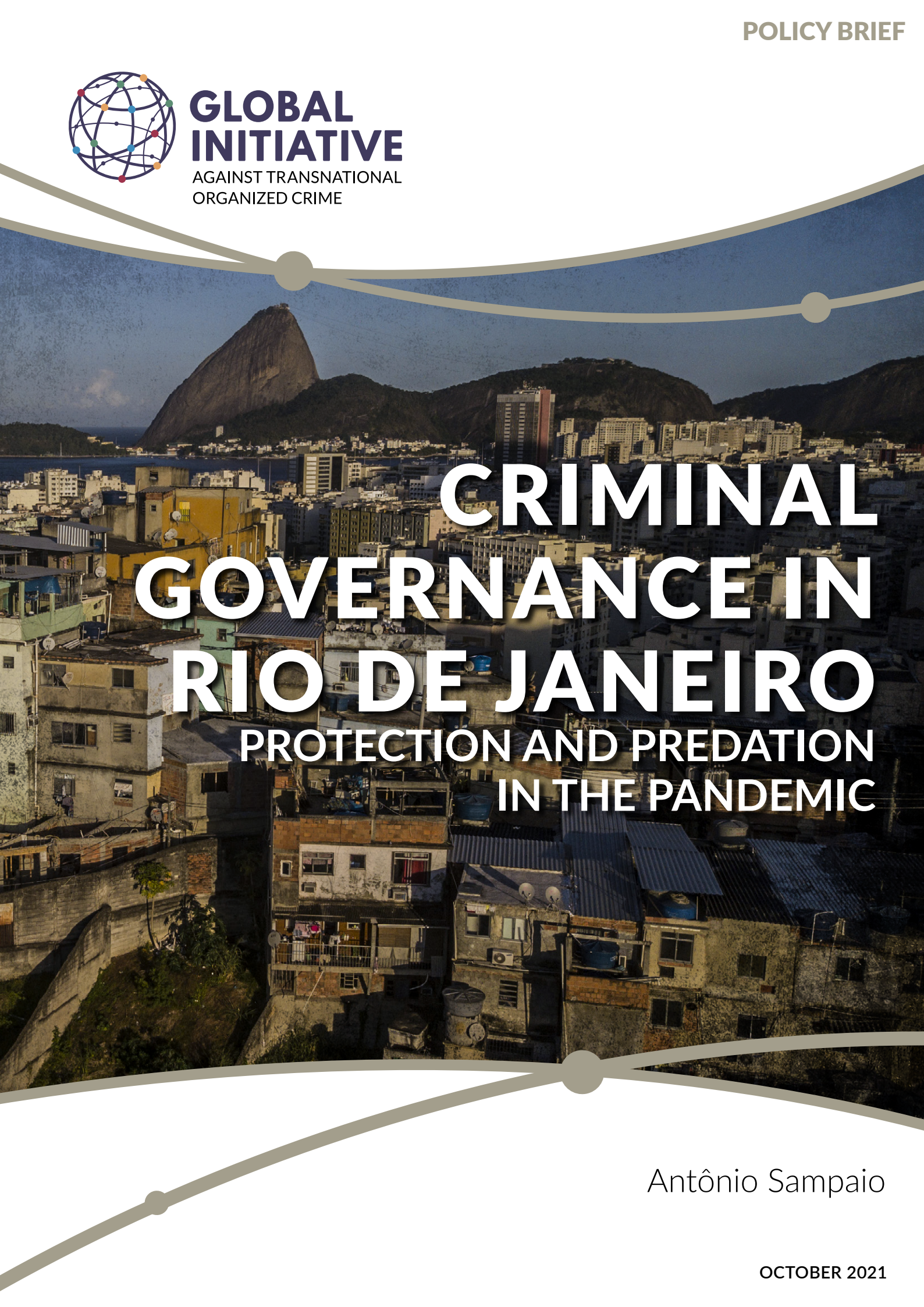




**GLOBAL  
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ORGANIZED CRIME



# CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN RIO DE JANEIRO

PROTECTION AND PREDATION  
IN THE PANDEMIC

Antônio Sampaio

OCTOBER 2021

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## CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN CITIES DURING COVID-19

This case study is part of a research project conducted by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), with support of Germany's GIZ, that examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic challenges accompanying it on criminal governance in cities. The project aims to study how gangs and other non-state armed groups operating in illicit economies have altered their activities in light of the new circumstances in areas of criminal governance, and how governments and civil society have responded.

We define criminal governance as instances in which armed criminal groups set and enforce rules, provide security and other basic services – such as water, electricity or internet access – in an urban area, which may be a part or the whole of an informal settlement or a neighbourhood.

The project uses a comparative methodology, drawing from semi-structured interviews feeding into five separate case studies. The data is then synthesized in a final report that analyzes and summarizes the main trends. A fuller description of the methodology can be found in the final report.

