**Sharing Authority: The Politics and Practice of Community Policing in the Brazilian Slum**

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**Abstract:**

Over the last decade, community policing has become the centerpiece of public security policy in several Brazilian states. By prioritizing violence reduction and the improving of police-citizen relations, its advocates argue that it is more humane than traditional repressive policing strategies, and also more effective at combating the growing influence of drug gangs in Brazil’s sprawling favelas (slums) and low-income suburbs. Evidence from Brazil’s two most ambitious community policing initiatives, the Pacification Police Units (UPPs) in Rio de Janeiro and the Community Security Bases (CBS) in Bahia, suggest that these claims do hold water, but that they also conceal a more complex reality: Even in the best of circumstances, community policing has relied on tacit agreements—or concessions—to share authority with local drug gangs, whose social and economic ties to communities run far too deep to be uprooted by police action alone.

*Key Words: UPP, Brazil, Drug Trafficking, Police Reform*

**Introduction**

The inauguration of Rio de Janeiro’s first *Pacifying Police Unit* (UPP) in Morro da Santa Marta in late 2008 ushered in a new era of police reform in Brazil, and with it, the hope that a more democratic and less violent police culture might finally emerge where the police had long been associated with authoritarianism and excessive lethality. It seemed also to be the culmination of a decades-long process of transnational policy diffusion. Community Policing (CP), a citizen rights-oriented policing philosophy that had been embraced in much of the developed world by the 1990s, was now becoming firmly embedded in the heart of Latin America.

Within a few years of Santa Marta’s ribbon cutting, dozens of UPPs had been inaugurated in Rio de Janeiro, and with the guidance and encouragement of a newly created federal program called PRONASCI, other Brazilian states began adopting similar programs, the most significant among these being the *Bases Comunitárias de Segurança* (BCS) in Salvador, Bahia. Taken together, these two initiatives, the UPPs and BCS, have since come to embody what can be understood as a uniquely Brazilian model of Community Policing, one which differs from its developed world predecessors in one broadly important way: Its primary goals concern not simply the improvement of state-society relations and crime prevention, but the forceful reassertion of government authority in communities (specifically, urban slums, or favelas) that are either currently controlled by well-organized drug gangs or that are at risk of falling under such control. In practice, then, Brazilian CP is part Community Policing, but also part counterinsurgency.

Advocates of the CP model have pointed out many shortcomings in the Brazilian adaptation that are rooted in this key difference. Both the UPPs and the BCS, for example, ignore core principles of the Community Policing model as it has been embraced in much of the Global North, namely its concern with decentralized administration and citizen consultation for the prioritization of communities’ security needs (Fruhling 2012). Others have taken this criticism much further, suggesting that the UPPs are not really CP at all, rather a form of military occupation that serves merely to perpetuate a worldview in which slum dwellers are perceived by middle and upper-class society as barbaric and dangerous (Poets 2015).

Despite these shortcomings and more aggressive critiques, the measureable positive impact of Brazil’s CP initiatives has been much greater than CP programs in North America, Europe, or Japan where they were first embraced. In fact, CP’s classical problem in the developed world largely comes from the difficulty in measuring policy success, as crime rates and perceptions of state legitimacy are often slow to change, and Community Policing offers little in the way of quantifiable improvement over short time periods (Skogan 2004). In Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, by contrast, CP programs have been associated with dramatic reductions in lethal violence, as well as significant improvements in residents’ overall sense of security and well-being (Cano and Ribeiro 2016; Santos 2017). Indeed, if we relied on these measures alone, Brazilian CP would stand out as an unprecedented success story, at least during the first half decade of their implementation (Brazil’s political and economic crisis has taken a toll in more recent years).

The argument I present here substantially departs from these earlier evaluative frameworks. Based on interviews and ethnographic research conducted in Salvador between 2016 and 2017, and in Rio de Janeiro between 2008 and 2014, I make two main claims. First, Brazil’s CP initiatives indeed fail to adhere to core tenets of the Community Policing model as embraced in the Global North, but given the incredibly ambitious goal to which they are created (i.e. displace the authority and influence of well-armed and deeply entrenched drugs) this standard was probably never realistic to begin with. Second, and more importantly, the apparent success of these programs in reducing lethal violence and improving citizen security, while positive, obscures a more complex and problematic development: An increasing reliance on tacit, informal arrangements between the police and locally embedded drug gangs to *share* authority in CP designated communities as a condition for peace. These arrangements, I argue, are mutually beneficial by themselves and do not necessitate direct material exchange (i.e. bribes) or even direct contact between police and drug trafficking gangs. As I discuss later, this problem is directly related to the spread of well organized prison gangs across Brazil, which have in turn shaped the structure, behavior, and resource base of street gangs, particularly in the country’s Northeast. In any case, these developments cast serious doubt on the long-term viability of current CP programs.

