The Myth of Personal Security: Criminal Gangs, Dispute Resolution, and Identity in Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of how drug traffickers resolve disputes and maintain order in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Much popular discourse and some scholarly studies argue that drug traffickers play a major role in controlling crime and minimizing conflicts there. This article shows that traffickers enforce community norms under a variable political calculus in which well-connected and respected residents are less likely to be punished for rule violations than are individuals who are marginal to the life of the community. This allows many favela residents who conform to local norms to feel a degree of control over their own safety, a “myth of personal security” in otherwise violent neighborhoods.

In the film Orfeu negro (Black Orpheus, 1959), a retelling of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice set in a fictional Rio de Janeiro favela (slum), a disturbing scene occurs. A man accused of raping a young girl is forced to leap to his death by Lucinho, the leader of the favela’s drug gang, while members of the community watch and voice their approval. This fictional portrayal of favela dispute resolution reinforces the widely held belief that traffickers are the de facto administrators of “justice” in Rio’s favelas. But even in this fictional portrayal, trafficker justice is nothing more than a myth. As the story progresses, the violence in the hands of the traffickers gradually turns against residents and ultimately, as the trafficker pursues his passions, results in Eurydice’s death. Lucinho is transformed into the character of Death and eventually is himself killed.

This story, part of an ongoing discourse about the role of traffickers in Rio’s favelas, illustrates an essential dilemma in the life of territorial criminals. As long as the residents of these tightly knit communities offer traffickers silence and protection, it is very difficult for state agents to penetrate the community and bring the criminals to justice. Unfortunately, the business of narcotics dealing (and, the makers of Orfeu would argue, the human and divine passions of the criminal) bring misery and suffering to residents not involved in the drug business. Regular shoot-outs between traffickers and police and other criminals, as well as assorted illegal activities, lead to murder rates in excess of 40 per
100,000 inhabitants in the city of Rio and much higher rates in some Rio favelas (Dowdney 2003, 112–13). Residents can seek the help of other traffickers or police to displace criminals who they believe endanger their lives, and these efforts can result in the expulsion and eventual murder of the traffickers. How, then, do traffickers maintain local support in the face of the overwhelming violence that their business brings to their communities?

Residents of favelas and the academics who study them suggest that traffickers maintain a degree of order in favelas by enforcing certain basic rules. The truth, however, is somewhat more complex. Traffickers do not enforce such rules uniformly. Instead, as shown by evidence from the favelas in this study, by skillfully providing for dispute resolution and maintaining local order with an eye to their political, social, and emotional relationships with residents, traffickers create a “myth of personal security” in which individual residents believe they can guarantee their own safety through their actions and political connections to traffickers. As this article will show, traffickers are less likely to punish respected and politically connected residents than those who are marginal to the political life of the favela community. This very specific process of maintaining order reflects broader trends of continuing reliance on hierarchical and personalistic relationships in Brazil’s political system and suggests that increased policing is unlikely to bring drug trafficking under control.

Over the last decade, Latin America has become the world’s most violent region (Tulchin and Fagan 2003, 13–29). High levels of fear and insecurity have led to profound social and political changes, ranging from increased reliance on private security guards and walled communities to calls for \textit{mano dura} policing and mass incarceration. As Teresa Caldeira has argued, stunning increases in violence have resulted in a social reaction that stymies democracy and limits basic rights (Caldeira 2000, 1–5; see also Rotker 2002, 236). None of those protections, of course, have reduced the violence, and, after huge expenditures, insecurity remains high among much of the population.

In the context of Rio de Janeiro, studies have shown that residents of favelas deal with their insecurity by relying on drug traffickers to resolve many neighborly disputes and enforce local norms. As Elizabeth Leeds notes, “The community as a whole benefits from the internal security system provided by the drug group. In most favelas and housing projects, robbery, rape, and other kinds of interpersonal violence are often met by equally violent reactions by the \textit{dono}, who may mete out his own form of justice” (Leeds 1996, 61; also see Barcelos 2003, 210–11, 215; Grynszpan 2004, 13). Donna Goldstein provides solid analysis of the types of punishments that traffickers use in their efforts to enforce local order (2003, 190–97).
While these works provide evidence of traffickers’ efforts to maintain order and resolve disputes, they have yet to provide a compelling analysis of the dynamics of how traffickers accomplish this or a nuanced interpretation of how trafficker efforts to maintain order fit into local favela politics. Building on Caldeira’s argument that narratives of exclusion and inclusion play a fundamental role in supporting Brazil’s “disjunctive democracy,” this study argues that the way traffickers maintain order plays an essential role in constituting the political identity of favela residents and reflects broader trends in the politics of insecurity in Brazil.

This study suggests that trafficker dispute resolution and crime control activities focus on building support in the particular segments of the favela community that traffickers depend on most, thereby ensuring that they maintain a critical base of support to guarantee their protection and safety. They do this by maintaining order in the favela through the context of narratives of reciprocity and respect, which are part of the tightly knit social networks that dominate favela life. They attempt to enforce local norms in the context of a political logic focused on respecting those residents who either follow norms or are closely associated with those who do. In this way, traffickers create an environment in which critical segments of the local population feel safe despite continuing high levels of violence. We call this sense of safety the “myth of personal security.” When traffickers crassly violate these norms, this myth is shattered, and residents will act against traffickers.

This article examines the mechanisms involved in the creation and maintenance of this myth through the analysis of specific examples of trafficker and resident interaction. It intends to show, furthermore, how these specific mechanisms used by traffickers and residents to increase perceptions of safety exemplify more general strategies of negotiation in contexts of inequality and oppression. In Brazil, where the right to security is not evenly distributed, these mechanisms used by favela residents can be seen as a reasonable means to navigate this inequality and provide for greater security. In a broader context, these examples demonstrate the hierarchical and personalistic nature of rights in Brazil. The right to security is reserved for certain groups and is secured through processes of demarcation of and membership in these groups. More than simply a favela practice, this selective marginalization permeates the politics of security in a variety of contexts.

More than six hundred favelas exist in Rio. This study focuses on five favelas of various sizes located in different parts of the city and reflects, from the perspective of general ethnographic work, a wide sample. That said, it should be noted that there is considerable variation among favelas in Rio, and the findings from this study should not be indiscriminately applied to all other favelas in the city. Rather, this study attempts to provide an outline for how the residents of some favelas in
the city discuss and act on the issue of personal security, an outline that can provide a model for other scholars to understand similar phenomena in other parts of Rio, Brazil, and Latin America.

