

Criminal Governance and Social Mobilization in Brazilian Favelas: A Qualitative Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of crime governance and social mobilization in Brazil's impoverished communities to answer why residents of favelas mobilize against state interventions while seemingly accepting the rule of organized criminal groups (OCGs). Previous studies have primarily explored the materialistic hypothesis or the role of coercion and fear in shaping community behavior. This article employs the tools provided by the literature on contentious politics and a qualitative meta-analysis to systematically assess the varied ways in which OCGs interact with the state and favela residents, mapping the heterogeneous effects produced as a result. The findings suggest that in favelas where criminal organizations are perceived as benign, residents may rely on them to fulfill basic needs, while the state is seen as an outsider that brings disruption of routines and violence. In favelas where criminal organizations are malign, there are few incentives for change as the outcomes of challenging OCGs are uncertain.

Keywords

Criminal Governance; Organized Criminal Groups; Social Mobilization; Qualitative Meta-Analysis; Routines; Grievances

Introduction

Since the 1980s, organized criminal groups (OCGs) have dominated many poor communities in Brazil's largest cities—Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Fortaleza, Salvador, and Brasília (Arias 2014). Using enough firepower to confront the state, drug dealers impose their informal institutions (Dana 2016), setting these impoverished areas, known as favelas¹, apart from the rest of the city and regulating almost every aspect of their residents' daily lives (Arias 2006). Reports indicate that organized crime in Rio de Janeiro controls almost one-fourth of

¹ More recently, the term “favela” has been substituted with “community,” as the former sometimes carries a negative connotation. Despite the good intention, the contraposition of terms may highlight the difference between the city and the so-called favelas, the peripheral communities (Birman 2008). In this article, I employ the term “favela” to account for its traditional use and communal identity, using the term “slum” as a synonym only to avoid excessive repetition.

the city's population (Sistema de Assentamentos de Baixa Renda 2021; Leitão and Lannoy 2020).

Successive state and federal administrations have tried to counter the problem via confrontation, leading to dismal results: the number of deaths related to police interventions in the country went from an already high 2,212 deaths in 2013 to 6,416 deaths in 2020, making Brazilian police one of the most lethal in the world (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2021, 62). Police killings frequently spark street protests in the victimized communities, sometimes escalating into blockages of roads near the favelas. Officials most times try to disqualify these demonstrations as orchestrated by OCGs to discredit the police (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 135). Corroborating this latter statement, a widespread opinion in the country is that favela dwellers complain only about state violence, never against gang violence: “Nobody protests against drug dealers” (Trigo 2020). Along these lines, a question of heated popular debate but still underexplored in the literature is why favela dwellers protest against police intervention rather than against OCGs. Why do not residents use formal and informal channels to oppose crime organizations and help the state to assert its monopoly of political authority?

Common knowledge suggests two answers: (1) residents are coerced to accept the criminal rule, living under fear (Zaluar 2002; Silva 2004; 2010), or (2) they condone the illegal order and benefit from criminal governance (see Souza 2005; Leite 2008). Regarding the *fear hypothesis*, there are many reports on how criminals terrorize vulnerable communities (G1 2017), subjugating dwellers to harsh quasi-laws, curfews (Narrete 1999), expulsion from the community, and even executions (Maia and Muniz 2015). Also, residents may fear that the state will be inefficient in fighting against drug dealers, which would allow criminals to remain in place and then seek revenge (Custodio 2013). Concerning the *materialistic hypothesis*, as Sakamoto (2022) notes, many in Brazil seem to believe the solution to urban violence is “to drop a bomb on crime-controlled communities.” Following this logic, slum dwellers are all part of a big criminal organization or, at least, would-be criminals (Guimarães 1981).

I do not reject the demobilizing role fear can play (see Young 2019) or the existence of cases in which members of poor communities, for multiple reasons that will be addressed ahead, develop a symbiotic coexistence with OCGs (see Leite 2008; Fernandes 2019). However, assuming fear as the prevalent explanatory variable for crime governance oversimplifies a complex dynamic and undermines agency, failing to account for instances

in which communities spontaneously oppose police intervention (Gouveia 2017).² Likewise, conjecturing that entire communities ally with drug dealers for material gains may be tantamount to adopting a stereotype that describes poor populations living in gang-dominated areas as criminals by equivalence (Zaluar 1994; 1985)³.

More recent scholarship has called attention to the varied ways crime organizations compete or collaborate with the state and interact with populations in Brazil's impoverished communities, producing heterogeneous effects (Barnes 2017). OCGs that are tyrannical, violent, or predatory spark grievances that may lead to certain degrees of popular resistance. On the other hand, where criminal organizations are benign toward the population, criminals can gain community acceptance (Magaloni et al. 2020). Despite this proposition may seem to corroborate the *materialistic hypothesis*, it is a more nuanced approach that goes beyond depicting the relationship between criminals and communities as a *quid pro quo* bargain of material benefits to yield popular support. The outcomes from the interaction between actors arise from a complex net of social trust, identity, frames, and repertoires of action.

Therefore, recent studies (e.g., Magaloni et al. 2020; Arias 2006; 2014; Alves 2011; Arias and Rodrigues 2006; Barnes 2017) have provided important insights into the understanding of criminal governance and the behavior of affected populations. Still, social science research has mostly overlooked the social mobilization dimension of the phenomenon. The notable exceptions are Holston's study (2008) which addresses the dynamics between OCGs, states, and democracy and Arias' study (2019) which tackles the strategies employed by civic groups to control violence by police and criminal groups. The present article contributes to this literature by focusing on contention politics towards governance—both civil and criminal.

The benefit of using the extensive knowledge produced by the specialized literature is to add new layers to the study of the relations between vulnerable communities, the state, and crime organizations. Whereas Magaloni et al. (2020) indicate that benevolent OCGs in Brazilian favelas can win hearts and minds, the underlying social mechanism that leads the population to undertake informal norms and reject state intervention is still not clear. The

² Gonçalves (2013) argues that, in contrast to common misconceptions, residents of favelas are far from being passive victims. They actively engage in the process of shaping and reshaping their urban landscape, demonstrating legal knowledge and capacity for political mobilization.

³ It should be noted that there are significant differences across favelas and OCGs. Some OCGs are known for their more paternalistic and communalistic views, while others lean towards authoritarianism and even have close ties with the police. As a result, the reality in one favela in Rio de Janeiro may not be directly comparable to another favela in the same city, let alone with a favela in other cities like Guarulhos, Belo Horizonte, or Salvador—each with its own unique context (see Feltrán 2018). This article aims to focus on common reasons behind the rule of OCGs and the progression of social mobilization against the state in Brazilian favelas, while still acknowledging that there are key differences between various OCGs and communities.

substantive and formal tools that the social mobilization groundwork provides are remarkably apposite in this scenario when the goal is to understand the political action that takes place outside the conventional political arena (McAdam et al. 2001, 11).

