

THE ROLE
FIREARMS PLAY IN

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN



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This report presents the findings of a comprehensive analysis of data on firearm deaths and injuries between 2012 and 2019 taken from the country's Mortality Information System (SIM) and national notifiable disease surveillance system (SINAN). The study focuses on the contribution of firearms to lethal and non-lethal violence against women in Brazil in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the role firearms play in this type of violence. In addition to data on violent deaths obtained from the SIM, we use hospital admissions data including mandatory notifications of non-lethal violence made available by the SINAN¹. This analysis sought to answer the following questions: what is the rate of firearm violence among women in Brazil and what is the age and race profile of victims? Where does this violence take place, what are the main types of firearm violence, and what are the trends in recorded cases in recent years?

Violence is understood here as any act that inflicts physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, the threat of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. Gender violence can be defined as violence directed against a person because of their gender. Although anyone can experience gender-based violence, the majority of victims are women and girls due to a history of restricted rights and male chauvinism that entrenches women's subordination in most societies².

In Brazil, article 5 of the Maria da Penha Law (Law 11340) –which celebrated 15 years of existence in 2021 – defines domestic and family violence as “any gender-based act or omission that causes death, injury, physical, sexual or psychological suffering and moral or property damage”.

According to a report published by the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLIREC), understanding the role firearms play in violence against women is essential as firearm violence has a multiplier effect on gender-based violence, be it in contexts of armed conflict or countries that experience relative “normality” like Brazil. Besides being used to perpetrate other types of violence, such as psychological and sexual violence, the proliferation of firearms exacerbates violence against women and girls and increases the lethality of violence.



¹The SINAN records data from hospital admissions for violence. As with certain diseases, the notification of specific types of violence is mandatory, providing information on the number and profile of victims of lethal violence and injuries caused by acts of violence that do not result in death.

²Violencia Armada, Violencia por Motivos de Género y Armas Pequeñas: Sistematización de Datos Disponibles em América Latina y Caribe, UNLIREC, 2015, p. 11. Available at: http://unlirec.screativa.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ViolenciaArmadaViolencia_Motivos_Genero_ArmasPequennas-ESP.pdf

³Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2021/06/07/1-em-cada-4-mulheres-foi-vitima-de-algum-tipo-de-violencia-na-pandemia-no-brasil-diz-datafolha.ghtml>.

The latest survey of violence against women in Brazil shows that one in four women experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence in 2020³. Across Latin America, perpetrators of female homicide are predominantly intimate partners or family members.⁴ A survey of gun use in the United States conducted by the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health shows that guns in the home are used more often to intimidate intimate partners than to thwart crime⁵. Despite the huge scale and socioeconomic impact of firearm violence against women, this issue still attracts scant attention and produces little public debate in Brazil. For these reasons, it is vital to obtain a better understanding of the role firearms play in violence against women in this country.

This report is structured as follows:

- Analysis of female firearm homicide in Brazil.
- Analysis of types of non-lethal firearm violence against women in Brazil.



**Guns are
more often to
intimidate than
to thwart crime**

The data used in this report are from the Ministry of Health and may therefore show discrepancies with data on violence provided by state public security departments⁶. One of the main differences is that public security data make a distinction between female homicide and femicide, with the latter being defined as lethal violence committed against women because of their gender. Health data provide important additional information, including place of occurrence, weapon used and breakdowns by race/color. These datasets are therefore not mutually exclusive and should be analyzed as different points of view on the same phenomena.

³Violencia Armada, Violencia por Motivos de Género y Armas Pequeñas: Sistematización de Datos Disponibles en América Latina y Caribe, UNILIREC, 2015. Available at http://unilirec.screativa.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ViolenciaArmadaViolencia_Motivos_Genero_ArmasPequennas-ESP.pdf

⁴<https://www.hsppharvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/gun-threats-and-self-defense-gun-use-2/>

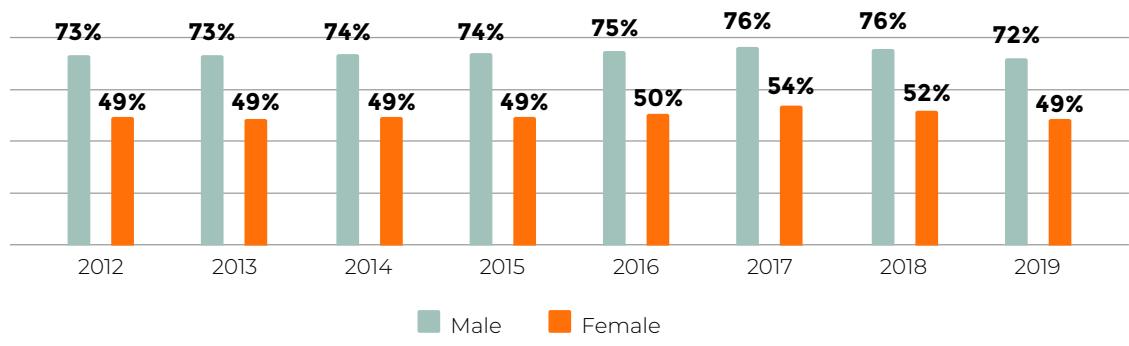
⁵Latest national statistics from these sources can be found in the Brazilian Public Security Yearbook available at <https://forumseguranca.org.br/anuario-brasileiro-seguranca-publica/> The figures reveal an increase in intentional homicides in 2020 and a rise in the proportion of homicides involving firearms.

FEMALE FIREARM HOMICIDE

I. General overview and victim race and age profile

Firearms are the most commonly used weapon in murders of women in Brazil. Fifty-one per cent of female homicides between 2000 and 2019 involved firearms. **This represents an annual average of around 2,000 women killed with guns.** The worst year during this period was 2017, when 54 per cent of female homicides involved firearms.

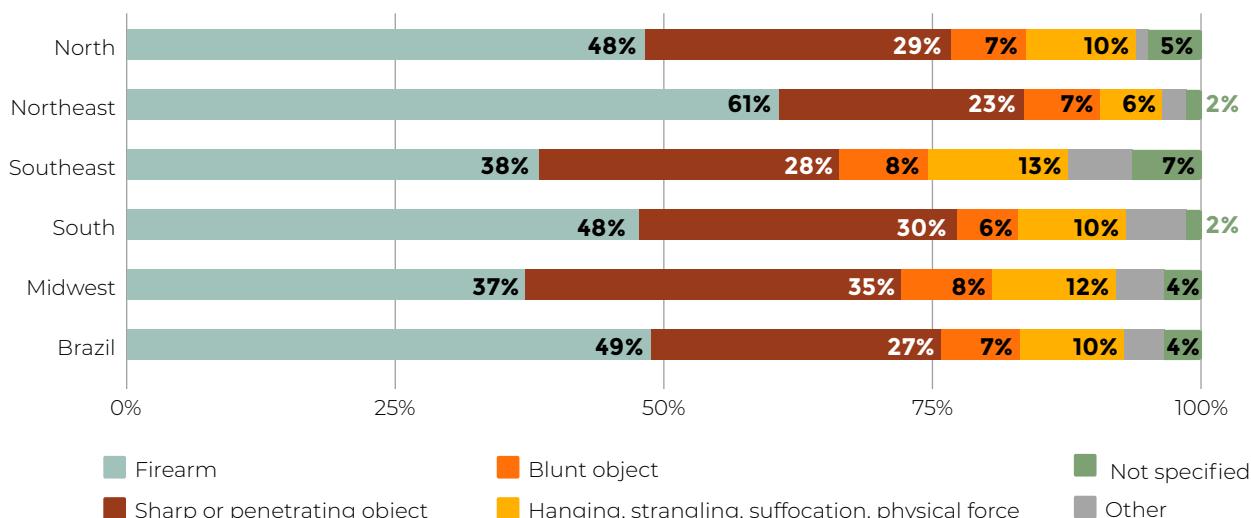
Graph 1 - Proportion of male and female homicides involving firearms. Brazil, 2012-2019



Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

Forty-nine per cent of female homicides in 2019 involved firearms. At regional level, this rate was highest in the Northeast (61 per cent of overall homicides), followed by the North and South (48 per cent in both regions), and lowest in the Southeast and Midwest, where rates were around 10 per cent lower than the national average.

