

# COMMUNITY POLICING THE BRAZILIAN FAVELA



Teenagers caught in police interrogation during a routine walking patrol. @ Michael Wolff

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*Photographs : Michael Jerome Wolff*

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is an assistant professor of political science at Western Washington University. His research explores the relational dynamics of criminal organizations and state institutions in Latin America, with a particular emphasis on drug violence and policing in Brazil and Mexico. His current work in Brazil examines the state's use of Community Policing as a strategy to reclaim and reassert its authority in poor urban communities dominated by drug trafficking gangs. He is also currently expanding his research in Mexico, looking into the politics of federal government engagement with citizen militias in the context of the country's ongoing drug war. His recent publications can be found in *Urban Geography, Policing and Society* and *Latin American Politics and Society*.

### Abstract :

*The adoption of ambitious Community Policing initiatives in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador over the last decade inspired hope among many police reformers that a new, more democratic paradigm of state-society relations might finally emerge in Brazil. Such was the allure of Community Policing (CP), a citizen-oriented policing philosophy that had been embraced in much of the Global North more than a decade earlier, and was now becoming entrenched in Latin America. As the form of Community Policing was modified to fit the sociopolitical context of the Brazilian slum, however, it took on characteristics more similar to counterinsurgency and peace keeping. As in peace keeping, the new initiatives led to immediate and dramatic reduction in lethal violence by deterring armed confrontation between rival gangs and between gangs and the police. Like counterinsurgency, however, their heavy-handed tactics are the source of deep tensions between the police and community members. Consequently, both its positive impact and its limitations have been far more pronounced than CP programs elsewhere. Ultimately, CP in Brazil suffers from an even greater flaw. Unable to replace the authority of locally embedded drug gangs, the police have largely resorted to sharing authority with them as a condition of keeping the peace.*

## INTRODUCTION

When Rio de Janeiro inaugurated its first *Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora* (UPP) in the *favela*<sup>1</sup> of Santa Marta in late 2008, followed two years later by Salvador's *Bases Comunitárias de Segurança* (BCS), many police reformers there and abroad imagined that a new, more democratic paradigm of state-society relations might finally emerge in Brazil, where policing had long been associated with authoritarian social control and brute violence. The new initiatives reflected the growing popularity of Community Policing (CP) worldwide. Having been widely embraced in much of the Global North in previous decades, CP was now lauded as a potential solution to the dual crises of public security and state legitimacy affecting many Latin American countries. In Brazil, the rise of the Leftwing Worker's Party to national power in the early 2000s helped to shift political discourse towards this end, and combined with years of strong economic growth, provided the political capital necessary to commit to major police reform. But this would be the first time that Community Policing would be implemented on a large scale anywhere in the developing world or in a context of high levels of criminal violence. Could it work? And if so, would it preserve the basic philosophical principles of the Community Policing model as it was developed in wealthier, less violent countries?

This article examines the form and impact of Community Policing as it has been applied in the sociopolitical context of the Brazilian *favela*. I argue that although Rio's UPPs and Salvador's BCS were both inspired by CP initiatives

1. In Brazil, "favela" refers to poor urban residential areas characterized by inadequate state presence and the prevalence of informal social and economic institutions.



“Abordagens” during a routine patrol in UPP Turano, Rio de Janeiro. @ Michael Wolff

developed in Japan and the United States, in practice they more closely resemble peace keeping and counterinsurgency missions commonly undertaken in the context of civil war. As in peace keeping, the new initiatives have tended to produce immediate and dramatic reduction in lethal violence by deterring armed confrontation between rival gangs and between gangs and the police. Like counterinsurgency, however, their heavy handed tactics are the source of deep tensions between the police and community members. Consequently, both their positive impact and their limitations have been far more pronounced than most CP programs in the Global North. Furthermore, I argue that the decrease of violence often credited to these initiatives is less the result of effective exercise of state authority than the outcome of tacit, informal arrangements established between the police and locally embedded drug trafficking gangs to share authority. Even if they reduce violence in the short run, these arrangements are delicate and vulnerable to even small changes in the balance of power between police and gangs, and thus cast doubt on the long-term viability of Community Policing in the Brazilian favela.

