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Outside of Crime but Inside the ‘World of Crime’: Youth Experiences in the Midst of the War in the Peripheries of Maceió and Belo Horizonte

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Fora do crime no ‘mundo do crime’: Experiências juvenis em meio à guerra em periferias de Maceió e Belo Horizonte analisa experiências juvenis diante de esforços de governança criminal nas periferias de Maceió, em Alagoas, e Belo Horizonte, em Minas Gerais. Partimos de experiências de jovens *não* envolvidos para evidenciar que estar fora do crime não é estar fora do *mundo do crime*, uma vez que suas vidas são atravessadas por regimes morais e de justiça de grupos criminais nos territórios onde vivem e circulam. Argumentamos que a instabilidade das dinâmicas criminais em periferias de Maceió e Belo Horizonte faz da *guerra* uma forma de relação central que atravessa relações de parentesco, amorosas, de vizinhança, amizade de infância, torcidas organizadas.

Palavras-chave: governança criminal, juventude, guerra, Maceió, Belo Horizonte

This article analyzes youth experiences in the face of criminal governance efforts in the peripheries of Alagoas state capital Maceió and Minas Gerais state capital Belo Horizonte. We consider the experiences of young people who are not involved in crime to demonstrate that being “outside of crime” is not the same as being outside the “world of crime,” in view of the fact that the trajectories of their lives are affected by criminal moral and legal regimes in the territories where they live and through which they pass. We argue that the instable criminal dynamics in the peripheries of Maceió and Belo Horizonte transform gang war into a form of central relationship that intersects with kinship, love, neighborhood, childhood friendship and *torcida* relationships.

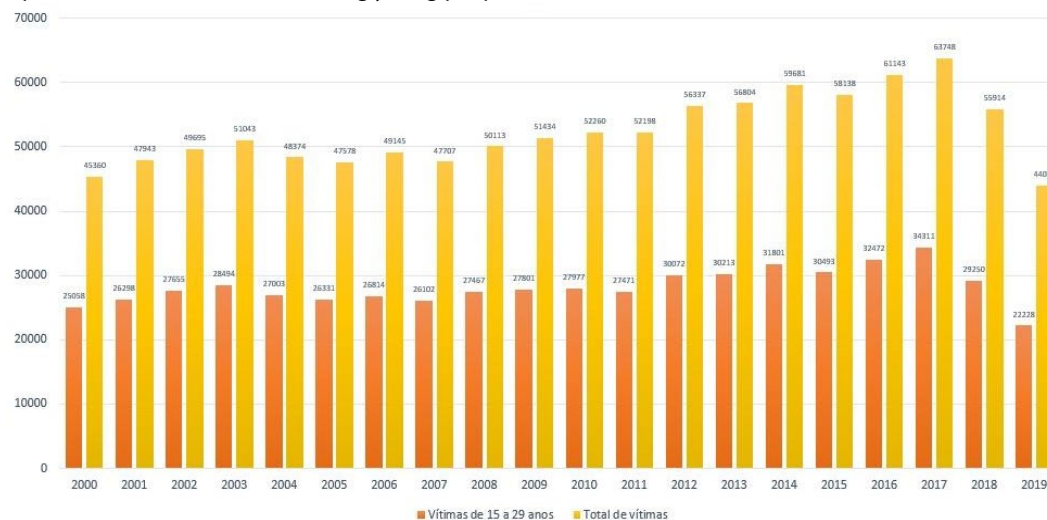
Keywords: criminal governance, youth, war, Maceió, Belo Horizonte

Introduction

In Brazil, youth has become central to the representation of urban conflict and the problem of violence (MOTTA, 2021). It is a commonplace for the speeches of public policy operators and official documents to affirm the importance of “keeping vulnerable young people out of drug gangs” and “rescuing young people from criminal communities.” The Brazilian public debate around violence presents young people from urban peripheries as susceptible to involvement in criminal groups and activities and legitimately subject to the violent and criminal acts of sectors of the State. The statistical data on homicides and incarceration in Brazil reveal the effects of this perception.

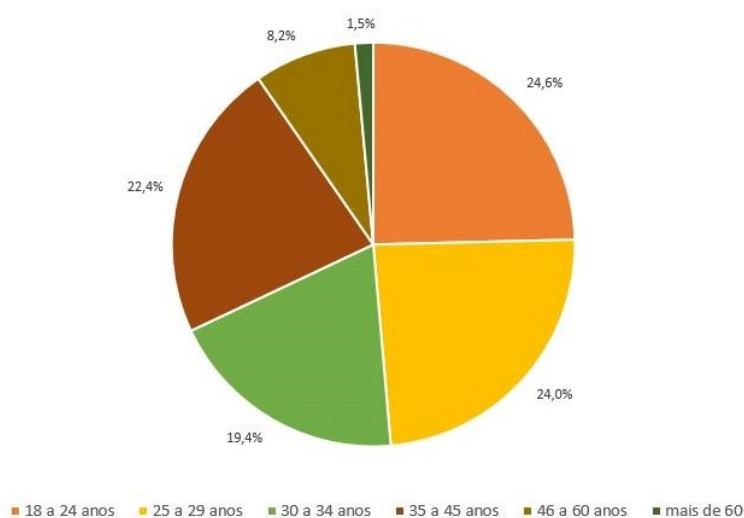
Throughout the historical series from 2000 to 2019, more than half of all homicide victims were young people aged 15 to 29. Almost half (48.6%) of all people imprisoned in 2020 were aged 18 to 29.

Graph 1: Number of homicides among young people in Brazil, 2000–2019



Source: Sistema de Informações sobre Mortalidade (SIM).

Graph 2: Distribution of the Brazilian prison population by age group, 2020



Source: Sistema de Informações do Departamento Penitenciário Nacional (Sisdepen).

