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Violence against older adults in Brazil: an ecological analysis of reports in 2020 and 2023

Violência contra a pessoa idosa no Brasil: análise ecológica das denúncias em 2020 e 2023

Violencia contra la persona mayoren Brasil: análisis ecológico de denunciasen 2020 y 2023

ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the reporting rates of violence against older adults in Brazil in the years 2020 and 2023, stratified by sex, race/ethnicity, and educational level. **Method:** A descriptive ecological study was conducted using data from the National Human Rights Ombudsman. All reports filed in 2020 and 2023 were included. Reporting rates were calculated using population estimates. Statistical analysis comprised descriptive statistics and comparison of rates between the two years using the Reporting Rate Ratio (RRR) with a 95% confidence interval. **Results:** The study revealed an increase in reporting rates between 2020 and 2023, particularly among illiterate men and women. In contrast, women with higher education showed a reduction in reporting rates. The rates among white older adults of both sexes increased. **Final remarks:** The findings highlight disparities in vulnerability to violence based on sociodemographic characteristics. Intervention strategies should prioritize older adults with low educational attainment and aim to enhance reporting systems.
Keywords: Elderly; Violence; Elder abuse.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar as taxas de denúncias de violência contra a pessoa idosa no Brasil nos anos 2020 e 2023, estratificado por sexo, raça/cor e nível de escolaridade. **Método:** Estudo ecológico-descritivo com dados da Ouvidoria Nacional de Direitos Humanos. Foram incluídas todas as denúncias dos anos 2020 e 2023, cujas taxas foram calculadas utilizando as estimativas populacionais. A análise estatística incluiu análise descritiva e comparação das taxas entre os anos por meio da Razão de Taxas de Denúncia, com intervalo de confiança de 95%. **Resultados:** O estudo revelou aumento nas taxas de denúncias nos anos 2020 e 2023, especialmente entre homens e mulheres analfabetas, sendo que mulheres com ensino superior apresentaram redução, e as taxas entre os indivíduos idosos de cor branca em ambos os gêneros sofreram aumento. **Considerações finais:** Os achados destacam disparidades na vulnerabilidade à violência, conforme características sociodemográficas. Estratégias devem priorizar idosos com baixa escolaridade e melhorar sistemas de notificação.
Palavras-chave: Pessoa idosa; Violência; Abuso de idosos.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar las tasas de denuncias de violencia contra personas mayores en Brasil durante los años 2020 y 2023, estratificadas por sexo, raza/color y nivel educativo. **Método:** Estudio ecológico descriptivo, basado en datos de la Defensoría Nacional de Derechos Humanos. Se incluyeron todas las denuncias registradas en los años 2020 y 2023. Las tasas de denuncia se calcularon utilizando estimaciones poblacionales. El análisis estadístico incluyó análisis descriptivo y comparación de las tasas entre los años mediante la Razón de Tasas de Denuncia con un intervalo de confianza del 95%. **Resultados:** El estudio reveló un aumento en las tasas de denuncias entre 2020 y 2023, especialmente entre hombres y mujeres analfabetos. Las mujeres con educación superior presentaron una disminución en las tasas. Las tasas entre personas mayores de raza blanca, en ambos sexos, también mostraron un aumento.
Conclusión: Los hallazgos ponen de relieve disparidades en la vulnerabilidad frente a la violencia según características sociodemográficas. Las estrategias de intervención deben priorizar a las personas mayores con baja escolaridad y fortalecer los sistemas de notificación.
Palabras clave: Anciano; Violencia; Abuso de ancianos.

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INTRODUCTION

Population ageing is increasing rapidly over the years due to the decline in birth and fertility rates together with the increase in life expectancy of the general population. As individuals age, they experience physiological, behavioral, physical, psychological, cognitive, and social changes that may lead to comorbidities that can result in fragility, loss of autonomy and physical dependence, that can expose them to situations of violence[1].

Violence against older adults (VAOA) can be described as a direct action, negligence or omission, causing harm or putting the older adult at risk of harm by a person in which they trust, a problem that involves complex psychosocial and medical conditions. Due to age or disability violence can also be caused by a person that does not belong to the elderly person's circle of trust, and it can be classified into five categories: physical, sexual, psychological or emotional, financial, and neglect, with victims often suffering a combination of these abuses simultaneously[2].

Although it is a worldwide phenomenon, quantitative data on the occurrence of VAOA is rare, especially in middle-and low-income countries. The Lancet Global Health published a meta-analysis showing that about one out of six older adults suffer some kind of abuse, with an overall prevalence of 15.7%, including 11.6% related to psychological abuse; 6.8% related to financial abuse; 4.2% related to neglect; 2.6% related to physical violence; and 0.9% related to sexual violence[3].