In addition to building on the theoretical framework, this article employs a qualitative meta-analysis to collect empirical evidence from materials that addressed the topic of criminal governance and violence in Brazilian favelas, systematically mapping the studies that used interviews as a source of evidence and qualitative methodology to inform the analysis. Based on these elements, I argue that in Brazilian favelas where criminal organizations are benign, populations resort to them to fulfill basic needs (e.g., public safety, dispute resolution, cable television, Internet, transport, water, electricity, gas, food, and medications). This situation does not only create dependence but shapes frames and identity status under which the state (and its police) becomes the outsider, playing the role of the agent that brings disorder and violence to the community. Parallely, where criminal organizations are malign, there are few incentives for changes in the *status quo*, given the uncertainty of payoffs: not only the chances of successful takeover against crime organizations are trifling, but the outcomes are also uncertain—the community will still be underserved and vulnerable to be subjugated by another criminal faction.

To substantiate the argument, the remainder of this article is organized into three main sections. The second section develops on why and how contentious politics guides the construction of the analysis, elaborating on the concepts of grievances, routines, frames, and counter-frames. The third section employs a qualitative meta-analysis to assess how favela dwellers perceive their identity, their relationship with the police and criminals, the needs of their communities, and how these elements interact organically. The fourth section discusses the consequences extracted from the empirical data and theoretical framework, summarizes the findings, and outline their policy implication.

The Politics of Contention

The objective of this article is to understand patterns of contention politics in Brazilian favelas, given the current conjuncture of criminal governance, articulating the analysis through the lenses of the social mobilization theoretical framework. Given this intention, a preliminary question is whether it makes sense to do so. Contention politics finds its classical conceptualization as episodic, public, and collective action that includes the government as a claimant, object of claims, or party to the claim (McAdam et al. 2001, 5). In the case of communities under OCGs' rule, mobilization includes the State as either

“mediator, target, or claimant.” (McAdam et al. 2001, 5). Local, state, and federal governments are not only deeply interested in popular claims involving criminal organizations but sometimes targets, when the population demands a solution for the war between factions or for the police violence that ensues—not to mention that states are claimants themselves, via police incursions to crackdown on gang activities.

Moreover, although crime organizations in Brazil do not seek to “topple the government and seize formal power” (Lessing 2015, 1488), they have developed complementary and competitive relationships with the state, sometimes gathering expressive political authority (Barnes 2017). States set the boundaries of contentious politics (Beissinger 1998), still, as Tilly and Tarrow (2015) demonstrate, states have mostly disregarded the impact of non-state armed groups on shaping political contention in the areas they control. Therefore, either because criminal groups present themselves as proto-states within the communities they dominate or because governments are embedded in the problem, the dynamics of contention between OCGs, states, and communities can be analyzed as a social mobilization problem.

The importance of this conceptual choice is that it clears access to a series of well-developed categories, such as grievances, identity, frames, routines, and repertoires of contention. In the following subsections, this article uses these categories to explore in depth the underlying mechanism that explains how criminal governance becomes engrained in favelas in Brazil. By doing so, the article also uncovers why the dwellers of vulnerable communities not only do not mobilize against OCGs but fiercely resist state intervention.

Grievances and Routines: Order and Disorder

Between the 1940s and 1950s, facing the underprovision of all sorts of public goods and the absence of coordinated structures to establish even the most basic collective services (e.g., protection, dispute resolution, water, electricity), favela communities in Brazil started to devise their authoritative bodies with proto-governance roles. Because these bodies lacked enforcement power, other forms of authority developed in parallel, including independent vigilant groups aimed at enforcing local norms and adjusting social behavior (Wolff 2015). When OCGs took over the communities in the following decades, criminals assumed these functions, becoming providers of public goods (Arias 2006).⁴

⁴ Misse (2003) argues that criminal groups were more paternalistic in the 1980s and 1990s. However, as the main leaders of these OCGs were either killed or incarcerated, younger leaders took over, and their criminal actions became notably more violent and disruptive. Concurrently, the provision of social services or public goods by these groups appears to have decreased. The qualitative evidence I have collected at least partially contests this perspective.

This could be a temporary conjuncture, once from the 1990s on, the governments in Brazil and other Latin American countries have tried to expand social welfare programs. However, the poorest social groups are not the main beneficiaries of these policies (Holland 2018)—the social safety net in Latin America historically supports people above rather than below the level of income risk (Haggard and Kaufman 2020). Moreover, state capacity is a critical problem across the continent (Luna and Soifer 2017), casting doubts on the state's ability to deliver its promises. Thus, a crucial point is that dwellers of favelas in Brazil do not *take advantage* of informal structures that deliver public goods in the absence of the state; instead, the population of underserved communities *depends* on parallel welfare networks for their subsistence (Lessing 2008; Mota et al. 2008), to access services that are available to populations living in other neighborhoods.

Taking the popular source of criticism in Brazil—that favela communities mobilize only against the police, not against criminals—the intricate dynamic between the state, OCGs, and underserved communities should help explain why slum dwellers may offer resistance against state intervention. As anticipated in the introduction, the literature on social mobilization provides categories that shed new light on the phenomenon. Among them, *grievances* and *routines* show that sporadic police incursions disrupt and endanger the continuity of subsistence services the community counts on to meet basic needs. As Simmons (2014, 515) observes, “threats to subsistence resources are a particularly powerful locus for collective action as they activate a combination of materially and ideationally driven concerns [...] perceived not only as material threats, but also as threats to community.”

To be clear, this does not mean that communities protest against police intervention due to rational calculations, that is, risk assessment of losing subsistence services. The very disturbance of subsistence routines is enough to engender spontaneous backlash. Bourdieu's (1990; 1996) description of *habitus* is applicable here: socially developed schemas that tend to be reproduced without questioning and regardless of conscious awareness. Habitus (or routines⁵) guide people's perception of the world as well as their actions in the world (Bourdieu 1998). More than a matter of semiotics, routines produce representations that allow people to attribute meaning to their daily experiences (Woodward 2000, 17-18). Exogenous forces that threaten the disruption of routines will often sound counterintuitive and meet fierce opposition, sometimes leading to collective action.

⁵ Despite the subtle differences between routines, *habitus*, and quotidian, I am using the concepts to design those taken-for-granted attitudes of everyday life. For this purpose, they are similar enough.

The prospects of contention are especially high when the existence of a community's subsistence routines is jeopardized via intrusion of privacy, safety, or control (Snow et al. 1998). Actions of the state in Brazilian favelas often fulfill all the requirements to pose a threat to the survival of its dwellers, either indirectly (by interrupting routines of subsistence) or directly (via extrajudicial killings). Under the argument that it is not safe for conventional police officers to patrol "areas of risk," the Brazilian state retreated from many communities, allowing OCGs to develop their structures mostly unchecked (Miranda and Muniz 2018). In the last few years, militarized police incursions have become the main mechanism of intervention in gang-controlled territories in Brazil (Hirata et al. 2021). During well-publicized large-scale operations, police employ war-like strategies to occupy favelas, besieging the community, screening residents in the streets, and invasively searching people's houses for drugs and weapons. To outsiders, police incursions may be deemed as necessary to restore public order, yet those living in the affected communities often experience these incursions as disruptions to public services, violations of their rights, including freedom of movement and the sanctity of their homes, and even the potential for loss of life (Alves 2011).