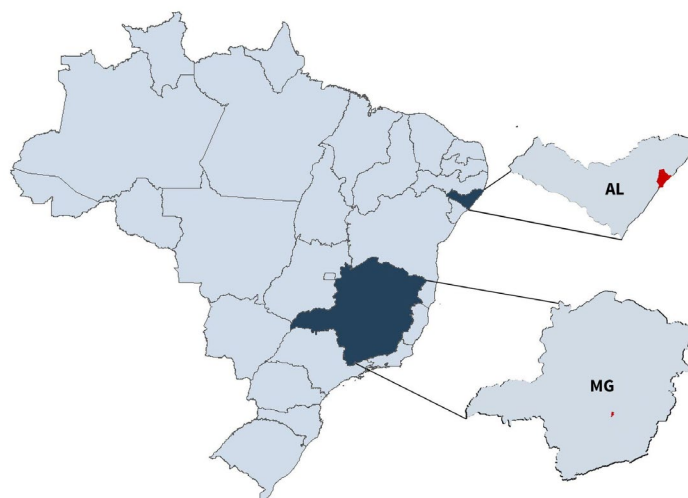
The issue becomes more complex if we consider the expansion of the “world of crime” (FELTRAN, 2020) since the 1990s, which has been characterized by the emergence of criminal gangs that act collectively to produce territorial, ethical-normative and market “governance” (LESSING, 2020; FELTRAN, 2018, 2020; MANSO and DIAS, 2018; PAIVA, 2019; RODRIGUES, 2020a, 2020b; BIONDI, 2014). The forms of such governance depend on the groups to be regulated, their configurations and context (LESSING, 2008, 2020; FELTRAN, 2011). Notwithstanding this variability, the lives of young people from Brazil’s urban peripheries are

affected by criminal governance in particular and intense ways (COZZI, 2018; MALVASI, 2012; RODRIGUES, 2020a; CIPRIANI, 2020; JONES and RODGERS, 2009).

We recognize that the experiences of periphery youth cannot be reduced to the dynamics and moralities of the world of crime, given that they are constituted and affected by dynamics related to politics (GROPPO and SILVEIRA, 2020; PLAZA SCHAEFER, 2018), culture (ABRAMO, 1994; DIÓGENES, 2013; ADERALDO, 2017), education (DAYRELL, 2007; KHOMYAKOV, DWYER and WELLER, 2020; SPOSITO, 2008), work (CORROCHANO, ABRAMO and ABRAMO, 2018; GUIMARÃES, 2005; LIMA and PIRES, 2020), and involvement in social projects (MEDAN, 2014; MOTTA, 2019; SOUZA, 2009), among others. Our focus in this article is on youth experiences in Brazil's urban peripheries in the face of criminal governance, since in contemporary times these experiences have proven to be analytically useful for understanding the nuances of the ways in which criminal governance is exercised and experienced in different contexts.

Our first ports of call are ethnographic studies carried out between 2013 and 2019 of young people from the peripheries of Maceió and Belo Horizonte (the state capitals of Alagoas and Minas Gerais, respectively). In spite of the difficulties inherent in defining the boundaries between those who are *outside* and those who are *inside* the world of crime (WHYTE, 2012; LYRA, 2020; GALDEANO and ALMEIDA, 2018), our focus is on young people who are not involved in crime in the sense of not being members of criminal groups or engaged in criminal activities. By describing the everyday situations, choices and calculations that these young people have to make, we demonstrate that being “outside of crime” does not mean to being outside of the “world of crime” (FELTRAN, 2011), since their daily lives are affected by the moral and legal regimes imposed by criminal groups in the territories in which they live and through which they pass.

Map 1: Map of Brazil and the states of Alagoas and Minas Gerais, showing the state capitals Maceió and Belo Horizonte



Source: The authors.

The 2010s represent an important milestone in the understanding of criminal dynamics and modes of governance over youth in Maceió. During this period, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and the Comando Vermelho (CV), two of Brazil's largest criminal organizations, established territorial control over drug market operations and disseminated their codes of conduct in Maceió's peripheries. Youth that are *involved* in crime have since been recognized as *gang affiliated*. The governance of the lives of youth not involved in crime became more clearly evident after 2016, when the Brazil-wide split between the CV and the PCC inaugurated a period of gang war in Maceió's poor neighborhoods and favelas. This led to the language of conflict and gangs becoming part of the daily lives of periphery residents (RODRIGUES, 2020a; RODRIGUES, SILVA and SANTOS, 2020). There are frequent reports of young people not involved in crime but who reside in territories identified as "belonging to" either the PCC or the CV breaking off relations with friends or family members linked to whichever of the two gangs is seen as a rival. The intensity and duration of this process has in some cases forced families and/or young people to move to other neighborhoods.

In Belo Horizonte, the criminal dynamics in favelas and periphery neighborhoods are not linked to large gangs that operate at a national level and are instead characterized by coexistence between small groups of armed youths who often call themselves *ganguês* (ZILLI, 2011). These groups, strongly territorialized in specific areas, maintain dynamics of violent rivalry known as "wars": long conflicts that usually depart from their initial cause and trigger sequences of retaliatory homicides, in which vengeance for one murder justifies a new one and so on (BERALDO, 2021; ZILLI and BEATO FILHO, 2015; ROCHA, 2015; ROCHA and RODRIGUES, 2020a). When gang war breaks out and deaths become frequent, all residents are affected in some way. Young people in particular are subjected to surveillance, as well as limitations on their freedom to move around and interact (CRUZ, 2010; ROCHA, 2017). At such times, the simple fact of being the relative of or having an affective relationship with someone involved in a gang war can result in a young person's name being added to a list of possible targets.

Maceió and Belo Horizonte are characterized by very specific criminal configurations. Maceió is home to a struggle for hegemony that is national in scope; Belo Horizonte is the scene of fragmented networks that interact locally in a very limited way. In both cities, one can observe unstable dynamics, in which arrangements are made, unmade and remade across a very short time scale. It is not a coincidence, then, that the word "war" is frequently used by our interlocutors, whether they are talking about the specific moments when a series of inter-gang retaliatory attacks and murders occurs (as in Belo Horizonte), or the split between the CV and the PCC in Maceió (and Brazil), which has given rise to an implacable logic of opposition and rivalry between individuals and territories associated with the two large gangs.

In Maceió, young people have reported breaking off relationships or avoiding personal encounters with family members or friends. The alternative would involve having to take what they refer to as the “drastic attitude” of “having to kill” anyone who is a rival, even if that person is a childhood friend or a cousin. In other cases, friendly relations have been interrupted due to the high risk of traveling through enemy territories. In the peripheries of Belo Horizonte, one often hears about the impossibility of young people from one territory, be they gang-affiliated or not, frequenting or even crossing the streets and alleys in territories belonging to enemy gangs, at pain of becoming targets in an indirect attack on the gang’s rivals.

On the other hand, the dynamics engendered by gang war are not confined to rupture, estrangement and prohibition, but also lead to bond formation and a sense of belonging. In the case of Maceió, the PCC-CV split had the effect of bringing together individuals from territories with a history of rivalry who had come to identify with the same gang. Although these bonds are to some extent the result of coercion, the reconfiguration imposed by gang war enabled movement through previously inaccessible territories and rapprochement with friends and family members linked to or identified with the same gang. In Belo Horizonte, the dynamics of rivalry between gangs and of the moments when gang war breaks out function as a way of strengthening bonds between members of the same group. In other words, these gang wars permeate and modulate the possibilities of circulation, as well as emotional and family bonds, and access to public services and facilities. That is why gang war is the central analytical category of this article.