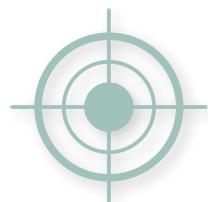
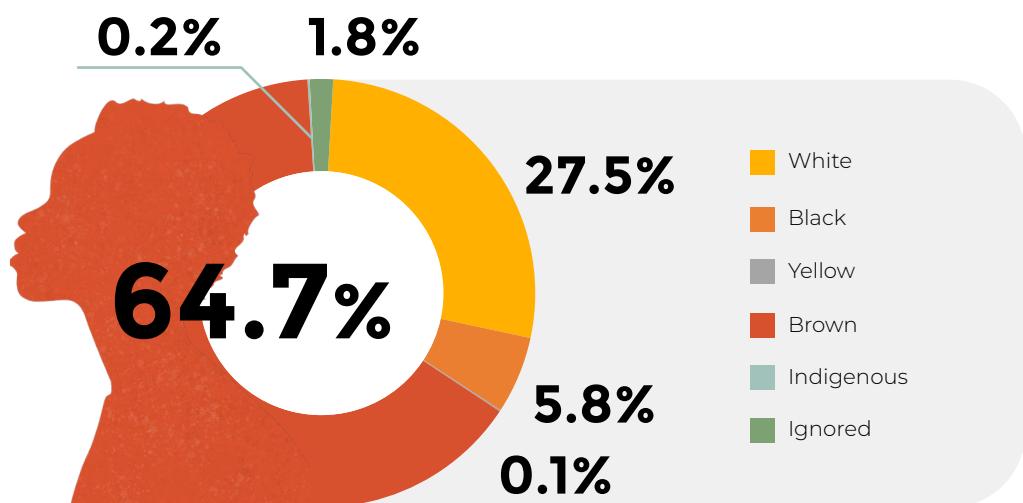
Graph 2 - Female homicides by weapon/method used. Brazil and Regions, 2019



Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

Historically, black women have been disproportionately affected by firearm homicide, with this group⁷ accounting for 70.5 per cent of female firearm homicides in 2019. As a result, the firearm homicide mortality rate among black women was two times higher than in non-black women. Fifty-two per cent of murders of black women involved firearms compared to 42 per cent among non-black women.

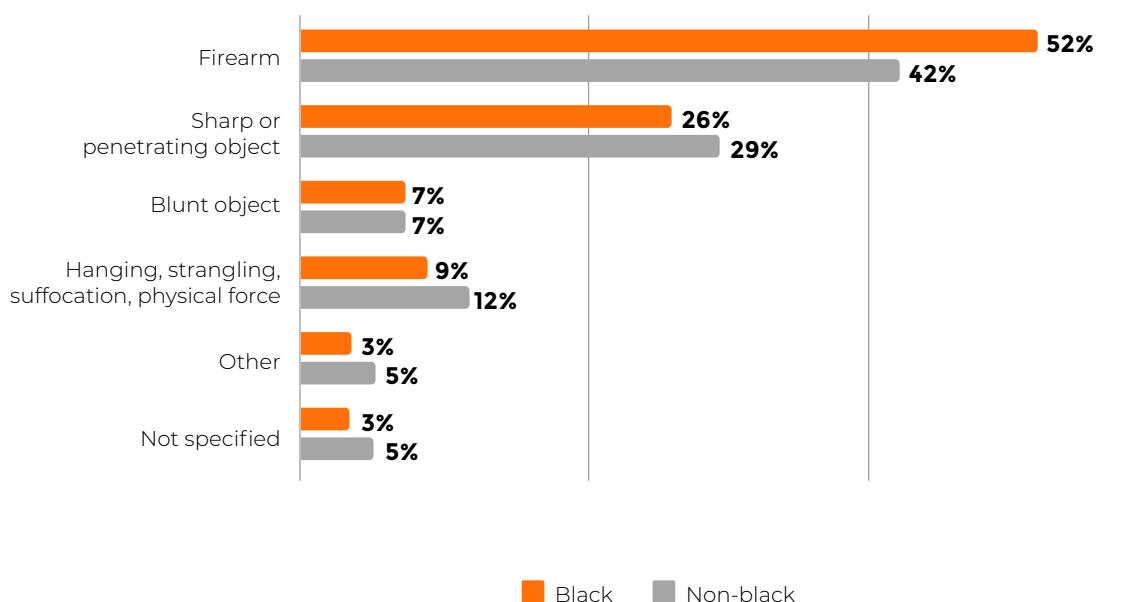
Figure 1 - Female firearm homicides by race/color. Brasil, 2019



Black women face a homicide mortality rate two times higher than non-black women

Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

Graph 3 - Homicides of black and non-black women by weapon used. Brazil, 2019



Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

⁷For the purposes of this study, the term black people refers to black and brown people.

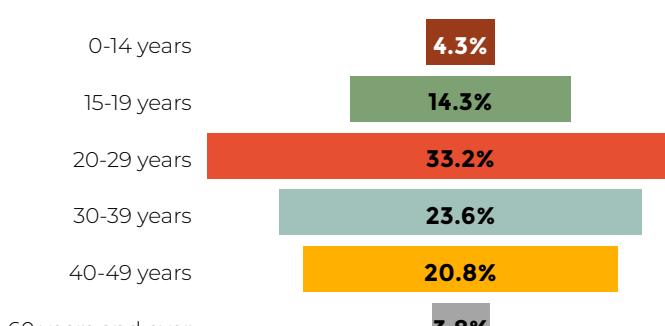
Young women (20-29 years) accounted for the largest share of female firearm homicides (33.2 per cent), followed by the 30-39 age group (23.6 per cent). Graph 5 shows that firearms were the most common weapon used across all age groups except older women (60 years and over). The firearm homicide rate was highest among adolescents (15-19 years) and young adult women (64 per cent and 59 per cent, respectively).

The analysis stratified by age group and race/color shows a sharp difference in rates between black and non-black women in the 15-19 age group (68 per cent versus 52 per cent) and 0-14 age group (47 per cent versus 22 per cent)⁸. This difference is less pronounced in the adult age groups. In the oldest age group (60 years and over), cold weapons were the most common weapon used in killings of non-black women (34 per cent), while firearms were the most common weapon in murders of black women (31 per cent), respectively.



Firearms were the most common weapon used across age groups

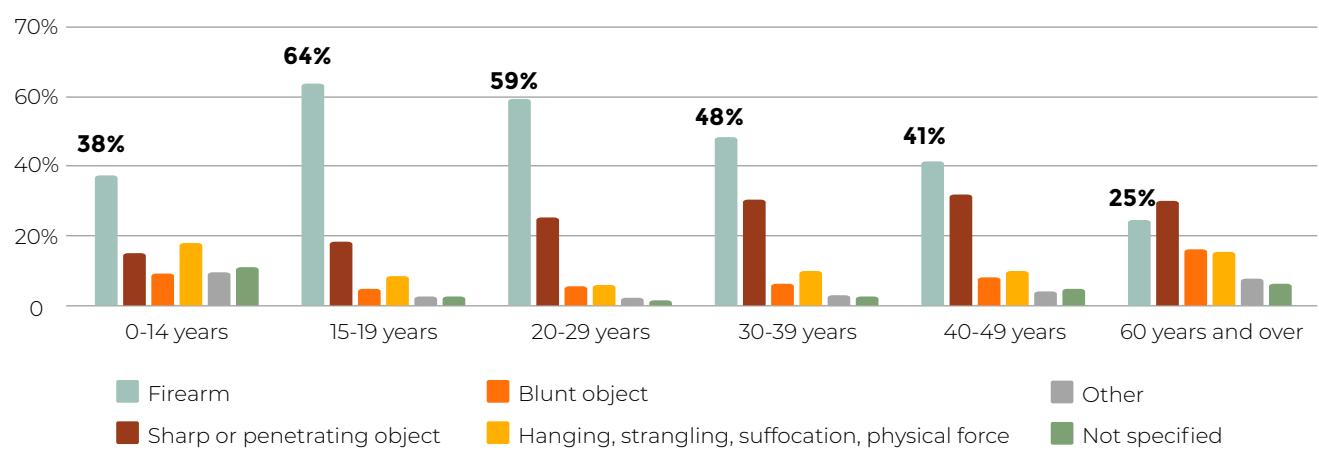
Graph 4 - Female firearm homicides by age group. Brazil, 2019



33.2%
20-29 years

Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

Graph 5 - Female homicides by weapon/method used and age group. Brazil, 2019



Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

⁸One explanation for these stark disparities is that black children are disproportionately affected by "stray" bullets (see for example a report on teenagers hit by stray bullets in Recife: <https://marcozero.org/aumenta-numero-criancas-e-adolescentes-vitimas-de-bala-perdida-no-grande-recife/>). Furthermore, black girls are more likely to be killed in violence involving organized crime (see for example a report on killings of girls in Ceará <https://diariodonordeste.verdesmares.com.br/seguranca/numero-de-meninas-mortas-em-2020-e-91-maior-do-que-2019-no-ceara-1.3019294>). Living in areas with a high incidence of gun battles and greater exposure to trafficking and armed violence are all indicators of high level of socioeconomic vulnerability resulting from racial and gender inequality; however, the data presented do not provide a definitive explanation for these disparities, warranting further in-depth analysis using data stratified by state.

