Urban Studies

Vulnerability, neglect, and collectivity in Brazilian favelas: Surviving the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state's necropolitics

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing inequities and injustices in Brazil, seen in the disproportionately detrimental impacts on favelas. State policy responses to the pandemic have disregarded favela residents' experiences. Recommendations such as 'shelter-in-place' ignore the reality of over 11.4 million favela residents who cannot work from home or afford to stop working, nor practise physical distancing from others. This study investigates the discourse of community organisations in favelas as they respond to the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state's necropolitics. Community organisations in favelas have taken action to protect their residents from the virus, unemployment and hunger. I assess organisations' (1) justification to act as a collective in their communities, and (2) stances about the government's responses to the crisis. Through content analysis of social media, websites and media appearances of eight favela organisations and collectives in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, this study finds three main themes through which organisations justify their actions: vulnerability, neglect, and collectivity and care. More than survival strategies, the actions of favela organisations are counter-political acts as they oppose the decrepit necropolitics of the state by collectively enduring in the Brazilian context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding favela organisations' actions in response to the pandemic is fundamental. It further illuminates the impact of public health emergencies in the lives of informal settlements' residents and the governance of public health emergencies in these communities.

Keywords
community organising, COVID-19 pandemic, favelas, informal settlements, necropolitics

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摘要

新冠大流行加深了巴西现有的不平等和不公正现象，这可以从贫民窟所遭受的、不成比例的不利影响中看出来。政府应对疫情的政策忽视了贫民窟居民的情况。诸如"待在家里"之类的建议忽略了超过 1,140 万贫民窟居民所面临的现实，他们无法在家工作，不工作就无法维持生活，也无法与他人保持社交距离。本研究调查了贫民窟社区组织在应对新冠大流行和政府死亡政治威胁方面的话语。贫民窟社区组织采取了行动保护居民免受病毒、失业和饥饿的侵害。我评估组织 (1) 在其社区中作为集体采取行动的理由和 (2) 关于政府危机应对的立场。通过对圣保罗和里约热内卢八个贫民窟组织和集体的社交媒体、网站和媒体表达的内容分析，本研究发现了组织证明其行动合理性的三个主要主题：脆弱性、忽视以及集体和关怀。贫民窟组织的行动不仅是生存策略，而且是反政治行为，因为它们通过在巴西新冠大流行背景下的集体忍受来反对政府陈旧的死亡政治。了解贫民窟组织应对大流行的行动至关重要。它进一步凸显了突发公共卫生事件对非正规住区居民生活的影响，以及这些社区的突发公共卫生事件治理。

关键词

社区组织、新冠大流行、贫民窟、非正式住区、死亡政治

Introduction

The spread of infectious diseases in urban areas presents significant governance challenges because of population density (e.g. De La Barra, 2000), complex networks and infrastructures of globalisation (e.g. Connolly et al., 2020a), poverty and segregation (e.g. Corburn, 2017). Such difficulties are exacerbated during public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic when the threat of a fatal infectious disease presents substantial risks to humanity, and security, socio-economic and political difficulties (e.g. Allam and Jones, 2020). Despite the global character of a pandemic, the governance of public health emergencies at the local level requires local responses and consideration of socio-economic and territorial aspects that can lead to spatialised and uneven arrangements of disease and death (Mulligan et al., 2012). This is especially pressing in the Global South, where informal settlements are disproportionately vulnerable to public health emergencies (e.g. Duque Franco et al., 2020; Wilkinson, 2020a). Most research on infectious diseases

and inequality has focused on the vulnerabilities of marginalised populations to public health emergencies (Wade, 2020). However, we know less about the governance of infectious diseases and public health emergencies in informal settlements and, perhaps more importantly, the role that community-led efforts play in these processes (e.g. Corburn et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brazilian federal government denied its gravity, refusing to support lockdown mandates and enacting austerity measures (e.g. da Luz Scherf et al., 2020). Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro advanced the non-governance of the pandemic through science denialism and neglect (Ortega and Orsini, 2020). In addition, government responses at local levels often ignored favelas' realities and failed to create policies tailored to them. Historically, policy and investment in favelas have been deficient, resulting in significant inequities that aggravate the impact of the pandemic on its residents (Braga et al., 2020). Black and Brown Brazilians represent a substantial number of

the population living in favelas (IBGE, 2019), and mortality rates are higher among Black Brazilians, likely because of increased existing vulnerability and limited access to health care (Baqui et al., 2020). Facing old and new threats, community-based organisations and collectives organised mutual aid actions and protective measures to support and safeguard their communities from the virus, misery and the state's necropolitics (e.g. Oliveira et al., 2020).