It is important to mention the centrality and importance of the notion of gang war in the Brazilian debate about urban conflict (LEITE, 2000; MACHADO DA SILVA, 2008; MENEZES, 2015; GRILLO, 2019). Leite (2000) has discussed how the war metaphor was consolidated in the 1990s as an interpretative key based on the assumption that armed groups threatened the State’s monopoly on the use of violence and that a forceful and violent State response was needed to solve the problem of “urban violence.” Grillo (2019) updated this reflection in the face of the deepening and radicalization of the urban conflict. He asked, “whether the war metaphor is already becoming a substitute representation of ‘urban violence’”, constituting itself as “a new cognitive map, which provides new subjectively justified models of conduct” (*Ibid.*, p. 64).

This article is in close dialog with this debate, whose object is the representation and constitution of conduct in the face of the radicalization of urban conflict in recent decades. However, while we recognize that gang wars are related to security forces and policies, as Leite (2000) and Grillo (2019) have pointed out, when we use war as a category, we have a distinct focus. We start with the different meanings attributed to the word “war” by our interlocutors, young residents of the peripheries of Maceió and Belo Horizonte, when referring to criminal dynamics. From this starting point, when we look at the experiences of young people from the peripheries

vis-à-vis the world of crime, gang war interests us when understood as a form of sociability (ROCHA, 2020). In this sense, it is a category that illuminates the moral elements of disputes that justify the maintenance of cycles of violent retaliation (*Ibid.*).

From this perspective, “war” it is a precious analytical key precisely because it allows us to identify and understand not only the similarities between different contexts, but also their specificities. If instability is a common feature of criminal dynamics and, consequently, of the ways in which criminal governance is imposed on young people in Belo Horizonte and Maceió, the ways in which it was and is constructed, how it is experienced, which actors are involved and what is in dispute in inter-gang conflicts are in each case specific. In the case of Maceió, a single gang war permeates the various territories of the city, although the power relations between them can be configured differently in each location. By contrast, in Belo Horizonte it would be more accurate to speak of wars, in the plural, as there are hundreds of wars between multiple criminal groups in specific territories.

This text explores the linearity and particularities of the implications of “war” in these two cities from two axes. First, we describe how the configurations of the world of crime in both cities are directly related to the ways in which criminal governance affects the lives of young people *not involved* in crime. We then analyze how this governance produces a context in which young people must engage in permanent reflection and calculation about their daily behavior (movement, leisure, relationships) and must constantly remake and combine their bonds with family members, loved ones, football team supporters’ associations and crime.

Everyday uncertainty: approximations and specificities of Maceió and Belo Horizonte

A series of studies have sought to understand how living in Brazil’s urban peripheries is an experience shaped by unpredictability. Hirata (2018) called the daily effort of individuals who live in and from the urban peripheries “surviving in adversity.” Cavalcanti (2008) discusses how shoot-outs or the constant threat of them in Rio’s favelas impose a routine of concern and worry for those who are not at home (how and when to travel). Motta (2020) discusses how periods of intensified armed conflict in a Rio de Janeiro favela require routinization of the calculation of practical measures to reduce risk and the construction of subjective mechanisms to deal with suffering, fear and pain. Menezes (2015) considers the implementation of so-called Police Pacifying Units (UPPs) in Rio de Janeiro, arguing that for favela residents this implied a shift from the dynamics of crossfire to those of a minefield, and called for its own calculations and choices. Vianna (2015) and Vianna and Farias (2011) show how recurrent lethal State violence in Rio de

Janeiro's favelas is understood as a political struggle by mothers who lost their children as a result of police violence. Pierobon (2018), inspired by the works of Das (1999), shows us how gender is crucial to understanding the unequal distribution of responsibilities and suffering among family members in a context of violence (State and criminal) and lack of access to public services. Beraldo (2020), analyzing a large favela in Belo Horizonte and considers the routinization and incorporation of a complex web of normative regimes through which individuals must navigate.

The modes of organization of the worlds of crime in Maceió and Belo Horizonte are examples of this dynamic, in which routine is unpredictable and characterized by uncertainty. However, if we understand *war* as not only the maximum expression of this constant instability, but also as a form of relationship (ROCHA, 2015), it is essential to look at the specific contents in each case.

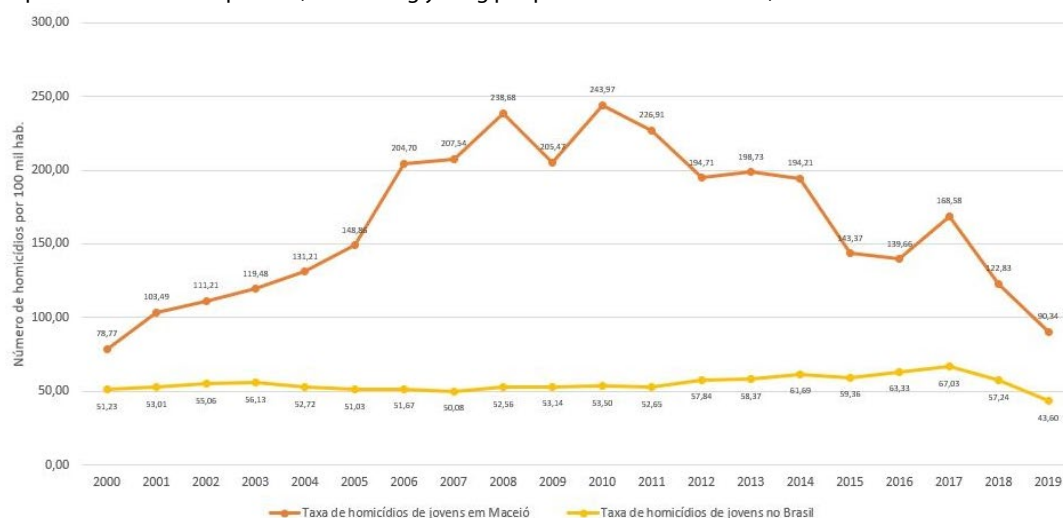
In Maceió (and in the state of Alagoas as a whole), approximations between local criminal markets and gang networks from Southeast Brazil have been observed from the early 1990s to the 2000s. The historical position of the Alagoas hinterland as a marijuana producer, the transit of prison leaders linked to gangs through state prisons and the strategy of transferring prisoners from Alagoas to federal prisons favored the arrival of the CV and, later, the PCC in the state. Thus, in the 2000s, it was possible to see gang leaders from other states gaining prestige and becoming commercial partners of gang leaders in Alagoas, even though strong fragmentation and violent rivalries between neighborhoods and streets still prevailed (CARVALHO, 2021; RODRIGUES, 2020b).