## MADE FOR THE FAVELA

Brazil’s CP initiatives have employed much of the same rhetoric and imitated the outward appearance of the Japanese and American models of community policing that inspired them, but in practice they look very different. Administratively, their command structures remain highly centralized, and there are no institutionalized mechanisms for citizen consultation in the prioritization of local security needs, which are both core tenets of the Community Policing philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Besides, the most dramatic difference is the greater strategic objective assigned to them: the “pacification” of urban slums, or favelas, that have fallen under the control of well-armed drug trafficking gangs. To this end, Community Policing has taken on a functional role similar to counterinsurgency or peacekeeping into the context of civil war.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the first phase of implementation. In Rio de Janeiro, the establishment of UPPs are preceded by so-called “mega-operations” in which

2. Fruhling, Hugo. 2012. “A Realistic Look at Latin American Policing Programmes.” *Policing and Society* 22:1, 76-88

large numbers of special tactics police, often backed by actual military forces, launch pre-announced incursions into gang dominated slums.<sup>3</sup> These initial incursions are then followed by an occupation period of several months during which specialized police units conduct search and seizure operations in the hope of rooting out known gang members and capturing drug and weapons caches. The second phase of implementation, the installation of a permanent base inside the favela and the assignment of UPP officers specially trained in Community Policing, begins only once the area is deemed safe for the Military Police high command to patrol. The BCS in Salvador follow similar (although somewhat less militarized) two-phase implementation process.

Once a UPP or BCS is established, daily police operations fall along two broadly distinct categories: community outreach activities and reactive policing.<sup>4</sup> The first is centered around the use of the police substation as a sort of community center where civilian volunteers (but more often CP officers themselves) offer a variety of classes to favela youth, including martial arts, music, and even police academy prep courses. In the case of the BCS, outreach also includes so-called “community visits” and “solidarity missions,” which aim to identify and solve long term problems at the individual and family level (e.g. assisting victims of domestic violence or connecting families to public services). The larger objective of both activities is to familiarize residents with the new police presence, as well as to shore up perceptions of state legitimacy generally.

Reactive policing, meanwhile, continues to be central to both the UPPs and BCS. Like more traditional modes of policing, it consists primarily of conducting regular patrols and responding to resident complaints, but it is carried out on foot by well-armed tactical units (usually of five officers carrying submachine guns) and in much closer proximity to local residents. Since residents tend not to report most crimes to the police (assumably out of fear of retaliation from gang or simply lack of confidence in the police), in practice it often consists only of patrols. Walking patrols, in turn, rely heavily on the use of *abordagens* (or “stop and frisk” detentions, usually targeted at young males) as their primary tactic, ostensibly as a measure to reduce violence by deterring the carrying of weapons or drugs’s trafficking.

Much of what the UPPs and BCS do is consistent with Community Policing model as it is practiced elsewhere, especially with respect to community outreach activities.

3. Cano, Ingacio and Eduardo Ribeiro. 2016. “Old Strategies and New Approaches Towards Policing Drug Markets in Rio de Janeiro.” *Police Practice and Research*, 17:4, 364-375.

4. Interview: Capt. Alan Carlos, Naranjiba BCS, Salvador, BA. 8.4.2017.

These similarities, however, are often overshadowed by the primary objective of these initiatives, which is to occupy and “pacify” large urban slums. Consequently, they have depended on an aggressive use of force in line with counterinsurgent strategy, and once installed in communities, operate in ways similar to international peacekeeping, whereupon their function is less about imposing authority, and more about deterring armed confrontations.

## SETTLING FOR SHARED AUTHORITY

The UPPs and BCS are often criticized in the media and in academic circles for failing to adhere to the core philosophical principles of Community Policing, and in the case of Rio de Janeiro, this has compelled the government to abandon CP terminology for that of “Proximity Policing”. I argue here, however, that the major hindrance to the success of such initiatives remains the economic and political entrenchment of drug trafficking gangs in the Brazilian favela.

For decades, this has been a problem almost unique to Rio de Janeiro, but in recent years well-organized prison gangs have proliferated throughout Brazil, consolidating criminal trade networks and fueling the rise of local favela-based drug gangs as they go. These drug gangs succeeded in settling themselves in the favela and in developing a more sophisticated organization that enabled them to grow wealthier and to exploit the material needs of poor communities. Today, even though proliferation of drug gangs has been a direct cause of the rise in violence, they have become an essential source of welfare and social order for the country’s urban poor, who have suffered disproportionately from Brazil’s persistent economic recession and recent political turmoil.