Favela residents’ “myth of personal security” is constructed and maintained through discourse and interaction between residents and traffickers, particularly in three areas: definition of and adherence to favela norms; management of crime; and resolution of disputes. Using data from observations and interviews collected during three-and-a-half years of fieldwork in five different favelas in Rio de Janeiro between 1997 and 2001, this study examines the specifics of resident and trafficker interaction that contribute to and expose this “myth of personal security.” The favelas included in this study are Rocinha, an extremely large favela located in the wealthy southern zone; Tubarão and Ceuzinho, neighboring favelas with a total population of about 20,000, also in the southern zone; Santa Ana, a small favela of about 4,000 located near downtown; and Vigário Geral, a community of about 10,000, where police massacred 21 residents in 1993 and where, subsequently, a social movement emerged to control violence.2

EMOTIONAL DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICS OF PERSONAL SECURITY

In the context of the power and violence of drug traffickers, how do people who have no choice but to live in dangerous places deal with the ongoing fear of physical violence? How does this fear play out in the complex relationship between those who have control over the means of violence and those who do not? As Rossana Reguillo notes, “fear is not only a way of talking about the world, it is also a way of acting” (Reguillo 2002). The failure of civil society and the state to deal with these issues effectively, especially in the context of poor neighborhoods, has led to the emergence of localized strategies to maintain order that depend on criminals, often elevating them to the status of local heroes.3

Perceptions of insecurity have long had effects on political movements and institutions in Latin America. Manuel Garretón argues that order and domination under authoritarian regimes stemmed directly from how societies manufactured and tried to dissipate fear. The bureaucratic-authoritarian dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s built up fear in order to control populations (Garretón 1992, 13–16). Sofia Salimovich, Elizabeth Lira, and Eugenia Weinstein argue that during this period, reality and fantasy mixed together to create insecurities (Salimovich et al. 1992, 73–74).

The constant anxiety [of experiencing political repression] tended progressively to confuse the analysis of real risks and of the threat
to personal security. People devoted a major portion of their time to the attempt to control fear. With this goal personal activities and social participation became limited. (Salimovich et al. 1992, 89)

Indeed, under extremely high levels of repression, people were drawn inward to live almost exclusively within their families (Salimovich et al. 1992, 85). In the midst of the pervasive violence that characterized some of the later-twentieth-century authoritarian regimes, people held strongly to the hope that through individual actions, by withdrawing from the public sphere and carefully choosing friends and acquaintances, they could avoid violence against themselves. This, of course, does not mean that people realistically assessed their overall security or that their behavior made them safer. In reality, isolation may have put them in more danger, and probably only strengthened the authoritarian regimes that threatened them. Nevertheless, withdrawal, isolation, and the careful choice of friends and social activities designed to minimize chances of violence increased feelings of safety among these groups. Individuals’ collective activities, their perception of safety in a dangerous place, and the ways that they engage with those who have access to the means of violence affect how security operates in particular places. Internalized norms and practices, played out through social activities, influence political outcomes. These same dynamics operate in Rio’s favelas today.

**PERSONAL SECURITY IN THE FACE OF VIOLENCE**

The Brazilian police stand out even in Latin America for their use of lethal violence. Data from 1995 show that 9.3 percent (358) of all homicides in Rio de Janeiro were attributed to law enforcement officers, with most of these lethal confrontations occurring in favelas (Cano 1997, 32, 45). In 2003, homicides attributed to Rio’s police numbered 1,159 (Lemgruber 2004, 8). The concentration of homicides in favelas contributes to homicide rates eight times higher in the western and northern zones of the city (where most favelas are located) than in the wealthy southern zone. (Excellent data on homicide rates in Rio can be found on the Cesec website. See Cesec n.d.)

The situation that favela residents face is different from that which social actors faced under military regimes. Repression now takes place at the hands of violent social actors themselves, along with rogue police, who, through their involvement in the drug trade or its repression, visit huge amounts of violence on the communities least able to defend themselves. Thus, simply changing the ruling political regime has done little actually to improve security for much of the population. Rather,
where insecurity runs high, individual residents continue to focus on creating their own spaces of safety within their particular communities.

In her powerful book *Laughter Out of Place*, Goldstein provides an interesting perspective on how the disempowered deal with violence. She argues that extremely poor women living in one favela on Rio’s periphery use humorous stories and jokes to deal emotionally with the violence that surrounds them.

The protagonists in this ethnography find themselves at the bottom of a number of complex and interacting hierarchies, a situation that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to find their way out from under these oppressive structures in any straightforward manner. . . . Yet these women communicate in an oppositional aesthetic style—a constant form of spontaneous black humor—that seems to belie their everyday struggles. This black humor, one of the many offshoots described by Freud as intimately related to the human aggressive impulse and defined by Breton as the ability to find laughter in human tragedy, is significant because it is perhaps one of the few ways of escaping pain and human suffering. (Goldstein 2003, 15)

What Goldstein suggests is that favela residents overcome fear by devising emotional strategies to minimize the extent to which they feel afraid. When they work through stories and tell jokes, threats become more manageable and are brought to a human scale. In a similar way, favela residents also engage in discourses about violence and order, through which they perceive that they gain some control over the violence in their community. Goldstein’s approach builds on, and advances in complex new ways, Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ discussion of how poor women in Brazil’s Northeast use linguistic conventions to deal with the death of infants in an environment with extremely high child mortality rates (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 360–99). These practices, she argues, reinforce mortality rates. In the same way, while the discourse of Goldstein’s favela women may enable them to manage violence, these discourses ultimately leave this violence unchallenged, thus reinforcing it. As a result, emotional discourses in both settings lead to practices with substantial implications for mortality in particular communities.

For Goldstein, the support of criminals in favelas, local dependence on them to resolve problems, and the rejection of this strategy by other residents reflects the emergence of multiple oppositional cultures in favelas. Many favela residents confirm their rejection of the state’s treatment of them by offering support and protection to traffickers. Other residents, particularly women, who reject trafficker violence, register their dissent from these norms by joining evangelical churches (Goldstein 2003, 219). Traffickers, however, have a certain respect for evangelical Christians. Those who publicly take on the outward trappings of religious reform
(long pants and skirts, not drinking or taking drugs, and spending most social time in the homes of other members of their faith) often have a high degree of consideration in the favela. Indeed, conversion to a Pentecostal faith is one of the few ways that someone can safely leave the drug trade. Thus individual order and security in an unsafe environment are built out of choices the resident makes and how these choices affect the person’s participation in particular communities. People engage with the traffickers, be it through religious conversion or other changes in their behavior, in an emotional response to the violence they face and the lack of hope that the state will resolve the problem.

Caldeira has made similar observations about Brazil’s middle and upper classes. In a discriminatory democracy beset by rapid growth in violence and disorder, different groups have attempted to secure their own political and civic identities by differentiating themselves from other marginal social groups.

Crime and criminals are associated with the spaces that supposedly engender them, namely favelas and cortícios (tenements). . . . [F]avelas and cortícios are considered unclean and polluting. . . . Excluded from the universe of the proper, they are symbolically constituted as spaces of crime, spaces of anomalous, polluting, and dangerous qualities. (Caldeira 2000, 78–82)

She continues,

Predictably inhabitants of such spaces are also conceived of as marginal. . . . Their behavior is condemned: they are said to use bad words, to be immoral, to consume drugs, and so on. In a way, anything that breaks the patterns of propriety can be associated with criminals, crime, and its spaces. (2000, 78–82)

These distinctions are essential in overcoming individual insecurity: “To protect themselves they have to rely on their own means of isolation, control, separation, and distancing. In order to feel safe, that is, they have to build walls” (2000, 101). While the well-off build fortified enclaves, Caldeira argues, their newfound fear of the poor leads them to advocate policing and penal policies that criminalize the poor and give police a free hand to use high levels of violence against “marginal” elements of the population (2000, 210). For Caldeira, then, these distinctions and discriminations result in high levels of human rights abuse and prevent democracy from deepening.