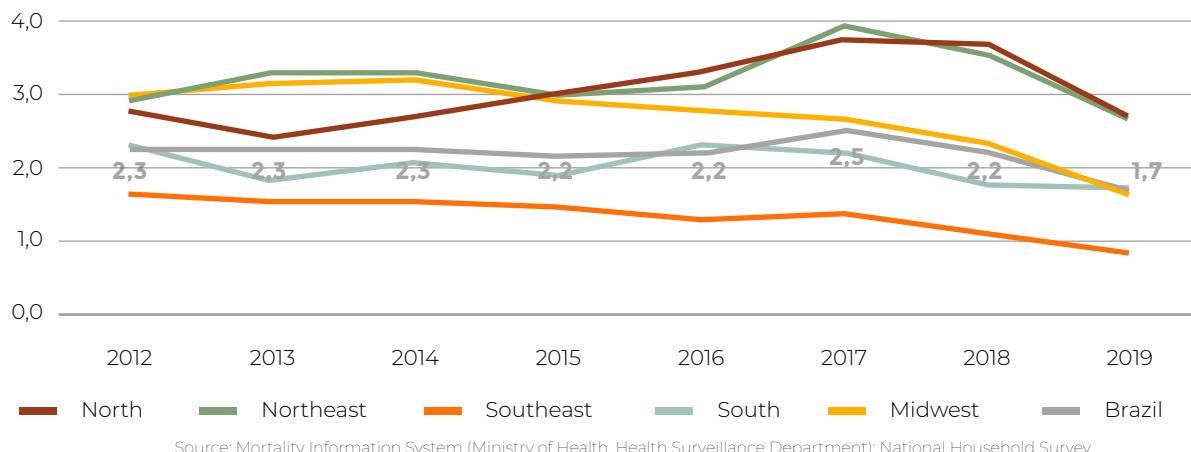
II. Regional snapshot and racial disparities

The analysis of the period 2012 to 2019 reveals that the number of female firearm homicides grew up to 2017, when the number of overall homicides in the country peaked followed by a drop in the following two years. The increase between 2012 and 2017 (+8 per cent) was due largely to a proliferation of violence in the North and Northeast regions, where there was a 35 per cent jump in female firearm homicides. The reduction seen across all regions from 2017 was more pronounced in the Midwest (-39 per cent) and Southeast (-38 per cent). Despite the general fall in overall homicides in the country from 2017, female firearm homicide rates per 100,000 population in the North and Northeast regions were around 60 per cent higher than the national rate, amplifying the differences observed in previous years. In contrast, the Southeast showed the lowest firearm homicide rates over the period, with the rate in 2019 being around half the national average.

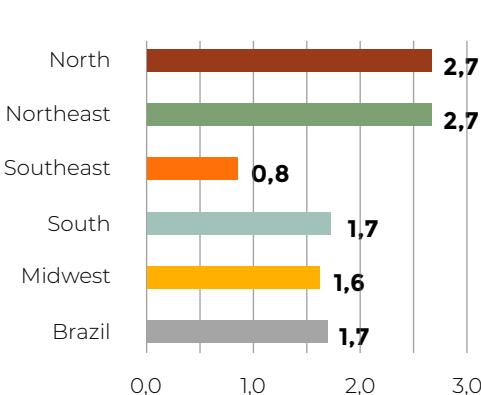


In 2017 the overall number of homicides peaked

Graph 6 - Female firearm homicide rate per 100,000 population. Brazil and Regions, 2012-2019

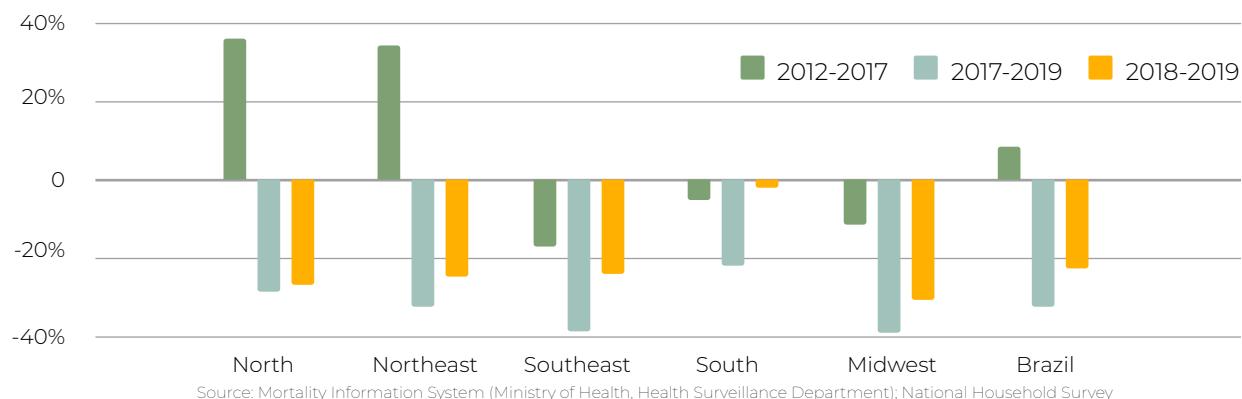


Graph 7 - Female firearm homicide rate per 100,000 population. Brazil and Regions, 2019



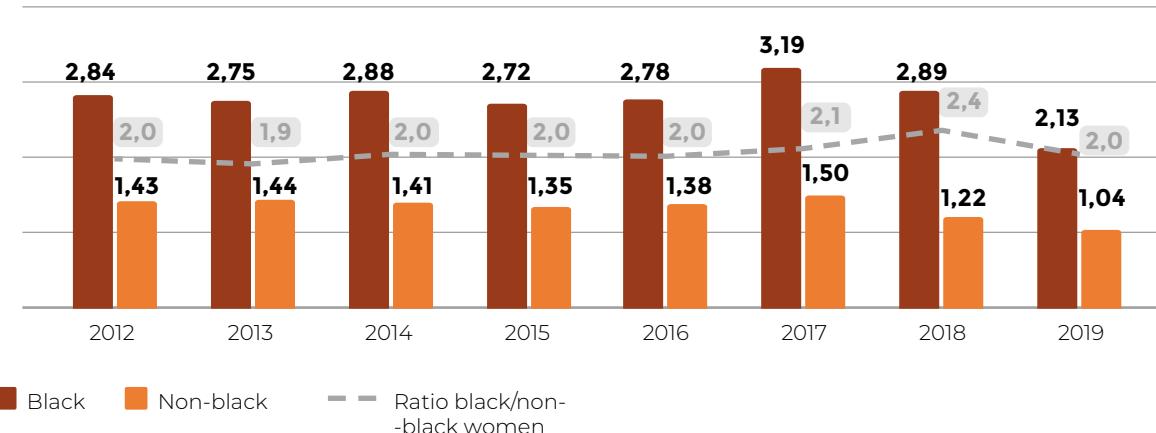
Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department); National Household Survey

**Graph 8 - Variation in female firearm homicide rates.
Brazil and Regions, 2012-2017, 2017-2019, 2018-2019**



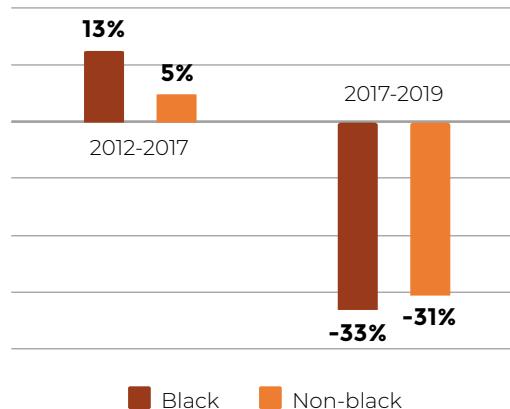
The analysis stratified by race reveals that the firearm homicide rate among black women in 2019 was twice as high as in non-black women. This difference was more pronounced in the Northeast region, where racial disparities have grown in recent years, with black women being three times more likely to be killed by armed violence than non-black women.

**Graph 9 - Firearm homicide rate per 100,000 population among black and non-black women.
Brazil, 2012-2019**



**Graphic 10 - Variation in firearm homicide rates among black and non-black women.
Brazil, 2012-2017; 2017-2019**

Victims of firearm violence in Brazil are predominantly young black people living in poorer and socially marginalized areas. This snapshot reinforces the uneven distribution of violence in the country. These disparities are the product of the structural racism at the heart of Brazilian society, which also affects black girls and women.



III. Place of occurrence of female firearm homicides

Data on where these acts of violence take place can provide crucial insights into the dynamics of homicide. The most common place of occurrence of firearm homicides was on a public street, representing 53 per cent of overall firearm homicides and 42 per cent of female firearm homicides in 2019. However, the proportion of victims killed in the home differs greatly between men and women, with one in four women being killed at home, compared to only 11 per cent of men. The table below shows that the proportion of female firearm homicides committed in the home rose between 2012 and 2019.