The other case studies in this project are Tumaco (Colombia), San Salvador (El Salvador), Nairobi (Kenya) and Cape Town (South Africa). You can access the five case studies and the final summary report at [criminalgovernance.globalinitiative.net](https://criminalgovernance.globalinitiative.net).



## SUMMARY

Rio de Janeiro has often been cited as a city where criminal organizations have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic in order to grow, 'tighten [their] grip on territory' and 'boost their standing in communities'.<sup>1</sup> Several international media outlets reported on the imposition of curfews by drug trafficking groups in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, with one outlet saying 'residents see [criminal groups] as a more effective and caring version of the state'.<sup>2</sup>

The reality is more complex. Whereas criminal groups in Rio's favelas have indeed imposed some curfews and tightened their grip over some territories, the effects of the pandemic on governance dynamics have been limited in both time and space. Significant attempts to respond to the pandemic, through curfews for example, were restricted to a few favelas and were largely abandoned after the first few months of the pandemic. Overall changes to criminal governance were few, and many were not related to the pandemic. However, the continuation of criminal governance and the slow pace of aid from the state have reinforced the sense of abandonment by favela communities and their need to respect the rules and limitations imposed by armed groups.

It is important, however, to note that this reinforcement of control over communities does not mean an increase in public support for criminals or militias. Even as interviewees reported that some favela residents welcomed the few curfews established by criminal groups, these were intertwined with long-standing threatening or predatory practices by these same groups. One important reminder of these groups' negative impact on favela residents was the armed violence resulting from struggles for territory between rival groups. This violence for territory continued even during the initial months of the pandemic, when favela residents were most concerned about the potential effects of the virus and many were respecting social distancing guidelines.

The pandemic has also highlighted how vulnerable local communities are to the whims of local criminal groups. Whereas some local gang commanders imposed curfews, small businesses in some areas controlled by militias (armed groups formed partially by current or former police officers) had to keep their doors open either due to direct orders to do so or in order to pay 'security taxes'.

The state, be it through local, regional or federal governments and their agencies, did not fare better – in fact, in some governance aspects, such as security provision, it arguably fared worse than criminal groups. The most frequently voiced source of concern and disruption during the pandemic was not crime but rather police operations in favelas. These operations were deployed with ample use of rifles and armoured vehicles in densely inhabited favela areas as the police exchanged fire with local armed groups. The situation caused so much concern that a Supreme Court justice issued an order for the police to restrict such operations to 'exceptional' circumstances, in response to complaints by local activists and political parties.<sup>3</sup> This led to a decrease in the number of people killed during such operations, but the police gradually heightened the pace of favela incursions towards the end of 2020 and early 2021 – in fact, in May 2021, Rio's Civil Police conducted the deadliest operation ever recorded in Rio de Janeiro, killing 28 people.<sup>4</sup> Police operations sometimes even disrupted food distribution work by civil society organizations.

The continuation of police violence, combined with the slow pace of state-provided aid to favela residents, resulted in increased outrage towards regional and federal governments according to several community leaders, journalists and activists from the favelas. The exception was the disbursement of an emergency cash handout to families in need in April 2020 by the federal government. But most of the direct humanitarian relief efforts, involving the distribution of food and hygiene products, to people in favelas suffering from the huge economic impact of the virus were conducted by civil society groups, sometimes with support of businesses and foundations. Their work was frequently mentioned by interviewees as essential to fight off food insecurity, with distribution of food as the most urgent area of work. The contrast between the state's violent footprint and the reliance on community mobilization and local task forces for very basic necessities was not lost on local communities.



▲  
Rocinha, Rio, is one of  
the Red Command's most  
important territories.

© Spencer Platt via Getty  
Images

## BACKGROUND

**R**io has four armed groups fighting for dominance over illicit economies in the favelas, alongside the increasingly common practices of providing their own service provision mechanisms and taxing businesses. By far the oldest, and most infamous in the popular imagination, is the Red Command (Comando Vermelho, CV), which originated inside a prison, the Candido Mendes Penal Institute in Ilha Grande, in Rio de Janeiro state during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The group was born out of a collective of inmates aiming for better living conditions.<sup>5</sup>

Some versions of local organized crime history claim that the CV founders learned organization and even tactics from leftist guerrilla leaders, who were fighting the military regime in Brazil at the time. Statements from CV founders and former guerrilla fighters imprisoned in Ilha Grande point to an indirect learning of organizational principles and the sharing of several books, including some on guerrilla movements.<sup>6</sup> During the 1980s, many prisoners left Ilha Grande (many of them escaped) and used their superior organization to control drug-selling points in favelas. This territorial hegemony was – and still is – important for drug traffickers in Rio in order to ensure retail points and access to a large consumer market, which, in turn, was used to establish a relationship with the world's most important suppliers at the time: Colombian cartels, starting with Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel and later the Cali Cartel.<sup>7</sup>