According to the Brazilian Public Security Forum (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2021, 62), the police kill on average 18 people every day in Brazil.⁶ Hirata et al. (2021) mapped police interventions in Rio de Janeiro favelas and found a significant convergence between the number of deaths and wounds in shootings during periods of a high incidence of police operations and the number of shootings with the presence of police. According to Brazilian laws, police officers are allowed to use lethal force only to confront an imminent threat⁷, yet that might not always be the case. An investigation of police killings in Rio de Janeiro by *The New York Times* found that "officers routinely gun down people without restraint" (Andreoni et al. 2020). Multiple victims were shot in the back and/or three or more times. Half of the killings were carried out by officers already charged with murder (Andreoni et al. 2020).

In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that police interventions are not always met with flowers in favelas' streets. Beyond the analysis of formal lawfulness, the dichotomy "good guys and bad guys" is convoluted, as police forces often bring disorder and even death

⁶ Specialized literature considers excessively high any ratio of police killing to the number of homicides above 10% (Cano and Fragoso 1999, 208). Brazil's average is 12.3% (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2021) — police killings as a proportion of the total number of intentional deaths.

⁷ Article 25 of the Penal Code of Brazil stipulates that "acts in self-defence who, using moderately the necessary means, repulses an unfair aggression, present or imminent, to his/her own or somebody else's rights."

to the communities, not liberation. Magaloni et al. (2020) predict that state crackdown against criminal regimes that offer an extensive network of public services to poor populations tends to backfire, as communities see the police as oppressors and criminals as benevolent. This happens not only due to material aspects: the concepts of grievance and routines put state forces as outsiders. In the eyes of vulnerable populations, the legitimate use of violence is not always in the hands of the state. Translating this line of thought into a hypothesis to be tested in the empirical section:

H1. OCGs are more integrated into the favelas' than the police, causing police interventions to disrupt dwellers' routines and produce grievances.

Frames: Defining Who is Who

Grievances and routines are not the only categories that may explain why favela dwellers mobilize against police intervention instead of assisting the state to restore its monopoly of political power. Grievances and routines interact with other categories, such as frames, to produce collective action (Verta et al. 2009, 887). Frames are “interpretive schemata” that “enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Polletta 1998, 139; see also Snow and Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986). In other words, frames construct meanings (or images), mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas with powerful impacts in the real world (Benford and Snow 2000).

Demonstrating the influential role of frames in the realm of crime policy in Brazil, a prevailing belief holds that “a good criminal is a dead criminal.” This belief, captured in a popular saying, was even adopted as a populist jingle by former President Jair Bolsonaro in 2022 (Brasil 2022). Similarly, between 2018 and 2019, Rio de Janeiro’s Governor Wilson Witzel implemented what he described as a “shoot-to-kill policing policy,” which included the deployment of snipers in helicopters to strategic locations, including favelas (Kaiser 2019). As the number of police-involved killings increased, Witzel justified these actions by framing them as a necessary response to “confront terrorists” (Child 2019). While this may be an extreme case, it is essential to recognize that even in situations where such a policy is not explicitly articulated, the overarching frame of “society versus criminals” or, in some cases, “terrorists”, encourages law enforcement officers to adopt a more aggressive and self-righteous approach when dealing with favelas. This framing contributes to what has been described as a “logic of urban confrontation, built on a ‘metaphor of warfare’” (Machado 2017).

The structure of frames can be disaggregated into its parts: identity, injustice, and agency (Gamson 1992; 1995), which facilitates its understanding in-depth. The *identity* component refers to the feeling of belonging and “depends on factors such as particular events, compelling public narratives, prevailing discursive frames [themselves], and so on” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 20). Put differently, the ways of doing things can shape how individuals are perceived by a community (Shesterinina 2021, 143) and who is in or out of a certain group, eventually shaping collective identities and defining who are the outsiders (Meyer 2004, 137).

Being aware of the challenges in outlining a satisfactory concept of identity, either instrumental or non-instrumental (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), I conceptualize collective identity as how groups are seen (via cognitive models, rules, purposes, and relational comparisons with other social categories) and make meaning of themselves (within-group content) (Abdelal et al. 2006). The underlying assumption is that social ties create a sense of common purpose (McClendon 2014, 281), allowing groups to affirm and defend themselves collectively, but it also creates potential for other groups to challenge their claims or target them as a collectivity. (Kellner 2001; Gripsrud 2002). All these elements seem to be present in the case of favela dwellers, either to shape a common identity or to become a source of antagonism.

Leite (2008; 2012) maintains that in Brazil the idea of “favela” encompasses the notions of unity and marginalization. In the latter aspect, favelas are, in Wacquant’s (2001) words, a “stigmatized territory.” They are conceived as territories plagued by poverty and branded by criminality, disorder, and violence, whereas favela dwellers are seen as “dangerous classes.” The socio-spatial segregation between the so-called “asphalt”⁸ and the favela produces separation and concentration of social groups, isolation (localization), inequality of access (in various meanings of the expression), and—most prominently—internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Marinho and Schor 2009, 80). This segregation results in “human antagonists rather than impersonal forces like hunger or poverty, against which collective action must be mobilized” (Polletta 1998, 139).

As for the *injustice* component, it denotes that a situation is unfair and that it is political rather than simply personal (Klandermans 1988, 179). Individuals may be moved emotionally by an act or context that violates conceptions of morality and those emotions can explain social mobilization (Simmons 2014, 521). Jasper (1997, 106) calls it a moral shock: a piece of

⁸ Favela dwellers call “asphalt” the rest of city, those parts that are not poor and underserved communities.

information—for instance, a case of police killings—that raises such a “sense of outrage” that makes individuals embrace political action.

Sometimes, political action takes more subtle forms than protests. It can take the form of “adversarial framing” (Gamson 1995) or “counterframing” (Benford 1987). Aware of the real-world effects of frames, social groups and movements have engaged in processes of refuting the frames built by outsiders, constructing their images of “good” and “bad”, attributing blame, and targeting antagonists. This may lead favelas dwellers to point out the state as a propitiator of violence in the slums, given its historical omission, at the same time that the presence of the police propitiates violence as well (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 134). In terms of hypothesis:

H2. Popular perception of police intervention is negative in favelas, which diminishes the support for state action.

Finally, the *agency* component of frames conveys “a sense of collective efficacy, a belief that the situation is not immutable and that ‘we’ can change it” (Polletta 1998, 139). Can favela dwellers change their condition? Silva (2004; 2010) considers that slum dwellers face a dual form of domination: they are marginalized in the prevailing social order, confined to the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, and they are subjected to the coercive sociability enforced by criminals. Accordingly, it seems almost unimaginable that social mobilization against OCGs could flourish in an environment of duress, in which criminals impose their laws with arbitrary violence. However, there are well-documented cases of social mobilization under extreme repression. For example, Pfaff and Yang (2001) describe how groups used commemorative dates to protest in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and China in 1989. The Arab Spring has been extensively studied in the literature (e.g., Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Hoffman and Jamal 2014), with examples of groups mobilizing from scratch amidst repressions, as exemplified by Pearlman’s (2021) of protests in Syria. These protests have involved a diverse array of strategies, ranging from discreet collective action in China (Fu 2017) to online opposition in Saudi Arabia, despite the risk of imprisonment (Pan and Siegel 2020).