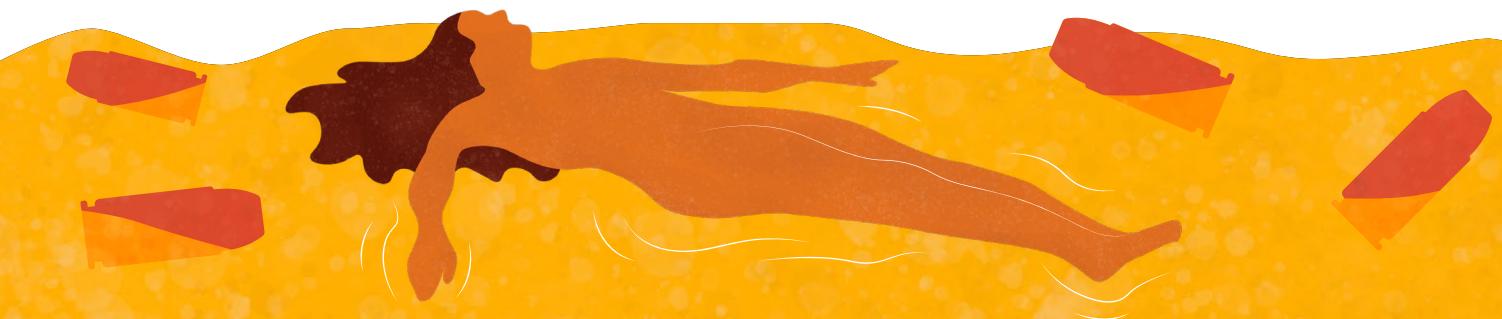
The public street is the most common place of firearm homicides to occur

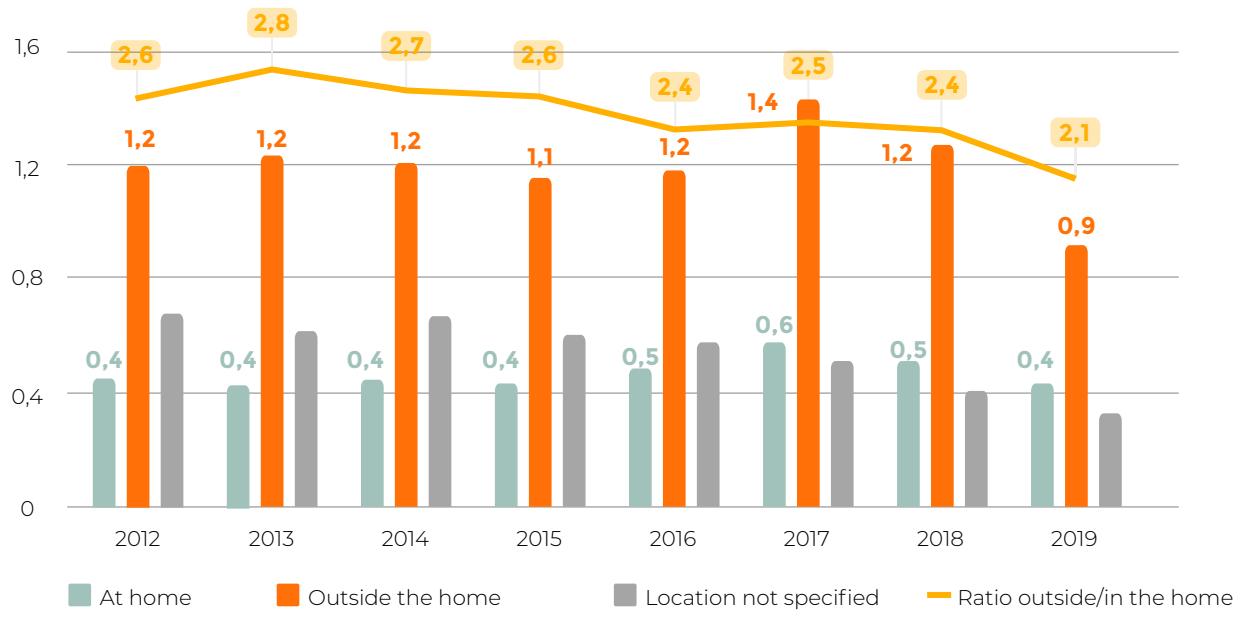
The data also reveal a fall in the proportion of cases where the place of occurrence was ignored (shown as information not available in the table) between 2014 and 2017. It would be reasonable to assume that this reduction should lead to an increase across the other categories. However, during the period 2017 to 2019, despite relative stability in the proportion of cases with information not available, the share of murders committed in the home increased and the percentage of victims killed on a public street fell. These figures indicate that, despite a drop in absolute numbers of female firearm homicides between 2017 and 2019, the share of those homicides committed in the home increased.

Table 1 - Female firearm homicides by place of occurrence. Brazil, 2012-2019

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
The home	19%	19%	19%	20%	22%	23%	24%	26%
Public street	41%	42%	42%	43%	42%	46%	47%	42%
School, sports facility	3%	3%	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%
Farm	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Other	7%	8%	8%	7%	8%	9%	8%	10%
Information not available	29%	27%	29%	28%	26%	20%	19%	20%
TOTAL	100%							

Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department)

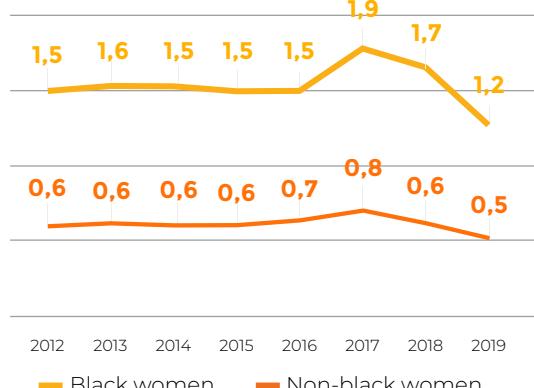


Graph 11 - Female firearm homicide rate per 100,000 population by place of occurrence

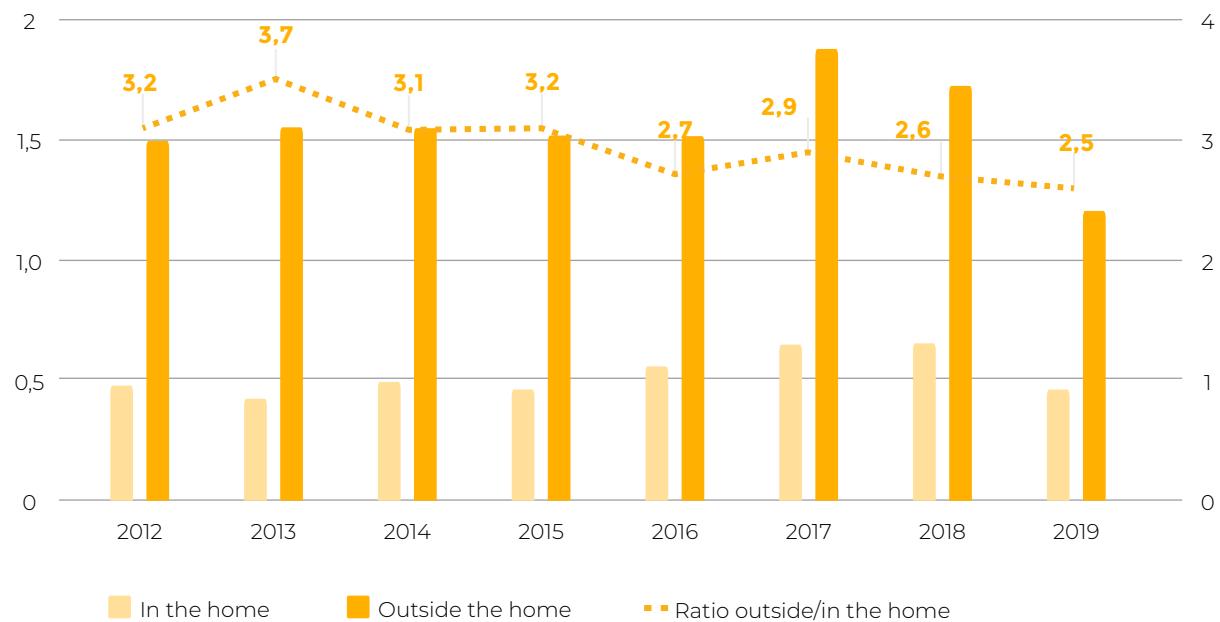
The analysis stratified by race/color reveals racial disparities in firearm homicides committed both outside and in the home. These differences were more pronounced outside the home, with rates among black women being more than twice those in non-black women throughout the period.

Black women were 2.5 times more likely to be killed outside the home than in the home in 2019, with this difference being less pronounced in this year than in other years. The victimization rate outside the home was also higher among non-black women; however, the difference in rates between in the home and outside the home is much lower in this group.

It is interesting to note that while there was a reduction in overall firearm homicide rates in both groups from 2018, the rate of murders of non-black women in the home increased in 2019.