Considering regional variability in Brazil, in the Northeast, physical violence is considered the most prevalent, followed by neglect and abandonment[4]. However, a study developed with reports generated by Dial 100, showed that neglect was the most prevalent, followed by psychological and financial abuse, with sexual violence presenting a low number of reports[5].

As humans age, they face behavioral, physical, psychological, cognitive, and social changes of a physiological nature, which may trigger comorbidities that can cause fragility, loss of self-sufficiency, and physical dependence. When these situations are enhanced by factors such as low socioeconomic status, family inability to take care of the elderly, and a history of intrafamilial conflicts, we have an environment that favors VAOA[6].

Although there is no consensus on the risk factors for this phenomenon, due to its dynamic nature[7], certain characteristics are pointed out as indicators of vulnerability to abuse, such as: female gender, advanced age, poor physical or mental health, functional dependence, cognitive impairment, dependence and low income, family conflicts, social isolation, lack of social support, and use of addictive or dependence-causing substances[7,8,9].

Despite there have been advances in the recognition of violence against older adults, there are few studies that comparatively analyze recent periods marked by social changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, social isolation and the fragility of protection systems increased violence and underreporting, while in 2023, the resumption of in-person activities may have altered the incidence and visibility of violence. Comparison between these years helps to fill gaps in knowledge and subsidize policies to combat violence.

Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze the rates of complaints of violence against older adults in Brazil in 2020 and 2023, stratified by sex, race/color, and

level of education.

METHOD

This is an ecological study with a cross-sectional design and quantitative approach using aggregate data on complaints against older adults, available on the National Human Rights Ombudsman (NHRO) panel on the Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship (MHRC) website, covering the years 2020 and 2023. This period was chosen because it allows for the evaluation of complaint rate patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic and two years after it. The recommendations of the initiative Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) were used as a reference to structure the study according to its methodological design[10].

All complaints against older adults recorded in the years analyzed were included. The study population comprises individuals aged 60 years or older, with the stratification variables defined as follows: gender, age group (60-69, 70-79, and over 80 years), race/color (white, brown, yellow, black, and indigenous), and level of education (illiterate, complete elementary school, complete high school, and complete higher education).

To calculate this rate, the number of reported cases of violence each year was used as the numerator, and the total number of elderly people was used as the denominator, considering stratification by gender and age group, and using a multiplication factor of 100,000. The denominator information was collected from the Department of Informatics of the Unified Health System (DATASUS), according to population estimates for the year 2022. The dependent variable was the standar-

dized violence rate, while the independent variables included years of schooling and the aforementioned sociodemographic categories.

For the quantitative analysis, a descriptive analysis of the data was initially performed, expressed in tables, followed by a comparison of the reporting rates between 2020 and 2023 using the Complaint Rate Ratio (CRR)[11], calculated by dividing the 2023 rates by the 2020 rates, with their respective confidence intervals (95% CI). The data were processed using Jamovi software, version 2.3.28. The percentage variations between the years were calculated using the following equation:

$$VP= \frac{(V2)}{(V1)} -1 \, x100$$

[12], where v1 represents the 2020 rate and v2 represents the 2023 rate.

Regarding ethical and legal aspects, submission to the Ethics and Research Committee on Human Beings was not necessary since the data were aggregated and freely available, in accordance with Resolution No. 510/2016, Article 1, sole paragraph, item II, of the National Health Council.

RESULTS E DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study show differences in the rates of complaints of violence against older adults between the years studied. Table 1 shows the percentage variations between years, as well as the RRRs and their respective CIs. Thus, it was observed that among males and females, in almost all races/colors, there was an increase in these rates. Among men, there was a significant increase in rates among blacks (+46.9%) and browns (+52.3%), while for women, most of the increase was among whites (+44.4%) and browns

(+36.3%). In contrast, rates decreased in yellow men groups (–33.3%), while increased in yellow women groups (+130.0%).

The analysis by level of education revealed a significant increase in illiterate elderly men (+110.2%), those with a high school education (+229%), and those with a college degree (+176.8%). When analyzing females, women with elementary school (–12.60%) and higher education (–15.2%) showed a drop in the rate of complaints, while between illiterate women (+22.9%) there was a small increase when compared to those with high school education (+2.9%).