Caldeira and Goldstein are describing similar processes. Caldeira’s Paulistanos and Goldstein’s favela residents both use emotional strategies to frame the social context of violence in their communities in such a way that some classes of individuals are excluded from that violence and other groups are responsible for it. Through discourses focused on
differentiation, particular individuals, and the safety of specific spaces as opposed to the more dangerous city at large, these two groups create a sense of safety in dangerous places. The specific strategies they use focus on distinguishing themselves from other groups that they see as truly dangerous.

**CONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF PERSONAL SECURITY**

As the focus of much discourse on marginality, favela residents face special challenges in distinguishing themselves in such a way as to feel secure in their surroundings. If they are marginal to the discourse of society at large and, as a result, subject to high levels of police violence, favela residents need to find different ways not to be marginal. One major strategy they use is to invert the social order by decrying police violence and suggesting that the traffickers with whom they have to live provide a higher degree of security in their community than exists in surrounding areas. Thus the favela, seen as dangerous and marginal by society as a whole, is seen as a place of refuge and safety by its residents.

Maintaining this view in the midst of all the violence from both police and traffickers, however, is a tall order. The perception of the favela as a safe place arguably depends on the creation and maintenance of certain beliefs about social relations there, particularly between traffickers and other residents. The degree of safety that residents perceive in favelas is tied heavily to the specific ways that residents and traffickers interact. The perceptions of safety that make up the basis of the myth of personal security rely on the assumption that the use of violence in these interactions is reserved for specific acts or persons understood as marginal. Using the same techniques of differentiation that Caldeira argues are used in middle-class neighborhoods, favela residents establish their nonmarginality through the “marginalization” of other people. Someone with respect or connections in the favela is not marginal; someone who is unconnected or who engages in certain types of behavior becomes marginal.

**Discourse, Violence, and Favela Norms**

Perhaps the most complex question facing researchers who study favelas today is the nature of the norms that govern local social life. The huge influx of drugs and high-powered weapons into these communities over the last generation has, in many ways, both built on and destroyed the bases of the communal structures that governed favela social life between the 1950s (when residents’ associations, *associações*...
de moradores, or AMs, began to form) and the early 1980s, when local organizing reached the peak of its power in making demands on the state government. During this period, AM leaders resolved conflicts through systems of legal reasoning internal to favelas and presided over dramatic mutirão (cooperative building) projects that provided basic infrastructure to these places (on dispute resolution see Santos 1995). The norms and institutions that governed favela life during this period emerged from a combination of the historical norms of poor communities in Rio, the role of populist politicians in channeling funding to particular client communities, and the activities of the Catholic Church’s Pastoral de favelas.

Of course, this whole system began to unravel as drug traffickers’ power grew and criminals built ties to politicians and developed a larger role within the favelas. The startling increases in violence over the 1980s and 1990s dramatically transformed the institutional life of favelas as many nonprofits pulled out, AMs developed close relations with traffickers, the Catholic Church’s role shrank, and the political role of evangelical churches grew. These changes established a new set of dispute resolution practices which, once again, overlaid a history of continuing local customs.

Before the 1980s, drug trafficking played only a minor role in Rio’s favelas. The most important criminals operating in favelas engaged in a number of other illegal activities, including, above all, the jogo do bicho (animal game, numbers game), which has long funded the city’s most important samba schools. Drug traffickers, for the most part, dealt in marijuana and were lightly armed, carrying knives, navalhas (straight-edged razors), and, occasionally, 38-caliber revolvers (Dowdney 2003, 27–28).

This all began to change in the mid-1980s with emergence of Rio as a transshipment hub for Andean cocaine en route to Europe and North America (Gay 2005, 55). As narcotics poured into the city, small-time drug dealers rapidly gained access to heavier arms and began to compete vigorously over control of increasingly valuable bocas de fumo (literally “mouths of smoke,” drug sale points). Those criminals who possessed the best organizations generally fared better during this period, and drug dealing consolidated over the next ten years under the umbrella of a handful of prison-based facções (factions). The most prominent of these was the Comando Vermelho (Red Command), a gang that had formed in the Ilha Grande Prison during the waning years of Brazil’s military dictatorship (Dowdney 2003, 29–32; also see Gay 2005, 55–56).

Despite the consolidation of gangs into the large facções, most of the power has remained concentrated in the gangs that dominate particular favelas (Dowdney 2003, 46). These organizations have historically provided favela residents with some minimal social services, such as financial assistance for funerals, water service, and vans to take residents to and from stores and hospitals (Gay 2005, 56; Arias 2004, 3).
Residents have also expected these gangs to maintain some semblance of order. In practice, however, the types and extent of the services have depended heavily on the particular drug traffickers who led the gangs. In addition, there is some evidence that with declines in the resources available to drug traffickers, and with generational changes that have brought to leadership positions dealers with few ties to local favela communities, the gangs have curtailed some of these services.

At the heart of today's favela norms is the lei do silêncio (law of silence). This lei essentially says that residents of favelas should not publicly discuss crimes or acts of violence that take place in the favela that can be linked to traffickers. Underlying the lei do silêncio is an understanding that traffickers will severely punish those who disclose their activities to the police. In practice, the lei do silêncio is far from perfectly enforced. Because favelas are tightly knit, closed, and closely related communities, an attack on one resident can create antipathy toward traffickers from the victim's friends, family, and neighbors. Traffickers must be sensitive to residents' concerns and create a sense of order without alienating the population. In this process, traffickers and other favela residents are very concerned with specific relationships to individuals and those persons' historical behavior.

Residents of favelas spend a large amount of time talking about local violence among themselves. As a result, the lei is honored more in the breach than in practice. This can be seen clearly in an interaction with an older woman and a representative of the local AM in the favela of Tubarão. Responding to an interview request from a researcher, the woman said,

I won't talk about the AM because it has been sold out (esta vendido). Nothing in the community should be sold to anyone. The community shouldn't have an owner but now it does. Bernardo [the president of Tubarão's AM] makes it pretty (bonito) for him [the dono; literally, owner]. Talking about the community could get you in jail. It is very dangerous. . . . There is lots of stuff that you can't talk about and I will only talk about things if I can talk about all of it. (Zinha and César 1998)

Zinha made this statement in front of César, the representative of the AM, who had introduced us, almost as if she were challenging him to respond. She believed that the affiliation between Bernardo, the AM president, and the community's “owner,” or dono (a common way Cariocas refer to the head trafficker in a favela) created a situation in which she did not feel comfortable discussing how the community worked. In this statement Zinha publicly honors the law of silence in refusing to speak about the close relationship between the drug trafficker and the president of the AM, but at the same time uses the statement to
denounce this relationship to an outsider. Despite stating the open secret of Bernardo’s relationship with the trafficker, Zinha incurs no punishment. Zinha is safe because she is a respected older woman and proves her position and safety in the community by publicly talking about its secrets.

