



HEALTH OF INCARCERATED ELDERLY

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, Brazil has seen a change in its population profile characterized by the rapid and accentuated increase of the elderly. The natural aging process weakens the individual making them more prone to develop old age diseases that can compromise independence and self-reliance. When investigating the issue of crime in the country, one can see an increase of the participation of elderly people in this context, ending with the incarceration of these individuals. The objective of this study was to conduct a theoretical discussion about the increasing the number of elderly people in prison and the impact of the prison environment on old age and the health of these individuals. It was possible to observe that social and economic factors can contribute to the entry of the elderly into the world of crime and that the health and aging of these individuals are negatively affected, due mainly to the unhealthy environment and the lack of assistance in prison.

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INTRODUCTION

Brazil currently has a total population of approximately 190,755,799 inhabitants, of which 20,590,597 are elderly - aged 60 years or over. According to projections by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the elderly population in Brazil is expected to reach 58.4 million, or 26.7% of the total population by 2060 (IBGE, 2013). This demographic trend of increasing the elderly population in the country is also observed in the prison environment with the increase in cases of crimes committed by elderly people. The high rate of people incarcerated with diseases demonstrates that having health in a prison system is almost a utopia, since most prisons present a reality where many individuals live in the same environment, in overcrowded cells, with minimal comfort, inadequate food, drug use, sedentary lifestyle, and lack of hygiene (Minayo; Ribeiro, 2016; Soares Filho; Bueno, 2016). The aging process of the incarcerated elderly, as explained by Ghiggi (2015), does not occur in the same way as an elderly person who is in society, since the prison environment is unhealthy, affecting more forcefully various

aspects of the individual's life, such as biological, economic, social and psychological. Corroborating this, Minayo; Ribeiro (2016) affirm that the prison situation, in itself, has more potential to create the physical and mental symptoms, since, the high number of prisoners with health problems living in the same environment, in extremely crowded cells, have very negative repercussions on the physical and mental condition of the person. Therefore, it is stated the prison fosters multiple and costly chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart failure, cognitive impairment and terminal liver disease, and/or causes a deterioration in its staff, leading to disability (Williams; Brie; Marc; Stern; Mellow; Safer; Greifinger. 2012). In view of this, we aim to present some theoretical discussions about old age and the health of the imprisoned elderly, seeking to discuss the increase in the number of elderly people in situations of imprisonment and the impact of the prison environment on old age and the health of these individuals.

The increase in the number of incarcerated

In recent decades in Brazil, there has been an increase in the number of people who are 60 years old or more, and according to projections of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (IBGE 2013), the elderly population will

continue to grow in the near future. This exponential and rapid growth of the elderly population and its consequences for the individual, family and society is a tremendous challenge for the government, and the family, to face. This requires a somber and urgent investigation, as it is a right of Brazilians to grow up with security, dignity, autonomy, independence and active participation in society (Closs; Schwanke, 2012). As Silva points out (2012, p.206):

The needs of the elderly population, a contingent that grows at a very rapid pace in Brazil today, is now seen as one of the expressions of the contemporary social question. This requires the state and government to reshape the public agenda and investments, in order to overcome specific and localized actions, public policies of social scope, with concrete budgetary demarcation, and institutional guidelines at the various administrative levels that make up the federative republic.

Thus, the increase in population has repercussions throughout the spheres of society, including in the criminal trial process, since an increase in the number of crimes by elderly persons has been noted. This can be explained by the social and economic problems that afflict the country and which promote the entry of people from the world of crime (Côrte, 2010). According to data from the National Penitentiary Department (Depen, 2014), the Brazilian prison population surpassed 607,000 people, ranking fourth in the ranking of countries with the largest prison population in the world, 6.7 times higher than in 1990. In 2000, the total number of prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants was 137, as early as 2014, the rate reached 299.7 people. If this rate is maintained, in 2022, the incarcerated population of Brazil will exceed one million people and by 2075, one in ten people will be in prison. In Bahia, the number of prisoners in 2014 reached 15,399, ranking tenth in the state with the largest number of inmates in the country, and with a rate of 101.8 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants (Depen, 2014). As Secretariat of Penitentiary Administration data and resocialization (SEAP) the prison population of Bahia in December 2017 was 14,916 prisoners (SEAP, 2017), a slightly smaller number compared to 2014, but still alarming. With regard to the elderly population, the numbers are very small, but important data for research, because it is growing, even slowly compared to other age groups. In 2014, of the 84% of the information obtained, 1% of the inmates were elderly, given the Brazilian reality (Depen, 2014).