Hence, slum dwellers could mobilize against OCGs, but do they have an insensitive to do so? According to Opp and Gern (1993), social mobilization makes sense when the benefits of participating in the movement are higher than the costs, that is when the prospects of meaningful changes overcome the risks of repression and its severity. I assume

that historically neglectful states have very little credibility when it comes to offering benefits to underserved communities. The hypothesis is:

H3. Favela dwellers see the costs of mobilization against OCGs as higher than the benefits they could achieve by reestablishing the state's authority.

Nobody can better than the dwellers themselves elaborate on this point. The next section of this work brings data amassed from multiple sources, via meta-analysis, translating into research the voices and thoughts of those living in favelas.

Empirical Test: Qualitative Meta-Analysis

In this section, I test empirically the predictions about how grievances, routines, and frames determine patterns of social mobilization in Brazilian favelas. To do so, I employ qualitative meta-analysis (QMA) to analyze a segment of the literature produced in the Portuguese language that studies life in underserved communities in Brazil and addresses directly or indirectly criminal governance in these spaces.

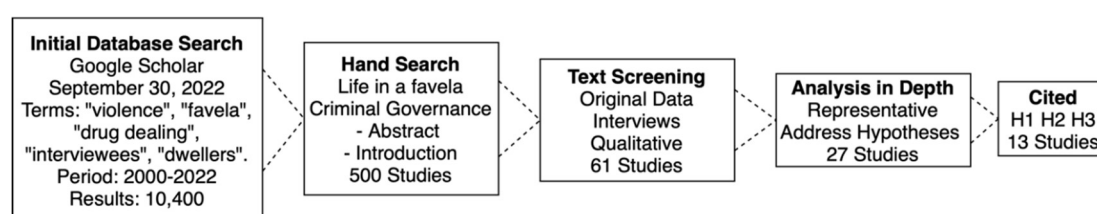
Qualitative meta-analysis is an instrument for research on social science that has been underexplored (Paterson et al. 2001), considering its multiple potential applications. As a research instrument, it delivers a “rigorous secondary qualitative analysis of primary qualitative findings” (Timulak 2009). The method allows researchers to synthesize previous research by drawing on the richness of their material, exploring different works, and even different study designs in an aggregated work (Newig and Fritsch 2009)—as a secondary analysis of case-based research, QMA focuses on primary sources collected in previous works, instead of their findings themselves, increasing sample sizes and explanatory power, enabling a wider generalization. Also, given that QMA follows a systematic procedure to select the data, it reduces the risks of selection bias relative to literature reviews.

Here, this type of design is particularly useful. Single cases studying favelas are insightful but usually rely on the idiosyncrasies of each community (e.g., location, size, and type of criminal governance) or the role of the interviewees (e.g., current, or former gang member, resident, or community representative) to conclude. The product of aggregated data, if carefully examined, can deliver a comprehensive picture from the perspective of those living within different underserved communities in different periods. Such a study design indeed loses direct observation (Fu and Simons 2021), but it gains the ability to collect elements that account for variations in time and space, thus increasing the generalizability of

the analysis (Newig and Fritsch 2009). Moreover, a thorough treatment of the collected data with “ethnographic sensibility” (Simmons and Smith 2021) should take advantage of the heterogeneity in the data while enhancing external validity.

I conducted the search on September 30, 2022, on the Google Scholar database, limiting the period of interest from 2000 to 2022. I used the terms “violence,” “favela,” “drug dealing,” “interviewees,” and “dwellers” in combination.⁹ The Google Scholar search returned about 10,400 results. I reduced the universe of interest to 500 results by applying a stopping rule: after 100 consecutive articles that lacked substantive relevance for the topic under scrutiny, I interrupted the analysis. This first manual screening evaluated the title, abstract, and, when needed, introduction. In a second screening, besides the substantive aspect, articles were selected based on their use of interviews to collect qualitative data. Excluding duplicates (3) and broken links (13), 61 materials that dealt directly or indirectly with the topic under investigation were selected. As additional exclusion criteria, materials without original data (40), purely quantitative, and monographs and dissertations (260) were excluded. In the case of edited volumes, I treated book chapters as independent studies. The final sample comprises 27 published materials that were read in-depth, from which 13 brought relevant data that is now cited along with the results.¹⁰ Figure 1 presents a graphical description of the process of selection and Table 1 in the Appendix lists the cited works.

Figure 1. Studies’ selection strategy



Subsistence Routines and Disruptive Policing

The first striking element the data suggests is the existence of strong grievances towards the state, due to a perceived historical negligence of the community, and a positive

⁹ For the search in the Portuguese language I use the following terms: “*violência*,” “*favela*,” “*tráfico de drogas*,” “*entrevistados*,” and “*moradores*.” I did not use the term “criminal governance” (*governança criminal*) because it is not a term of common use in Brazil. I use instead the term “violence,” which in combination with the other terms was enough to filter down the universe of results.

¹⁰ In a quantitative meta-analysis, where each observation can significantly alter the results, employing multiple coders to select and evaluate the articles is crucial. However, this requirement is less stringent for a qualitative meta-analysis. Therefore, in this study, I took on the role of a single coder.

view of criminal governance. In the words of an interviewee, “the Command¹¹ has social action in the community, while the state worries more about those neighborhoods in the South Zone, or Tijuca, where there are those middle-class people” (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 138). Another interviewee is emphatic: “There is no such a thing as police action. Who solves the problems is the Command” (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 141). These descriptions match with the view the drug dealers have of themselves: “One has to accept. Who makes the community safe? The Command does it! Why is there no robbery in the community? Because the Command bumps off any burglar. Good for who? Good for the residents” (Informer 29; Zilli 2015).¹² Despite many dwellers avoided to praise drug dealers, the cognition that the Command rules the community, provides services, and solves problems is prevalent and a lesson that must be quickly learned by new residents:

When I moved in here, I learned about this guy who rules the community. My sons were having issues with some boys bullying them after school. I talked to this guy, who to me is a ‘good person,’ explained what was going on and it was done! We’ve never had problems again. (Interviewee 124, 30 years old in Souza et al. 2016, 59)

The body of interviews makes a clear case: OCGs get the job done. However, given their lack of formal legitimacy, the effectiveness of criminal networks depends on their ability to deliver timely and satisfactory outcomes: “I always say that we have two Courts of Justice: the lawful one and the unlawful one. The unlawful works much faster. In the blink of an eye, it’s done, no problem! Because their [OCGs] intention is to have no problem in the favela!” (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 141). Apart from various sociological factors, the constant demand for achieving desired outcomes typically leads criminal networks to exhibit a high degree of violence. This consistent exposure to such violent methods, in turn, molds what Silva (2004) describes as “violent sociability,” which is the process of desensitizing individuals to brutality against fellow human beings and normalizing such behavior. Inez (43 years old) illustrates how these structures and theoretical concepts operate on the ground:

The second time they broke into my house... they destroyed everything and wrote on the floor that I was going to die. They really wanted to scare me! What solved this? A bunch of guys we know from another community. They settled the issue with those who broke into my house... It wasn’t something that get somebody killed but it did cause some broken limbs. (Silva 2013, 11)

¹¹ “Command” is the term used by gang members and slum residents to refer to the criminal group that exercises control over the community.