The lack of consideration for the governance of the current public health emergency in favelas, *quilombos*,[1] Indigenous communities and prisons points to the renewal of the necropolitical state, which leaves to die those who are deemed disposable, either from the virus, hunger or other known strategies such as police violence, spatial segregation and evictions (e.g. Goes et al., 2020; Granada, 2020). Biopolitics and necropolitics shape the governance of urban environments (Ortega, 2020). Biopolitics is the exercise of power to enable, manage and oversee life (Foucault, 1990). On the other hand, necropolitics refers to the sovereign power of death, in which 'vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead' (Mbembe, 2019: 92). Necropower follows categorisations of space where specific populations and territories are subjected to different rights, forms of subjugation and extermination. In Brazil, sovereign power has historically used racial selectivity to govern urban environments, enacting harm, surveillance and deprivation in Black territories (Lins, 2020). Currently, the Brazilian state renews its necropolitical governance strategies through furthering austerity measures and through its decision not to act in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly hurting Black, Brown and Indigenous populations.

This study investigates favela organisations' discourse in responding to the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state's necropolitics. It is fundamental to include the perspectives of those more severely affected by the current pandemic – Black, Brown, Indigenous populations – to move forward in attempting to reduce historical and structural inequalities, repair past and current damages and consider future public health emergencies (Biglieri et al., 2020). Specifically, this study answers two central questions: (1) How do favela organisations justify their actions as they organise to respond to the COVID-19 public health crisis? and (2) how do favela organisations position themselves about the government's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic? To answer these questions, I utilise content analysis of Facebook posts of favela organisations in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to understand the emergent discourse embedded within collective efforts in the face of COVID-19 and the state's failure to protect them during the first six months of the pandemic in Brazil.

I first summarise the relevant scholarship about the governance of urban public health emergencies and their effects in informal settlements. I next describe the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and favelas before detailing the study cases and research methods. I then analyse and discuss the three most predominant themes across the organisations. Last, I conclude by reflecting on the governance of public health emergencies in informal settlements in light of the state's necropolitics and the practice and politics of life inherent to favela organisations' work.

Urban public health emergencies: Governance and inequalities

Processes of extended urbanisation result in increased vulnerability and the spread of infectious diseases (Connolly et al., 2020b), issues that need to be addressed by urban governance (Keil and Ali, 2007). In facing a public health emergency, governance

decisions must consider different populations' needs to create policy responses while engaging many stakeholders and interests (Cave et al., 2020; McFarlane, 2023). The territorialisation of contamination and public health measures exposes and deepens existing vulnerabilities and structural inequalities (e.g. Dodds et al., 2020). Disadvantaged urban populations often experience a lack of access to resources, and exposure to poor environmental conditions, leading to health inequalities and increased risks (Corburn, 2017; Nathan, 2023).

The novel character of the COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges for urban governance, including uncertainty, limited data and political pressures (Capano et al., 2020). Integrated urban governance in cities has been critical in successfully controlling virus spread and supporting residents (Sharifi and Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). However, despite a few successful cases, city governance responses in the early months of the pandemic generally failed to effectively respond to expected coronavirus outbreaks. This failure shows the need for governance preparedness improvements and increased focus on health to ensure residents' long-term wellness (Parnell, 2020). Responding to a public health crisis in urban areas requires the activation of governance networks to engage citizens in collaboration and co-production. Cooperation between government and civil society allows cross-sectoral planning and community participation by leveraging local capacity and knowledge (Montgomery, 2009), particularly in vulnerable contexts such as informal settlements (e.g. Patel and Shah, 2021).

Informal settlements and the spread of infectious diseases

Informal settlements are disproportionately vulnerable to the spread of infectious diseases and the consequences of a pandemic (Wilkinson, 2020a). Traditional governance approaches to infectious diseases are generally not viable in informal settlements, making a rapid spread of infectious diseases more likely (Adiga et al., 2018). Quarantine is a privilege for those who can afford to stay home, and lockdown measures may lead to economic uncertainty and food insecurities for residents (Crush and Si, 2020). Many informal settlements lack basic urban infrastructure, further endangering residents with contamination (Satterthwaite et al., 2019). Limited data on informal settlements' residents' health and poor access to health care increase their epidemiological vulnerability (e.g. Tampe, 2021). Because of these challenges, it is critical to embrace community organisations, leaders and residents in responding to public health emergencies in informal settlements, especially in communities with active governance structures. In these cases, communities are more likely to organise themselves, forge partnerships and respond to emergencies independently of government support (e.g. Rodrigues et al., 2020).