In Rio de Janeiro, this tacit sharing of authority has now ceased to produce social stability, as the power and authority of drug-selling gangs has eclipsed that of the increasing cash-strapped and unpopular UPPs in many of their target communities. The recent decision of Michel Temer, Brazil’s current president, to authorize direct military intervention there in February 2018, might well turn out to be the death knell for Rio’s decade-old CP initiative. In Salvador, where organized gang violence and political engagement is a much more recent development, the BCS continue to enjoy clear indicators of success, although in very limited geographical spaces. Here, too, however, signs of the program’s decline are increasingly evident.

In the following section of this paper, I address my first claim by briefly discussing the policy trajectory by which the Community Policing model reached Brazil, and how it was modified to fit the sociopolitical context of the Brazilian slum. I then discuss the case of the UPPs in Rio de Janeiro in attempt to unpack the broad theoretical and empirical dimensions upon which they have been criticized or praised. From there, I move on the much less studied case of the BCS in Salvador, the primary empirical contribution in this paper, where I explore the ground-level mechanisms driving the tacit authority-sharing arrangements that constitute my core argument. Finally, I conclude with some implications this has for the future of police reform in Brazil, and for future research on policing in Latin America.

*From Tokyo to the Brazilian Favela: Community Policing Made for the Slum*

In his 1976 book, *Forces of Power: Police Behavior in Japan and the United States*, David Bayley credited Japan’s impressively low crime rates to a century-old policing system known as *Koban*, a nationwide network of closely placed police substations that served simultaneously as centers for community learning and outreach. The Japanese model drew special attention in the United States, where the reactive policing strategies of the era not only failed to curb rising crime rates, but were also widely believed to have contributed to the race riots and intensifying social conflict in the 1960s and 1970s (Leishman 2007). By the end of the 1980s, a *Koban*-inspired philosophy of “Community Policing” took hold among American police reformers, paving the way for the creation of the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (C.O.P.S.) in 1994. With the institutional support and financial incentives provided by C.O.P.S, a majority of police departments across the country adopted CP initiatives by the end of the decade (Skogan 2006).

Latin America, meanwhile, was in the midst of its so-called *Third Wave*, an unprecedented series of democratic regime changes that took hold across the Western Hemisphere in the 1980s and 1990s (Huntington 1993). In many countries, national and local police forces had become a symbol of repression associated with the outgoing authoritarian regimes, and police reform therefore became a key issue early on in the democratization process (Riccio et al. 2017). Community Policing, which was introduced directly via U.N. peacekeeping missions in El Salvador (1991) and Guatemala (1996), seemed to fit the new democratic ethos of the region, thanks to its citizen rights-oriented approach to public security and its emphasis on decentralized administration (Fruhling 2007). By the close of the century, most of Latin America’s newly democratized regimes had at least rhetorically embraced Community Policing as potential cornerstone of public security policy.

In Brazil, a *Koban*-inspired CP initiative called CONSEG was adopted in Sao Paulo as early as 1985, and similar initiatives were adopted periodically throughout the 1990s and early 2000s in Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. These initiatives tended to be small, poorly funded, and motivated primarily by acute political crisis, however, and following a pattern common among CP programs elsewhere in Latin America, most did not survive beyond the political administrations that created them (Cordeiro et al. 2012).

Although the first UPPs in Rio de Janeiro had tenuous institutional underpinnings and were motivated by acute political crisis like other CP initiatives that came and went before them (Pinto and Scarlet 2016), this lack of institutionalization may in fact have given the UPPs the necessary flexibility to survive the staunch institutional resistance to police reform (Willis and Prado 2015). Meanwhile, two important developments would favor the new program’s expansion and deeper institutionalization over the coming years. First, the Lula administration, which at the time enjoyed unprecedented popular support, created PRONASCI[[1]](#footnote-1) in 2007, a new federal ministry that formally embraced the Community Policing model and assisted state governments that were committed to developing CP programs (Ruediger 2012). Second, in 2009, news emerged that Rio de Janeiro would host both the 2014 World Cup Games and the 2016 Summer Olympics. Coming in on a tide of general economic optimism in Brazil, this news helped to change the political landscape in Rio de Janeiro in favor of heavy state investment in public security. A newly enriched private sector jumped on board, and a public-private partnership was soon incorporated into the UPP’s funding structure (Godoi 2013).