¹² In all citations, I am using the original coding, where existing, including fictitious names.

A chorus of dwellers reiterate the same idea: the problems of the favela are solved *within* the favela. And the police are not part of their world—only if as an intruder. Favelas are indeed spaces strongly filled with signals that delineate a zone of influence, define loyalty, and imply allegiance and submission to the internal order (Gomes 2002, 64). In some communities, calling the police is a big mistake, one that might not be without consequences, as it directly challenges the authority of the Command. Yet, there is a practical and spontaneous aspect of the issue as well, based on grievances:

I don't like the police... I prefer to have a drug dealer by my side rather than a police officer, with those big guns. The police are racist, they already harassed my brother in front of our house because he is Black. This is absurd [talking with tears in her eyes]. (A 23-year-old woman in Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 112-3)

This is not an isolated voice. In the last decades, underserved communities in Brazil have organized protests, marches, and other campaigns against discrimination and police brutality. In 1993, a forty-kilometer march along a highway from downtown to Vigário Geral, a favela in Rio de Janeiro where twenty-one dwellers were killed by the police, attracted broad media coverage and public attention to the massacre (Arias 2019). This type of episode of contention and tactical repertoire “create solidarity, oppositional consciousness, and collective identity among participants, while also defining the relationship and boundaries between collective actors and their opponents” (Taylor et al. 2009, 868).

In this context, the police, as an institution, takes on an almost depersonalized role and is viewed as an adversary: “The police will invade your house and will beat you... They don't see that we live here because we can't afford to buy a house. We have nowhere else to go. We *work* to survive” (L., 23 years old in Paula and Pimenta 2007, 61).

L.'s account is one among many that stress the “worker condition.” As Conceição (2015, 210) points out, when favela residents assert the phrase “I am a worker” in their interactions with the police, it conveys more than a mere denial of being a criminal. In alignment with Conceição's perspective, Zaluvar (2000, 145) argues that identifying as part of the working class reflects a belief in the moral superiority of hard work over pursuing easy gains through criminal activities. It emphasizes values associated with family and ethics. Furthermore, this identification directly challenges the *materialistic hypothesis* that favela residents endorse criminal behavior. Although they may share the same living environment, there is still a clear distinction drawn between those who break the law and those who are diligent workers. This testimony illustrates this point:

They accuse us of protecting criminals, of being favorable to drug trafficking, of conniving with this parallel power. If you take the population here, 98 percent, 99 percent of the

community are *workers*, people who get home very late after work, who leave before dawn to work. So, why do they treat people here like that? Why does the state see us this way? It is a way to exclude us. A way to deny our rights. You are excluded. Excluded economically, excluded from politics, excluded socially, from your rights. (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 136)

The intriguing fact is that dwellers simultaneously reject both OCGs and the police. While this topic will be further explored in the upcoming subsection, it is worth noting that the sentiment among many favela residents can be summarized quite succinctly: the misconduct of criminals does not automatically equate to a positive view of the police. At least drug dealers are always in the community: they are part of the favela, and they are there in tough times. The same cannot be said about the state, as the police are often seen as the ones who *create* the tough times when they appear: “Police take away our peace of mind, I’m not against police action, but let it be an intelligent thing, they can’t come shooting everywhere.” (Geraldo, 42 years old in Sonoda 2012, 8). This is quite a common opinion, shared by many interviewees. “The worst thing that can happen is when we have [police] operations, you know? ... The people, dwellers, workers end up dying” (a 17-year-old woman in Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 75). The presence of police means that the routines are disrupted, and violence is unleashed: “Every time the police come here, classes are suspended, businesses close... It directly interferes with our lives... Police coming to the community is a harbinger of violence” (Marcos, 45 years old in Sonoda 2012, 9).

These factors provide substantial support for hypothesis H1: despite drug dealers not being celebrated by the majority of residents, OCGs tend to have a greater degree of integration within the favelas compared to the police. The police, often accused of truculent behavior, including allegations of racism, make their interventions disruptive to the daily routines of residents while also generating enduring grievances.

Portraited Images

Favelas evoke a wide range of emotions, from deep passion to strong disparagement. A poignant example is provided by a 12-year-old boy who shares his heartfelt aspirations: “My dream is to get my mom out of here, because when there is a shooting, the criminals shoot by the side of my room... I’ve never liked to live here.” (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 69). The strong sense of community within favelas can sometimes lead the elderly to momentarily forget about the frequent shootings, as illustrated by Silvio, a 75-year-old resident: “I like here. I cannot afford another place and if I have to pick a favela, I prefer here” (Polivach a and Santo 2012, 185). A 24-year-old woman is even more passionate: “I love my favela. I am proud of living here” (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 80).

From an external perspective, the view might not be as positive: “There is a frontier: on one side, the *favelados* [favela dwellers], hated, despised... On the other side, the rich, white... Their dream is to get rid of us. I grew up with this threat lingering in our mind ‘one day this will have an end’, ‘one day you will have to go!’” (Margarida in Brum 2009, 4). Margarida’s account seems appears to align with Wacquant’s (2001) concept of “stigmatized territory.” Favelas, like other spatial structures that either reflect or run parallel to economic, political, and social systems (Gomes 2002; Marinho and Schor 2009), are considered “entrenched facts of social life that have their autonomous (or at least relatively autonomous) logics and that determine or at least tightly constrain social action” (Swell 2001, 54).

of favelas are renowned for enabling their inhabitants, including those involved in criminal activities, to adeptly navigate their narrow pathways, while outsiders, including the police, often face considerable difficulties in moving around (Conceição 2015). The proximity of houses in favelas, often constructed closely together, and in some cases even on top of one another, may foster a profound sense of shared identity and community. However, the consequences of residing within a favela extend well beyond its physical boundaries, both in reality and perception. Being identified as a “favelado”² or resident of a favela when outside these neighborhoods is a challenging and complex experience: “You can wear nice clothes, but you look like a poor. It’s in your face. You will get there [in a shopping center] and they won’t let you in” (R., 27 years old in Paula and Pimenta 2007, 60-1). In a vivid illustration of Leite’s (2008; 2012) concept of “dangerous classes”, a 28-year-old man shares his experience: “It happens all the time. We are walking down the streets, and the person sees us and hold the purse, change their path, think we are going to mug them. That’s horrible!” (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 90).

Valladares (2000; 2005) posits that favela residents, being impoverished, have struggled to shed the negative image that has long been imposed upon them, replete with stereotypes. This image has deeply influenced how the national elites perceive the poor, associating poverty with vagrancy, vice, filth, and idleness. In the words of a 24-year-old man: “Once, I was looking for a job and the woman asked, ‘Where do you live?’ I answer ‘Vigario Geral.’ She said I couldn’t work there because people from Vigario were ‘too angry’... The woman did not give me the job because I lived in the favela” (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 91).