In the early 2010s, gang activities were consolidated beyond existing commercial partnerships. During the same period, we witnessed the resurgence of national and state public security policies, culminating in an increase in the incarceration of young people and adolescents in Alagoas. Prisons and inpatient wards became one more space for young people to grow closer to the *proceder*¹ codes of the expanding gangs. The state policy at the time was to exterminate former crime leaders not linked to gangs (CARVALHO, 2021; RODRIGUES, 2020a). In other words, state policies were instrumental in handing control of the Alagoan world of crime to the gangs, as they led to possibilities for new leaders to seek to "grow in crime" through gang alliances. These same policies contributed to the expansion of gang *proceder* codes that seek to regulate violent conflicts in the world of crime and which may have contributed to the decrease in homicides that was widely publicized and celebrated between 2014 and 2015 as an example of the success of state policies (see Graph 3) (RODRIGUES, 2020a).

New ways of regulating *proceder* in poor neighborhoods were instituted under the aegis of the gangs. To some extent, the presence of gangs contributed to a decline in lethality in conflicts between neighborhoods or streets with long histories of rivalry resulting from disputes over the control of drug dens and vendettas. At that time, there were no rivalries, disputes or conflicts between individuals and territories identified with the CV or the PCC. Gradually, criminal

policies and markets, hitherto operated in a decentralized manner in each territory of Maceió, regulated by local bosses, began to respond to the regime of gang government (LIMA, 2016; RODRIGUES, 2020a, 2020b). In 2016, the alliance between the CV and the PCC came to an end, with consequences for the homicide rate. This saw the sudden imposition of an intense rivalry between people linked to either of the two gangs, as the situation developed into a gang war (BARROS *et al.*, 2018; RODRIGUES, 2020a; SIQUEIRA and PAIVA, 2019). This led to an explosion in homicide rates among young people,² as shown in the graph below:

Graph 3: Homicide rate per 100,000 among young people in Maceió and Brazil, 2000–2019



Source: Sistema de Informações sobre Mortalidade (SIM).

The spread of gang symbols and codes of conduct, as well as the outbreak of gang war, specific spaces came to be understood CV or PCC territories due to their association with the activities of each gang. Far from single-gang hegemony à la São Paulo (FELTRAN, 2018) or well-defined territorialization in the manner of Rio de Janeiro (GRILLO, 2013), moving from one part of Maceió to another of the city became a dilemma with which many young people had to deal with, regardless of whether they were involved with the dynamics of the world of crime. An emblematic example was the murder by stoning of a young MC who habitually purchased marijuana in a neighborhood recognized as the territory of one gang, but whose social media postings revealed the use of symbolic gestures associated with the other. Young people making gang-associated gestures in social media posts have led to multiple retaliations of this type, affecting boys and girls with or without a history of criminal activity.

Loyalties to one of the two gangs began to be constructed on the foundation of “growing polarization between feelings of defensiveness and affection for PCC and CV symbols” (RODRIGUES, 2020a, p. 1). From 2016 onwards, young people engaged in criminal activity were

pressured to take sides in the war. Belonging to a gang or being a prospect became important in terms of recognition and as a survival factor (CARVALHO, 2021).

Some reports from our interlocutors, young people incarcerated in the socio-educational system of Alagoas, are quite illustrative of this process and reveal the diversity of forms of and reasons for being linked to one of the gangs. With the outbreak of war, as soon as a neighborhood became identified with a gang, it became almost an imperative for the youngest youths already engaged in criminal activity and in vulnerable circumstances to follow the lead of their peers. As one of our interlocutors said, “my hood became PCC, so I was with the PCC.” After all, the alternatives were to move or suffer retaliation:

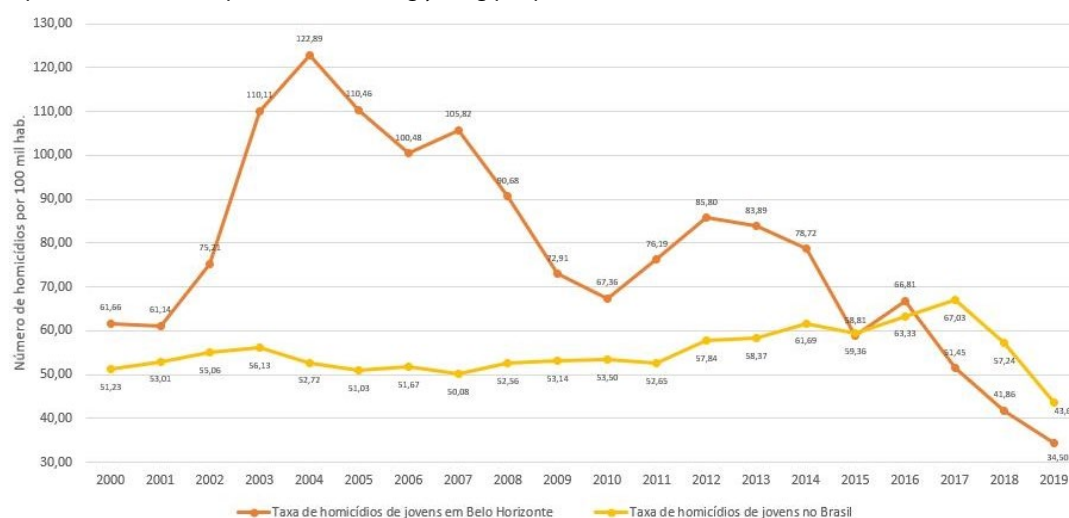
- Out there, how did you guys get involved? (Interviewer)
- Like I said the other time, my neighborhood became a PCC neighborhood, so I was in. If your hood goes PCC, you go with it, right? The other neighborhood became CV so I “ran with” the CV and got involved. (João)
- So, you think you had no other option? (Interviewer)
- I didn’t. (João)
- You had to become PCC. (Interviewer)
- Right. There are neighborhoods that are with us. If mine switched from one gang to another, everyone would go over to whichever gang their hood did. Mine became PCC, his became PCC, so everyone became PCC... And today we here are. (João)
- So, it’s not that you chose to be with the PCC. What happened was: “my hood turned PCC, they were already involved in crime, so I’m going to have to be with the PCC”? (Interviewer)
- As far as I’m concerned, yes. (...) I’m PCC because my hood is. (João) (Conversation circle, UM01, March 2020)