By 2014, on the eve of the World Cup games, 38 UPPs had been inaugurated across Rio de Janeiro, employing some 9,543 newly trained police officers and occupying more than a fourth of all of the city’s favelas (Wolff 2015). Although Brazil’s economic crisis had already set in by then and much of the initial private investment had dried up, the UPPs had passed their most formidable test: In April 2014, Rio’s newly elected governor, Luiz Fernando Pezão, committed to continuing the signature policy initiative of his predecessor, Sergio Cabral. Few CP initiatives in Brazil had survived such transfers of power before, and the fact that the UPPs did now suggested that Community Policing might actually become the cornerstone of public security policy in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere in Brazil as many police reformers had originally hoped.

But do the UPPs really count as Community Policing? In some respects, they have been even more intimately engaged in community affairs than traditional CP, particularly where UPP commanders have taken over functions of informal governance that were previously exercised by drug gangs, a situation that Michel Misse (2011) warned might perpetuate the “territoriality of power” so typical of contemporary politics in Rio de Janeiro.

Most criticism of the UPPs, however, has focused on their lack of adherence to the most central tenets of the Community Policing philosophy, especially its concern with decentralized administration and citizen consultation for the prioritization of communities’ security needs (Fruhling 2012). Institutionally, UPP commanders are, for example, beholden to the central command of the state Military Police, which is itself under the direct authority of the governor. While individual base commanders do enjoy a significant degree of discretion over day-to-day operations, their security priorities, administrative tenure, and access to material resources are all determined by a central command whose strategies and motivations tend to be far removed from the specific interests and needs of targeted communities. Moreover, there are no institutionalized mechanisms to ensure citizen participation and input in the prioritization of a community’s security needs, and therefore the UPPs tend to be just as paternalistic as traditional policing (Cano 2012).

Due in part to these criticisms, the government of Rio de Janeiro abandoned the term “Community Policing” altogether, opting instead for the less loaded term, “Proximity Policing” (Magaloni et al. 2015). This more accurately reflected the UPPs’ operational framework, which depends primarily on the maintenance of a permanent police presence *within* a target community, but the program’s proper name—*Pacification*—probably captures the policy model somewhat better. This is because it is, in effect, classical counterinsurgency applied to the urban slum. Conceptualizing drug gangs as a form of armed insurgency, the state hoped to eliminate this threat and reassert its authority by forging alliances with local leaders and by prioritizing the well-being of civilian non-combatants (see Kilcullen 2010). In other words, Pacification was about winning hearts and minds, backed up by the threat of overwhelming military power.

Counterinsurgent strategy is evident at all stages of the UPPs’ implementation. Once a specific favela community is selected, special police forces (often with the additional help of military and federal police units) launch a large-scale “tactical intervention,” which is followed by a national flag raising ceremony, and then several months of sweep operations in an effort to clear the area of gang leaders, weapons and drug caches (Cano and Ribeiro 2016). Once the area is deemed secure, the UPP itself is inaugurated, and its officers—all ostensibly trained in the principles of Community Policing—assume daily operations. These operations fall into two loose categories: 1) community outreach, including all proactive efforts community-police rapprochement, such as home visits and the offering of free classes to local youth, and; 2) Repression/Reaction, the bulk of which occurs in the context of regular walking patrols, responding to complaints, and enforcing minor code violations (Lieut. Ivan 2014).

This counterinsurgent approach has been widely criticized, but it made practical sense for two important reasons. First, even though the politico-military dynamics of combating drug gangs are very different from those of actual insurgency, the degree of territorial control that drug gangs exercised in Rio’s favelas was, by 2008, far too great for traditional Community Policing to deal with on its own. Earlier CP initiatives such as GEPAE[[2]](#footnote-2) (early 2000s), for example, failed in part because they simply did not have the personnel numbers or material resources to exercise authority in the face of well-armed and socially entrenched drug gangs (Bruno 2012). Secondly, the political returns of the counterinsurgent strategy were much greater than for traditional community policing because the visible indicators of success are more dramatic. Various studies have found, for instance, that homicides in UPP targeted communities were between 50 and 75 percent lower than in communities without UPPs, and that residents’ sense of security and freedom of movement had improved significantly (Cano 2012; Magaloni et al. 2015; Cano and Ribeiro 2016).[[3]](#footnote-3) Above all, the residents in and around most UPP-targeted communities benefitted from the sudden absence of openly armed bands of drug traffickers and the violent armed conflict their presence tended to invite (Cano 2012). Meanwhile, one of the key problems for traditional CP programs is that, unlike repressive policing strategies, it very difficult to measure policy success, which makes political support more difficult to maintain (Skogang 2006).