The profile of the imprisoned population in Bahia is very similar to most Brazilian states. Regarding race, color or ethnicity, 87.7% of people incarcerated in Brazil are black. Regarding marital status, 58% are single, followed by 27% in a stable marriage. As for education, 51% have completed Primary Education (Depen, 2014). Unfortunately, there is no data regarding the type of crime committed and the average time of imprisonment per group. In addition, there are no data on the profile of the population incarcerated with regard to the age group. What lies behind these data is the following question: Why has the number of older people committing crimes increased in recent years? In Brazil the answer to this question becomes a bit difficult since there are no studies about the issue of the elderly incarcerated in the country. However, in other countries, such as the United States of America (USA), studies have been conducted, such as the Howse (2011), which had elderly prisoners as participants, and

came to the conclusion that there are three main reasons for the elderly incarceration: demographic change, changes in sentencing practices, and a general increase in crime levels. Perhaps these are also the reasons in Brazil, adding to these the living conditions and vulnerabilities that many seniors experience in various social and economic contexts within the country. It is very common that the image of the elderly is characterized as fragile, defenseless, and incapable; a victim characterization. This view often makes for a useful target, to suffer criminal acts such as assault, theft and even death. However, the number of crimes committed by older persons is a reality and has grown every year. The number of elderly people who leave this pattern of defenseless has only grown in Brazil, and over time, according to statistics, crime with the participation of the elderly will increase even more (Monteiro, 2013). In the United States, the number of incarcerated elderly people is already characterized as an epidemic, which has become a recurring concern of the authorities, mainly due to the high financial costs with this population. The report produced by the *American Civil Liberties Union* about the situation of the imprisoned elderly population, brings a title that denounces this reality: "*At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly*". The US is the biggest jailer in the world and also has the largest number of arrested elderly, both those who committed crimes after 55 years, as those who were arrested young and are serving more than 30 to 50 years in prison (The Aclu, 2012). The same document (Aclu, 2012) brings the projection that in 2030 one third of the prison population in the US will be the elderly.

Future projections for Brazil are also alarming. According to data in 2025, about 25% of the prison population will be people 60 years or older and a prison sentence of at least 20 years. Although low in statistics, compared to the population of incarcerated youth, one cannot ignore this fact. It is necessary to seek to know and understand this other reality of the elderly (Côrte, 2010). In his research, with articles selected and cut from daily newspapers that circulate in the city of São Paulo regarding the elderly as an agent of crime, Côrte (2010) concluded that most of these elderly people have lived a life of crime and that in the aging process tends to continue in this environment. For a long time, the silence on the situation of the imprisonment of elderly people in Brazil was a constant, but in recent years it has been reported in the public circulation media in a subtle way, without drawing attention to the problem and the complexities that are involved around the situation (Carmo and Araújo, 2011). As previously discussed, this silencing can be overshadowed because the number of seniors is not so significant when compared to the number of young adults imprisoned, or on the other hand, by the view of the elderly as a helpless and fragile being. This reality of growth in the number of elderly people who have committed crimes and consequently been imprisoned demonstrates the need for studies that account for understanding the aging process of an elderly inmate, but also to understand everything that is involved in this dynamic.