The CV's main rival in the drug trafficking underworld is the Third Pure Command (Terceiro Comando Puro, TCP), a splinter group from the Third Command, which was born around the same time as the CV from a rival faction of Ilha Grande inmates (known as 'Falange do Jacaré').<sup>8</sup> Today, the TCP is strong in the northern areas of Rio, including in some favelas taken in clashes with the CV.<sup>9</sup> The TCP has been strengthened by its alliance with militia groups, which have stronger links with



**FIGURE 1** Territorial distribution of armed groups in Rio de Janeiro (metropolitan area), 2019.

NOTE: Even though some of the areas have experienced changes in armed groups' presence during the pandemic, the overall configuration of territorial power remains unchanged since this map was produced in 2019.

SOURCE: Adapted from Grupo de Estudos dos Novos Ilegalismos at Universidade Federal Fluminense; Fogo Cruzado; Núcleo de Estudos da Violência da Universidade de São Paulo; Disque-Denúncia; Pista News.

corrupt members of the police and other state agencies.<sup>10</sup> A third drug-trafficking group, Friends of Friends (Amigos dos Amigos, ADA), has been severely weakened by clashes with rivals in recent years.

Militias are armed groups operating heavily in informal economies, including illicit drugs, but with a deeper connection to the state. Many of their members are current or former police officers and they have ties to corrupt members of government agencies that facilitate the groups' exploitative practices. Militias impose 'security taxes' – a type of extortion – on businesses and provide goods and services, such as cooking gas, internet and even informal public transport through vans. The older drug-trafficking groups such as the CV and TCP have also resorted to these income sources, but are much more reliant on drugs income than the militias. Militias are also deeply involved in local politics. Candidates supported by militias (or sometimes militia members themselves) grant small favours or distribute basic necessities to garner political support. For instance, some militia groups allow low-income families to buy small plots of land in instalments<sup>11</sup> and even organize parties and barbecues during election campaigns to incentivize voting for certain candidates.<sup>12</sup>





▲ Military police were deployed in an operation after an armed group threatened rail commuters in Rio in October 2020, during the pandemic. © Fabio Teixeira/NurPhoto via Getty Images

## CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE DURING COVID-19

### Curfews

The most common measure taken by criminal groups in Rio as a direct response to the pandemic was the imposition of curfews. This earned significant attention in the international media, but its significance on the ground was limited to a few favelas and only during the initial months of the crisis.

Limited as they were, these ‘favela curfews’ nevertheless acquired broader political and social symbolism as acts of local agency in face of a federal government that was perceived to be reluctant to embrace responsible measures amid a global pandemic. (Most notoriously, President Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly appeared in public breaking social distancing guidelines and was consistently opposed to lockdown measures.)<sup>13</sup> One NGO worker highlighted this contrast, commenting ‘it is sad to see that drug traffickers have more social consciousness than the president of the republic’.<sup>14</sup>

In practical terms, however, the favela curfews were of limited effect. Many favela residents work in the informal economy, meaning that they lack any social security (such as unemployment benefits) and their income would completely vanish if they did not leave home to work. Even though armed groups’ curfews were respected in the first few weeks, they gradually opened up as the fear of the pandemic started



to wear off. In some cases, like in the Vila Vintém favela, in Rio's western area, the curfew was understood more as 'an orientation' and adherence was low.<sup>15</sup>

Curfews were more commonly adopted by drug trafficking groups, especially the CV, than the militia groups, though the latter was also reported to have imposed such measures. For the most part, curfew orders – be it by drug traffickers or militias – were extremely patchy, although some favelas received detailed 'guidance' from the local CV leadership. A banner published by several local news websites issued instructions for the Caramujo favela area in northern Niterói (a separate municipality from Rio de Janeiro but part of the Rio metropolitan area).<sup>16</sup> In it, the local CV criminal leadership says:

The thing is getting serious and there are people thinking it is a joke. The governing authorities [*governantes*] told the population to stay in quarantine and respect orders. ... Since you are not respecting the governing authorities' orders, from today 07/05 you will respect ours. We want the best for our region, if the governing authorities are not having the capacity to fix it [*dar jeito*], we will!<sup>17</sup>

The banner stated that activities such as parties and going to public squares and sporting venues were banned. Sitting in bars was also banned, though people were allowed to buy drinks to take home.



President Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly flouted COVID-19-related restrictions in public appearances during the pandemic. © Mateus Bonomi/Andalou Agency via Getty Images

In contrast, in the Rocinha favela (also CV controlled), the communication of restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19 seemed to be more discreet. The favela is one of the most important territories for the CV due to its proximity to affluent areas in central Rio. A person who works in Rocinha said COVID-19's impact over local CV behaviour 'was not zero but was almost zero', citing bans on the entrance of tourists as the only significant precautionary measure in reaction to the pandemic.<sup>18</sup> A veteran local journalist also reported not having observed curfew rules issued by CV in Rocinha.<sup>19</sup> However, some Rocinha residents were reported by a newspaper to have received warnings to stay home via a messaging application on their phones, but this was not mentioned by the local interviewee.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that reliance on online messaging apps meant that the rules spread only to networks linked to, for instance, certain WhatsApp groups. In any case, it is interesting that the CV's rules on COVID-19 were not more widely communicated, since its grip over services in Rocinha is even stronger than in most of its other territories, with the group controlling distribution of cooking gas and internet, and levying extortion taxes.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the threatening character of some of the messages issued to communicate curfews and other restrictions, enforcement seemed not to have included the actual use of force, though the warnings contained explicit or implicit threats. A level of threat is always present when it comes to orders issued by criminal organizations, since in Rio it is common to see members of such groups walking in broad daylight armed with rifles. Sometimes, however, the threats were more explicitly spelled out. One former dweller of Alemão favela area said she had learned that the local criminal group threatened that those out on the street without justification would be beaten with a wooden pole (*madeirada*), though it is unknown if the threat was ever carried out.<sup>22</sup> In May 2020, a man armed with a rifle was heard in a video that appears to have been shot from his own mobile phone celebrating that there is 'nobody on the street' in Vila Kennedy (a CV-controlled low-income area in Rio's western area), adding that 'there were some locals over there, I talked to them and they left the street'.<sup>23</sup> Measures by the CV in Vila Kennedy also reportedly included bans on public events and street markets (which usually sell food).<sup>24</sup>

## Banning funk parties

Drug trafficking groups also cancelled some of their iconic funk parties during the initial months of the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> These gatherings are common features of favelas and are frequently organized by or associated with drug traffickers, who attend them and display weapons. Even in Vila Vintém favela, where drug traffickers were lenient on those who violated the curfew, the parties were suspended.<sup>26</sup>

The initial announcements regarding suspensions or bans on funk parties often came accompanied with messages of social responsibility. A banner posted on Twitter announcing one such suspension in a CV area of the Maré favela complex said there would be '10 days without parties in the CV areas out of respect for residents[.] Our faction always thinks what is best for the community.'<sup>27</sup>



Parties were reported to have started up again in several locations in the first week of June 2020, after the initial shock of the pandemic had passed.<sup>28</sup> But new suspensions on parties were announced by the CV in March 2021 – a period of rising numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths in Brazil, with great media attention. In Coreia Hill, one of the most popular funk parties in São Gonçalo (a large municipality that is part of Rio's metropolitan area) was cancelled by the CV with the following message:

We are facing a delicate moment due to the new coronavirus (COVID-19) and due to the situation, to avoid agglomerations there will not be any type of event in our community to prevent the spread of the virus and protect everyone.<sup>29</sup>

This announcement was made by a CV faction in São Gonçalo known as the 'Pivete troop', named after the local commander Leilson Ferreira Fernandes, alias 'Pivete'. He is the same commander who scheduled a celebration of his 34th birthday at the same funk party (called 'Baile da China') in September 2020, when the pandemic was far from stabilized in Brazil.<sup>30</sup>

**Favela parties, such as the annual Rio Parada funk party, shown here, were banned during the pandemic by armed groups.** © Mario Tama via Getty Images



## Reasons for variance

There are three main factors that explain the huge discrepancy between favelas in terms of criminal rules imposed in direct reaction to the pandemic. First, decision-making regarding rules for local communities is usually managed by local commanders, as opposed to the central leadership that oversees an entire criminal organization across all of its favelas. One interviewee who lives in Vigário Geral, a favela with a recent history of both CV and TCP dominance, said that ‘the CV is like this: each manager, each head, does whatever his idea is’. According to him, the TCP approach was different, with orders being more homogeneous and top-down.<sup>31</sup> This is also reflected in the variance in the rules and how they were enforced – sometimes in reaction to specific complaints by locals, even in TCP’s areas. In Vila Aliança (in Rio’s western area), local TCP leaders reportedly received complaints in March 2020 about local traders increasing prices.<sup>32</sup> In response, the local ‘troop’ (*tropa*, a local slang for the armed members loyal to a certain local commander) issued orders for prices to be kept unchanged and organized small groups to patrol local commercial areas.