The dramatic improvements in security brought significant economic benefits, too, at least for some. Property rights became more secure, and outside businesses began to invest more in favela communities as result. Local residents began opening their own businesses, too, and something like a “favela tourism” industry began to emerge (Andre 2010). Furthermore, areas in and near UPPs began to see significant increases in property values, which not only provided new economic opportunities for favela residents, but also contributed to a decrease in overall levels of inequality citywide (Frischtak et al. 2012). Of course, higher property values and other economic improvements also threatened to “gentrify” favela communities, potentially pushing the poor from their homes (Souza 2010). This has not happened extensively so far, however, nor have reactions to it created policy-threatening political costs.

In sum, the expansion of the UPPs in Rio de Janeiro after 2008 represented a pivotal change for advocates of police reform, who by and large embraced Community Policing as a favorable alternative to the much more violent traditional modes of policing in Brazil. And while the organizational foundations of the UPPs somewhat brazenly eschewed key principles of the CP philosophy, adopting instead a strategy resembling counterinsurgency, the result of this was a much more visible and immediate positive impact that we generally see with CP programs elsewhere. As I argue in the next section, however, this positive impact (mostly the cessation of armed conflict between rival gangs and with the police, which open favela communities up to myriad opportunities for social and economic improvement) often came to depend on tacit and tenuous arrangements between police and gangs to share authoritative responsibilities as a term of peace. These tacit arrangements were hardly noticeable during the first few years of the UPP program, but as economic recession deepened after 2013, they became evermore apparent and tenuous.

*Community Policing in the Time of Prison Gangs: From Rio de Janeiro to Salvador*

Since the late 1980s, roughly one fifth of the population of Rio de Janeiro has lived in favela communities where well-organized drug trafficking gangs exercise a crude form of local governance and jealously guard their territorial domains (Leeds 1996; Arias 2007). The organizational pulse of these gangs lies in the state prison system, however, from which Rio’s most powerful criminal factions, the *Comando Vermelho*, *Terceiro Comando*, and *Amigos dos Amigos*, emanate dictates and behavioral guidelines to their street-level counterparts (Penglase 2008; Wolff 2015). Until the late 1990s, this dynamic was unique to Rio de Janeiro, but by the end of that decade the notorious *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) faction had established a near monopoly of prison control in neighboring Sao Paulo along similar lines (Biondi 2016). Since then, the PCC has established a presence in prisons across Brazil, bringing with it an organizational template for emerging local prison gangs as well as the access keys to an advanced criminal trade network (Apolinario 2017). As prison gangs have proliferated and became better connected to illegal trade networks, their affiliate gangs in the streets have become more powerful, more competitive, and more violent. In short, cities across Brazil, especially in the country’s Northeast region, have begun converging around a criminal system rooted in the centripetal organizational force of prison gangs, resembling that of Rio de Janeiro three to four decades ago.

This problem is particularly apparent in Salvador, Bahia, where the rise of PCC-inspired prison gangs in the mid-2000s corresponded with a reported 161 percent increase in homicides between 2002 and 2012, making it Brazil’s most violent city for a time (Kinosian 2015). In response to what was increasingly seen as a public security crisis, then governor of Bahia, Jaques Wagner (PT 2007-2014) launched his *Pact for Life* initiative in 2011, the core feature of which envisioned the installation of *Bases Comunitárias de Segurança* (BCS) in high-conflict neighborhoods (Cordeiro et al. 2012). Eighteen of these Community Policing bases have since been inaugurated in Salvador alone, and five others throughout the state of Bahia.

The organizational form of the BCS is nearly identical to that of the UPPs, reflecting a process of policy diffusion Kurt Weyland (2005) attributes to “cognitive heuristics.” That is, early reports about the success of the UPPs in Rio de Janeiro provided policymakers in Bahia with the political capital needed to adopt major policy change and a blueprint for how to carry it out. Considering the remarkable decline in homicides and general improvements in citizen security during the early years of the UPPs, the heuristic was potent: Where the growth of prison gangs fuels a parallel growth in drug trafficking gangs and related violence in the urban slum, UPP-style Community Policing is effective at dealing with the dual crisis of public security and the need to reassert state authority (Wolff 2015b).