Table 1 - Rates of complaints of violence against older adults per 100,000, stratified by sex, race/color, educational level, and year of occurrences[15]

Category	Subcategory	2020	2023	Variation (%)	CRR (CI 95%)*
Sex and Race/Color					
Male	White	6.1	8.8	44.0%	1.44 (1.38–1.51)
	Brown	4.42	6.73	52.30%	1.52 (1.45–1.60)
	Black	1.75	2.57	46.90%	1.47 (1.39–1.55)
	Yellow	0.12	0.08	–33.30%	0.67 (0.58–0.76)
	Indigenous	0.04	0.06	50.00%	1.50 (1.32–1.70)
Female	White	18.91	27.31	44,40%	1.44 (1.40–1.49)
	Brown	12.37	16.86	36,30%	1.36 (1.32–1.41)
	Black	4.64	6.09	31,30%	1.31 (1.26–1.37)
	Yellow	0.2	0.46	130,00%	2.30 (2.10–2.52)
	Indigenous	0.14	0.23	64,30%	1.64 (1.50–1.80)
Sex and educational level					
Male	Illiterate	5.29	11.12	110.20%	2.10 (2.00–2.21)
	Complete elem. school	2.17	4.17	92.20%	1.92 (1.80–2.05)
	Complete high school	3.34	10.99	229.00%	3.29 (3.15–3.44)
	Complete higher degree	1.64	4.54	176.80%	2.77 (2.60–2.95)
Female	Illiterate	14.83	18.23	22.90%	1.23 (1.19–1.27)
	Complete elem. school	5.93	5,18	–12.60%	0.87 (0.83–0.91)
	Complete high school	9.97	10.26	2.90%	1.03 (1.00–1.06)
	Complete higher degree	5.54	4.7	–15.20%	0.85 (0.81–0.89)

*CRR= Complaint Rate Ratio
*CI 95% = Confidence Interval
Source: Research data, 2025.

The study showed that, in general, there was an increase in the rate of complaints on VAOA from 2020 to 2023, a result that corroborates that of Marques and Teixeira[13], which showed that, comparing the years 2020 and 2022, there was an increase of approximately 145,000 complaints of VAOA, and during COVID–19 pandemic, Brazil recorded a 59% increase in violence and abuse against older adults, with almost 26,000 complaints between March and June 2020, the most critical period. Economic instability and unemployment resulting from COVID–19 pandemic are key factors in the occurrence of domestic violence, leading to accumulated tensions in the family environment, which cause violence as a form of "power" to subjugate the other[13].

The data from this study showed that there was an increase in the rate of complaints against older adults of both

sexes, especially females and those with no education. These results are consistent with the systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Kitaw et al.[14], which showed that the prevalence of abuse was higher in studies that included only women (32%) when compared to those that involved both sexes (27%). This difference may be associated with factors such as gender power dynamics, financial dependence, social isolation, and longer life expectancy, which increase elderly vulnerability in relation to caregivers or family members[15].

Despite having a longer life expectancy, elderly women face additional years with poorer quality of life, greater fragility and a higher risk of functional dependence. In addition, sociodemographic factors such as low educational levels, living alone, and the need to take care of others or receive care contribute to an even greater decline in quality of life[16]. Furthermore, women represent 55.7% of Brazilian elderly people, and men 44.3%, which may explain the higher number of notifications, as well as the feminization of aging corresponding to higher life expectancy of women compared to men[17].

It was observed that women with complete higher education had fewer complaints of VAOA, comparing 2022 and 2023. It is important to note that, although there is no consensus, the literature indicates that education can influence the elderly person's perception of the violence suffered, with a lower prevalence among those with a higher level of education[18-21].

Older male individuals with lower levels of education also had a high rate of reporting VAOA. In Brazil, there are more older people with no education or only elementary school education, which may ex-plain this occurrence[22], result that is also consistent with other studies[23,24].

The study conducted by Dias et al.[25], showed that having more than 150,000 cases of reported violence against older adults in Brazil between 2018 and 2023, 44.17% were committed against individuals of white race/color, as demonstrated in this study.

Elderly people of brown race/color also represented a significant number of complaints in the years studied, with both male and female individuals showing an increase in rates. This result corroborates the study by Lima, Palmeira, and Macedo[26], which analyzed cases of reported violence against older adults from 2012 to 2019 in northeastern Brazil. 11,250 out of the 18,357 complaints in the period studied corresponded to brown race/color.

It is important to note that this study had some limitations, including the impossibility of individual causal inference due to data aggregation and reporting bias, since the most vulnerable groups may not have access to the necessary information, leading to underreporting, especially in more remote areas. On the other hand, it has strengths, given that it systematically performed a stratified analysis, allowing for comparison of rates between the years studied, as well as enabling collaboration to strengthen the formulation and reformulation of more assertive public policies against VAOA.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study showed a pattern of increase in complaints of VAOA between 2020 and 2023, especially among men of all educational levels and illiterate elderly women. The results suggest that education acts differently between the sexes:

while men had a significant increase, especially those with a high school diploma, women with higher education showed a reduction in the number of reports. This disparity may be linked to factors such as greater autonomy, access to support networks, or underreporting in more educated groups, requiring complementary qualitative investigations.

Strategies targeting less educated older adults, especially illiterate men and women, are a priority, as well as improvements in reporting systems. Future studies should explore the reasons behind the reduction among women with higher levels of education, investigating whether it reflects lower vulnerability or barriers to complaints.

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