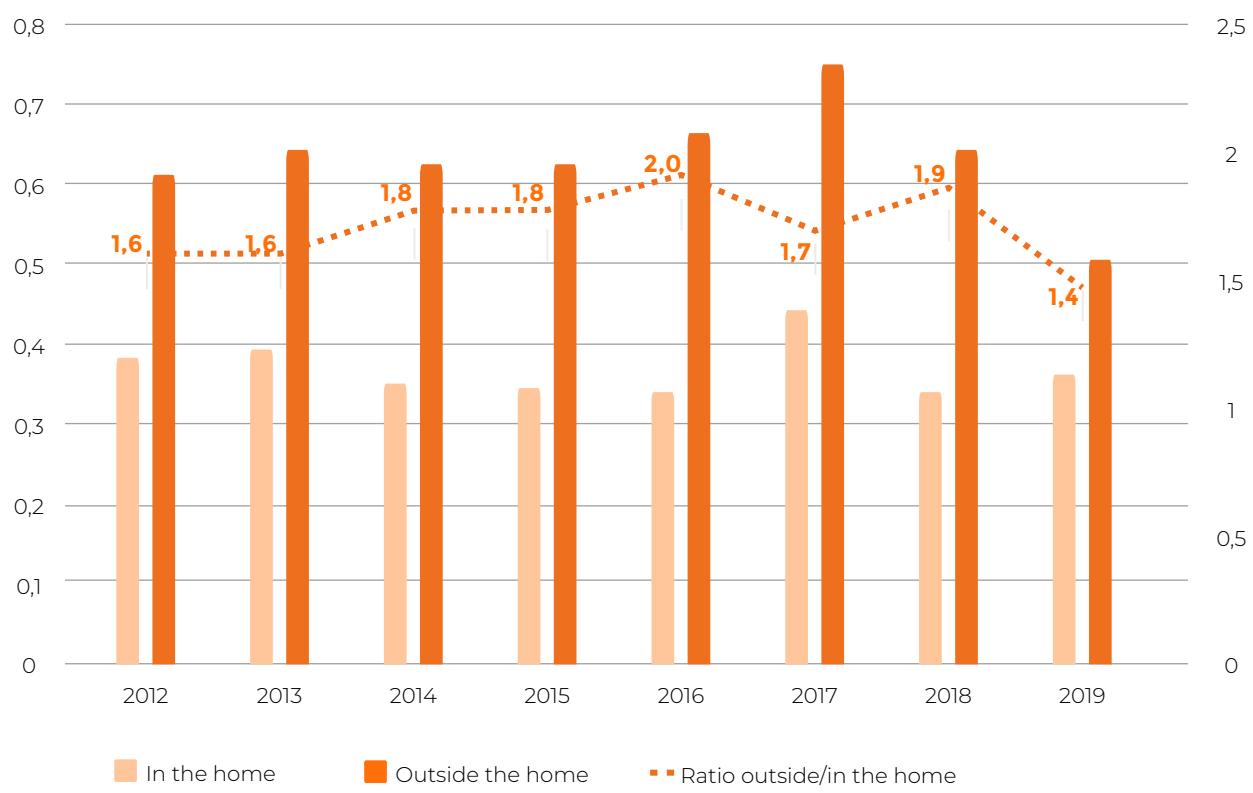
Graph 12 - Female firearm homicide rates in the home by race/color. Brazil, 2012-2019 (per 100,000 population)**Graph 13 - Female firearm homicide rates outside the home by race/color. Brazil, 2012-2019 (per 100,000 population)**

Graph 14 - Differences in firearm homicide rates between in the home and outside the home among black women



Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department); National Household Survey

Graph 15 - Differences in firearm homicide rates between in the home and outside the home among non-black women



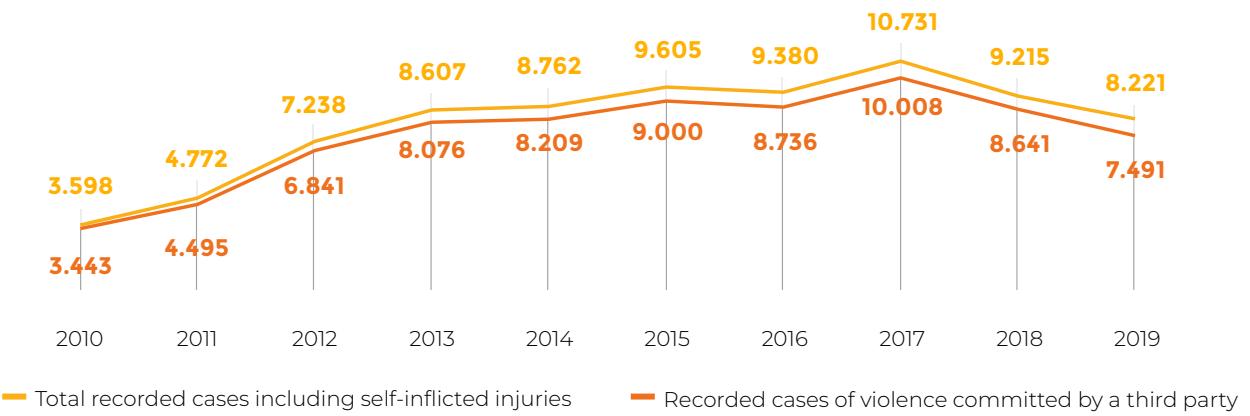
Source: Mortality Information System (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department); National Household Survey

NON-LETHAL FIREARM VIOLENCE

Besides death, firearm violence causes other types of harm that can be investigated using data on hospital admissions.⁹

Among the thousands of recorded cases of non-lethal violence between 2010 and 2019, on average, 8,000 per year involved firearms. Ninety per cent of these violent acts were committed by a third party and around 6 per cent were self-inflicted injuries.

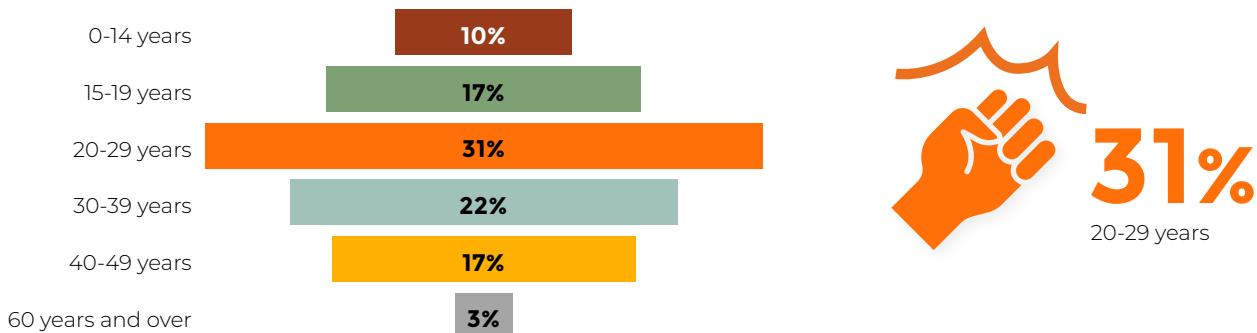
Graph 16 - Recorded cases of non-lethal firearm violence. Brazil, 2010-2019



Source: Ministry of Health/Health Surveillance Department - national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN)

Of the 7,491 victims of violence committed by a third party¹⁰ in 2019, 45 per cent (3,378) were women. Forty-eight per cent of these victims were teenage girls and young women (15-29 years) and 61 per cent were black.

Graph 17 - Recorded cases of non-lethal firearm violence against women by age group. Brazil, 2019



Source: Ministry of Health/Health Surveillance Department - national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN)

⁹The national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN, acronym in Portuguese) records data from hospital admissions for violence. Notification is mandatory for suspected or confirmed cases of violence against all women, regardless of type of violence and age group; specific types of violence (family/domestic, sexual and self-directed violence, people trafficking, slave labor, child labor, torture, legal intervention, and homophobic violence); and acts of violence committed against specific groups (children and adolescents, older persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and the LGBTQIA+ community). Community violence against adult men who do not fall within these criteria is not included in the system (Ministry of Health, Health Surveillance Department manual for reporting interpersonal and self-directed violence. Brasília, 2016).