Indeed, the early years of the BCS program in Salvador also produced some remarkably positive outcomes in terms of homicide reduction and improved citizen security. In the Calabar favela, which received the first BCS in 2011, homicides dropped from around 5 per month in 2010 to less than one per year by 2016 (Carlos 2017). Even in the favela complex of Nordeste da Amarelina, known widely as the “most difficult” BCS precinct, homicides fell from their 2010 peak of 53 to an average or 15 per year by 2015 (Figueiredo 2016). Although comprehensive studies of such impacts have yet to emerge in Salvador, most BCS commanders report similar reductions in homicides in their designated patrol areas since bases were established. Moreover, the physical mobility of residents in gang dominated communities improved substantially in most BCS precincts. In Calabar, for instance, a public health clinic located in the favela that could not be safely accessed by nearly half the community’s residents due to turf disputes between rival gangs, and only became fully accessible after the BCS began its operations in 2011 (Cardoso 2017).

Similar improvements can be seen in terms of police legitimacy. The Community Outreach activities of the BCS have been particularly successful at winning over children and the elderly, even if young and middle-aged men have tended to remain highly suspicious of the police. The so-called “community visits” and “solidarity missions,” usually carried out on a weekly or biweekly basis by a select unit of both male and female officers, have connected many elderly residents to the police for the first time in their lives, while the free classes taught at BCS bases have attracted large number of children (Rair 2017). And although the most popular of these classes tend to be martial arts and boxing, it is telling that preparatory courses for the police academy entrance exam are almost always full (Leticia 2017; Carlos 2017).

These readily apparent successes appear to lend credibility to the heuristic that holds UPP-style Community Policing (i.e. counterinsurgent CP) to be an effective way for the state to reassert its authority in communities where criminal gangs have established a rudimentary form of local governance. However, as in Rio de Janeiro, the success of the BCS does not necessary reflect an actual reassertion of state authority so much as a tenuous concordance between the police and drug gangs, who for the time being are both capable and willing to commit to shared governance in exchange for peace.

Two factors lie at the heart of this problem. First, the depth of poverty and concurrent lack of an effective welfare safety net has kept many favela residents in a perpetual state of material need. Second, exploiting this material need has become the well-honed strategic objective of local drug trafficking gangs whose organizational linkages to prison gangs and nationwide criminal trade networks provide them with clear directives of social action as well as the economic power to make it matter (Apolinario 2017).

To illustrate, the current president of the Residents’ Association in Calabar estimates that some 90 percent of the area’s inhabitants have at one time or another sought some material assistance from the local gang leader, “Alveraldinho,” who in accordance with the dictates of prison gang leadership (he is an affiliate of the *Comando da Paz,* or Peace Command) has ordered his own rank and file to generously assist residents in need (Nilsa 2017). This exploitable material need, which might reasonably be considered the general condition of most of Salvador’s favela communities, often concerns the very basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, as well as medicines and medical emergency, but may also include matters of social importance, like the financing of birthday parties or putting on free concerts for the community (Carlos 2017). In both cases, it presents an obvious problem for the police, whose mere presence in a community may appear as a direct threat to the only reliable social safety net many residents have. And since the police have little to no material resources of their own to dispose of, nor institutional mandate to do so, they also cannot compete against the material generosity of drug gangs.

There is, furthermore, a highly exploitable need in favela communities for guarantees of social order and basic governance, especially with regard to conflict resolution and the application of local justice. In Salvador during the decades prior to the rise of organized prison and street gangs in the mid-2000s, most problems of local governance were typically channeled through socially engaged Residents Associations that acted simultaneously as the primary political linkage between local residents and the state (Nilsa 2017). Egregious crimes like theft, assault, rape or murder, meanwhile, were dealt with by the police, often in an extralegal, violent, and (importantly) immediate way that was generally congruous with local cultural attitudes about just punishment (Paes-Machado and Noronha 2002). By the mid-2000s, however, Residents Associations across Salvador fell into disrepute and authoritative decline, usually due to corruption and politicization, and the police were increasingly scrutinized and held accountable for their abuses of power (Nilsa 2017; Reis 2017). Something of an authoritative vacuum emerged as a result, and it was in this context that the recently formed prison gangs, the most powerful of which reigned from Salvador’s Lemos Brita Penitentiary, began executing behavioral dictates to their street-level counterparts regarding gang-community relations, a large part of which concerned the exercise of local governance.