João’s words reveal, on one hand, the modeling of ideas and practices and, on the other, the eagerness of young people to take a position in the face of a prestigious novelty, which offers the promise of “establishing” themselves in “crime,” and enjoying recognition, money and protection. In other words, there is no stability, but a dispute for the imposition of a system of *proceder*, be it the *proceder* of the PCC or the *proceder* of the CV. This is because, despite pressure for standardization at the national level, in Alagoas there are no stable references for the consolidation of an order, so that old traditions of criminal fidelity still drive the structuring not only of crime but also of street culture, which has begun to be remodeled under new affective and normative influences (CARVALHO, 2021; LIMA, 2016; RODRIGUES, SILVA and SANTOS, 2020; RODRIGUES, 2020a).

The dynamics of adhesions, splits and configurations resulting from the emergence or expansion of broad criminal groups of national scope, as occurred in Maceió, was not repeated in Belo Horizonte. Even so, the city did not escape the significant increase in Brazil’s youth homicide rate that occurred between the 1990s and the 2010s. Belo Horizonte went from a rate of 17.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996 to a record of 64.7 homicides per 100,000 in 2004, an

increase of more than three times in less than ten years. This increase was concentrated among young people: even in 2004, the city recorded a rate of 122.8 homicides per 100,000 among young people aged between 15 and 29, more than double the already high overall homicide rate recorded that year. Even with the reduction of homicides³ after the spike in the early 2000s, the profile of most homicide victims remained basically the same: young, black or brown men and residents of slums and peripheral neighborhoods.

Graph 4: Homicide rate per 100,000 among young people in Belo Horizonte and Brazil, 2000–2019



Source: Sistema de Informações sobre Mortalidade (SIM).

It is important to point out that, at least since the 1990s, these homicides have mainly occurred in about 20 of the more than 200 neighborhoods, favelas and housing projects in Belo Horizonte (BEATO FILHO *et al.*, 2001; SILVEIRA *et al.*, 2010). These are neighborhoods marked by the coexistence of multiple groups of armed youths, engaged in intricate local networks of rivalries, alliances and violent retaliation—wars. These small groups active in the same neighborhoods generates a multiplication effect of rivalries and armed confrontations, which have been identified as one of the main factors for the occurrence of homicides, especially among young people, in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte.

Although public security actors and some researchers (BEATO FILHO *et al.*, 2001; SAPORI and SILVA, 2010; SAPORI, 2020) point to drug trafficking as a central motivation for wars among armed youth groups on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, research carried out over the last decade highlights the moral character of these violent rivalries (ZILLI, 2011; ROCHA, 2015, 2017; BERALDO, 2020). The illegal drug trade increases the cycle of aggression by facilitating the acquisition of the firearms and motorcycles frequently used in ambushes.

Figure 1: Homage to a young man who died in 2015 in this alley, in Morro do Papagaio, Belo Horizonte



Source: Rafael Rocha's personal archive.

Even when the founding episode of a gang war is a disagreement due to drug trafficking or a robbery, from the moment one of the parties involved is the victim of aggression, his partners are expected to get together and retaliate. In other words, even when a commercial matter leads to a disagreement between rival gangs, the resulting vendetta quickly assumes its own dynamics of attacks and revenge, detaches itself from the initial cause and gains autonomy as a justification for the aggression and deaths that accumulate on both sides. Rodrigo, a young man who was born and raised in a favela in the East Zone of Belo Horizonte, says that his adolescence was marked by a war against another group from the same community that started before he was born:

— It started in the late 1980s. It was crazy. One guy would be like “I’m from Cruzeiroinho,” the other one would be like “I’m from Sapo,” and they would have grown up together. For a while I was at war with the end part [of *Cruzeirinho*]. Actually, I had nothing to do with it myself, but just because I was from here, wherever I bumped into guys from there, there’d be trouble. (...) People here in Buraco do Sapo were very afraid, it was dangerous because the homicide rate was so high. I lost too many friends. I mean, I’m 24 years old [*and it is 2016*]. Most of my friends who were involved in crime died or are doing lots of time, like 25 years, you know? And they got involved with something without really knowing why. People were fighting but they didn’t even know what it was all happening for. It was like, “I’m from here, I have to do my bit, I can’t let the guys from over there take the piss.” And that’s it, by the time you see what’s going on, it’s all fucked up...

Statements like Rodrigo’s, who report joining the group in their region and entering the war almost as a process marked by inertia, are commonplace among young people involved in the

ganguês in the peripheries of Belo Horizonte. There are no reports of “baptisms” or any type of ritual that would mark the exact moment when these young people joined the local armed groups. On the contrary, many of them say they played soccer, hung out, had parties and barbecues with other young people living on the street or in the area until, usually in their early teens, because they spent long periods with the other members on street corners and alleys, began to be identified, both by the police and by rival groups, with the *gangue* of the region where they lived. The gradual process of gang identification involves surveillance on the part of the police and enemies, who begin to see an individual as a potential rival no more, but as an effective participant in war (ROCHA, 2015).

And, unlike in the peripheries of Maceió, the wars among countless small groups of armed youths in the favelas and poor neighborhoods of Belo Horizonte have not undergone major reconfigurations since the 1990s. The emergence and expansion of criminal gangs, especially the PCC and the CV in neighboring states, had a limited effect in Minas Gerais, with operations concentrated in the municipalities of the southern regions, the Triângulo Mineiro and the Alto do Paranaíba regions, which border São Paulo and/or Rio de Janeiro states (RIBEIRO *et al.*, 2019; DUARTE and ARAÚJO, 2020). There is no evidence of consistent out-of-state gang activity in Belo Horizonte as no large criminal groups emerged there, unlike Manaus, Fortaleza and Porto Alegre.⁴

Bonds, disruptions and everyday calculations in the midst of war

In Maceió, the relational bonding, splitting and re-bonding resulting from gang war are part of the daily lives of young people who live outside the world of crime. The dynamics of Maceió’s organized football team supporters, known in Portuguese (and hereinafter referred to as) *torcidas*, provide examples of this. Since the 1990s, *torcidas* have been important collective entities in the social lives of young people from the urban peripheries, whether in activities related to football matches, in carrying out social actions in local neighborhoods or in providing young men with an opportunity for reputation-building through the physical battles between *torcidas* known in Portuguese as *pistas*. In the 2000s, *pistas* between young members of the city’s two main *torcidas*, Mancha Azul and Comando Vermelho,⁵ made regular local headlines and were the subject of local TV news reports. In the following years, with the intensification of conflicts in- and outside of stadiums, and attacks and murders linked to inter-*torcida* rivalry, *torcidas* began to be perceived as a public nuisance. A dozen or so police operations took place at various *torcida* clubhouses. In addition to being described as criminal organizations, they were accused of drug trafficking in some regions of the city.