Residents regularly discuss violence and push the envelope of what can and cannot be said in order to reinforce their own ideas of their safety. When someone is killed, residents of the favela incessantly discuss the murder. The conversations usually hover around the issue of the deceased’s often tenuous involvement in trafficking. By talking about violence and finding explanations for murders, residents help to normalize events and augment their feelings of personal safety.

A story from one resident of Vigário Geral elaborates on this analysis. Visiting with a longtime resident from one of the poorest parts of the favela late one Saturday night, our discussion turned to trafficker violence. From late 1996 to mid-1999, Vigário experienced a peaceful period. Recalling the brutality of the earlier period, following the 1993 massacre, the resident remembered one particular murder. Another favela resident was friendly with a man from outside the favela who worked for the police as a clerk. The man was not a police officer, but simply did paperwork; he was essentially a government bureaucrat. His job did not pay much, however, so he started a small business selling beach sandals in Vigário. Seeing that his friend, the Vigário resident, was also short of cash, he “took his friend . . . to the factory [where he purchased his supplies] and said he could sell flip-flops but not in Vigário because it was his territory.” Eventually the Vigário resident decided he wanted the whole business and arranged for the murder of his partner by spreading rumors that his partner was an X-9 (informant) for the police. Soon afterward, on one of the man’s trips to the favela, the traffickers had him killed. Eventually the truth came out, however, and the traffickers forced the resident to leave the favela (Evanildo 1998).

This story shows the other side of the rule that protected Zinha from punishment for talking about trafficker behavior. An older, well-connected woman can speak her mind about the problems in the favela with little risk of violence against her. A young, poorly connected man with a suspect job, on the other hand, risks being killed on the basis of a spurious allegation, since his lack of contacts in the community means that traffickers will have to deal with very few local political problems as a result of the homicide.

Favela ethics, however, go beyond the lei do silêncio. Marcos Alvito has written that in one Rio favela, residents distinguished between “good” traffickers and “bad” traffickers by the way traffickers respected local understandings of honor and reciprocity. Good traffickers, he writes, protected women from sexual assault, did not involve children
in drug dealing, and generally did their best to prevent residents from suffering from the effects of the drug trade. The traffickers, he notes, set up certain places where addicts could use drugs and prohibited them from consuming drugs in other places (Alvito 1996, 148–58). Further, residents expected traffickers to maintain order, resolve disputes, prevent theft, and distribute certain basic goods to the community. Although all traffickers did not do this at all times, traffickers who made a habit of doing these things with some regularity would generally maintain a higher level of support among residents. This is also reflected in residents’ memories and statements about past traffickers. Comments of residents of Rocinha and Vigário Geral, as well as reports about traffickers in Acari, Vigário, and Santa Marta testify to the support received by traffickers who publicly maintained basic local norms (Alvito 2001, 219–46; Weffort 1991, 20).

Rules, however, are flexible. Jorginho, an ex-trafficker from Tubarão, stated, “the basis of the law [of the hill] is your respect in the community.” He continued, “respect is based on whether you drink, smoke [marijuana], sniff [cocaine] in public or go after women who aren’t your own. . . . Those who do not do these things earn the respect of other residents. Those who engage in these activities lose respect.” It is notable that men and women who hold positions of respect in favelas are rarely seen drinking at the innumerable bars that dot community streets. Jorginho said, “it would appear as if this was not a big deal but it is. . . . If you get yourself in trouble but are respected no one will do anything to you. If you get yourself in trouble but are not respected people might beat you up” (Jorginho 2001). This perspective was echoed in the statements of Joselino, an Evangelical Christian and lifelong resident of Santa Ana: “many in the community are complicit because they have fear,” but “as long as traffickers respect you, you have no problem. To maintain respect it is necessary that you don’t become involved in drugs.” Asked if those who have recently moved to the favela also have respect, Joselino said, “If a resident has lived in the community five years he has just as much ability to deal with the traffickers as long as they have respect” (Joselino 1997).

Different categories of residents, however, have more prestige than others. The trabalhador (worker), pai de família (family man), or mulher de idade (older woman) generally has more protection than a viciado (addict), bebado (drunk), or vagabundo (criminal, bum). Residents express a high degree of anger when someone from a respected category is injured in conflicts, whereas they express a smaller amount of concern when someone from a less respected category is hurt. As shown in the story about the murder of the police clerk in Vigário, traffickers are more likely to kill someone from a less respected group than a well-connected resident.
Discussion also plays an important role in preparing a community for a murder or some other type of violation of local norms. Jorginho, the former trafficker, noted, “When traffickers want to kill someone people begin to talk about it. . . . ‘Jorginho is going to die,’ they say, or ‘they are going to get Tiago.’ . . . Everyone on the hill talks about it…. The idea passes from one person to another” until it gets back to the person they intend to kill (Jorginho 2001). Through a process of discussion, traffickers prepare the community for the murder and explain why a particular person is likely to be killed. These conversations and stories make those who will be killed marginal to the favela. Through them, residents develop understandings that reduce their fear of the violence by considering why traffickers will kill a particular person. These discourses fail, however, when traffickers act well outside the local ethical framework or murders follow no specific logic that residents can use to understand them, or understand how they can protect themselves from that type of violence.

Traffickers implement rules inconsistently but within a political discourse focused on defusing tensions and shoring up support among particular groups in the community. Thus traffickers will pay more than lip service to favela norms, but in significant cases will violate those norms to undertake other actions that may support their political position. In compensation, traffickers will publicly support local norms and undertake other concrete actions to build resident support.

**Crime Management**

While the specifics of trafficker involvement in activities of crime management varied from place to place, there was consensus among the residents in each of the communities studied that traffickers were either partially or wholly responsible for crime management. As one favela resident put it, “we live in a state within a state . . . the law that operates is the ‘law without law.’ That is the law of the other side, that of the traffickers. If people have a problem they go to them” (Lucas 2000). Or, as one favela AM president closely associated with traffickers said, “We are the government here” (Sérgio 1996).

The “governance” activity of criminals is generally divided into three areas: punishment related to drug trafficking; control of other criminal activities, such as theft and rape; and keeping order by, for example, calming domestic violence or breaking up street fighting. Trafficker reactions to residents’ behavior in these three areas and residents’ knowledge of these reactions amounts to a general set of “rules” regarding appropriate behavior in the favela; that is, behavior that would avoid trafficker involvement. As one resident explained, “we know our obligations, what to do so that it [violence against them from traffickers]
does not happen” (Danilo 2000a). In using the concept of obligations, this resident works within the logic of patron-client relations. Just like the rural peasant living on the dono’s land, the favela resident lives with certain obligations to the dono of the favela.

Residents are expected not to steal from other residents or from residents of surrounding communities. Rape and other extreme violence against women and children is also prohibited. Causing public “confusion” (disorder) by heavy drinking, harassment, or fighting is also not allowed. Anyone owing a debt to traffickers or interfering with trafficking is punished.