Since then, gangs in Salvador’s favelas have taken on a governing role in an increasingly consistent and effective way. As in the case of Rio de Janeiro, this “Lei do Trafico” (Law of the Drug Gangs) tends to be highly selective in its application (i.e. there is no universal rule of law), but it works in spite of this precisely because it adheres to and helps to uphold an unequal local social order in which “respectable” residents are clearly distinguished from so-called “marginados” (Arias and Davis 2010). Above all, however, it works because it is immediate and forceful, resolving anything from petty disputes to the punishment of serious crimes like rape or murder in a direct and definitive fashion. In this way gangs successfully create a sense of predictability and order, at least within the circumscribed territories they control.

When Bahia’s government began installing BCS in targeted favelas around Salvador in 2011, it was this authoritative order that the new Community Police were intended to replace. Unsurprisingly, the gangs have jealously guarded their authoritative domains against the encroachment of BCS police forces. After all, the dependence of favela communities on the informal welfare and governance that the gangs have nurtured is paramount to their own security in the face of police intervention, for it helps guarantee that most residents most of the time will avoid collaborating with the police, whether out of loyalty or for fear of retaliation. In either case, the BCS police have in most cases been unable to replace or even significantly reduce the authoritative influence of drug gangs except in the geographical zones immediately surrounding the police bases and in high-traffic commercial zones (Figueiredo 2016).

The reasons for this difficulty in reducing gangs’ authoritative influence are economic, technological, and geographical. Economically, the deep poverty of Salvador’s urban slums provides a large and cheap labor pool that gang leaders can employ, and which can be mobilized to act as a highly effective surveillance system in the service of social control and gang security. In the Uruguai favela near the city’s old port, for example, unemployed women receive regular cash assistance from the local gang leader in exchange for reporting suspicious activity or simply for spying on their neighbors (Lemos 2017). Young children and adolescents are also routinely employed by drug traffickers, either to transport or hide merchandise, or to keep a look out and track the movement of the police (Carlos 2017). More insidiously, the myriad daily needs of the poorest residents (i.e. food, clothing, medicines, etc…) and more periodic needs (i.e. medical emergencies, funerals, debt relief, etc…) allow drug gangs to nurture a deep dependence on their own informal welfare system.

Second, relatively new communications technology, today dominated by the ubiquitous WhatsApp internet messaging service, has dramatically increased the effectiveness of gang surveillance networks by allowing gang *olheiros* (“lookouts”) to provide live-feed updates on all police movements. This has allowed drug traffickers to operate floating points of sale that can be disbanded and hidden whenever a police patrol is near, only to be reconstituted as soon as the patrol leaves (Carlos 2017).

Finally, the geography of Salvador’s favelas, often marked by steep hills, few (if any) vehicle accessible roads, and high population density, significantly reduces the reactive capacity of the police while increasing the dangers (both to police and local residents) of pursuing suspects (Cardoso 2017). Taken together, these three factors—poverty, facile communications technology, and difficult geography, create almost insurmountable challenges for a police force tasked with displacing and replacing gang authority. Not only do they deter residents from collaborating with the police, but they also limit the ability of the police to apprehend suspects even when their whereabouts are known.

Despite these difficulties, BCS forces do exercise some degree of power and authority in their designated communities, and as mentioned above, this is particularly true of the geographical areas immediately surrounding police bases and in commercial zones. With the exception of a few particularly contentious communities, such as *Nortedeste de Amarelina*,[[4]](#footnote-4) Salvador’s drug gangs have largely ceded these territories to full police control and, again following dictates and guidance from their counterparts within the prison system, and have committed to a policy of non-confrontation with the police in those areas (Reis 2017). This dynamic has, in effect, created substantial “safe zones” within gang-dominated favela communities where not only the police but also various other public institutions and private enterprises have become increasingly active in community life. For residents living in these areas state authority outweighs that of the drug gangs.

The police exercise some authority outside of these “safe zones” as well, but their authority is severely circumscribed due to residents’ fear of retaliation from drugs, as well as a deep distrust of the police themselves. The message from the gangs is clear, as one graffitied wall in Calabar demonstrates: “God knows everything, but even he is not a rat.”[[5]](#footnote-5) And when residents do report crimes to the police, they often receive stern warnings about the risks of talking to the police. Or in other cases, gang operatives simply preempt the exercise of police authority by enforcing laws and imposing punishment before the police can do so (Fredson 2016). Moreover, residents tend to be extremely skeptical of the police, often assuming by default that the police are corrupt and potentially dangerous to deal with. According to a community leader, “My son was a police officer, and he himself always told me, ‘Never trust a cop’” (Nilsa 2017).