In response to the described state of affairs, three non-exhaustive reactions can be expected. Firstly, grievances are likely to run deep, as demonstrated in the previous subsection. Secondly, favela residents may adopt the strategic use of identity, including

concealing their identity (for an extreme example, see Einwohner 2006). Lastly, slum residents may choose to confront the challenges by constructing counter-frames, precisely as anticipated by H2. The obvious targets are outsiders and, in particular the main instrument of state intervention in favelas, the police. Regretfully, José, a 42-year-old resident, expresses his lament that "there was a time when there existed a distinction between 'criminals' and 'police officers'" (Mota et al. 2008). He further explains his perspective:

I cannot see a police officer as an authority, a representative of the law. Not here, within the favela... It got so absurd that on a bus, I was the only one to get patted down. So, my feeling toward the police is outrage. Not even citizens we are. We are favelados. That's what we are: fa-ve-la-dos." (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 135)

When it comes to the fundamental rationale for violence, or even the legitimization of violence within the favela master frame, both the police and criminals are perceived as equally violent, with no distinction. As explained by a 25-year-old woman: "Within the community we know who the villains are... Here we are subjected to the Command; in the asphalt, we are subjected to the police... So, to me, they are the same thing" (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 113). In a session involving a group of teenagers, Fernandes (2019, 232-3) posed a series of questions regarding the perceptions of police and criminals. When asked, "What do criminals do?" the response included activities such as trafficking drugs, committing murder, theft, assault, and engaging in various forms of humiliating acts. Subsequently, when asked, "What does a cop do?" the response indicated a perception of similarity with criminals: "Same thing! It's all shit, just the same!" (followed by laughter).

Nevertheless, while violence from OCGs and the police have similarities, the differences are striking. A 28-year-old man goes so far as to assert that the problem lies in "not the violence in the favela, but the police violence" (Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández 2013, 114). Fernandes (2019, 235), drawing insights from her fieldwork, notes that the presence of drug dealers does not interrupt the daily routines of the favela community, yet the dynamics change significantly when the police are present, evident in the behavior of the residents. Fernandes (2019, 235) further shares that the situation where a member of an OCG pointed a gun at her elicited no significant reaction from the 12-year-old teenager she interviewed. The teenager simply laughed it off, stating that "it's okay." appear to evoke minimal concern among favela dwellers, whereas the mere presence of the police induces a sense of unease and nervousness within the community.

The apparent double standard could be explained in two complementary ways. Firstly, police officers pose an immediate threat of harm, while drug dealers, often integrated

into the community (as suggested by H1), tend to be dangerous to residents only under well-established circumstances, becoming part of the routine. Secondly, the product of the counter-frames created within the community gives rise to a qualitative distinction between internal and external violence (as posited by H2). Internal violence happens within (informal) rules the community is aware of and can avoid. Exogenous (police) violence is sporadic, unpredictable, unruly, inevitable, and then unfair and unacceptable.

Frames are certainly not static, as Benford and Snow (2000, 614) elucidate. Framing is an active and dynamic process, which involves agency and contention. Interpretive frames not only differ but also challenge one another, evolving in response to changing circumstances and perspectives. On the other hand, priming ensures that previous experiences pre-sensitize people to activate a frame (Snow and Moss 2014, 1134)—favela dwellers will hardly trust the police due to past abuses. The key takeaway is that frames can change, but they are also sticky. This bolsters H2: the interaction between frames and counterframes makes state action in favelas, especially via police intervention, very unpopular.

Weighting Costs and Benefits

While substantial support has been found for H1, it is crucial to highlight the varied and complex impacts of criminal governance and state intervention, as outlined by Magaloni et al. (2020). The interviews confirm that diverse types of interactions between criminal actors and the population produce different outcomes. While in some communities criminals play the role of benevolent dictators, providing a generous range of public services, in other favelas they are seen as tyrants: “I cannot go to the dances anymore. Now there is a new faction there and they shave our heads if we show up over there. Can you imagine I going to work with a shaved head?!” (Rosa, 35 years old in Santos and Kerstenetzy 2007). Hence, the assessment of costs and benefits—whether it involves mobilization or acceptance of criminal governance—is contingent on the specific context. Nevertheless, certain elements are common across communities, such as the pervasive feeling of state abandonment and the relentless pursuit of a better life.

Once again challenging the *materialistic hypothesis*, the narratives of some favela residents reveal the immense struggle they face while trying to lead their lives in the midst of pervasive violence stemming from multiple sources. It becomes evident that not everyone can normalize violence and adapt their behavior and perceptions based on the available frames and counter-frames. Many individuals suffer adverse consequences, including physical and mental health issues. Laura, a 32-year-old resident, exemplifies this point: “I

developed panic disorder. If I hear any noise, I can't help thinking it's a shooting" (Santos and Kerstenetzy 2007). Laura's experience is not unique: cases of chronic stress – including phobic-anxiety syndromes such as post-traumatic stress disorder – triggered by violence, fear of violence, and pervasive feelings of insecurity are endemic in favelas (Souza 2008, 40).

The situation has evolved in such a way that favela residents have consistently shown support for the rise of "militias," which have gained prominence over the past two decades. Starting around 2006, several favelas have come under the control of groups of off-duty military police. These groups have ousted drug dealers from the areas and established their own presence, complete with offices and a mandatory fee (commonly called "contribution") that residents must pay to maintain what is described as "order" (Misse 2007, 154). Despite being in dire economic straits, most residents comply with paying the fee, as they perceive it as a marked improvement in their living conditions. In the words of one resident: "It's much better. We don't have that thing of being stopped by the drug dealer. We no longer have that. Drug trafficking was horrible. Not anymore. The militia has taken control, and now residents can live in peace" (E6 in Costa 2013, 243).

For many residents, militias are far from being a perfect solution, but they are perceived as the best available option. As one resident, Celma, expressed, "We would like the police to come here and implement an organized system in the community, arresting those who need to be arrested" (Conceição 2015, 212). Another resident, Zélia, added, "But since the government does not do its part... We cannot count on the government to provide order, you know? So, at least we live in a place that is not ruled by criminals [if the militias dominate]" (Conceição 2015, 213). Consequently, it is evident that grievances also exist against OCGs, and the state could potentially leverage these grievances to regain control with the cooperation of the residents. However, as emphasized by McAdam et al. (1996, 5), "people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem."

The state's total lack of credibility is one of the greatest barriers to envisioning a pro-state social mobilization. Having gained insights into the vivid experiences of those living in favelas, it appears surreal to imagine that vulnerable populations would risk their lives mobilizing against OCGs for the sake of a negligent state that has consistently delivered nothing but violence. As one resident puts it, "Two and half million people without govern, do you understand? Without state. The state commits violence twice: first for its omission and then when it invades the community (E1 in Costa 2013, 248). Even in areas not (yet) entirely under the control of gangs, the sentiment prevails that "if there is a crime in the

community ... we don't call the police because *they don't come anyway*, so we don't bother calling" (Interviewee 10, 35-year-old in Souza et al. 2016, 58).

