, fear, mistrust, losses, imposed silence and sleep difficulties may persist. In addition to emotional exhaustion, the need for constant vigilance can limit movement around the city, hinder social interaction and interfere with life plans. These restrictions may affect young people and those facing greater social vulnerability more intensely, as they cannot always leave places where they experience risk.

Another aspect requiring attention is the effect of this coexistence over time. The constant need for self-protection may produce exhaustion that hinders the ability to react to or question certain situations. This does not mean, however, that everyone responds alike or that frequent exposure necessarily produces acceptance of violence. The analyzed studies differ particularly concerning trust among neighbors, relationships between poverty and criminality, and possibilities for resisting violence. While some research points to weakened bonds and increased mistrust, other studies show that trust and solidarity may persist even in violent contexts. These differences must be considered because the studies were conducted in different periods with different participants and methods. It would therefore be inappropriate to claim that violence affects all people or communities in the same way.

The research also highlighted how violence-related suffering is perceived in health services. In some situations, people's difficulties are not associated with the insecurity and

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violence present in their lives. Consequently, this suffering may remain largely unrecognized or be treated solely as an individual problem through diagnoses and medication. Although these resources may be needed in some cases, they should not replace an understanding of the conditions in which suffering arises. When care considers symptoms alone, it risks overlooking an important part of people's lived reality.

For psychological practice, this discussion reinforces the need to understand not only individuals but also their territories, relationships, difficulties and available support. People who avoid leaving home, show mistrust or remain constantly alert may be trying to protect themselves from situations that pose real danger. Without understanding this context, these behaviors may be misinterpreted as mere signs of a psychological problem. Expanded clinical practice contributes to work that considers each person's life history, experiences and social conditions without reducing suffering to a diagnosis. This form of care also relates to Psychology's ethical commitment to social reality. In addition to acknowledging suffering, psychologists can help question the idea that violence is a natural part of life, encouraging recognition that this reality has social causes and can be transformed.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. As a narrative review, it could not gather all existing research on the topic. Furthermore, many of the Brazilian studies analyzed were conducted in Rio de Janeiro, requiring caution when relating their findings to other regions. Few recent studies focused specifically on the psychological distress of people directly affected by urban violence were found. Another limitation is that the main study used to discuss acceptance of violence presents older data and examines opinions and behaviors without directly assessing participants' psychological distress. The research on exposure to violent news was conducted in the United States, in a different context from Brazil. Many consulted studies also do not allow a direct causal relationship to be established between exposure to violence and psychological distress. The conclusions should therefore be understood as interpretations developed from the research analyzed rather than definitive answers.

These limitations demonstrate the importance of further investigation. Research in other Brazilian regions, especially the Northeast, could improve understanding of the experiences of people living daily with violence and insecurity. Further studies are also needed on the effects of news and social media, experiences of violence in schools, and the outcomes of psychological and social care provided by public services. Better knowledge of these realities can help care practices address the needs of different populations and territories.

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Finally, this work's main reflection is that the fear and insecurity experienced by people living with urban violence cannot be understood solely as individual issues. These feelings also relate to living conditions, social relationships and everyday experiences. Understanding this relationship is important for psychologists to offer listening that recognizes suffering without disregarding the reality in which it arises. It is also necessary to understand that learning to live with danger does not mean ceasing to suffer or agreeing with violence. By considering these issues, Psychology can contribute to care that is more attentive to people and their social conditions, without treating violence as natural or impossible to change.

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