In the second half of the 2010s, the scenario changed and the rivalry between the two *torcidas* softened. This is because, little by little, other senses of group identification began to overlap the old disputes. This is the period in which there was convergence and partnership between the PCC and CV networks at the national level, which was reflected in regional contexts. It was at this time that the presence of the two gangs became more noticeable in the poor neighborhoods of Alagoas. In 2014, the rap group Família 33, attentive to the harmony between the streets and criminal dynamics, sang about a new ideal based on peace between neighborhoods:

*Calma meu xará
Que eu vou te apresentar
Saca o gesto com a mão
É linguagem milenar
Não precisa nem falar
Saca os pixo na cidade
Não queria nem pagar
Mas essa é a realidade*

*Sem perder a humildade e nem o proceder
Não importa se você é Mancha ou se é CV⁶
Nosso inimigo é outro
Anda engravatado
Os capanga do lado
E tá lá no senado
E nós morrendo à toa pela guerra do poder
Dando audiência pros programa merda da TV*

*O primeiro tá aí
Em prol dos irmãozinho
Lutando pela paz e liberdade
De nós tudinho
Na rua ou na cadeia o certo é um só
Seja na ZN, na ZS ou na ZO⁷
(The excerpt is from the song *Freio de viatura*)*

In this context portrayed by rap, violent conflicts between *torcidas* began to be overlapped by gang *proceder* codes, which for many have become synonymous with justice and symbols to fight for. Ideas began to circulate about resolving *tretas* peacefully. These ideas also enjoyed a certain currency among *torcidas*.

The *torcidas* were affected by the 2016 CV-PCC split. Gang war put pressure on young people to take a side and forced whole neighborhoods to identify with one of the two gangs. *Torcidas* began to face an internal problem: members from rival gang-allied neighborhoods began to consider each other as enemies. There are reports of teenagers who, upon noticing that others

from the same *torcida* but a rival neighborhood had just boarded the bus they were on, immediately dismounted. One also hears of conflicts between *torcida* members from rival neighborhoods at matches and parties that resulted from their having taken opposing positions in the gang war. Conversely, reports circulate of conflicts between members of rival *torcidas* from the same neighborhood having their rivalry moderated by being on the same side in the gang war. In short, for many, the gang and its associated *proceder* code have assumed greater significance than their bond with their neighbors or a larger entity like a *torcida*.

The overlap of gang *proceder* codes and *torcidas* has led to incidents in which members accuse each other of being associated with crime. As in other Brazilian states, citing the slogan *somos torcida, não o crime* (“we’re *torcidas*, not criminals”) became part of the attempts of such entities to dissociate themselves from the world of crime. This contrasts with the evidence of *torcida*-associated graffiti in the peripheries of Maceió being crossed out and replaced with gang-associated symbols. In one such case, a wall in a housing project that had played host to a long history of conflict between rival *torcidas* was tagged with the word *MANCHA*; two days later, the tag was crossed out and the tag *TOCV* (i.e., the initials of the *Torcida Organizada Comando Vermelho*) appeared below it. Each of these was then crossed out and the tag “PCC 1533”⁸ appeared on the wall. Several months later the wall had remained unchanged, and the tag “PCC 1533” had spread to many of the other walls in the housing project. These walls were communicating changes. They provided a clear indication that *torcidas* were being replaced by gangs and their *proceder* codes as symbols of local affiliation and guides to conduct for young people living in the area.

Figure 2: Wall of housing project in Maceió with a *torcida* tag replaced by a PCC one



Source: Personal collection of Adson Amorim.

Dynamics of the world of crime that are as unstable as those in Belo Horizonte and Maceió pose another, sometimes insuperable challenge to relationships between young people: how to define who is *inside* and who is *outside* the world of crime. First, it is important to note that the nature of relationships with a gang can vary greatly, making it difficult to accurately define them.

In Maceió, a youth may perceive himself as linked to a gang while not being perceived as such by other gang members or anyone else. The opposite can also be true: a young person may not identify as belonging to a gang but can still be regarded as associated with it by third parties. Furthermore, *involvement* with a gang may only be situational: a youth may not recognize himself or be *recognized* as belonging to a gang but may still be *considered* as such. Such *involvement* can sometimes have a compulsory character, the last alternative for an individual who needs to protect himself from multiple threats, so that being *in* the gang is synonymous with enjoying a protection network.

One of our interlocutors in the field, Vitória, had drawn on her link with the CV through her late father in order to protect herself from the threat of physical aggression from her stepfather. She was one of the gang's "considered individuals" and was therefore able to activate a safety net that protected her. His stepfather, who "ran" with the gang, was punished by the CV *brothers*. We can see, then, how the gang bonds of young people like Vitória can be circumstantial and ambiguous (RODRIGUES, SILVA and SANTOS, 2020).

In the range of degrees of *involvement* in the world of crime, the position of the "considered individual" (*considerado* or *considerada* in Portuguese) is useful for understanding the how people who are between those not involved in criminal activities may still follow the *proceder* code in their everyday lives. *Considerados* could be individuals who participate in a *corre* or give a *fita*⁹ to someone involved in crime or who are related to them by family, emotional or sexual ties. An interlocutor in Maceió explained to us that his position as *considerado* in the eyes of CV leaders, imposed limitations even as it offered possibilities. On the one hand, he was subject to certain restrictions on his ability to move around and work in certain parts of the city, but, on the other hand, he could frequent certain other spaces, such as nightclubs, with assurance.

Consanguinity, kinship, neighborhood, school friendships, romantic relationships and criminal dynamics are fundamental in the construction of young people's relationships in the urban peripheries (*Ibid.*). In Belo Horizonte, family and neighborhood relationships also play a key role in terms of proximity to gangs. In many cases, daily coexistence with a family member or friend involved in a "war" is enough for the associated youths to be brought into the dynamic of a violent conflict. Pedro, aged 15, lives in a gang territory in the neighborhood of Santa Lúcia. He says that initially he became a target because of his older brother's involvement in the world of crime. Later it was because he was *colando* with the other members of the local gang, which was "at war" with the youths in the nearby street.