In Latin America, civil society organisations' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in informal settlements focused on containing the spread of COVID-19 and lessening the socio-economic impacts of prevention policies. Recent accounts of these efforts have highlighted their attempts to mobilise a diverse range of actors and resources to protect vulnerable populations (Duque Franco et al., 2020). Research has also emphasised the limitations of mobilisation efforts, including lack of government involvement and the absence of regional alliances (Andion, 2020). Additionally, scholars have found evidence that the focus on ensuring the basic needs of vulnerable populations has prevented organisations from mobilising for structural change (Duque Franco et al., 2020). Ultimately, responding to a public health crisis in informal settlements requires

locally-led efforts tailored to the complexity and diversity of such environments and their residents (Wilkinson, 2020b).

COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, the federal government denied its gravity and the science, dismissing the loss of life in favour of a functioning economy (Ortega and Orsini, 2020). President Bolsonaro disregarded public health recommendations, refusing to support lockdown measures and physical distancing and suppressing data related to the virus's spread and lethality (Burki, 2020). The federal government significantly decreased funding to social welfare policies and the public health system (da Luz Scherf et al., 2020), furthering its neoliberal project. The Brazilian government's actions and discourse are manifestations of the state's necropolitics, renewed during the pandemic (Mbembe, 2019). The expansion of the necropolitical state during the COVID-19 pandemic aggravates the dehumanisation of Black, Brown and Indigenous bodies by leaving them to die (Granada, 2020). The inadequacy and absence of policies tailored to these communities, the lack of testing and under-notification of cases and deaths and continuous state violence demonstrate the blunt neglect towards the lives of these populations, uniquely targeted by the necropolitical state (Goes et al., 2020).

Faced with old and new threats, individuals, organisations and collectives organised mutual aid initiatives to protect themselves (Ortega and Orsini, 2020). Community organisations and coalitions partnered with the private sector and non-governmental organisations to minimally safeguard the most vulnerable populations in Brazil with actions that respond to their realities and territories (Friendly, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2020). Common favela initiatives included collecting and distributing donations, providing information and awareness, monitoring contamination and gathering and disseminating data about the pandemic in their communities. These initiatives and networks of support are not new. Despite responding to the current pandemic, they arise from an intricate web of collective and organised action that has been in the making for decades (Telles et al., 2020). The pandemic presented new challenges, demanding the development of new practices and the adaptation of existing ones. However, community responses were possible due to the wealth of knowledge, histories and experiences embedded in these communities.

This study aims to qualitatively uncover favela organisations' discourses in responding to the threats of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state's necropolitics. The study focuses on favela organisations' justification for their actions concerning the pandemic and the government's response. Despite past experiences with infectious diseases such as dengue fever and the zika virus (e.g. Ribeiro et al., 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented public health challenge due to its impact across all areas of society and the lack of appropriate governmental response towards favelas. Therefore, understanding favela organisations' justifications and actions is critical because it draws attention to the perspectives of one of the groups most harshly impacted by the pandemic and the state's renewed necropolitics.

Methodologically, recent studies about the COVID-19 pandemic in informal settlements have used quantitative methods and data such as surveys and census data to identify broader patterns (e.g. Mishra et al., 2020; Patel, 2020; Sahasranaman and Jensen, 2021). Other studies have used structured and semi-structured interviews to grasp how residents and leaders make sense and describe their realities and efforts (e.g. Auerbach and Thachil, 2021; Nyashanu et al., 2020). While both methodological approaches offer valuable insights about the

Table 1. Overview of the organisations.

City	Organisation	Favela	Type of organisation	Favela's population
São Paulo	Vila Nova Esperança Association	Vila Nova Esperança	Residents-led association	~3,000
	São Remo contra o coronavírus	São Remo favela	Coalition of organisations	~8,000
	União dos Moradores e do Comércio de Paraisópolis	Paraisópolis	Residents-led association	42,826
	UNAS Heliópolis	Heliópolis	Residents-led association	~180,000
Rio de Janeiro	Coletivo Fala Akari	Favela do Acari	Residents-led association	27,347
	Manguinhos Solidário	Manguinhos	Coalition of organisations	36,610
	Gabinete de Crise do Alemão	Complexo do Alemão	Coalition of organisations	69,143
	SOS Providência	Morro da Providência	Coalition of organisations	4,094

Data Sources: Prefeitura do Rio, Prefeitura de São Paulo, IBGE Censo Demográfico 2010.

realities and struggles of the COVID-19 pandemic in informal settlements, they are limited in capturing the emergent, naturally occurring discourses of community-led organisations as they strive to endure through existing and added adversities. This study seeks to fill this gap by using favela organisations' Facebook posts as its primary data source to capture the emergent discourse of how these organisations represented themselves in the public sphere during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil.