Residents’ understanding of punishment for breaking the rules varied. Robbery, for example, could bring about a range of punishments. One Rocinha resident said, “in the case of robbery, they come in for sure to wipe out [the offender], they don’t want to know [the details]. Or they kill or beat up [the offender]” (Cosme 2000). Another colorfully added, “the first time they are likely to hear both sides and just talk . . . the second time they are called [results in a] surra [beating] and the third time it would be to detonar [“go off,” or brutally and explosively attack]” (Virginia 2000a). A third agreed: “it is not that nothing is ever stolen, but if that person is found, he is killed” (Sérgio 2000). To summarize this perception, one succinctly added, “if one robs, he will die” (Solange 2000). While death was mentioned as a possible sanction for stealing, beating seemed to be more common. Examples of sanctions for robbery recounted during the course of the research were beatings with bricks, forcing an accused thief to walk the length of an open sewage canal while being beaten with rocks and sticks, and cutting off of the ears or hands of accused thieves.

Punishments varied with the crime. Penalties for rape were severe. This was graphically noted by one female Rocinha resident during a focus group: “their way [of punishing rape] is terrible. They take a broomstick and put it up [the accused’s anus] . . . or order [the rapist] walk in a bra and underwear through the entire favela, being beaten up by everyone. They shoot [the rapist] in the leg, in the arm . . . usually they don’t use bullets, but beat [him] up” (Solange 2000). For other offenses, such as domestic violence, fighting in public, and harassment, punishments were less severe, ranging from beatings and house arrest to a “talking to.” Punishment of drug-related offenses, specifically stealing drugs, not paying incurred debt, or informing on traffickers to the police, was always severe, usually death.

Beyond knowledge of punishments for breaking “the rules,” residents had clear notions of how traffickers enforced them. There was a general understanding that the traffickers would “judge” an offender. The following explanation offered by Danilo, a 19-year-old male resident, makes this clear.
For example, like this: [I do] something bad. They are going to go after me. If they think that, if they can say something to frighten me so that I don’t do that anymore, they are going to talk to me, friendly-like (numa boa) and let me go home. If they do not know what to do, if they do not know how they should act, certainly they are going to take me and bring me up [to the top of the hill] so that the boss (chefé) can decide. [The boss] is going to hear [my] story from the mouth of the traffickers themselves, he is not going to hear it from [my] mouth and he will decide what he is going to do. If he is going to recommend that [I] no longer do it, to frighten [me], so that [I] start to walk a straight line (andar legalzinho na linha), or if he is going to order something done [to me]. (Danilo 2000b)

This idea of passing judgment was confirmed by other favela residents. Cosme, a 24-year-old male resident, put it this way:

[H]e [the trafficker] is going to analyze [the case] and see who is right and who is wrong . . . he is going to see and argue, this, this and this happened. And he is going to try to find out with the other person [involved in the case] what is going on . . . within his judgment and from hearing from other people, he is going to analyze [the case]. (Cosme 2000)

Lucas, another male resident, also emphasized that traffickers pass judgment, even using the term verdict to describe the trafficker’s decision.

[W]hen somebody errs, he [a trafficker] takes him to the boss (chefé). Then the boss, who is in command, has to know what is going on. So they [the traffickers] take the person [to the boss] in order to analyze the case. . . . So then he [the boss] gives the verdict. (Lucas 2000)

The premise of these accounts is that traffickers’ actions are not arbitrary or based on personal reasons, but based on some notion of right and wrong that conforms to shared beliefs about criminal behavior. Residents’ understanding of these rules and their enforcement amounts to a general code of conduct for the favela. While adherence to these rules is not an absolute guarantee of one’s safety, it provides residents with a perceived level of predictability and security in an area known for high rates of violence, contributing to the “myth of personal security.” That is, if one follows these rules, the chances of becoming the object of trafficker violence are minimal.

Another important characteristic of these observations is the clear effort by traffickers to build political support for their decisions. For example, Danilo notes that traffickers will generally approach in a friendly way (numa boa) when opening a discussion about rules enforcement. It is further clear from both statements that residents perceive that traffickers will
listen to both sides of the story before pronouncing judgments and that traffickers give serious thought to their decisions.

Residents’ combined perception of traffickers as seemingly friendly and open when discussing local issues and introspective in deciding punishments resonates with Boaventura Santos’s observations of how AM leaders in the 1970s approached favela dispute resolution. Santos notes that AM leaders had little sanctioning power, and instead relied on arguments, claims of knowledge, and threats to gain residents’ compliance (Santos 1995, 242–46). While traffickers clearly have more resources at their disposal to force residents to comply with their decisions, the residents’ statements quoted here indicate that they attempt to work within a framework of outward friendship and listening to gain compliance. The reason for this is the necessity of maintaining resident support. If traffickers behaved otherwise, it could undermine their position in these tightly knit communities.

Although residents have clear ideas about these rules and how and when they are applied, actual enforcement often directly contradicts residents’ expressed understandings. Punishments are at times negotiable, and traffickers’ actions are often conditioned by social relationships with residents. For example, the traffickers’ armed guards, the “soldiers” of Rocinha, were called to a residence to break up a domestic dispute in October 1999. Marcos, a 14-year-old resident, was threatening his uncle with a knife. According to neighbors, Marcos was angry because his uncle had confronted him about the robbery of some CDs, a cell phone, and beauty products on consignment for sale from the house. The “soldiers” refrained from beating Marcos, at his aunt’s request. None of the family mentioned the robbery to the traffickers. The traffickers ordered Marcos to pack his things and leave his aunt’s house. The traffickers were called to the residence a second time, around Christmas the same year, because Marcos had been accused of stealing from another area of Rocinha. According to neighbors, the stolen goods were in his house, but the traffickers did not search it because other neighbors vouched for Marcos’s whereabouts on the night in question (Field notes 1999; 2000).

In another instance, the punishment for theft was negotiated down to a lesser sanction. Reynaldo, a 25-year-old resident, was stopped on the way home from work and taken to the chefe. He was informed that his nephew had stolen a cellular phone and, when found, would get his hand chopped off. Reynaldo negotiated with the traffickers to reduce the punishment for his nephew, who actually was his brother’s stepson. The traffickers agreed to set the nephew’s hand on fire instead, and not to exact any punishment from the rest of the family. This penalty was not actually carried out, because the family moved out of Rocinha that night. Reynaldo’s sister-in-law was aware that her son was getting into
trouble and had arranged the move to avoid just such an incident, apparently none too soon.

Commenting on an incident in Tubarão, one resident made clear that different people were punished in different ways. In April 1999, one of the authors of this study discovered that a can of potato chips and a digital alarm clock had been stolen from the room he was renting. His landlady was the wife of an imprisoned drug trafficker, and the room was in the home of the father of another, important trafficker. After making some inquiries into the theft, the researcher made clear to neighbors that he was not interested in any form of retribution for the crime but simply wanted it not to happen again. Later, when the lease was about up, the researcher ran into the landlady and, for reasons unrelated to the theft, said he was not interested in renting the room again. The woman replied that if the researcher was concerned about the theft, the traffickers had caught a boy who had been stealing and led him away with his hands tied. Later the researcher, talking with a contact, expressed concern that his comments may have led to the boy’s punishment. The contact assured him not to worry about it. The boy was from the other side of the favela and had nothing to do with the theft of the researcher’s belongings. That robbery, said the resident, had probably been committed by a boy who lived in the same house and was a nephew of one of the important drug traffickers in the favela; as a result of his connections, nothing would happen to him (Arnaud 1999).