The UPPs and BCS, for their part, were intended to fix this problem by replacing gang authority with that of the state. They failed to do this mostly because of a lack of resources and a limited range of action that would be needed to govern in drug gangs’ stead. What often looks like a success, then, such as the significant decline in homicides and improved access to public services in CP-targeted community, doesn’t rely on effective police authority, but on tacit agreements between police and drug gangs to share authority. In short, the police do not govern or impose authority in favelas, rather its presence only deters armed confrontation between rival gangs, allowing existing local gangs to use their resources to impose local order.

Poverty and ineffective state presence is at the heart of this problem. According to a community leader in the Calabar favela of Salvador, for example, some ninety-percent of resi-



CP officers respond to a domestic violence call in Calabar, Salvador. @ Michael Wolff

dents have at one time or another sought material assistance (e.g. food, medicines, school materials, or funeral services) or arbitration during a conflict (e.g. domestic fights, property claims, or commercial disputes) from a local gang, and many depend on such assistance on a regular basis.<sup>5</sup> For the local gang leader, “Alveraldinho,” responding to residents’ requests is an integral part of their mission. Indeed, the *Comando da Paz* (CP) prison gang to which he is affiliated has a codified set of rules and norms encouraging its members to nurture community support in such a way.<sup>6</sup>

The dependence of poor communities on gangs for welfare and social order certainly varies from one community to another: Nonetheless, even limited dependence creates an almost impenetrable barrier to the kind of open police-citizens cooperation that lies at the heart of the CP philosophy. This is because favela residents are well aware of the consequences of cooperating with the police, especially when

it threatens gangs’ security or income. In the best of cases, residents who cooperate with the police might only lose an important economic and social safety net but most likely they would face violent retaliation, including expulsion or death. Moreover, when the police do succeed in capturing high ranking gang members—with or without the cooperation of local residents—periods of heightened violence often follow as gangs fight to constitute a new criminal order, negatively affecting everyone.

Compounding the problem, the police are endowed with neither the material resources nor the discretionary freedom to supplant the social and economic functions played by drug gangs. A common frustration of BCS commanders, for example, is that the majority of claims brought by community members are not security-related, but instead pleas for material assistance, which the police can rarely offer.<sup>7</sup> Even when claims are security-related, the police are unable to address them efficiently or in time to preempt a resolution by the gangs themselves. In Calabar, for instance, a recent attempt by the BCS’ “solidarity” unit to help a victim of domestic violence, which involved a

5. Interview: “Dona Nilsa,” Residents’ Association President, Calabar, Salvador, BA. 7.26.2017.

6. Apolinário, João. 2017. “Sistema Prisional e Segurança Pública: Análise sobre a contenção da criminalidade a partir do sistema prisional.” *Observatório de Segurança Pública*, UNIFACS, Salvador, BA.

7. Interview: Liet. Leticia, Bairro da Paz BCS, Salvador, BA. 7.28.2017.



*“Tactical Units” on routine patrol in Calabar, Salvador. @ Michael Wolff*

painstakingly slow legal process, was interrupted when the local gang leader took up the issue with much more immediate effect, beating and expelling the abuser from the community.<sup>8</sup>

Unable to stem the rising tide of gang influence, but requested to show positive results to their superiors (who must show positive results to the public), CP commanders have in most cases settled into tacit arrangements of shared authority with local drug gangs. While the police respond primarily to domestic disputes, noise complaints, and community outreach, gangs provide selective welfare and regulate social order. This arrangement does not imply corruption, per se, as it doesn’t require illegal material transactions such as bribes between the police and gang members. It is rather a kind of symbiosis in which both groups benefit: the business of drug-selling gangs is to some extent protected by the presence of permanent police bases, and the resulting drop in violent gang conflict can

be claimed by the state as a policy success. The community itself might benefit too, but to a much lesser degree than the proponents of Community Policing would have hoped.

## CONCLUSIONS

Long after its first adherents began lauding its great need and potential, the community policing model has today become a deeply rooted paradigm of public security policy in much of the Western world and throughout Latin America. The Brazilian experience with CP over the last decade suggests that even in developing countries; the model can be effective, particularly at reducing violence and improving perceptions of state legitimacy. This success, however, has come at cost. First, CP in Brazil lost core philosophical principles of Community Policing when it was modified to “pacify” the urban slum. More importantly still, its successes have come to depend on the informal sharing of authority with drug gangs whose economic and organizational power only continues to grow. The model may still be working today, but its future is by no means certain.

8. Investigator observation, “Solidarity Mission,” Calabar, Salvador, 12.21.2016.