The difficulty that the BCS police have in imposing authority in their respective favela communities has become greater in recent years due in good part to Brazil’s ongoing economic and political crises. Between 2014 and 2016 alone, Brazil’s GDP shrank by more than 7 percent, resulting in millions of jobs lost and a steep decline in government revenue (Cascione 2016). For the BCS police in Salvador, this meant salary and hiring freezes, reduced training and munitions, and scarce necessities like gasoline and vehicle repairs. And as low officer moral and retirement cycles has diminished BCS forces, the state has been unable to replenish them. Initial staffing minimums were reduced from more than one hundred in 2011 to between thirty and fifty just seven years later (Santos 2017). This, in turn, has meant that actual on-duty personnel numbers are often too small to even leave base. Meanwhile, the economic crisis and accompanying loss of jobs and government revenue have deepened the material dependence of local populations on drug trafficker wealth.

But if the police have been unable to displace and replace the authority of drug gangs, the gangs have also been unable to get rid of the police. Previous experiments in Community Policing in both Rio de Janeiro and Salvador in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which were much smaller in scale and more vulnerable to attacks by drug gangs, had essentially been run out of gang controlled areas and subsequently abandoned by the state (Bruno 2012; Elis 2017). Today, both CP programs are large enough (and still have enough political capital) to hold their ground. What emerges from this stalemate, then, is a kind of jurisdictional sharing of authority between police and drug gangs that resembles the informal power sharing agreements between rival families of the Sicilian mafia (see Gambetta 1993). One major difference is that jurisdictions in this case are not only geographical (ex. Outer vs. Inner favela), but also categorical. That is, the police may to some extent exercise authority anywhere geographically, but will only enforce certain aspects of the law, while drug gangs continue to enforce a separate set of laws. Typically, this arrangement restricts police work to matters deemed unthreatening to the security of drug gangs, such as noise complaints, dumping, domestic disputes, and myriad minor code violations. Matters of sexual assault, egregious domestic violence, theft, and murder, meanwhile, generally fall under the jurisdiction of the drug gangs themselves (Nilsa 2017; Leticia 2017). In this context, conflict occurs when the lines between one jurisdictional domain and another are blurred.

For the most part, BCS commanders have not made serious attempts to upset this authority-sharing dynamic, nor have their political superiors pushed them to do so. Perhaps surprisingly, this reticence on the part of the police likely has very little to do with bribery or any other direct forms of collusion with drug gangs, contrary to popular narratives about police-criminal relations in Brazil. Instead, the primary reasons are political and pragmatic. Bahia’s *Pact for Life* initiative, for which the BCS became the central institutional component, had been marketed by the government from its inception as a policy specifically designed to reduce lethal violence, following the precepts of a similar policy package in Pernambuco state by the same name. Metrics for the program’s success were likewise measured in terms of homicide reduction, and criteria for promotions and bonuses built into the program to improve agency performance depended on individual BCS’ reaching targeted goals of homicide reduction (Santos 2017). This meant that as long as drug gangs had the organizational capacity to reign in their own violence, which has increased dramatically over the last decade in tandem with the growth of prison gangs, this impromptu system of shared authority benefited both them and the police. As violence decreased, BCS commanders and their political superiors could claim credit for it, and drug traffickers could take advantage of this relative peace to attract a larger and more stable consumer base.

Although this dynamic might seem like a “deal with the Devil” (certainly both the UPPs and BCS have often been criticized for “protecting” the drug trade), the alternative option of more aggressively going after drug gangs has potentially far more disastrous consequences. Part of the problem is that in dismantling local drug trafficking networks, a whole informal welfare safety net is likely to disintegrate, leaving an economically vulnerable population even deeper in the lurch. Of still more pressing concern, any substantial weakening of a local drug gang, whether by the arrest of its leader or by attrition among its ranks, almost invariably invites violent competition from rival gangs or from rivals within the same gang. The resulting violence not only translates metrically as failed policy implementation, but also further tarnishes community-police relations.

Taken together, the great difficulty faced by the police in asserting authority in Salvador’s favela communities and the substantial peace dividends that can be reaped by limiting their action against embedded drug gangs suggests that while this system of shared authority may be suboptimal, it may also be the only realistic way that Community Policing the Brazilian slum can work at all. Of course, the current equilibrium is inherently a very delicate one, and is acutely vulnerable to political change and shifts in the criminal order.