Impacts of prison environment on elderly people's health and health

Old age is diverse and occurs in a differentiated way for each person. It happens biologically and socially, since the life process and the individual choices add to the biological particularities and give significantly different characteristics (Farinatti, 2008). For Neri (1995), old age is a social and

individual category, which is linked to the ideals and values of society, according to the environment in which the subject ages. Their individualities of their group, and the way that this individual is socially involved are basic factors in this process. Thus, "old age and aging are phenomena that vary in historical time, according to the structuring, values, policies and practices of each society" (Diogo, Neri, p.7, 2013). To think about the aging process of an elderly individual who is incarcerated is to take into account that aging will occur in a differentiated way from the elderly person who is not incarcerated, since the realities of environment and social coexistence are extremely different. According to Bersaglini (2016), the population that is in prison in Brazil has previous deficiencies, but prison accentuates the implications due to the unhealthy environment of overcrowding, adding the consequences of the being confined. When this reality refers to the elderly population, the aggravating factors are even greater, since these individuals enter their old age in a social context of seclusion, with norms and rules of the prison institution, exposed to overcrowding, unhealthy conditions and a series of adversities (Camargo, 2015). In addition, the elderly are kept isolated from the coexistence and support of the family, which is a fundamental institution for coping with the demands of life (Gonçalves; Leite; Hildebrandt; Bisogno; Biasuz; Falcade. 2013).

Because prison is an all-inclusive disciplinary apparatus, designed to exercise the power to punish by suppressing free time (Foucault, 1987), it intensifies not only physical but psychological problems, especially in the elderly. In this perspective, and with the reality of the Brazilian prison system, it is inferred that being incarcerated makes possible the appearance of feelings of frustration, idleness, disbelief in the near future, violence, rupture of family and social ties, mental disorders, which can impair the quality of life, as well as accelerating the process of aging (Deus, 2003). The quality of life is understood as "the individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value system in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (Whoqol Group, 1994). The elderly, according to Porporino (2014), who maintains social contact with family members, friends and other social supports, who are participatory in society, who have some level of financial stability and have social support networks, are happier and have a better quality of life. On the other hand, those who grow old in prisons are already subject to distance from family and friends and are excluded from social support networks, without political participation and consequently distanced from happiness, while having health concerns and fear of death. As Porporino points out, (2014, p. 2) the prison environment is unhealthy: Aging in prison becomes an incessant grind where one is forced to endure a closed, austere, routine, noisy, and pungent environment." And aging in this environment is different from aging in freedom: There is no "choice" to learn to age gracefully in prison. You just get old, fast and mostly invisibly (Porporino, 2014, p.2).

Longevity, at the same time as it is an achievement of humanity, is a concern, because if on the one hand there is the strong desire to live long, on the other there is the fear of living with disabilities and dependence. This is mainly due to the fact that in old age the occurrence of illnesses and physical impairments, psychic and social functionality is higher than that of a young person (Paschoal, 2011). For the incarcerated elderly, the health problems are even more intensified, mainly

due to the environment in which they live, because the Brazilian prison system is deficient in terms of hygiene, health, and discipline (Caixeta, 2006). Furthermore, the entrapment anticipates and accelerates the process of aging, with illness as the promoter, and drastically reducing the life expectancy (Oliveira Costa, Medeiros, 2013). Given this understanding, it is possible to affirm that everything in prison is intensified, which makes the aging process and health a challenge. Health understood as a complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of disease (Who, 1946). Several problems can affect one's life and consequently the health of an individual, including violence, harsh environment, improper lifestyle and human rights abuses. These various problems are commonplace in the prison environment, which makes it difficult to maintain health and have a dignified aging in this space (Porporino, 2014). Most of the elderly prisoners, due to their previous life, are less healthy than the general population. This may be due to difficulties in accessing health services, unfavorable living conditions or the use of drugs and/or alcohol. Added to this is the fact that the prisoners have much larger incidences of heart disease, hypertension, hepatitis C, diabetes mellitus, and other chronic diseases. For this reason, studies that discuss the incarceration of the elderly tend to argue that imprisonment is a disease promoter and that old age for those in prison is accelerated (Ollive, 2016).