It is no wonder that even in the rare cases when OCGs are targeted by social mobilization, the state does not escape criticism and scrutiny. Rocinha, a large Rio favela in Rio de Janeiro, provides an instructive example. In 2004, a significant number of individuals lost their lives in a conflict that erupted between rival gangs, and the subsequent police intervention further escalated the situation. A city-level NGO worked with local grassroots groups to organize a demonstration that featured a concert by a renowned protest singer from the 1980s, known for advocating democracy (Monken 2004; Arias 2017; 2019). Even though the act stung criminal factions, the organizers made it explicitly clear that they held the police "responsible for violence in the favela" as well (Arias 2017; 2019).

All around the world, people engage in social mobilization because they expect to make things better: they dare to have hope (Moss 2014). In Brazilian favelas, dwellers appear to lack reasons to believe that a shift away from OCGs or militias to the state would improve their living standards, ability to survive, or levels of victimization. Even if most residents do not benefit from criminal governance, it does not mean that it makes sense for them to bear the costs of social mobilization to help the state. As articulated by a resident:

Some people, a minority, benefit [from criminal governance]. But the immense majority, if they had a magic wand that could, like that, without risk, put an end to all this [violence], they would do that. That's for sure... So, I mean, the immense majority is against this, but just doesn't see how to solve the situation. Why? What should one do? Denouncing? Sometimes the police themselves are involved. That's the reality. So, dwellers don't feel safe saying anything, you know? (Pandolfi and Grynszpan 2005, 136).

Therefore, even from a rational perspective of a collective action problem, it raises serious doubts whether favela residents would be in a better position by mobilizing against OCGs. The cost-benefit calculation tends to be negative unless the state completely changes its approach to underserved communities. In today's scenario, the risks of social action are excessively high and the payoffs for successful mobilization are uncertain or even weak. As anticipated under H3, favela dwellers believe (as they should) that the costs of mobilization against OCGs are higher than the benefits they would achieve by siding with the state.

Discussion and Conclusion

Heterogeneity across space and time is a remarkable feature of favelas in Brazil. Some favelas are large and under the control of criminal gangs, while others remain in contention,

with rival gang factions vying for dominance. Some are deemed “pacified” at certain times, while many undergo recurring periods of frequent police incursions and the ensuing confrontations. Despite these distinctions, favelas share several important commonalities: poverty, prejudice, drug dealing, and violence can be regarded as constants across these underserved communities. By gaining insights into the subjective viewpoints of residents from various favelas, this meta-analysis draws a comprehensive picture of what residents think regarding criminal governance and state intervention, which provides valuable insights into patterns of contention.

An explicit and underlying premise of this work is that the prevalent explanations for the persistence of criminal governance in favelas, such as fear or material gains, are inherently incomplete. The body of interviews did not identify *fear* as the primary explanatory variable for why OCGs find almost no popular opposition to their rule. Fear of repression is surely an important constraint for political dissent (Young 2019), but many other emotions (Pearlman 2013, 391-2), such as anger (Gould 2002), are also relevant to explain social mobilization (Goodwin et al 2004). In the same way, most dwellers expressed scant signs of affinity for criminal governance¹³, and, and there is limited evidence to support the idea of *material gains* beyond what is an average community typically receives from the state – public goods that are offered in other neighborhoods in Brazil.

The central question that arises is this: if neither fear nor material gains offer a comprehensive explanation for how criminal governance becomes entrenched and why favela dwellers resist attempts of police takeover, what can rationalize the patterns of social mobilization within these communities, often directed against the state? My argument is that the interaction between grievances and frames, aligned with the state’s historical action (or inaction) in favelas, shape the structure that drives social mobilization against the state and makes mobilization against OCGs meaningless, primarily due to its unpopularity, high costs, and meager potential rewards even in the unlikely event of success. Figure 2 summarizes this scheme and provides a graphical representation of the proposed theoretical model.

¹³ One concern could be social desirability bias, leading the interviewees to express disagreement with unlawful activities. However, given that most interviews occurred within favelas, the opposite could also be true: dwellers may express support for the Command either under fear of repression or given a sense of communality.

Figure 2. Theoretical model for explaining social mobilization against the state and not against OCGs

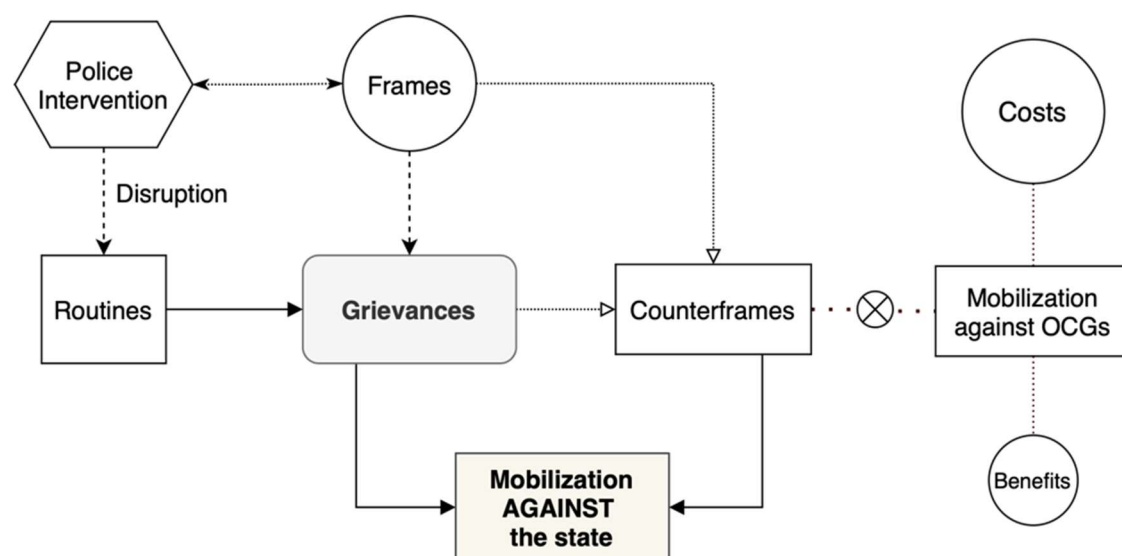


Figure 2 shows how police intervention disrupts established subsistence routines in favelas, resulting in grievances. These grievances are also fabricated by detrimental frames that portray favela dwellers as dangerous. Police intervention serves to reinforce these frames, while these frames, in turn, drive more aggressive police intervention, forming an autopoiesis or feedback mechanism. In response to this dire situation characterized by disruption leading to grievances and detrimental frames, favela residents develop counterframes. Both grievances and counterframes lead to social mobilization against the state. Counterframes also block mobilization against OCGs by producing double standards in the evaluation of violence—exogenous (police) violence is unacceptable, while internal violence is manageable. To add to this, the state’s historical negligence in offering basic public goods to underserved communities makes the costs of social mobilization against OCGs much higher than the benefits that could be achieved if the bid was successful.