— Since when have you been unable to leave your street? (Interviewer)

— It started because my brother was already at war and the guys started to confuse me with him. After a while, even though they realized that I wasn't him, they'd grab me, hit me in the face and call me a bastard. So, should I just go out and get a beating, day after day? I used to hang out near the square; my friends live there, I used to play football there sometimes, but now I can't even go and kick the ball around... (Pedro)

— And what was it like? "At some point did you say "now I'm in the war" or were you just drawn into it? (Interviewer)

— By the time I gave it any thought things were already getting complicated. I'd stop to smoke a joint with a guy from the street and the guys up the hill would accuse me of *colando* with them. After that, there was no going back. (Pedro)

— But were you accused of *colando* with them or were you actually *colando*? Which one came first? (Interviewer)

— It all happened at the same time, but it was different... It's like I said, I was just having out, smoking grass and telling jokes with the guys around here. But then the guys from the other street said I was intriguing with the guys from my street and that if they caught me, they wouldn't spare me. (Pedro)

Even though family and friendship ties may predate and are, in many cases, independent of relationships established through and within criminal groups, they contribute to blurring the boundaries between inside and *outside*. In spite of not being involved in criminal activities or affiliated to a gang, a youth who is a cousin, neighbor or in a romantic relationship with someone who is, ends up being associated with that gang and is not infrequently regarded as a member. The fact is that relationships and commitments that differ from those expected and required by gangs intersect and clash, affecting the experiences of non-involved youths. In this tangled web, efforts to get closer to or further away from criminal activities and to become connected to certain groups to the detriment of others (even without getting involved in criminal activities) require constant calculations with a view to minimizing risks and/or guaranteeing some degree of protection.

In Maceió, it has become common to hear reports of girls who were punished (FELTRAN, 2010) after having been accused of having disobeyed the *proceder* code, even when they were not themselves members of the gang. Their relationships with people from rival groups were often related to these accusations.¹⁰

— They usually die. Usually—I'm not talking about all cases—girls in relationships with guys who are *involved* usually die. She hooks up with a guy from one hood and then, as soon as she hooks up with a guy from a rival hood, she becomes a *considerada*. Sometimes the *consideradas* inform on what's happening in one hood to the guys from another one. I haven't actually seen it happen all that much, but every time I did it was because of that, and they end up dead. (Felipe, Conversation circle, March 2020)

In the peripheries of Belo Horizonte, when war breaks out, the daily lives of all of the local residents are circumscribed as they come under surveillance and are surrounded by exchanges of gun fire. Wander, a broadcaster and well-known hip-hop artist from the East Zone of Belo Horizonte, tells of how, in the early 2000s, a war between three gangs in the Taquaril neighborhood affected his daily life and those of a whole generation of young residents of the area.

He says that because he was a well-known figure because of the dance parties he organized, he offered to mediate, but when “war” broke out he found himself coming under threat:

— That was right at the beginning. I went to the people in Sector 2 and said: “Please let’s put a stop to this. If you want, we can go and sit down with your rivals and sort things out before everyone gets sucked into this fight. In the meantime, please stop hassling their wives and kids. None of these people has anything to do with your fight.” So, we had a sit down to talk about things. I was still able to move around freely, but the fight hadn’t stopped. The guys from up here went down there and got into gunfights in the middle of the night. Then the guys from down there came up here and got into gunfights in the middle of the night. During these shoot-outs, the brother of one of the guys who was involved in the gang got killed—but the brother who got killed had nothing to do with it. In a bar in the middle of the night some guys appeared and killed some people—then the whole thing started to get out of control. Then it got real bad, they started killing wives, girlfriends, relatives... Anyone who was young, like I was at the time, and who was friends with any of the gang members was a target. Just leaving the house was complicated, as was going to work. I had to sneak my way to the radio station by the most roundabout route possible. For about three years I never went anywhere near that street there [*points at a street corner near the location of the interview*]. I only went through there by bus, and even then, I always ducked down so they couldn’t see me through the window. (...) And like, the bus, at 6 p.m., was packed. And when the bus went around that corner, everyone started at the corner to see if there was going to be a problem. It was the same when it was going the other way. It was like this: The guys from 2¹¹ on their side, the other part of 2 on their side and the ones from 3 on their side. None of it had to do with the drug trade, it was all due to a misunderstanding. A fight over a woman, someone badmouthing someone else. The whole community paid a very high price, like, there is a scar on the community that will never heal. Because the people who died had nothing to do with any of the gangs. For a really long time, the young people here couldn’t move around and go to bars and what-have-you. A lot of things were basically just ruined. Coming and going freely — that was gone. Getting out of here was the best thing you could do. (Wander, broadcaster and resident of the eastern periphery of Belo Horizonte)

In his account, Wander describes a moment in which he, as a well-known figure due to the dance parties he used to organize, offered to mediate between the two sides in a gang war in an attempt to place limits on the cycle of attack and retaliation, before, in his words, “everyone gets sucked into this fight.” However, with the murder of the brother of a young man involved in the neighborhood rivalry, “war broke out” and the cycle of attack and retaliation started affecting people close to those involved in the “war.” From that moment on, Wander and all of the other young men and women in the neighborhood began to feel threatened and to modulate their relationships and trajectories in the community in order to avoid being considered possible targets in the context of the conflict.

Final notes

The cases of Maceió and Belo Horizonte reveal the inseparability of criminal histories and dynamics. Comparison of the two cases helps us to understand the specific forms of criminal governance in each context. It also reveals how criminal groups of radically different sizes working

at radically different scales can produce similar effects, such as the instability and uncertainty that constantly permeate the daily lives of young people. We have analyzed this instability as an effect of war. The “wars” in Belo Horizonte and the “war” in Maceió can be thought of as relationship experienced by youths in the peripheries of the two cities. Although at first glance, one would expect a “war” to have the effect of breaking bonds between people, these cases demonstrate that it can also force new bonds to be formed, as well as new group identities and protection networks.