These observations about the role of respect in punishments are confirmed by one event in Ceuzinho. After an AM meeting, one researcher ran across traffickers brutally beating a man accused of rape in front of a crowd. Later a distraught Jorge, a former Ceuzhino AM president, who also witnessed the beating, said, “the guy is a drunk who loses himself but isn’t a rapist,” noting, “he will probably get himself killed” (Alexandre and Jorge 1999). Jorge was also a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Clearly, one of the factors affecting this attack was the man’s alcoholism.

Even in the extreme case of sexual assault, trafficker punishments are haphazard and based in personal connections. One winter afternoon Amália, a very poor woman, told the following troubling story. Amália was the mother of a trafficker’s child, but had broken off their relationship after he went to jail. She told the tale while manicuring the fingernails of her close friend Elizete, a former occasional drug dealer, ex-convict, and now-divorced wife of a member of a powerful local drug-trafficking family.

Amália: I was attacked by ten of the jiu-jitsu boys [informal gangs who practiced this martial art]. They grabbed me, they sucked my tits and stuck their fingers in me but didn’t do anything to me. I had been bothered by them before back when I was with Lucio [her ex-
boyfriend] and he would talk to them. Things got so bad with them, the feud (rixa) between the traffickers and the jiu-jitsu boys that Lucio fired bullets into their little school and ended that little school of theirs. It’s not like this now. They assault women all the time and the traffickers don’t do much about it. I was assaulted one night while I was drinking. I was upset and went home. One of their girlfriends asked me not to say anything so I didn’t. The next day my aunt went to complain.

*Interviewer:* To whom? The police?

*Amália:* No, not the police, I would be afraid to do that. We went to the *comando*. They talked to the guys but they said that I had been drinking and that I had asked for it. The *comando* agreed with them and said that I had been drinking and had drunk away my conscience, that I had asked for that. I told them that I drink with my mouth not my conscience but they didn’t do anything. (Amália and Elizete 2005)

This story demonstrates several important points about the personalistic nature of trafficker punishment. The first is that the traffickers used Amália’s status as a drinker and possible drug abuser as justification to deem her story less credible than that of the men who assaulted her. The second is that the current traffickers seemed generally unwilling to resolve this type of problem. According to Amália, these men do this often, but the traffickers have not moved against them. This may reflect something specific about this current group of traffickers and their relationship to this particular group of men in the community, or it may reflect a broader generational shift among Rio traffickers and a decreasing concern with maintaining order (this interview was conducted in 2005, as opposed to the late 1990s). Perhaps most important is Amália’s relationship with Lucio, who previously had protected her from these types of problems through the use of force. Now she was not involved with him and, without that personal connection to a powerful local trafficker, the other traffickers were unwilling to take her side in a dispute with this group of men.

These stories show that well-connected residents, or those whom respected residents will vouch for, are not likely to receive punishments for the crimes they commit. Traffickers will create exceptions or otherwise ignore what these residents do out of respect for the people willing to testify in favor of the accused or account for their movements. The reason for this is simple. If someone is willing to come to the aid of the suspect, or if the suspect is well connected to powerful criminals, hurting or killing the suspect will lead to greater animosity in the community against the traffickers who enforce the rules. In general, then, those most likely to suffer punishment are those least connected to the
community and those who individually, as in the case of an alcoholic, have the least respect.

Residents vacillate between affirming that traffickers “judge” and pointing out that rule enforcement is arbitrary and individualistic. In a large favela, such as Rocinha, gerentes (managers) at the middle level of the drug hierarchy are responsible for drug sales and distribution in specific areas. They are also expected to handle crime control and maintain order in those areas. Approaches to rule enforcement differ among these gerentes and even among individual traffickers in the same area. Residents made distinctions between traffickers who were “calm,” or willing to resolve conflict through discussion, and those who were “sinister,” or cheio de marra (full of courage) and willing to use violence. In the example of Marcos, neighbors commented that he was lucky that “calm” soldiers came rather than one particular soldier who was known for resolving such incidents through violence (Field notes 1999).

Although the enforcement of these rules may have been contextualized by social relations in the favela, the rules themselves are based on beliefs and values shared by both residents and traffickers. Stealing, rape, and public disorder are disapproved of not just by the traffickers but also by residents. Residents perceive those punished by traffickers as deserving of their pain. In the example of Reynaldo’s nephew, Reynaldo told the traffickers that if he knew where his nephew was, he would turn him in himself, because “there will be no thieves in my family” (Reynaldo 2001). In addition, residents approve of the low levels of theft and assault created by this enforcement; many mentioned that they “feel safer here in Rocinha than outside [Rocinha]” (Cosme 2000). One resident active in community projects commented, “Here you do not have to lock your door and [you] can hang your clothes on the line without worrying about someone taking anything.” Referring to severe forms of trafficker punishment for stealing, this resident added, “it is the way to be sure that not everyone is stealing everything” (Sérgio 2000).

An older woman, who had raised four daughters in the favela and had supported the traffickers’ efforts, said she never worried about anything happening to her daughters in the favela (Regina 2000).

**Dispute Resolution**

Residents often seek out traffickers to solve disputes with other residents. Most of these conflicts are over construction, property ownership and rentals, or neighbor relations. Recourse to traffickers in these disputes is particularly telling of traffickers’ authority in conflict resolution, because other agencies often exist to handle such disputes. Rocinha, for example, has three AMs, a municipal regional administrative office, a legal aid project, and a small claims court where residents can go to
resolve civil disputes. Residents mention that going to the traffickers is “something more certain, quick and efficient. Or [the other person] does [what the trafficker says] or dies” (Solange 2000). Community agencies, especially the AMs or the municipal administrative region, are sought after to resolve these disputes, but lack the ability to enforce decisions. Yet in spite of the general recognition of a trafficker role in these disputes, traffickers rarely intervene in such cases. Often the traffickers send residents to other agencies, such as the residents’ association or, in some cases, even the legal system.

Trafficker involvement in resolving these types of disputes, then, is often just symbolic. It is common for one party in a conflict to threaten to seek out trafficker intervention, saying that he or she would “call in the guys (caras).” The credibility of this threat depends on both the relationship between the parties in conflict and the relationship the threatening party has with the traffickers. For example, a threat to solicit trafficker intervention from someone involved with drug trafficking is usually more credible than a similar threat from someone not connected to traffickers. Invoking the threat of seeking trafficker intervention, especially when residents deem the threat credible, often helps get the other party to resolve the dispute.