Study methodology

Qualitative methodologies are necessary to make sense of particular needs and struggles of marginalised populations during public health urban crises (Teti et al., 2020). For this study, the researcher conducted a content analysis of social media data to examine community organisations' public discourses as they responded to the pandemic.

Case selection

The researcher used purposeful sampling to select groups and organisations for this study, considering the appropriateness of each case concerning the research question and the availability of data sources (Patton, 2014). The first step consisted of consulting existing mapping of resident-led organisations and coalitions and creating an initial list of possible cases. Many non-profit and research organisations were already comprehensively mapping such efforts, which served as a starting point for the research. The second step was comprised of choosing to focus on Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the two Brazilian cities with the largest numbers of favela residents (IBGE, 2010), to narrow down the initial list. The third step was selecting eight favela resident-led organisations and coalitions from the list (see Table 1), based on two main criteria: availability of data (organisations or groups of organisations responding to the pandemic and using digital tools to communicate their actions) and favela population. The final sample included organisations in favelas of varied population sizes to ensure a diverse set of contexts.

Data sources

Data sources included Facebook pages of the organisations, Facebook posts and any

material contained in the posts and organisations' websites that referred to the COVID-19 pandemic or aspects related to the pandemic, such as physical distancing or crisis. Facebook is the social media outlet used by all selected organisations. In addition, when organisations posted YouTube videos created by them or media appearances (i.e. interviews for newspapers, websites, TV outlets and participation in roundtables with researchers), those were also included in the data. The data comprised 756 Facebook posts, 46 website posts (including documents, news stories and interviews) and 25 videos. The selected data date from 26 February 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Brazil, through 26 August 2020, equalling the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil.

Data collection and organisation

Data collection and organisation consisted of the following steps: (1) manually collecting each Facebook post from each organisation across the six-month period due to strict Facebook regulations against data scraping; (2) compiling the data and additional materials (i.e. images, videos, links) in spreadsheets divided by organisation; (3) collecting website and media article posts using NCapture, an extension from Nvivo 13 that captures webpages as PDF files; (4) importing all spreadsheets and PDF files to the software NVivo 13 to analyse the data.

Data analysis

Analysis began with the development of an initial list of deductive codes derived from the literature review and the research questions. Analysis continued with the following steps: the primary coder read each piece of raw data; coded each piece of raw data using deductive codes; and when a new concept or idea was identified in the data, a new code

was created (Saldaña, 2009). The second round of coding proceeded as follows: the primary coder re-read each piece of raw data and assigned codes; and similar and connecting codes were grouped into categories, and categories were combined into main themes in response to the research questions. The primary coder wrote in-depth memos for each theme, describing the structure of codes and categories concerning the research questions (Saldaña, 2009). The primary coder also analysed the data temporally, searching for patterns in the frequency of codes and categories by month.

A second independent coder coded 25% of a randomly selected portion of the raw data using the same initial list of deductive codes. Both coders compared the lists of final codes and categories. They discussed the differences between the lists and coding to clarify the understandings of the data and reach a consensus in the interpretation of them. This process contributed to a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the codes, categories and themes.

Findings and discussion

The content analysis generated three main themes about why favela organisations assembled to respond to the pandemic: vulnerability, state neglect and absence, and collectivity and care. In the following subsections, each theme and its manifestation in the organisations' discourses are discussed. Overall, all themes were consistently present throughout the six months of analysis. Nonetheless, the theme of state neglect and absence peaked in May of 2020, three months after the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil, when the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths started to significantly increase in the country. Additionally, community governance structures and organisations pre-dated the pandemic in all favelas where the chosen organisations operate.

Theme one: Vulnerabilities

Overall, six of the eight organisations used the theme of vulnerability to explain why they organised to respond to the pandemic. To address such vulnerabilities, most organisations described their efforts as an attempt to reduce the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities. They specified the conditions that made them vulnerable, frequently highlighting such vulnerabilities' historical and structural nature. These conditions affected their ability to follow public health protocols to protect themselves from being exposed to the virus and maintain their livelihoods during the pandemic. Within the theme of vulnerability, organisations highlighted two types of vulnerability: socio-economic and spatial vulnerabilities.

Manguinhos Solidário (a coalition of organisations) and Vila Nova Esperança Association diverged from the other six organisations in talking about their responses during the pandemic. Both organisations discussed their efforts to fight the virus instead of attempting to reduce the impacts of the pandemic due to existing vulnerabilities. Such explanation places the responsibility for their challenges during the pandemic on the coronavirus itself, instead of denouncing the historical, societal conditions and consequences that make them more vulnerable to the pandemic's effects. From this dataset, it was not possible to conclude why these organisations chose to talk about their efforts in this way.