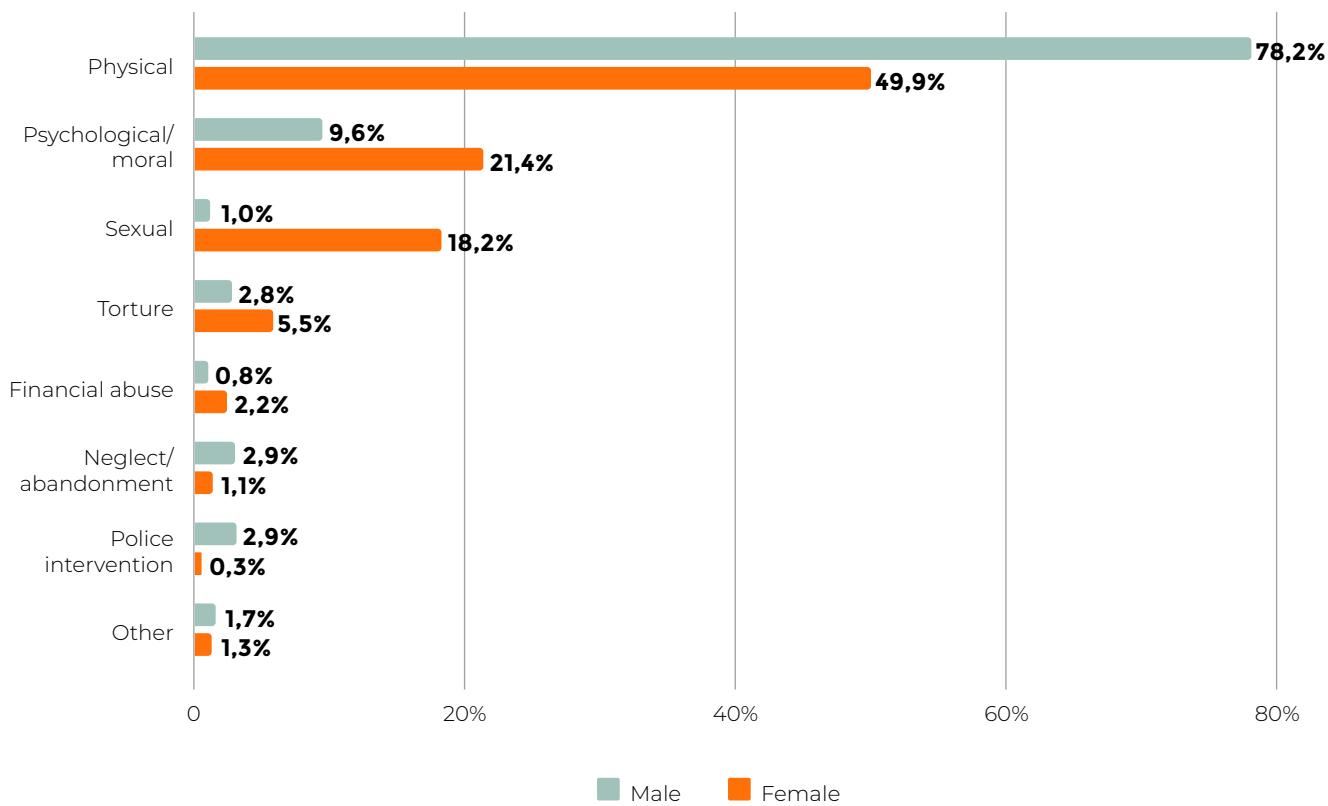
¹⁰Excluding self-directed violence (self-harm or suicide attempts).

The most common types of non-lethal firearm violence were physical violence, psychological/moral violence and sexual violence, with the data revealing important gender differences in these categories. While the vast majority of violent acts against men were cases of physical violence (78 per cent), this category represented only 50 per cent of cases against women, with psychological/moral violence and sexual violence accounting for a significant share of acts of violence (21 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively) against this group.



Physical violence represented 50% of cases against women

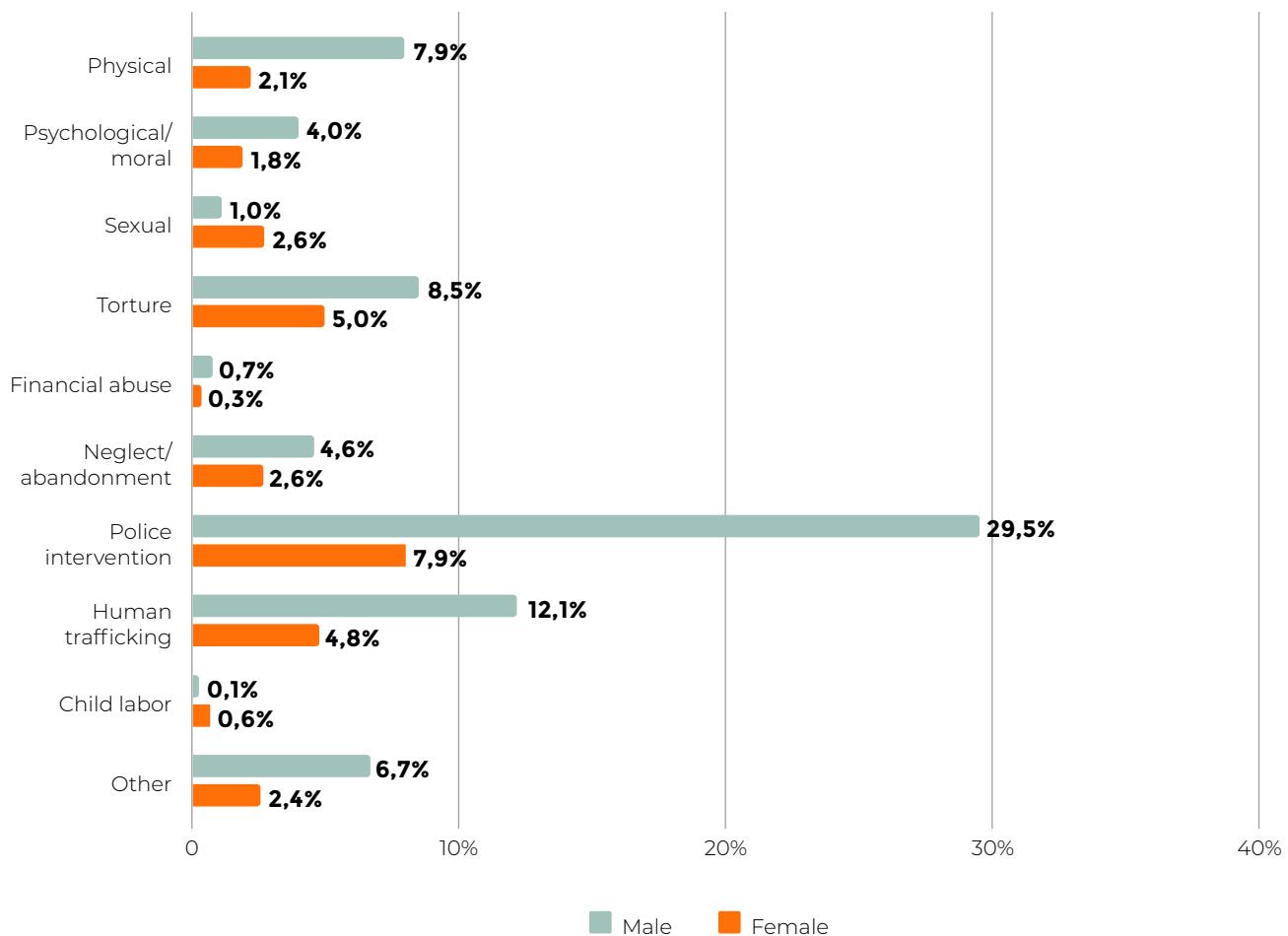
Graph 18 - Types of non-lethal firearm violence by gender. Brazil, 2019



Source: Ministry of Health/Health Surveillance Department - national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN)

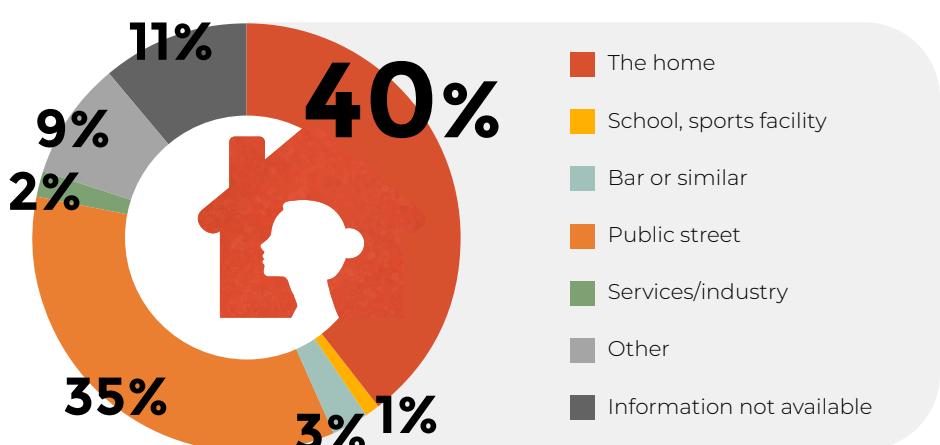
There were 280,000 recorded cases of acts of non-lethal violence in 2019, the vast majority of which (72 per cent) against women. Firearm violence accounted for 2.7 per cent of overall cases, 5.2 per cent of cases among men, and 1.7 per cent of cases against women. The proportion of cases of non-lethal violence involving firearms was greater among men across all categories of violence except sexual violence, in which the rate was twice as high among women (2.6 per cent). This rate was even higher among 15-29 years old women (4.1% non-black and 6.2% black) and 30-39 years old women (5.6% non-black and 6.2% black).

Graph 19 - Proportion of cases of non-lethal violence involving firearms by type of violence and gender. Brazil, 2019



Between 2018 and 2019, the home overtook on a public street to become the most common place of occurrence of non-lethal firearm violence against women (40 per cent versus 35 per cent).