The second factor is related to the overall style of criminal organizations holding sway over favelas. All three of the main drug trafficking organizations imposed some curfews or social distancing measures at the beginning of the pandemic, though not in a uniform fashion and not in all their territories. Curfews and other movement restrictions were particularly frequent in CV-held areas.<sup>33</sup> Reports of such restrictions imposed by militias, by contrast, have been much less frequent.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the drug trafficking groups, some militias issued orders for stores and traders to remain open. According to research done by the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), the militia in Rio das Pedras, an area considered the birthplace of the militia phenomenon, imposed a nightly curfew from 8 p.m., although it was weakly enforced.<sup>35</sup> In most other militia areas, militias either forced stores to remain open or continued with extortion practices that effectively led to stores remaining open (since owners still had to earn money in order to pay the militia). These orders, in stark contrast to what drug trafficking organizations were doing, are linked to militias’ *modus operandi*, which is more focused on earning income through extortion of local businesses and sometimes residents (although some militias are increasingly operating or tolerating drug sales).<sup>36</sup> Militia-held areas also saw price increases for critical items such as cooking gas and food in markets.<sup>37</sup> A local researcher said cooking gas, hand sanitizers and masks were more expensive in Rio das Pedras than in the CV-held Jacarezinho favela.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, the most significant factor influencing the pandemic’s impact on favela residents was the pre-existing strength of civil society organizations and the capacity they have to, indirectly, affect local criminal groups’ behaviour. Many such organizations that work in areas with criminal presence in Rio need to maintain a dialogue with the local overlords. In some of the larger favelas, civil society organizations have been able to develop more than in other, smaller, communities. In Maré, for instance, some of the larger and more traditional organizations have become so well known that the local managers of drug-selling points (*bocas de fumo*)

know those who work for them and respect them.<sup>39</sup> Community-run civil society communication about social distancing in Maré started right at the beginning of the pandemic, and drug trafficking organizations followed the lead by halting funk parties.<sup>40</sup>

This dynamic was described by a local aid worker involved in the distribution of food in the CV-held City of God in western Rio. According to him, armed criminals voluntarily left a certain area when they saw the vehicles and personnel linked to the aid effort arriving:

They [CV members] ... would leave. We would stop [with] two or three vans with food, make the donations, leave and then they would return to that place. ... They were very perceptive. Even before the vans arrived, there was a team going to the place to demarcate the area so that those receiving the donations could remain at a safe distance from one another. So when they saw this, they would ask if donations would take place and then they would go to another street. There wouldn't even be a request for authorization.<sup>41</sup>

This kind of accommodation is the result of constant negotiation between drug trafficking organizations and those in influential or leadership positions within local civil society. Many drug traffickers were born in the favela where they operate and know the main community leaders and have some contact with them. 'They are in a way part of the community and they are impacted by the community', as one

**Members of a samba school distribute food to residents in São Gonçalo, April 2020.**

© Luis Alvarenga via Getty Images



interviewee put it.<sup>42</sup> Even if drug traffickers do impose rules, especially cracking down on theft within the community, they sometimes engage in negotiation regarding certain rules. In some favelas, sales of crack cocaine are banned as a result of residents' opposition to the substance (which is considered more addictive and destructive than traditional cocaine).<sup>43</sup> Rule-making with regard to the pandemic seemed to follow a similar pattern, with drug trafficking groups not interfering with aid workers while at the same time not getting involved in providing donations (with very few exceptions; see below). This helps to explain why, as time went by, drug traffickers greatly relaxed restrictive measures in response to changing attitudes in local communities, who started to worry less about contagion and more about earning a living.

## Predation amid the pandemic

Even as some criminal groups took sporadic measures aimed at reducing exposure to the virus, some exploited basic services in a way that disrupted people's lives or caused fear. Internet access became a more pressing need during the lockdowns due to increased reliance on remote working, and armed groups were quick to exploit the opportunity. While the practice of extorting legal internet providers in areas of militia activity is not new, during the pandemic militias increasingly cut the cables linked to licit internet and electricity providers in order to have their services and illicit cable connection as the only functioning alternative for locals.<sup>44</sup> An army intelligence report from October 2020, cited later by a news website, said sources reported that 1.5 million customers of one formal internet provider had their internet connection interrupted, to be replaced by the armed groups.<sup>45</sup> In a statement, the provider acknowledged that its 'technical teams have been prevented from accessing equipment and from operating the network', hence also preventing repairs.<sup>46</sup>

This left residents with no choice but to buy what one user described as an inferior connection from militia-affiliated companies.<sup>47</sup> A public prosecutor familiar with militias' modus operandi said such services are imposed by force or threat of force, placing the population in a difficult position between essential services and fear of retaliation if they somehow circumvent the local rules.<sup>48</sup>