Socio-economic vulnerabilities. The organisations' socio-economic vulnerabilities include poverty, unemployment, informality and inequality. Organisations highlighted the ramifications of poverty due to unemployment, work informality and lack of income caused by the circumstances of the pandemic, discussing the threat of hunger as one of the significant challenges faced by their communities. For example, in April 2020, the Manguinhos Solidário organisation wrote about their efforts and the urgent need to support families: 'In just 12 days or so, we have already reached the homes of almost 300 residents… "Let's go!" Those who are hungry are in a hurry, we cannot stop, many families in need!' The UNAS Heliópolis organisation posted in May of 2020: 'The coronavirus pandemic has exposed to everyone the inequalities of our society. While some ordered food through an app, the lack of food in the favela is a sad reality.'

Organisations drew attention to how inequalities made it impossible for residents to work from home or isolate to protect themselves, support their families and even buy hand sanitiser. A post from the Coletivo Fala Akari in Rio de Janeiro exemplifies their reflections about work informality and questions higher income groups who have privileges and, in many cases at the beginning of the pandemic, refused to allow service workers to stay home and continue to receive their monthly salaries:

> The periphery is the maid, the doorman, the app driver, the delivery man, the informal worker who needs to be on the bus and on the subway selling his products to bring income to the house … How willing are our bosses to follow the steps humanity asks for and allow each of these professionals to practice isolation and still pay their wages? (March 2020)

Similarly, the Paraisópolis organisation emphasised existing inequalities and their effects during the COVID-19 public health emergency:

> Looking out the window, we see two different worlds. One over there, in a peaceful quarantine, doing home office, supplied with food and entertainment by TV, cell phone and internet, masks and hand sanitizer at will. And another, without money, without food,

without even water to wash hands, where the pandemic reveals and further accentuates the social difference. Residents of communities living in open streams, without basic sanitation, where hunger already existed, are now heading towards absolute misery. Hand sanitizer and masks are luxury items, inaccessible to this population. (May 2020)

The UNAS Heliópolis organisation continuously collected, analysed, mapped and published data about the needs and difficulties of residents. In April 2020, the organisation posted a study about the early impact of the pandemic in the Heliópolis favela: 'According to the survey, 68% of the residents of Favela de Heliópolis have already lost their monthly income after the beginning of the new coronavirus crisis.' Overall, this theme highlights existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and the negative impacts of the pandemic as one of the reasons for the organisations' efforts and mobilisation during the pandemic.

Spatial vulnerabilities. Spatial vulnerabilities are the territorial manifestations of socio-economic conditions, including favelas' lack of infrastructure and overcrowding. Organisations stress the inadequacy or complete absence of basic sanitation and sometimes the lack of water during the day, preventing families from maintaining public health protocols. The SOS Providência collective wrote about this difficulty:

> Favelas are at greater risk of community contamination, mainly due to the scarcity of services and infrastructure, such as lack of access to clean water and markets in and around communities. We estimate that there are 1,611 households and 5,337 people in vulnerable situations in Morro da Providência and Zona Portuária. (May 2020)

The Vila Nova Esperança Association highlighted similar concerns: 'It is already

clear that the lack of sanitation and social inequality are major obstacles to combating COVID-19 in the peripheries and favelas, which is why several leaders are mobilising to seek help for their communities' (March 2020). The Paraisópolis organisation and partners transformed two schools within their community into a centre for favela residents to isolate from their families in case of contamination. In a Facebook post in April, the organisation explained the rationale behind the need for the space: 'The initiative allows residents who are unable to quarantine in their homes, due to lack of space or living with people with pre-existing illnesses, to stay isolated for 15 days' (April 2020).

The UNAS organisation in Heliópolis discussed the lack of internet access for many families in the community and its impact on their ability to receive the federal government's emergency fund and the children's ability to follow school lessons online. In a post in July 2020, the organisation shared the results of a survey asking about difficulties in accessing the internet in Heliópolis and how this negatively impacts the daily life of the community, especially during the pandemic:

> With the pandemic, access to the internet has become even more difficult, especially for the most vulnerable families. Those who are unable to pay for a private service for their residence are left without access to the internet, or with access that is significantly impaired, as cell phone packages guarantee unlimited access only for social networks. During the pandemic, without internet access, the families in Heliópolis: Are not able to request and use emergency aid, being forced to go to the federal bank agencies; have their children excluded from online school activities; they are prevented from accessing public services, such as the micro-entrepreneur portal; they are excluded from information relevant to their reality. Not having access to the internet is a violation of human rights, during the pandemic this exclusion further increases the situation of vulnerability.