A number of important questions arise from the proposed theoretical model. First, what kind of subsistence routine is disrupted by police intervention? Scholars connected to legalist traditions reject assertions that drug dealing, despite being a criminal offense, represents a feature of favelas’ spatial structure (see Campos 2005).¹⁴ It is true that drug

¹⁴ The legalist frame, which dichotomizes between the legal city and the unlawful city (Silva and Leite, 2007, 548), lacks the capacity to garner sufficient popular support in favelas. This is because the available counterframes (depicting the police as racist, violent, and selective) resonate more strongly due to shared grievances. While there is no doubt that Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) create a legal problem, an exclusively legalist perspective primarily relies on repression and establishes rigid boundaries between the legal and illegal realms,

dealing in favelas became so normalized that it is easily represented in moments of leisure, while police intervention is depicted as a threat to the whole community (Fernandes 2019, 235). However, this phenomenon has gained visibility not only in favelas but also in various Brazilian cities, especially the metropolises, where economic and sociopolitical dynamics have been increasingly influenced by the presence and consumption of drugs. This is not, therefore, a “marginal” reality of an “exotic” space, but a relevant phenomenon that has shaped different sectors of the society as a whole (Souza 2000). Furthermore, as indicated by the interviewees, subsistence routines include schooling, legal businesses, transport, and many other public services that the community needs to provide itself in the absence of the state.

Contributing to the recrudescence of an already undesirable condition, claims of racism and prejudice have historically followed police action in favelas (French 2013; Håndlykken-Luz 2020). Since group identity is rooted in history (Dawson 2020), in-group policy demands (Enos et al. 2019) and the recognition and legitimatization (or lack thereof) of their actions depend on cultural elements (Swell 1999). The absence of cultural assimilation, for instance, may create space for intergroup hostility and violence (Kopstein and Wittenberg 2011). This is the environment in which frames and counter-frames blossom. As Polletta (1998, 139) remarks “frames combine a *diagnosis* of the social condition in need of remedy, a *prognosis* for how to do that, and a *rationale* for action.”

In the case of violence in favelas, in addition to the role frames play, routines themselves are important in explaining why dwellers see internal and exogenous violence through different lenses. Internal violence (coming from other dwellers or criminal governance overall) is normally predictable, comprehensible, and falls within (informal) rules that permit dwellers to navigate and evade it. Without external violence, dwellers live their (hard) lives, doing their best to take care of their affairs and ensure their survival. However, exogenous (police) violence is sporadic, unpredictable, unruled, unavoidable, and perceived as unjust. It is not surprising that police incursions provoke disturbances, resistance, and frequently lead to mobilization. Simmons (2014, 520), discussing why some facts resonate more than others, suggests that “certain ‘problems’ may systematically conduce to the formation of an easily prioritized identity, and particular events that highlight, create, or

compelling the state to try to assert its monopoly of force through violence. This approach has proven unsuccessful in various parts of the world (Lessing 2017). In contrast, the standpoint of contentious politics acknowledges that the conflict is not solely about formal institutions (laws) but also about claims. This perspective introduces fresh explanatory variables and offers new possibilities for conditional solutions, irrespective of the legal status of the issue at hand.

expose those problems might favor identification with a category particularly conducive to participation in organized resistance.”

As long as the state continues to neglect providing public goods to underserved communities, favelas have no reasons to mobilize against OCGs. Where OCGs are perceived as benign, dwellers resort to them to meet basic needs—from public safety and dispute resolution to access to essential services such as water, electricity, food, and medications. Where OCGs are considered malign, incentives for mobilization are not higher because of uncertain and weak payoffs. Moreover, police incursions will keep facing fierce resistance, as they disrupt the lives of those who are already dealing with significant hardship. Police confrontation in favelas means nothing more than death and destruction for the affected residents.

The implication of this article is that states can increase the likelihood of popular dissent against OCGs by changing the parameters of the calculation between costs of benefits of social mobilization. This could be achieved by providing more public services, socioeconomic opportunities, establishing sources of income, creating a welfare safety net, and adopting community-based policing in underserved communities. Such measures would make it more difficult for criminal governance to operate effectively. Conversely, persisting with the current approach is likely to continue producing grievances and counter-frames, making state intervention in favelas increasingly complex, while populations become dependent on the benevolence of criminals.

Certainly, this study has its limitations. It involves highly heterogeneous data collected from diverse communities subject to varying types of criminal governance and police violence. Beyond geographical diversity, the study also spans a broad time period, with qualitative data ranging from 2002 to 2017. These time windows encompass circumstances that may have had significant impacts, not always controlled for in the original methodologies. Nevertheless, these shortcomings do not diminish from the relevance of this study, particularly in terms of its theoretical and conceptual contributions. The heterogeneity across units and temporal variance can also be seen as a strength, uncovering the common explanatory factors that remain constant across space and time.

In terms of future research, there is still space to examine whether and how initiatives to reinsert the state in favelas, such as the Pacifying Police Units (*Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora*, abbreviated UPP) in Rio de Janeiro, reshape the interrelationships among communities,

OCGs, and the State.¹⁵ Additionally, the role of media in constructing the perception of favela residents and the real-world impacts of this framing, particularly regarding the “workers” versus “criminals” dichotomy should be further investigated. Moreover, there is a need for deeper insights into the role of social identity, that is, how OCGs embed themselves within impoverished communities, often becoming integral to the favela’s informal institutions. Unraveling these questions is key for shedding light on why residents may prefer one form of violence over another, and why violence perpetrated by the state is seen as oppressive and intolerable, while criminal groups manage to integrate into the daily life of favelas. This understanding is crucial for developing more effective policies and interventions in underserved communities.

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¹⁵ While there’s an extensive body of literature on the impact of UPPs on violence and drug trafficking, there has been surprisingly little focus on how the introduction of police into favelas has altered the dynamics of relationships among the community, criminals, and the state.

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Appendix

Table 1 Materials with cited interviews

Work	City	Favela	Time	N
Paula and Pimenta (2007)	Guarulhos	Pimentas Bananal Vila Galvão	2007	71
Mota et al. (2008)	Rio de Janeiro	Guaratiba	2008	*
Jovchelovitch and Priego-Hernández (2013)	Rio de Janeiro	Cantagalo Cidade de Deus Madureira Vigário Geral	2009-2011	204
Costa (2013)	Rio de Janeiro	Vidigal	2012	30
Santos and Kerstenetzy (2007)	Rio de Janeiro	Barbante	2007	50
Souza et al. (2016)	Viçosa	César Santana Ben José Cardoso Floresta	2014	125
Sonoda (2012)	Rio de Janeiro	Various [‡]	2007-2008	30
Brum (2009)	Rio de Janeiro	Cidade Alta	2008-2009	*
Silva (2013)	Londrina	Jardim Santa Rita	2011	57
Conceição (2015)	Rio de Janeiro	Cidade Alta	2012	5
Ferreira and Santo (2011)	Rio de Janeiro	Manguinhos	2008	26
Zilli (2015)	Belo Horizonte	Various [‡]	2010-2011	40
Pandolfi and Grynszpan (2005)	Rio de Janeiro	Formiga Maré Rocinha	2002	*

[‡] Sonoda (2012) collected data from 28 favelas in Rio de Janeiro (RJ). Ferreira and Santo (2011) worked in 16 favelas in Belo Horizonte (MG) and metropolitan region.

* Sample size was not reported in the original work.