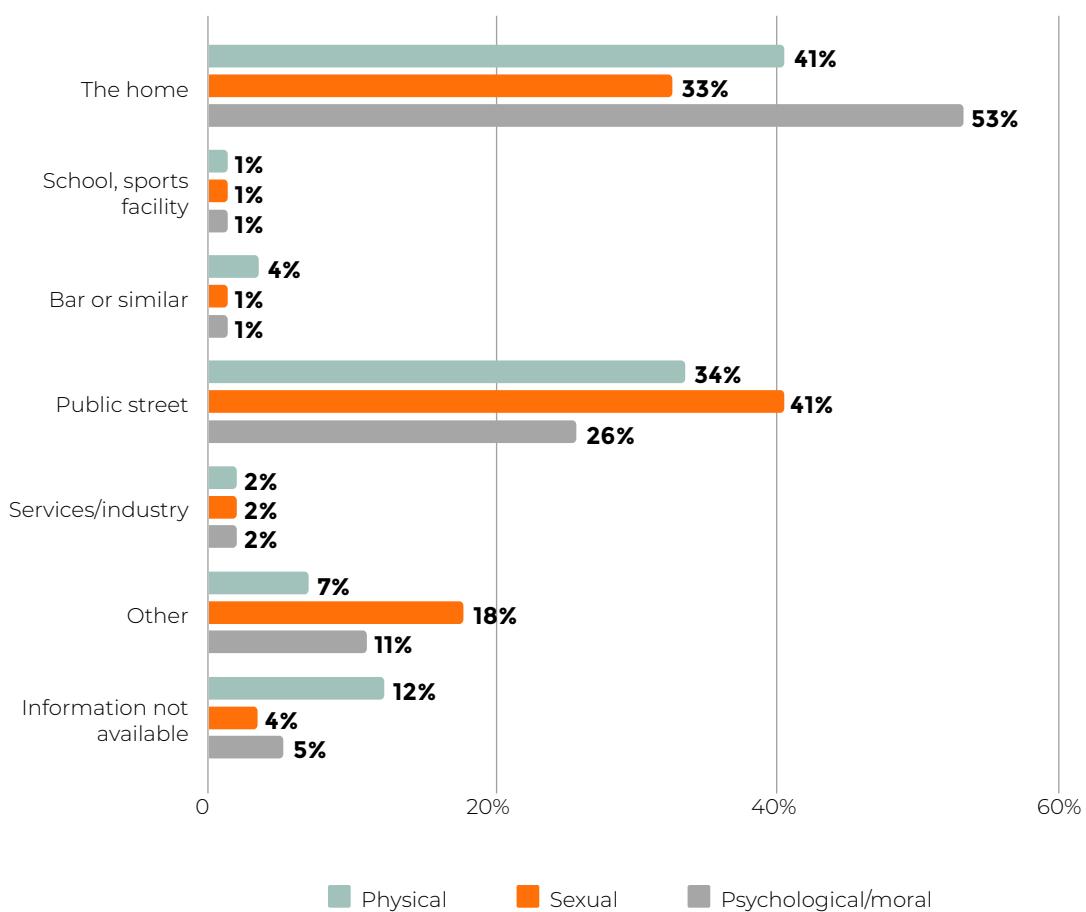
Figure 2 - Recorded cases of non-lethal firearm violence against women by place of occurrence. Brazil, 2019



Acts of firearm violence against women involving physical and psychological violence were mostly committed in the home. These rates were higher among non-black women.

Although acts of firearm violence involving sexual violence were mostly committed on a public street, a significant proportion took place in the home. These rates were similar among black and non-black women.

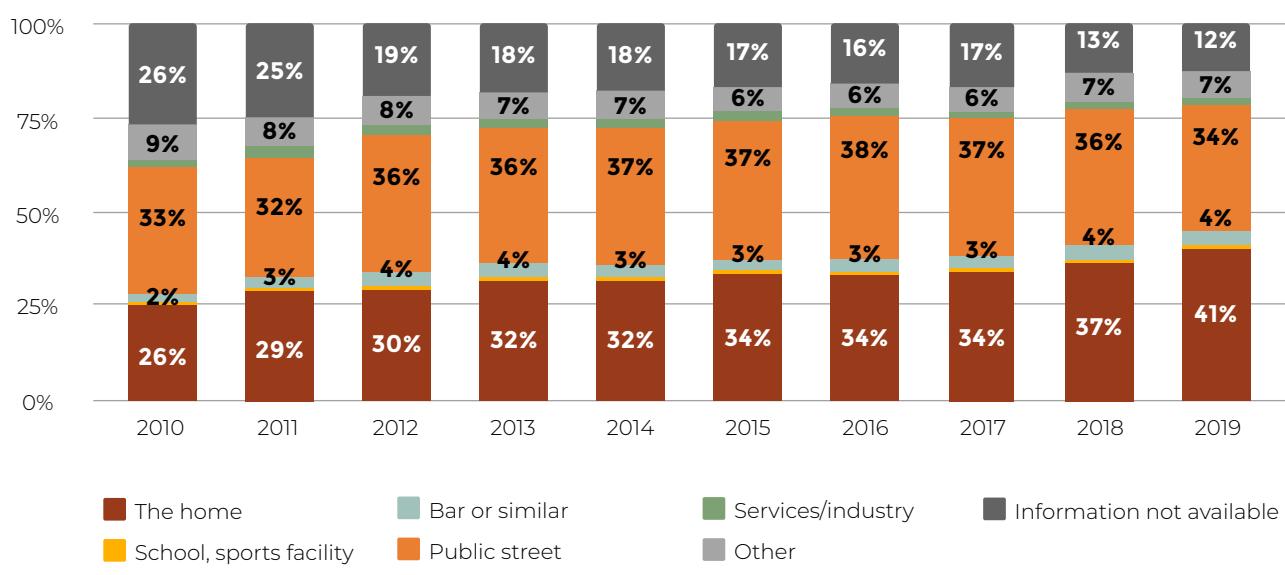
Graph 20 - Recorded cases of non-lethal firearm violence against women by type of violence and place of occurrence. Brazil, 2019



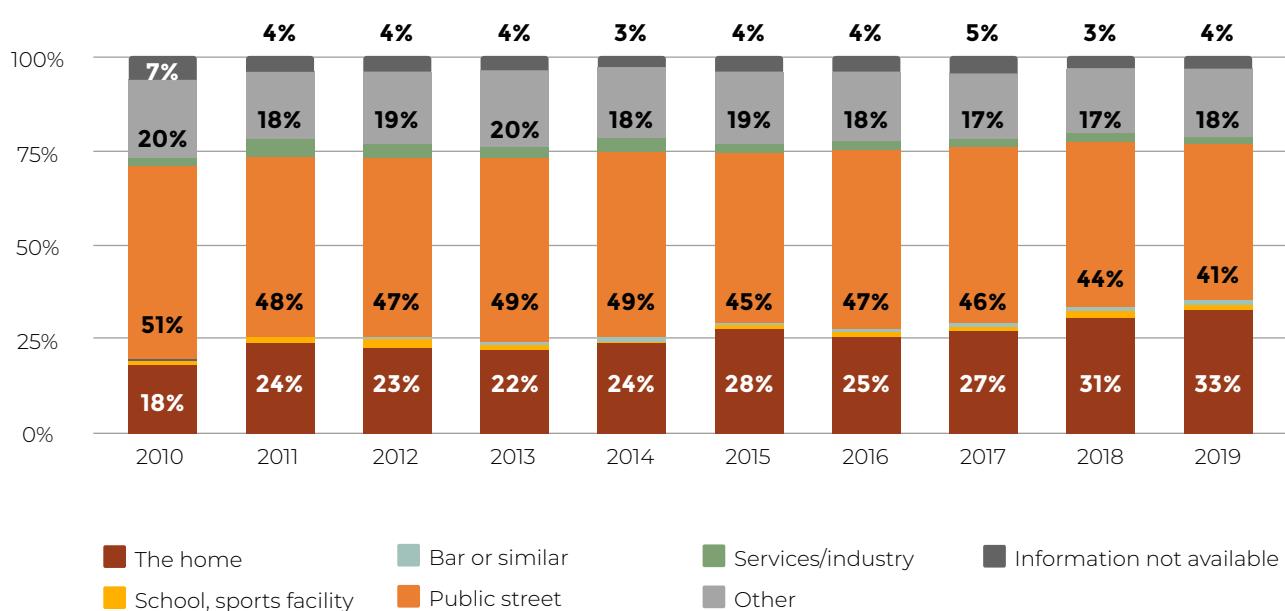
Source: Ministry of Health/Health Surveillance Department - national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN)

The number of recorded cases of non-lethal firearm violence against women grew between 2010 and 2017, followed by drop of 25 per cent between 2017 and 2019. This drop was more pronounced for acts of violence committed on a public street (-31 per cent) than those taking place in the home (-11 per cent). Against this backdrop, the share of acts of violence committed in the home grew steadily over the period, as shown in the following graphs depicting the three most common types of firearm violence by place of occurrence.