**Conclusions**

The installation *Pacifying Police Units* (UPPs) and *Bases Comunitárias de Segurança* (BCS) in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador de Bahia after 2008 was in many ways a triumph for advocates of police reform in Brazil and internationally. The Community Policing model, which had been embraced through much of the Global North over the previous two decades, had now become firmly and institutionally planted in Brazil. Furthermore, initial assessments of the UPPs and BCS were exceptionally positive, resulting in almost immediate and dramatic reductions in violent crime while improving citizen security and physical mobility over all. This suggested that Community Policing might also work elsewhere, too, not just in other Brazilian cities, but across Latin America, which as a region has only seen criminal violence continue to increase over the last two decades.

One apparent problem with this analysis is that the UPPs and BCS fail in many ways to adhere to core tenets of the Community Policing model as it was developed in countries like Japan, the United States, and United Kingdom. In effect, much of what made Community Policing so attractive was its democratic ethos and decentralized organization, and this is precisely what was abandoned when the UPPs and BCS were tasked with “pacifying” large urban slums dominated by armed and well-organized drug gangs. While the initiatives maintained an outward appearance in line with traditional CP models, their strategic and organizational modalities were more similar to counterinsurgency. As I have argued in this paper, this counterinsurgent approach to policing, while not particularly congruous with broader efforts at democratic reform, allowed for the UPPs and BCS to demonstrate much more dramatic and more measurably evident degrees of success than traditional CP programs in the Global North. And in any case, traditional CP would likely not have worked at all where drug gangs exercised such deep social and political control as in the favelas of Rio and Salvador.

Far more dangerous for the future of these programs, and likewise for citizen security, are the mechanisms by which social peace has been achieved and maintained in targeted areas, specifically the tacit and informal sharing of authority between police and local drug gangs. The deepening of Brazil’s economic crisis in recent years and the spread of prison gangs throughout most of the country, furthermore, has made such a state-criminal symbioses much more difficult to avoid or to break without provoking more serious immediate crises. For the time being, this dynamic suggests that the political capital undergirding Brazil’s ambitious CP programs should keep them afloat despite recent upsurges in violent crime and shrinking government revenues. The balance of power between local police and gangs is a delicate one, however, and as prison gang and their street-level affiliates concentrate and expand their power further, the balance is unlikely to hold.

In Rio de Janeiro, this power balance has already largely been upset, and consequently, many of the largest UPPs, such as those in the favela complexes of Rocinha, Alemão, and Maré, have begun to disintegrate and have been effectively replaced by military occupation. The BCS of Salvador have so far escaped this fate, but there are clear signs of significant shifts in the local criminal order, as well as an overall decline in political support for the BCS program, that threaten the already very limited hold the police bases have in their targeted communities. In this context, levels of violence become increasingly predicted by the extent of monopoly control a particular gang exercises over a community, and less by the presence of a Community Police base.

Ten years ago, Brazil’s experiments with Community Policing harnessed a general optimism peculiar to that era, and seemed to promise a panacea for the rising levels of violent crime across Latin America. Today that experiment is embattled, and much of that optimism has been traded for a more pessimistic, much more punitive and violent understanding of public security needs reflective of the *mano dura* policies of the late 1990s and early 2000s. But what the findings in this study suggest (I hope) is that the ultimate failure of the UPPs and the BCS to assert state authority back into gang dominated slums does not mean that Community Policing was inherently wrongheaded, and in fact it is far more productive policy model than its more violently confrontational alternatives. It does require, nonetheless, much greater state attention to the problems of urban poverty and to management of prison populations in addition to committing Community Policing.

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1. Programa Nacional de Segurança Pública com Cidadania (PRONASCI). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Grupamento de Policiamento em Areas Especiais* (GEPAE) was implemented in several favela communities in the early 2000s, and bore resemblance to the UPPs, but on a much smaller scale. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ironically, most of this reduction in homicides reflects the marked decline in people killed by the police. Although this has led some to criticize the UPP initiative, I hold that the “pacification” of the police themselves is in fact one of the most important achievements of the UPPs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The BCS in the Nordeste da Amarelina favela complex has been directly attacked by drug traffickers multiple times, and its patrolling area is limited to a single paved road traversing the community of (est.) forty thousand because of the pervasive threat of armed resistance to further incursion (Figueiredo 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wall graffiti is common and serves both to indicate who controls what territory (a message for rival gangs) and to communicate rules of conduct (a message for local residents). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)