The Vila Nova Esperança Association highlighted housing as a point of entry for the fundamental human rights present in the Brazilian constitution and favelas' realities as evidence of residents' lack of access to such rights:

> When we talk about housing, we are talking about much more than walls and a roof: we are talking about our right to shelter, health, basic sanitation, public transport, leisure, and a multitude of other factors. These rights are explained in the Universal Declaration of #human rights and our Federal Constitution, but we from favelas have to constantly fight so that our access to this right is not denied. With the #coronavirus crisis, it is even clearer that we can no longer ignore the situation in which people live on the periphery. Informality, lack of water, open sewers, houses that are too small for very large families. (April 2020)

Overall, the theme of vulnerabilities emphasises the contextual and local conditions that make favelas more vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. Community organisations have exposed such vulnerabilities, their historical nature and consequences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their knowledge of these vulnerabilities compels them to mobilise in the protection of their residents in the face of the current conditions.

Theme two: State neglect and absence

Except for two coalitions of organisations in Rio de Janeiro, there is a predominant theme of state neglect and absence as critical reasons for community response to the pandemic. Each organisation expresses such understanding through specific ideas and vocabularies, but the overall perception of state neglect and absence is reiterated across organisations and coalitions. Organisations emphasised the long history of state neglect demonstrated by lack of basic infrastructure and denounced violations of their fundamental

rights as Brazilian citizens. In addition, there is an understanding of the inadequacy of public health recommendations for their contexts and the lack of policies developed for the governance of the pandemic in favelas. In a statement, the Coletivo Fala Akari stressed such neglect:

> To contain major problems, the federal, state, and municipal governments – still very timidly – have been publicising and establishing a series of actions to which the country's entire population needs to submit. However, once again, the favelas, peripheries, ghettos, quilombos, hinterlands, and the entire population on the margins are at the mercy of their own luck. Let's start with the basics: washing your hands! This has been a widely publicised recommendation. How is it possible that this is actually done to avoid contamination if the favelas are without water? The government and several organisations indicate social isolation as the primary means of preventing the disease. This is not possible in our reality! (March 2020)

The São Remo contra o coronavirus coalition explained their justification in organising during the pandemic, highlighting the absence of government action:

> In the absence of any concern by governments with the situation of workers living on the periphery in the face of the crisis, several leaders and social movements in the São Remo favela took the initiative to organise collective action to fight COVID-19. (April 2020)

Similarly, the Gabinete de Crise do Alemão coalition frequently included the following reminder in Facebook posts about their relationship with the state: 'It is very important to remember that we are not agents of the State, our actions happen exclusively because of the support of people and companies that are sensitised by the abandonment that we suffer daily.' In addition, many organisations mapped COVID-19 cases

in their communities, maintaining that the under-reporting and lack of information from the state about the pandemic in favelas made it harder for them to respond in their communities appropriately. The UNAS organisation argued that the lack of information also made them vulnerable to misinformation:

> So far, the government has not reported the number of cases and victims in Heliópolis, as well as any other favela in the city of São Paulo. The lack of specific data makes it difficult for local organisations to act and leaves communities at the mercy of misinformation and fake news shared mainly via WhatsApp. (June 2020)

Organisations highlighted the state's indifference as it relates specifically to the pandemic in their local contexts and to broader levels of policy decisions that directly affect them. For instance, many organisations discussed the federal government's neglect and defunding of the Brazilian public health system, which is free and predominantly used by those who cannot afford private health care, including favela residents. Bolsonaro's government has been actively trying to dismantle the public health system that minimally protects favela residents' and other marginalised populations' health in Brazil (e.g. da Luz Scherf et al., 2020). The state's neglect of the public health system adds to the theme of state absence and the resulting need for community action.

Beyond the specific vocabulary, there is an intrinsic layer in the discourse of favela organisations denouncing state neglect and absence as necropolitics while seeking to resist it. Favela organisations show understanding of the state's necropolitics and its many direct and indirect manifestations and reiterate their role in making policy to survive it. Together with other organisations, the Coletivo Fala Akari denounced the state's necropolitics as the absence of public policy and militarisation to kill in predominantly Black and non-White communities:

> Historically, our territories, favelas, and the peripheries of the state coexist with the absence of public policies such as health, basic sanitation, housing, and education. The gap that exists from the lack of rights in these primarily black and non-white spaces intensifies when the only action that the state promotes is militarisation. …

> Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the collectives in the favela and the periphery that have been creating outlets to guarantee food security for thousands of favela residents in the state of Rio de Janeiro and the reduction of the contamination curve in these spaces with the distribution of hygiene kits and health guidelines. We try to produce public policy that does not interest the state because while we try to kill hunger, the state tries to kill us. (May 2020)

Similarly, a leader of the Paraisópolis organisation clarified their positioning concerning the necropolitical state during the pandemic in an interview with the BBC News Brazil website:

> But instead of having a specific plan for favelas, which is what we want now, they are creating a plan to let the poor die. This is what is happening. If you don't make a plan for the peripheries of the entire country, you choose to let the poor die on their own. (Interview with Gilson Rodrigues, BBC News Brasil, March 2020)

Favela organisations' discourse demonstrates their awareness of the state's necropolitics during the current public health emergency. These organisations oppose the state's plan 'to let the poor die' with counterpolitical actions of survival and resistance, safeguarding their communities from the virus and socio-economic distress during the pandemic. This long-lasting act of surviving embodies a discourse of collectivity and care. Most importantly, favela organisations'

proposition of resistance is not individual but rather a collective act of surviving.