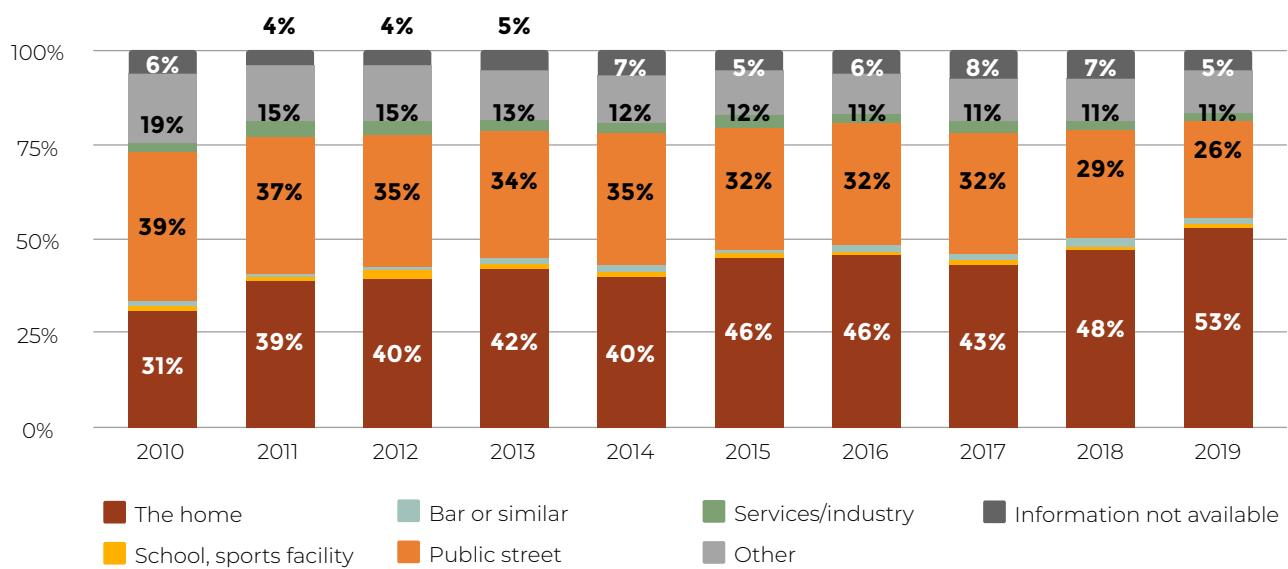
Graph 21 - Recorded cases of firearm violence involving physical violence by place of occurrence. Brazil, 2010-2019



Graph 22 - Recorded cases of firearm violence involving sexual violence by place of occurrence. Brazil, 2010-2019



Graph 23 - Recorded cases of firearm violence involving psychological/moral violence by place of occurrence. Brazil, 2010-2019



Source: Ministry of Health/Health Surveillance Department - national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN)

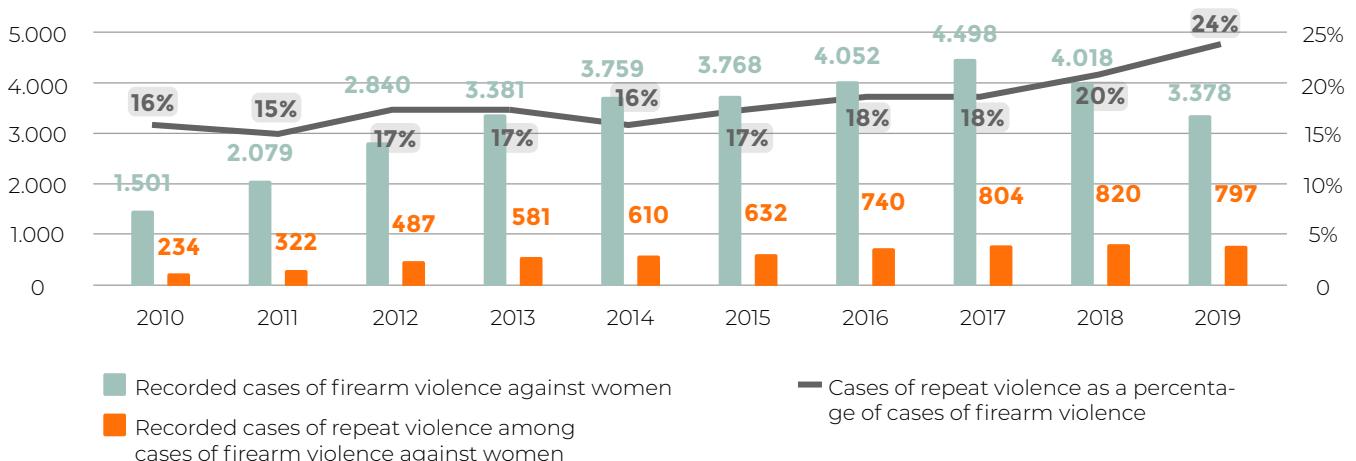
Graphs 21, 22 and 23 show that the proportion of acts of violence committed in the home increased over the study period across each of the three most common types of violence – physical violence, sexual violence and psychological/moral violence.



Finally, the level of repeat violence against women is striking, with rates reaching 24 per cent among victims of firearm violence admitted in 2019. This rate is cause for concern as it demonstrates that many women suffer repeated acts of continual violence. The fact that almost one in four victims had previously been admitted for violence to health care services that should have the capacity to help or refer victims to violence support services suggests that these services are failing to prevent repeat incidents.

Many women suffer repeated acts of continual violence

Graph 24 - Proportion of cases of repeat violence among recorded cases of firearm violence against women. Brazil, 2010-2019



Source: Ministry of Health/Health Surveillance Department - national notifiable diseases surveillance system (SINAN)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The findings presented in this report offer some valuable insights into the role firearms have played in violence against women in Brazil over recent years, with emphasis on 2019.

Shooting was the most common method of female homicide in Brazil, accounting for 51 per cent of deaths between 2000 and 2019.

The data also spotlight racial disparities. In 2019, the vast majority of female victims of firearm homicide (70.5 per cent) were black and the firearm homicide rate among black women was twice as high as in non-black women.

The findings also provide important information about where firearm violence takes place. One in four female firearm homicide victims are killed in their home, compared to only 11 per cent of male victims. This proportion has grown in recent years, illustrating the link between firearms and domestic violence, with studies¹¹ showing that the majority of female homicides in the home are the product of this type of violence.

With regard to non-lethal violence, an annual average of 7,500 admissions for firearm violence were recorded between 2010 and 2019. It is striking that 45 per cent of these victims in 2019 were female, which is equivalent to 3,378 women. Forty-eight per cent of these women were teenagers and young women (15-29 years) and 61 per cent were black.

It is also interesting to note that, in addition to physical violence, a significant proportion of cases of firearm violence against women involves psychological/moral violence and sexual violence.



¹¹According the 2020 Atlas of Violence published by the Institute of Applied Economic Research: "It is consensus in the literature that femicide may be regarded as the extreme end result of a continuum of violence suffered by women (Kelly, 1988). At the same time, the international literature recognizes that most homicides that take place in the home are perpetrated by acquaintances or intimate partners (Cerdeira, 2014). A study conducted by Campbell et al. (2003) involving 220 victims of intimate femicide in eleven cities in the United States reported that 70% of the victims had been previously abused by the intimate partner and that factors of risk included perpetrator access to firearms, drug use and the fact that they lived at the same address." (p. 38. Available at: <https://www.ipea.gov.br/atlasviolencia/download/24/atlas-da-violencia-2020>).

The findings also show an increase in the proportion of cases of non-lethal firearm violence in the home, illustrating the threat firearms pose to victims of domestic violence. **In 2018, the home overtook on a public street to become the most common place of occurrence of non-lethal firearm violence against women.** Likewise, acts of firearm violence against women involving physical and psychological violence were mostly committed in the home. These rates were higher among non-black women.

The data demonstrate that keeping a gun in the home is a risk factor for female victimization both when it comes to lethal violence and non-lethal physical, psychological and sexual violence. Female victims of domestic violence generally find themselves immersed in different types of vulnerability, including physical, economic and emotional vulnerability. **The presence of a gun in the home gives the aggressor even greater power in the already unequal relationship** that characterizes domestic violence, increasing women's vulnerability and ultimately being used to commit physical, sexual or psychological/moral violence.

Responsible gun control policies therefore need to be strengthened, taking into account not only the risks associated with the carrying of guns in public but also the hazards of keeping guns in the home. Regrettably, the federal government is doing precisely the opposite, having published more than 30 measures making access to firearms easier since January 2019. Some of these measures – such as increasing the intervals for repeating psychological tests and criminal record checks from 5 to 10 years and relaxing the justification needed to own a gun – increase the risks for women.

An important measure to protect women is the application of Law 13880, created in October 2019. Amending the Maria da Penha Law, the new law provides that in cases of domestic violence, the police should check whether the perpetrator owns or is carrying a gun and notify the licensing authority to order the immediate seizure of the weapon.

This measure is especially important in a country where one in four women admitted to hospital for non-lethal firearm violence have previously been admitted for violence. **It is clear that more effective coordination and cooperation between different public services is a priority to help break this cycle of violence.** In addition to efforts to eradicate male chauvinism and racism entrenched in Brazilian society, a number of short-term measures should be taken to address multiple risk factors and save lives.

CREDITS

The role firearms play in violence against women

English version of the report O papel da arma de fogo na violência contra a mulher. Instituto Sou da Paz/Ford Foundation, 2021.

An analysis of firearm violence in Brazil between 2012 and 2019 using health data

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Instituto Sou da Paz

2022

Support: Ford Foundation