When traffickers do intervene in such cases, they take pains to ensure that their intervention further legitimizes their authority by seeming impartial and conforming to local norms. For example, traffickers decided to mediate a dispute in which two residents had been sold the same house; they did so partly to preempt a violent resolution by marginal members of the trafficking gang. Concerned about the repercussions of allowing the case to be resolved by “mercenary” factions, the dono communicated to his gang that traffickers would broker a peaceful solution. As the trafficker who handled the mediation explained to the two parties in the dispute,

[T]his is why I want you to come to an agreement, because those people [the mercenary element], myself for example, I would [not] do something like that, but there are guys there along [the canal, at the drug sale point], because they need the money to snort [cocaine], they will kill [for anything] and then abscond. So then it happens, it becomes a vicious circle, why? Because if they kill you [two], the boss will want to kill them . . . we know that you [two] are [working people] (trabalhadores), are honest people, so we want you [two] to come to an agreement. . . . (Paraphrase of comments by Claudio, as related by Solange 1999)

The unjustified killing of “honest” people falls outside the code of conduct understood by both traffickers and residents. The trafficker takes pains to valorize workers over other traffickers and to create a situation in which workers will not get killed. However, the trafficker sug-
gests that if the residents do not come to an agreement, they themselves will lose their standing as *trabalhdores* and become criminals. At this point it would be within local norms for the residents to be killed. The trafficker, in this statement, is pointing out that he does not want that, because it could create a “vicious circle” leading to escalating violence, which could undermine his own position in the favela.

In a large favela like Rocinha, where other agencies are available to intervene, traffickers’ decision to get involved in noncriminal conflicts also becomes strategic. One such example is the case of Joseleni, who wanted to evict a tenant for failing to pay rent. The tenant, a low-level drug dealer, sought trafficker intervention. Rather than decide the case, the traffickers, on hearing that Joseleni had begun legal proceedings, told the parties that they would let the court decide. The rationale, as Joseleni’s godson explains, was the following:

> He [the trafficker deciding the case] knows that she [the tenant] is wrong and in consideration of her [the tenant], he did everything [not to decide the case], that is, he “washed his hands.” He was not favorable to my godmother [Joseleni], who in this case was right, and also did not want to offend his acquaintance. That is, whatever the courts decide is fine. (Cosme 2000)

Siding with the tenant for personal reasons would have conflicted with the understanding that traffickers are “impartial judges” in these cases; but the trafficker did not want to act against a personal acquaintance either. The availability of other means of dispute resolution in Rocinha frees traffickers from acting in situations in which their legitimacy could be compromised.

**BREAKING DOWN THE MYTH: LOSS OF LEGITIMACY**

In general, resident-trafficker relations are built on a mutual understanding of a set of rules of conduct and an expectation that these rules will be enforced in deference to certain groups of residents. When trafficker violence falls outside these norms, the incidents provoke anger and outrage (*revolta*) among residents. It is in these moments that the coercive force underlying trafficker power is most clearly revealed.

A clear example is the murder of a teenage girl by her trafficker boyfriend in Rocinha one April morning in 2001. The murder was motivated by the girl’s alleged infidelity, and it occurred at the boyfriend’s house, where the girl had stopped to visit. After the incident, the boy fled the scene, and other traffickers secured the area, prohibiting the girl’s family from seeing or touching the body and firefighters (the agency usu-
ally called in to remove a corpse) or anyone else from entering the house. The traffickers continued to deny everyone access to the body until well into the afternoon, when they moved it to the entrance of Rocinha, where firefighters promptly removed it. Residents expressed outrage at the traffickers’ behavior. One 30-year-old female resident who knew the girl said that she “could not believe that they [the traffickers] did not even allow the family access to the body” (Virginia 2001).

Usually such incidents provoke no more than negative comments and outrage on the part of residents. When trafficker actions are consistently seen as an abuse of power that affects protected groups of residents, however, traffickers risk losing their limited legitimacy. Residents may respond with public protests that provoke a police response or, more often, efforts by some residents to help a rival group of traffickers take power in the community.

The politics of trafficker dispute resolution focus intensely on maintaining support among the critical segment of the population closest to drug dealers. This group has a large amount of information about criminal activity and could prove threatening to traffickers should they decide to pass that information to police or rival criminals. The story of the police massacre in Vigário Geral provides one illustration of how this happens. The murder of 21 residents on the night of August 29, 1993 was conducted in supposed retaliation for the murder of several police officers by traffickers the night before. Knowing that they had provoked the police, the traffickers warned residents of the impending trouble and then went into hiding outside the community. Without the traffickers to return fire, nothing restricted police access. Of those who died in the massacre, some were Evangelical Christians, some were young children, and others were soccer fans who had stayed out that night celebrating Brazil’s victory in a World Cup qualifying match. None were traffickers.

The next day, as residents coped with the enormity of their loss, they turned first on the traffickers and, in a stunning display of courage, walked up to traffickers, took their weapons from their hands, and threw them on the ground. Politically weakened and lacking local support, traffickers allowed residents to organize to promote peace in the community. Three years later, this led to a police occupation and the exile of the favela’s traffickers to other parts of the city, where, within a year and without the protection afforded by the community, most were murdered by the police.

On the afternoon of March 10, 1998, a group of police raided the favela of Santa Ana, in one of a continuing series of attacks designed to apprehend low-level traffickers. Seeing the police coming into the favela, the traffickers fled up the main street. The police responded by opening fire, and a bullet struck Nelsinho, a middle-aged pai de família,
in the head. Residents quickly surrounded the police and began screaming, and threatening to attack them. The police fired in the air to disperse the crowd, but failed. Eventually cooler heads prevailed, and the police left the favela with the ambulance that took Nelsinho to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead. Residents then walked out of the favela and blocked a major roadway in the city. The next day the killing and protest made the papers.

For months, residents had been upset about the presence of traffickers in the street. Many believed that the regular police raids this provoked would eventually lead to shootings in this highly frequented area of the community. After the killing of Nelsinho, Joselino, long-time resident known to be a serious business owner as well as a devoted father, talked to the head trafficker and demanded that he move the drug sale point to a safer location. In the interest of preserving safety in the community, the traffickers complied with the resident’s request.

In 1986, a drug trafficker operating in the favela of Tubarão became paranoid and began to threaten and expel residents from the community. Eventually his paranoia grew so deep that he expelled the president and vice president of the local AM. The angry vice president brokered an agreement with a powerful, expanding drug gang and, with the support of other residents, facilitated their takeover of the community, forcing out the original trafficker.

On the evening of May 20, 2000, a group of police murdered five residents of the Ceuzinho favela. While the police declared that those killed were drug traffickers, residents claimed they were not, and rioted in the streets. Film of the riot was broadcast on national television. The murder of these residents allowed one local leader to work with state officials to implement an innovative community policing program, which resulted in a long-term police occupation that significantly interfered with trafficking (Arias 2004, 21).

During the first months of 2000, residents of Rocinha criticized traffickers after multiple robberies occurred at the local branch of BANERJ (Bank of the State of Rio de Janeiro) and other commercial establishments. Residents complained that traffickers were not “doing their job” and were “being made fools of by outside criminals” (Virginia 2000b). Traffickers, failing to control this crime, embarrassed themselves and showed that they could not adequately protect the community. If they could not protect a single bank, residents reasoned, how could they protect the homes where people lived?