According to Ken Howse (2011), incarceration was designed to maintain and control young offenders. Therefore, the elderly without any illness or mild illness can suffer typical wear and tear in prison and can be affected with problems that lead to the absence of health. For the elderly with moderate to severe physical illness, living in the prison environment can be extremely complex, and at times, impossible. Added to this is the difficulty of obtaining adequate care for physical and mental health, which is often absent in prisons.

The problems that affect the health of the elderly and the reality of living without health in the prison environment were also pointed out in other countries, such as the USA, by *Human Rights Watch*, *Old Behind* (2012):

Life in prison can challenge anyone, but it can be particularly hard for people whose bodies and minds are being whittled away by age. Prisons in the United States contain an ever growing number of aging men and women who cannot easily climb stairs, haul themselves to the top bunk, or walk long distances to meals or the pill line; whose old bones suffer from thin mattresses and winter's cold; who needs wheelchairs, walkers, canes, portable oxygen, and hearing aids; who cannot get dressed, go to the bathroom, or bathe without help; and who are incontinent, forgetful, suffering chronic illnesses, extremely ill, and dying.

The study by Heidari, Wangmo, Galli, Shaw, Elger (2017) with 35 seniors who are incarcerated in Switzerland has shown that access to health services in prison, psychological problems and unhealthy environment are primarily responsible for sickness of the elderly, especially with diseases known as geriatric syndromes. These diseases are common among older people, and may arise earlier depending on the precarious situation in which the individual lives. The geriatric syndromes have an impact on the functionality of the people, it increases mortality, dependence, reduced financial resources, leads to frequent long-lasting hospitalizations, and can also decrease the quality of life (Brown- O'Hara, 2013). The main geriatric

syndromes are: cognitive disability, postural instability; immobility; sphincter incontinence; communicative incapacity; iatrogenesis (adverse effects and complications of medical treatments) and family insufficiency (Moraes, Marino; Santos, 2010). In addition to the visible health problems that have an impact on the health of the incarcerated elderly, the significant costs of this individual to the state must be highlighted. Figures show that it is almost double the cost compared to younger inmates. This is due to the fact that the elderly have different needs than those of the young and raise greater demands on health care (Elijah, 2015). Therefore, the unhealthy environment and the lack of adequate health care in prisons cannot be ignored as key issues to be addressed on the topic of the health of incarcerated elderly people. As discussed by Bersaglini (2016), these factors are social determinants of health and focus of aggravations and diseases for incarcerated elderly people. Thus, this issue needs to be discussed and solutions presented and implemented to reduce this public health problem.

Final Considerations

Aging is a natural process and involves several aspects such as physiological, social, and economic, among others. This process brings with it changes that can jeopardize the quality of life of the individual or that can be accepted in a resilient way by the individual. However, this study observed that this process in the incarcerated elderly will suffer the negative influence of other aspects not experienced by the elderly in freedom. It was discussed that the unhealthy environment of the prison is determinant for the appearance of diseases and aggravation of the health conditions of the elderly. Associated with this is the lack of health care, since most prison institutions do not have health services and professionals to meet the demands of this population. Other factors, such as social isolation and separation from family, can affect mental health and cause depression and even suicide in prison. The social economic condition of the country was pointed out by some authors as a factor of entry of the elderly in the world of crime and its permanence in it. Given this context, it was possible to find out that the increasing presence of the elderly in crime and in the prison environment is an important social issue and that it has consequences in several aspects, be it individual for the life of the elderly, for their family, for the government, or for society in general. This reality is being hidden and what is observed is that little or nothing has been done by the state or society to improve the situation of the prisoner, be it elderly or young. Therefore, more studies need to be carried out and published on this topic so that this reality becomes known and debated. In addition, discovering what actions can be taken to change this very harmful situation, which is likely to worsen with projections of increasing numbers of elderly people involved in crime in the country.

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