Food aid distribution was also manipulated during the pandemic by militias seeking to garner support for their chosen political candidates. (Both militias and drug trafficking groups have become deeply involved in electoral processes over the past decade, but this involvement goes deeper in the case of militias, since their members also run directly for posts in local municipal assemblies, a practice that is not as common among drug trafficking groups.)<sup>49</sup> Some candidates for the city council distributed food through an agreement with militias (for permission and support in the militia's area), while before the October 2020 municipal election, militias organized the distribution of food parcels (*cestas básicas*) themselves in order to associate this help with certain candidates, according to one activist who organized a separate aid distribution initiative in Duque de Caxias.<sup>50</sup> The militia member, the activist said, would start off 'as a good guy, some people even forget that that person is a



militiaman', but commented that behind the militias' apparently benevolent food distribution scheme lay the familiar practice of extortion:

Here the militias demand [taxes] and store owners pay them in order to work in peace. Part of these resources came in the form of food, and with these donations food baskets were assembled. People would go there [to the distribution site], form a queue and receive the baskets.<sup>51</sup>

The activist said that some comments by a militia-supported candidate in the area hinted at the risk of food distribution being interrupted if the candidate was not elected. She described the implicit threat as 'blackmail'. She also added that one militia-associated candidate tried to win her support, given her prominent role in aiding the community, and 'offered me food parcels but didn't give me the parcels because I did not agree to politically support' the candidate.

Because of the association between food parcels and militias' political interests, this activist became suspected of interfering in their electoral interests and of having political ambitions of her own. A militia-supported candidate who was not elected in October 2020 started to investigate the activist's food distribution work in order to see if a rival candidate was behind it. This fits within a 'culture' in Duque de Caxias, according to the activist, of 'doing something good in order to later on bring a candidate [for electoral campaigning], so people get suspicious about my work'. The activist said that candidates she knew (and who were not associated with militias) were threatened, and added that 'if I were interested in bringing someone [supporting a candidate], I could have been murdered'. Furthermore, she said that this constant suspicion and surveillance over supposed political interests linked to food distribution led to a reduction of donations to her aid distribution effort as the October election approached:

We didn't have difficulties [to get donations in the beginning], but as the electoral campaign approached we start to become cornered in the sense of 'who is behind you?'. In these moments the candidates access the territories and we retract and in this moment the donations decline and we lack resources.

Despite that, the activist said many donations were provided to local aid groups (including the one she led) by outside actors, such as private companies and NGOs.



▲ Residents of Jacarezinho favela gather following the death of 28 people on 6 May 2021 during a Rio Civil Police operation.

© Fabio Teixeira/NurPhoto via Getty Images

## CRIMINAL AND POLICE VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

### Homicides and violence between armed groups

Armed violence in Rio continued throughout the pandemic. Overall, 2020 saw a continuation of the downward trend of armed violence in Rio's metropolitan area, a trend that started in 2018, but from very high levels. The year ended with 2 405 intentional homicides, a 17.9% decrease from the previous year.<sup>52</sup> The total number of registered shots or gunfights in 2020, as tracked by civil society organization Fogo Cruzado (Crossfire), was 7 368, which is still extremely high (averaging 20 per day) but represents a 38% reduction from 2019.<sup>53</sup> April and May were the months with highest number of shots fired or gunfights (which consist of multiple shots as part of a single armed confrontation) in 2020, with 503 and 505, respectively, despite the city being in the midst of the early stages of the pandemic.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, the pandemic coincided with a period of particular instability in the relationship between Rio's armed groups, and this has probably contributed to the continuation of gunfights. Clashes between rival criminal groups, and between criminal groups and militias are common features of urban life in Rio, but the pandemic came at a moment of expansion for militia groups and the formation of an alliance between militias and the TCP against Rio's largest criminal organization, the CV.

Several clashes were registered in the days after the 13 March 2020 social distancing measures announced by the regional government.<sup>55</sup> Most of them consisted of territorial struggles between the CV and militia groups, the latter sometimes in alliance with the TCP. One of the biggest battlegrounds for this rivalry between the CV and the TCP–militia coalition was a large favela area located in the western neighbourhood of Praça Seca. From July 2020 onwards, the CV started a concerted effort to retake the area, which had been conquered by a militia in 2017. Media reports point to CV fighters using camouflaged uniforms,<sup>56</sup> an observation supported by a statement by the Military Police from July 2020 that described the confiscation of ‘camouflaged clothes identical to those of the armed forces’ from criminals.<sup>57</sup> This struggle flared up again between 9 and 19 March 2021, when local residents reported gunfights for 11 straight days.<sup>58</sup> These clashes, however, seem to be linked more to an ongoing territorial struggle between armed groups than to any decision or strategy linked to the pandemic.

On 5 June 2020, one event changed the pattern of armed violence in Rio almost overnight. A Supreme Court judge ruled that police operations in Rio’s favelas should be suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic except in ‘absolutely exceptional circumstances’, in which case the police should send a written justification to the local public prosecutor’s office.<sup>59</sup> This led to a drastic reduction in the number of police operations over the next few months. It also made it more difficult to assess whether the pandemic and related social distancing measures had any significant causal effect on armed violence patterns.