Theme three: Collectivity and care

In Facebook posts and interviews, favela organisations' representatives and leaders frequently used the word *solidariedade* (solidarity, in Portuguese) to characterise outside support towards their initiatives. Organisations used the expression *network of solidarity* to describe the web of outside individuals, groups, companies and institutions that assisted their initiatives during the pandemic. When referring to outsiders' support, *solidariedade* points to outsiders' acting to be supportive and willing to help others. This meaning is frequently used in organisations' fundraising Facebook posts or posts thanking supporters who have donated. For example, the Vila Nova Esperança Association Facebook page often had updates about the pandemic in the community with the following text: 'Participate in this network of organisation and solidarity by donating on this link' (March 2020).

The word *solidariedade* was also used by organisations to refer to the collaborative work done inside their communities by residents and leaders themselves and the support of community organisations in other favelas. In these instances, the word *solidariedade* takes on a broader meaning, one that relates to other expressions frequently used such as 'the favela takes care of the favela', 'the struggle is collective', 'together we are stronger', 'from us to ours' and *nós por nós* (Portuguese for 'us for us'). When speaking of their work of supporting each other and other favelas, these expressions refer to an underlying theme of collectivity and care through which favela residents live and survive, not only during the pandemic but historically, which is often epitomised by the expression *nós por nós*.

The *nós por nós* expression comes from the African ideology and philosophy of *ubuntu*. This multidimensional concept represents the essence of African ontologies, encompassing respect for all humans, solidarity, interdependence and communalism (Kamwangamalu, 1999). Also represented by the expression 'I am because we are', *ubuntu* is a relationship of interconnection and interdependence among the individuals and the community. The foundation of the concept of *ubuntu* is collective solidarity, in which the individuals understand themselves through their relationship with others (Sambala et al., 2020). Such relationships of interconnection, interdependence and collectivity have historically been characteristics of favelas, where community ties and support have allowed them to endure despite the many difficulties and violence faced daily (e.g. Glass, 2020).

Scholars have previously connected the *ubuntu* philosophy and the *nós por nós* expression to Afro-Brazilian contexts in a variety of ways: understandings of *ancestralidade* (ancestrality) (Da Costa, 2010), the narratives and politics of favela and periphery movements and organisations (e.g. Imas and Weston, 2012), the solidarity economy of culture in São Paulo's favelas (Bueno, 2019), the life and work of Marielle Franco, a queer Black woman from a favela in Rio de Janeiro who was elected to the city council of Rio de Janeiro in 2016 and assassinated on 14 March 2018, in downtown Rio de Janeiro (Cavalcanti, 2020), and favelas' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Souza et al., 2020).

Favela organisations' discourse of collectivity and care embodies the philosophy of *ubuntu* as they act to survive the pandemic and the state's necropolitics as a collective. Frequently used expressions such as 'the favela takes care of the favela', 'the struggle is collective', 'together we are stronger' and *nós por nós* illustrate the notion of collectivity and care in their discourse, signalling the *ubuntu* philosophy. When discussing the

work of the residents who have been volunteering to make their projects happen, the SOS Providência coalition refers to the *nós por nós* as the essence of their work:

> Monitor Residents, MMs
>
> The essence of us for us, the heart of our entire action, and proof that with love, empathy, and willpower, anything is possible. You've outdone yourselves and done what many haven't been able to do in years. They carried all Providência in their chests, distributing love and hope. … Without you, all this would definitely not have been possible. And it's just the beginning!! Us for us!

