

Amid a Global Mental Health Worker Shortage, One Psychologist's Frontline Model for Crisis Prevention

Countries around the world, including the United States, have struggled with a shortage of licensed professionals trained in psychological crisis response — a gap that makes careers like Michele Lima Fontes Pinheiro's a useful case study

Kissimmee, Florida Sep 23, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - A candidate walks into a psychological evaluation for a firearm license. Over the next hour, a licensed psychologist has to assess not just cognitive function, but impulse control, emotional stability, and risk factors that a standardized test alone won't fully capture — then put a professional judgment behind it, in writing, that a state institution will rely on. It's the kind of rigorous, high-stakes assessment work that mental health workforce reports increasingly flag as being in short supply, in Brazil, in the United States, and in many other countries. Psychologist Michele Lima Fontes Pinheiro has spent years doing exactly that kind of work, alongside nearly two decades in public crisis-response care.

Since 2018, Pinheiro has served as a credentialed forensic psychologist for the Federal Police of the State of Pará, evaluating psychological fitness for firearm licensing — a role obtained through the institution's own formal selection process. That same year, she completed a specialization in Traffic Psychology with the highest possible grade, qualifying her to conduct the psychological evaluations Brazil requires for driver's license applicants. Both roles depend on a similar skill set: structured testing combined with clinical judgment that goes beyond what any single instrument can measure.

That judgment was built over almost fifteen years, from 2005 to 2020, at the Centro de Atenção Psicossocial (CAPS III) in Castanhal, a reference unit within Brazil's public health system (SUS) for patients in severe or recurring psychological crisis. Pinheiro holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from the Universidade da Amazônia (UNAMA), along with specializations in Clinical Psychology and in Health and Hospital Psychology.

"People assume a psychological evaluation is mostly a checklist — cognitive tests, a few standard questions, a score at the end. In practice, a lot of what I'm actually assessing doesn't show up on any single instrument. It's built from watching how someone answers, not just what they answer," says Pinheiro, who has been registered with Brazil's Regional Council of Psychology since 2005 (CRP-10/02105).

Reports on the mental health workforce in the United States have repeatedly flagged shortages not just of general practitioners, but specifically of clinicians trained to do rigorous risk assessment — work that sits at the intersection of clinical psychology and forensic evaluation. It's a narrower, more specialized gap than the general shortage headlines usually capture, and it's close to where Pinheiro's own background sits.

That instinct, she explains, comes from a psychoanalytic orientation she developed during her specialization in Clinical Psychology — something close to what Freud called free-floating attention: not locking onto the first answer someone gives, but staying open to what shows up around it. "Someone applying for a firearm license isn't going to volunteer that they have a temper. But it tends to come out sideways — in a story they repeat, in a detail they skip over twice without noticing. A person rarely tells you everything directly in a first interview, and noticing what's avoided is part of what makes an assessment accurate rather than just procedural," she says.

Her assessment work extends beyond firearm licensing. The Traffic Psychology specialization she completed in 2017, with the highest possible grade, qualified her to evaluate cognitive function, emotional stability, and risk factors such as impulsivity in candidates for a driver's license — a separate but related field where Brazil has long required this kind of structured psychological assessment before a licensing decision is made.

Pinheiro has also spent nearly two decades being invited by companies and institutions to speak on workplace mental health — talks that have included “Preventing Burnout,” “Humanized Leadership,” and “Communication That Connects: Reducing Workplace Conflict” — and has volunteered psychological support to corporate teams, extending the same prevention-first approach from public health into the corporate world.

Since 2016, she has also run a private practice, Espaço Psi, treating trauma, grief, and psychosomatic complaints in children, adolescents, and adults. It's a different setting from a forensic interview room, she notes, but the underlying skill overlaps: recognizing what a person isn't saying directly, whether that's a returning patient avoiding a subject or a first-time applicant leaving something out. Brazil's professional council has formally recognized both sides of that range — her registration card lists Traffic Psychology and Health Psychology among her registered specialties, alongside the clinical and forensic work she does day to day.

As mental health systems in multiple countries look for clinicians who can combine crisis care with rigorous, defensible assessment, professionals with Pinheiro's dual background in public-health crisis response and forensic evaluation represent a narrower, and by most workforce accounts harder-to-fill, kind of expertise.

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Source : Michele Pinheiro

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