Certain criminal security provision patterns were facilitated by the judge’s decision. For instance, Robson Rodrigues, a former senior officer at the Military Police, said that drug traffickers resorted more often to building barricades along crucial roads leading into favelas.<sup>60</sup> These barricades, formed of large concrete blocks,<sup>61</sup> tyres or barbed wire,<sup>62</sup> are currently common in favelas. Rodrigues said that the use of such barricades had been significantly reduced during the pacification strategy of permanent police presence in the favelas (which was scaled back by the state government from 2015 onwards),<sup>63</sup> but ‘increased during the pandemic’.<sup>64</sup> A researcher linked to Rio’s anonymous crime hotline (Disque Denúncia) said that some barricades moved further into the neighbourhoods that surround the favelas.<sup>65</sup> This, according to the researcher, was part of a concerted move by some criminal factions to make up for lost revenue from drug trafficking by expanding extortion taxes to businesses that were not previously included in such ‘security provision’.<sup>66</sup>

However, the barricades are at least partially motivated by the rivalry between the CV and militias that preceded the pandemic. For instance, one interviewee working in the Mangueirinha favela area in Duque de Caxias (in Rio’s northern metropolitan area) said a barricade marks the ‘border’ between the CV and the militia and their respective spheres of control in the community.<sup>67</sup>

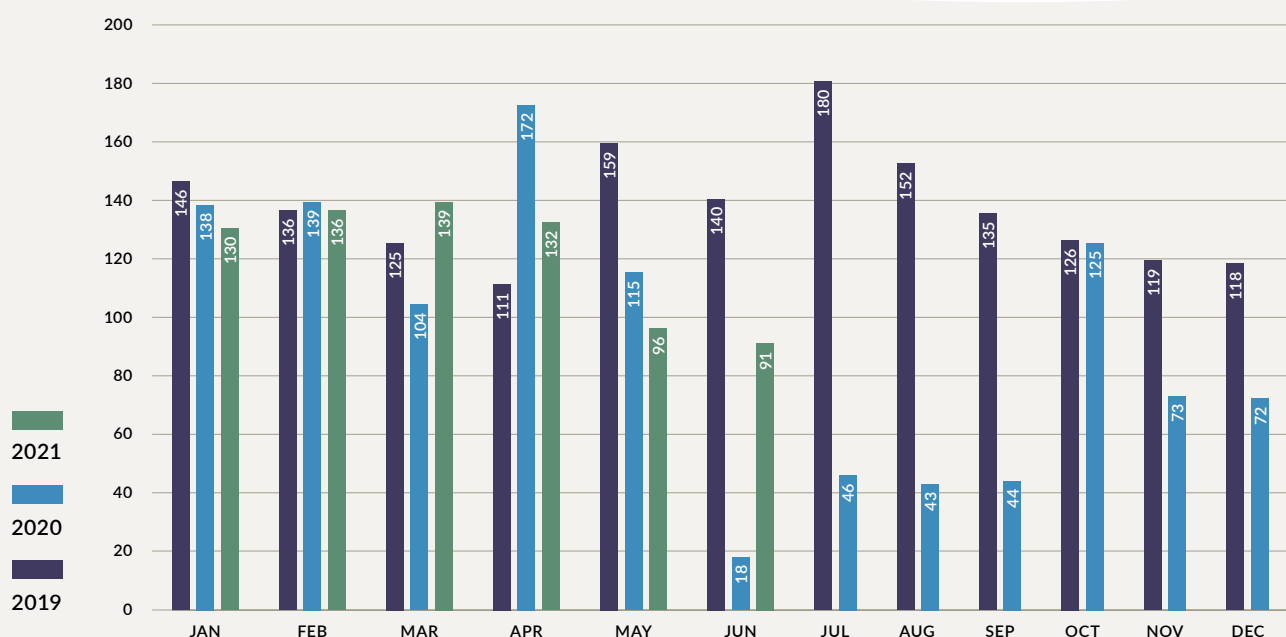


## Police violence

Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of expansion of state responsibilities worldwide, with governments issuing restrictions and limiting various aspects of social life, Rio's favelas experienced not only a continued marginalization from state services and institutions but also a significant level of repression. Police operations increased in the metropolitan area in the initial months of the pandemic, up 16.6% in April and 18.8% in May (up until 19 May), in comparison with the same months in 2019,<sup>68</sup> before they were drastically reduced following the Supreme Court judge's order.