The *nós por nós* is at the core of how favela organisations understand their work. Such understanding translates into the practice and politics of community care, where supporting and protecting each other is not only a choice or a necessity but a long-standing way of living. The same vocabulary is also used to describe their relationships with other favela organisations, as exemplified by a post from the Manguinhos Solidário collective:

> I want to thank the guys from the City of God favela who are in the same struggle as we are here in the Manguinhos Solidário, a struggle of one collective that reinforces the struggle of the other collective. This period has shown us how to achieve our goals, a collective struggle of a lot of solidarity and partnership! (May 2020)

The *nós por nós* refers to their specific communities as well as efforts in other favelas, similar communities facing the same struggles, the territory of favelas. The theme of collectivity and care relates to the overall territory of favelas through shared struggles and social interdependence that enables the creation and sharing of strategies, technologies, innovations and solutions of a collective nature. Favela organisations' initiatives to support and protect their own are

collaborative solutions that represent and reproduce the practice and politics of care that exist in the territory of favelas. Favela organisations' discourse embodies the *ubuntu* philosophy within the theme of collectivity and care as the means to survive the virus and the state's necropolitics.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to bring favela organisations' perspectives, knowledge and experiences to the centre of discussions about the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic while reflecting on the governance of the pandemic in informal settlements and acknowledging the burden carried by leaders and residents to support and protect their communities. This paper sought to understand why favela organisations decided to collectively assemble and respond to the pandemic through content analysis of social media data. Analysing social media data implies focusing only on what organisations' leaders and representatives chose to write about and post publicly. Other themes and narratives may be part of how organisations make sense of their work but may not be exposed through these venues. The themes discussed may also not represent all residents' needs or points of view in the favelas. However, using social media data captures the emergent, naturally occurring discourses of community-led organisations.

This paper sheds light on the underlying themes through which favela organisations justify their initiatives in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the literature about the governance of infectious diseases in informal settlements. First, there is an overall theme of vulnerabilities used to highlight the impacts of the pandemic in their communities. Similar to what Wilkinson (2020b) outlined as critical considerations for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in informal settlements, favela

organisations use their knowledge about local vulnerabilities to create responses. Understanding the state's neglect, absence and necropolitics drives organisations to counter-political actions of survival, resisting abandonment and death for favela residents. Finally, a theme of collectivity and care shows favelas' long-standing tradition of community ties, support and social interdependence that translates into practice and politics of care in their territories during the pandemic.

These findings allow us to reflect on the governance of urban public health emergencies in areas marked by profound historical deprivations and injustices. The absence of government support forces communities to create policies and partner with civil society to execute them to protect themselves, as seen in Brazilian favelas and informal settlements throughout Latin America (Duque Franco et al., 2020). A community's ability to do so and succeed lies in several factors, including the pre-existence of governance structures and individual and collective capacity that allows for targeted actions following unique conditions (Wilkinson, 2020b). The findings in this study help build qualitative evidence about the role of local values, attitudes and understandings of community in informal settlements' responses to public health emergencies. The themes found in favela organisations' discourse also demonstrate their activism in favour of structural change. While their specific initiatives focus on short-term urgent necessities (Duque Franco et al., 2020), their discourse embodies a demand for change beyond the pandemic. When denouncing the historic nature of existing vulnerabilities and the long-lasting state neglect and absence, favela organisations highlight the structural nature of these issues, exposing the need for societal change.

Government agencies should partner with favela organisations to learn from their efforts and co-create policies tailored to favelas' realities to remedy ongoing vulnerabilities and damage from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future public health emergencies. Governments often rely on technical specialists and knowledge to design policies towards informal settlements. Favela organisations have profound and unique knowledge about the realities of their communities, the difficulties they face and how to begin to address them. Learning from this wealth of knowledge and allowing residents to have agency over such a process is a critical step in bridging the gap between government and favela organisations and, possibly, beginning to remedy the historical vulnerability and inequalities. Supporting existing efforts with resources (including financial support) and leveraging the community infrastructures in place are critical. While these recommendations are not new (e.g. Mitlin and Bartlett, 2018; Watson, 2014), the findings further reinforce the urgency of changing the dynamics of planning and policy in favelas from top-down to bottom-up, from specialist-led to community-led.

Finally, favela organisations' responses to the state necropolitics represent practice and underlying politics of life beyond the current pandemic's governance. It is practice because it refers to past, ongoing and new actions and ways of living present in everyday life in the favelas. It is politics since it also informs how favela organisations and leaders conduct their work and connect with other organisations and leaders experiencing similar realities. Ultimately, such practice and politics are part of a mode of existence, demonstrated in their discourse as they respond to the current pandemic. This mode of existence relies on generational, territorial and community knowledge and infrastructures to materialise actions. And it is characterised by a long-standing condition of interdependence and collective nature of the self, a way

of living and subjectivity ingrained in collectivity and care. The practice and politics of life happen horizontally in the territory of favelas, within and beyond imposed spatial boundaries, through the shared struggles and care intrinsic to these communities, made visible by the realities and nature of the governance of the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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Note

1. *Quilombos* were communities created as places of refuge and protection for enslaved Africans to escape bondage. These communities still exist, understood by Nascimento (1985) as more than a geographical space, but also as a living political practice of Black Brazilians.

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