While gang war in Maceió may indeed lead to the dissolution of emotional, friendship and family bonds and force whole families to move from neighborhoods where they had put down deep roots, it can also lead to truces and even the creation of new bonds between erstwhile rivals. The behavior of Maceió’s *torcidas* serves as a barometer of the instabilities that go beyond the world of crime. The last decade has seen the pendulum swing between the dampening down of inter-*torcida* conflicts and the inflammation of them, all in response to the parallel relations between the PCC and the CV. Recently, the addition of a new element to the mix has muddied the waters and signaled an erosion of the place of the two big gangs in Maceió. This is the growing phenomenon of young people who self-identify as “involved in the world of crime” but who deny being linked to any gang and instead describe themselves as “neutral,” thus revealing an unwillingness to commit to a gang and to taking sides in any war that such a commitment might entail. The implications are unpredictable, but they certainly color the configuration of gang war in the peripheries, which may cease to be dualistic a result, and adds new layers to the instability and conflicts experienced in everyday life.

Figure 3: Tudo neutro tag on a wall in the Maceió neighborhood of Guaxuma



Source: Personal archive of Ada Rízia.

The gang wars in the peripheries of Belo Horizonte last for years or even decades, with oscillating degrees of ferocity, and inevitably influence the lives of local youth, their experiences of where they live, the extent to which they form and maintain interpersonal bonds, the trajectories and subjectivities of their and the routes they take through childhood and adolescence. The multiplication of atomized internecine conflicts across a given territory potentially lethalizes youth relationships and dynamics. It also expands of the space for discussion about what is “right” in the world of crime: each group or gang will promote a narrative that legitimizes its actions—this narrative will be set against a background replete with pusillanimity. The world of crime thus configured, such commonplace teenage actions as going to a party or on a date, take place amidst a broader dynamic of violent rivalry and retaliatory homicides outside of any teenager’s control.

In Belo Horizonte and Maceió, the dynamics of criminal governance are not restricted to disputes over the control of illegal markets, in the sense of mere economic gains from the control of territories. Gang wars involve accusations, moral self-perception and a dispute over the criteria of justice and interpretation of the *proceder* code. In the case of Maceió, although the CV and the PCC espouse an expansionist ideal, the disputes between them are also disputes over *proceder* jurisprudence, which implies accusations against rivals, variously described as “scum,” “worms” and “things.” In Belo Horizonte, absent the expansionist ideal, the city’s gangs have an inherent relationship with their territories. This contributes to the moral element of their disputes with their rivals, so that gang-war-as-sociability becomes ever more anchored to the moral viewpoint underpinning the justifications for maintaining vendettas (ROCHA, 2020).

We have described the calculations and choices that permeate the relational bonding, splitting and re-bonding that results from gang war as a way of demonstrating how gang war constitutes a central relational form for the youth Maceió and Belo Horizonte’s peripheries whose reach is not delimited by the apparent boundaries of the world of crime (ROCHA, 2015). This reach affects relationships otherwise unassociated with gang affiliation, such as kinship, love, neighborliness, childhood friendship and *torcida* membership. Thus it is that living in a context of gang war drives the calculus of multiple interpersonal bonds and loyalties that are formed, dissolved and then reformed in a constant cycle.

Notes

¹*Proceder* refers to the codes of conduct imposed by the gangs in the prisons and poor neighborhoods of Maceió. Although some elements of the *proceder* code already existed in the world of crime in the pre-gang period, the gangs have refined and expanded them. Much more than mere rules that lead to punishment if not complied with, *proceder* establishes the norms for the creation of an individual’s reputation on the basis of doing “what is right.”

² For more details on the effects of this process on homicide rates, see Feltran et al. (2022) in this special issue of **Dilemas**.

³ A series of studies (SILVEIRA, 2007; SILVEIRA et al., 2010; PEIXOTO et al., 2007; CASTRO, 2014) have highlighted the crime prevention policy implemented in 2002 by the then State Secretariat for Social Defense of the State of Minas Gerais, as one of the main causes of the reduction in homicides in the state, especially in Belo Horizonte and its metropolitan region. With the objective of reducing violence and crime in the neighborhoods with the highest homicide rates in the state, the crime prevention policy was structured around four programs: *Fica Vivo!*, focused on youth in the most violent neighborhoods in the state; the *Central de Acompanhamento de Penas e Medidas Alternativas* ("Center for Monitoring Penalties and Alternative Measures"), which aims to monitor and follow up on alternative penalties; the *Programa Mediação de Conflitos* (Conflict Mediation Program), which offers legal advice, coordination and promotion of community organizations; and the *Programa de Inclusão Social de Egressos do Sistema Prisional* ("Social Inclusion Program for Former Inmates of the Prison System"), which works with individuals who have previously been imprisoned. After about a decade as one of the flagships of Minas Gerais state's security policy, the prevention policy and the programs that comprised it were systematically scrapped, with successive cuts in funding leading to a reduction in activity, resulting in the loss of a substantial part of its legitimacy with community leaders and other residents (ROCHA, 2017).

⁴The Família do Norte (SIQUEIRA and PAIVA, 2019), the Guardiões do Estado (PAIVA, 2019) and the Bala na Cara and Antibala (CIPRIANI, 2019).

⁵ *Torcida* Organizada Comando Vermelho (TOCV) was founded in 1993. That same year, an Alagoan news program reported that disagreements had arisen between members of the *torcida* over whether the name of the group was a reference to the more well-known CV of organized crime fame. While some members of the *torcida* said they did not want to be associated with a "criminal organization," the *torcida*'s directors and other members claimed that the reference was based on the idea of power and the club's colors. With bans imposed on *torcidas* in the 2010s and the growing presence of the "real" CV in Alagoas, the controversy about the *torcida*'s name resurfaced. Since 2006, the formal name of the organization was changed to "Comando Alvi-Rubro." The Public Prosecutor of Alagoas is committed to preventing the supporters calling themselves the Comando Vermelho again, claiming that this would represent an apology for crime.

⁶ CV here is a reference to the *torcida*.

⁷ These last refer, respectively, to: The North Zone, South Zone and West Zone, the main spatial subdivisions of Maceió's neighborhoods.

⁸ "1533" is a symbol of the PCC and refers to the ordinal position of the letters P and C in the alphabet (15th and 3rd letters respectively).

⁹ A *fit*a in Portuguese criminal argot is a tip on the conditions for committing a crime such as a theft or any other criminalized activity. In some specific contexts, the word *fit*a can refer to the explanation for an event or situation.

¹⁰ The (usually quite violent) punishments are often recorded and circulated by cell phone message as a kind of warning to discourage a given behavior. For an analysis of punishment videos in another context in the state of Maranhão, see Jara (2021).

¹¹ The numbers 2 and 3 are traditionally associated with criminal gangs (the CV, the PCC or the TCP) in poor Brazilian neighborhoods. In this specific case, they refer to the subdivisions of the neighborhood of Taquaril, which is divided into 14 sectors numbered in the order of their occupation during the 1980s.

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