The number of people killed during police operations remained above 100 in each of these months, and actually increased in April 2020 by 54% in comparison to the same month in 2019 (reaching 172 deaths) (see Figure 2). The number of people killed during operations fell drastically from 115 in May 2020 to 18 in June, the first month of the Supreme Court-mandated reduction in operations. However, the number gradually began to rise, and from September to October 2020 it surged from 44 to 125. During 2021, all months until April registered more than 100 deaths during police operations.<sup>69</sup> Gunfights during police operations interrupted aid distribution eight times during the pandemic, with five people killed and two wounded.<sup>70</sup>

Interviewees who live in favelas highlighted the frustration and fear brought to their communities by police operations. For instance, one interviewee from Jacarezinho favela, who worked as a volunteer in aid delivery, said: 'We had to alleviate the



**FIGURE 2** Deaths due to police intervention (metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro), 2019–2021.

Source: Public Security Institute, Government of Rio de Janeiro State, <https://www.ispvisualizacao.rj.gov.br:4434/>

effects of COVID and at the same time hide from the police operations. ... The state did not fail to make itself present through armed force.<sup>71</sup>

A grim illustration of such police brutality came on 6 May 2021 with a major operation by Rio's Civil Police in Jacarezinho, allegedly to repress a 'criminal faction' that was engaging in 'constant violations to the fundamental rights of residents' (which was the justification used to circumvent the Supreme Court judge's order).<sup>72</sup> The resulting operation left 28 people dead, making it the deadliest police operation in Rio's bloody history.

This violent face of the state was by no means a new phenomenon, but its significance to favela residents was heightened due to the contrast with the lack of aid delivery by the state.



▲  
Volunteers with personal protective equipment in a sanitizing operation in Botafogo designed to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. © Fabio Teixeira/NurPhoto via Getty Images

## CONCLUSION

Rio's 'favela curfews' grabbed worldwide media attention due to the paradox of gangs establishing life-saving rules with no immediate or obvious financial gain, sometimes in consultation with local civil society. But although the message of social responsibility to isolate or maintain social distancing was present in several announcements by criminal organizations, they often came accompanied by implicit and sometimes explicit threats. The curfews were not seen solely as a social good provided by criminal organizations, but also a reflection of society and, sometimes, of favela leadership organizations.

In any case, such measures were short-lived. The rapid relaxation of social distancing rules, including the resumption of the funk parties, shows that the social protection discourse was abandoned as favela residents grew wary of continued isolation. During both the imposition and the quick rollback of social distancing, community members who disagreed with armed groups' decision had no choice but to comply. Therefore, even though criminal groups showed flexibility in adapting their rules to community opinions about the pandemic, whatever rules were decided by the local gang leadership were enforced with a level of threat that ruled out dissent. In this way, the pandemic reinforced favela communities' sense of vulnerability and fear in relation to armed groups. There were no signs that drug trafficking or militia groups gained any legitimacy or support from local communities due to the imposition of social distancing measures. One activist from Mangueirinha favela said that locals expected more help during the pandemic and complained in private about the lack of support from the CV.<sup>73</sup>

The same sense of vulnerability and fear also characterized the relationship between favela residents and the state. Given the difficulty and risk associated with police incursions into favelas controlled by armed groups, social distancing or lockdown measures announced by the municipal or state governments had little to no impact in favelas.

In addition to the weakness of state governance in terms of enforcing rules in a time of great crisis, the state also initiated some of the most violent events in Rio's favelas during the pandemic, with heavily militarized operations within territories that are known for being domains of well-armed criminals. This placed bystanders' lives at risk – something grimly illustrated by the May 2021 police operation – and momentarily interrupted aid distribution efforts on several occasions. Armed clashes for territorial dominance also continued between criminal groups, particularly between the CV and the alliance formed by militias and the TCP. In fact, in some periods immediately after the start of state-wide social distancing measures, these clashes intensified. Furthermore, interviewees reported that drug trafficking continued during the pandemic.<sup>74</sup>

The pandemic itself did not lead to lasting changes in criminal governance in Rio de Janeiro, even though responses to the specific challenges of the pandemic, such as curfews and cancellations of the iconic funk parties, provide a valuable insight into the behaviours of criminal groups during crises. It is still possible that the negative economic impact of the pandemic, which is likely to be long-lasting, might further alter criminal governance or render favela communities even more dependent on services provided by armed groups, such as the internet. This is especially the case if the economic impact sees fiscal adjustment by the local and regional governments, resulting in even fewer resources for infrastructure and basic services in low-income areas. The reduced fiscal prospects also render a significant revision of public security strategies, including changes to police training and tactics, less likely.

The pandemic has, however, caused significant damage to the already fragile reputation of state-provided governance in favelas due to the continued violence of police operations and lack of security policies aimed at more lasting improvements. It has reinforced the position of drug-trafficking groups and militias as the foremost authority for hundreds of thousands of favela residents living in their territories, who have been at the mercy of rules decided by local armed commanders rather than the government and its agencies.



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