Each of these vignettes shows that when drug traffickers fail to control violence to residents’ satisfaction, they face serious challenges to their power. With one exception, all the stories show that when drug traffickers, or police responding to trafficker activities, kill or hurt residents who are not involved with trafficking, residents will take some action
against traffickers, demand reforms in traffickers’ behavior, or engage in protests that attract unwanted attention to the favela. As the case from Santa Ana makes clear, although the police killed Nelsinho, the residents allotted a certain degree of blame to traffickers and demanded that they relocate their sales area in order to stave off further retaliation.

These stories also show, however, that residents will hold traffickers accountable in these circumstances by making demands on them or, in some cases, collaborating with police to establish some degree of positive state presence in the community. In the case of Vigário, this led to the expulsion of traffickers from the favela and their eventual murder. The Tubarão case tells a slightly different story. There, residents became so angered with the unpredictability of one trafficker’s behavior that they chose to work with other traffickers to depose one set of criminals and bring in a new one. All of this shows the reverse side of trafficker efforts to maintain order and resolve disputes.

The evidence presented here suggests that while residents perceive a degree of regularity in trafficker behavior, trafficker dispute resolution and efforts to maintain order fluctuate depending on who is being punished or who is demanding redress. The implementation of these rules varies significantly according to the particular status of the individual in the community. As Jorginho and Joselino mentioned above, if someone has respect in the community, they are unlikely to be punished, even though they might have broken a rule. Well-connected individuals and those who might have friends or relatives speak in their favor are much less likely to receive severe punishment than those who are unconnected or who occupy a low-status position in the community, such as being a narcotics addict, an alcoholic, or a police clerk.

On its face, this apparent capriciousness in rule enforcement would suggest a degree of uncertainty that would undermine residents’ perceptions of their safety. This, however, is not the case. The vast majority of favela residents work hard to maintain the respect of their neighbors and do their best to avoid the type of activity that could undermine their position in the community. By minimizing violence against those who are respected, traffickers create conditions under which residents can immunize themselves against certain types of violence. This, combined with trafficker rule enforcement, creates an environment in which the vast majority of favela residents believe that through their own efforts and those of the traffickers, they are actually relatively safe in a highly violent environment. This occurs even in the face of still relatively high chances that residents could be killed by a stray bullet, as Nelsinho was. Traffickers’ adherence to favela norms of respect and neutrality in meting out punishments and resolving disputes creates conditions under which many residents feel that they can protect themselves and their families through minor changes in behavior.
This approach to controlling violence in favelas suggests that traffickers maintain order within a political logic. Traffickers may use violence to resolve problems for residents, but only if it reinforces their political position. As the examples here demonstrate, in some circumstances, traffickers do not follow this logic. However, when choosing not to follow such logic, they run the risk of residents' turning against them, effectively breaking down the myth of personal security through which their control operates.

**Trafficker Violence and Democracy**

Violence by drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro today constitutes part of the type of democracy that has evolved in Brazil. The events in the favelas are a kind of mirror image of the increasing reliance on private security among members Latin America’s upper classes and more general demands for harsher government policies toward the poor. Without the resources to hire their own security guards or buy armored sedans, and without the middle-class confidence that their vote can make a difference, the poor are forced to turn to their own local violence entrepreneurs, who provide them with a sense of security by occasionally enforcing local norms. They enforce those norms in a politically astute way that gives the core residents in a favela the sense that they can take action to increase their safety. Unlike the wealthy, the urban poor have virtually no way to opt out of this situation and little choice of which gangs will provide the “protection.” Yet this arrangement, like armored sedans and the political support of *mano dura* strategies by the upper classes, creates a “myth of personal security” for the poor.

Latin American democracy today is also problematic. It can be characterized as incomplete, partial, or disjunctive. In much of the region, people with resources have access to government institutions and sources of private protection that allow them to enjoy political and civil rights despite rising levels of violence. The less well off have the same constitutionally guaranteed rights but less ability to take advantage of them, because they have to live in dangerous places, they suffer discrimination by the police and others, and they lack the resources to contest these conditions.

Teresa Caldeira has shown that many of the repressive policies adopted in Brazil are part of an effort by the upper classes to protect themselves in an increasingly violent environment characterized by armed gangs and ineffective policing. The wealthy, Caldeira argues, manage their fear of violence by marginalizing the less well off. In a sense, then, policies that support police brutality in Brazil and the expansion of fortified enclaves as housing options are part of an effort to create a feeling of personal security in a dangerous environment by
securing one's own identity as a respectable citizen not subject to police or criminal violence.

Favela residents’ reliance on traffickers to resolve disputes and maintain order is part of the same process. Traffickers allow residents of favelas, through personal relationships and local respect, to escape being marginal. By enforcing order within local parameters in the context of social position, traffickers’ efforts place favela residents at the center of a social order and allow them to imagine that they are secure despite the violence around them. Thus favela residents, too, engage in actions aimed to decrease their fear of violence.

The traffickers, then, through their political use of force, construct an “in-group” in favelas, drawing a line between those who are acceptable and unacceptable in places marginalized from the rest of society. This is consistent with what other segments of society do through the media and by buying into closed communities. In Brazil today, where violent conditions emanate from both political and social actors and institutions, traffickers play a necessary role in building favela residents’ identity in a system that marginalizes them. We all tell ourselves stories about why we are safe. In the violent world that is Brazil’s imperfect democracy, the poor, who suffer most of that violence, turn to traffickers, in some ways, for a degree of reassurance.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This article has described and analyzed ways that traffickers and residents interact to create feelings of safety in the face of ongoing violence. Just as citizens under the authoritarian regimes of the 1960s and 1970s sought to decrease their chances of suffering violence through careful choice of friends and activities, favela residents today, by construing traffickers’ violent incidents as legitimate responses to particular behaviors or persons, can exert some degree of control over their personal safety. However, as this study demonstrates, the basis of personal safety is precarious, and actual trafficker violence is not always limited to these prescribed roles. This “myth of personal security,” then, is valid only insofar as both resident and trafficker behavior is constrained by understood and accepted uses of force.

Moreover, this role of traffickers in maintaining order in the favela contributes to building and maintaining the political regime that exists in Brazil. The incomplete or disjunctive nature of Brazilian democracy provides for unequal access to universally guaranteed rights, leaving citizens to negotiate these rights, such as the right to security, according to their own means. As this study has shown, in the favela, this leads to a reliance on traffickers and, in some recent cases, vigilante groups. The more violence the state directs at communities and the more such vio-
lence excludes them, the more dependent favela residents become on traffickers for reassurance and some sense of inclusion. While it may then appear that traffickers are in conflict with the state, that they are a parallel force, they actually are part of the existing political system. The activities traffickers engage in help to incorporate favela residents, an excluded group, into the broader social narrative. They may be discriminated against in society but they are, as many residents say, *em casa* (at home) when they are in their community. Greater exclusion of the poor and lack of access to other means to maintain their security will only increase trafficker power. A serious answer to the problem of trafficker violence and criminality must go well beyond the simplistic solution of police violence and must contain a deeper notion of the links between the political organization of favelas, the political identity of favela residents, and the broader political organization of Brazilian society.

**Notes**

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2. Rodrigues conducted research in Rocinha, Arias in Tubarão, Cenzinho, Santa Ana, and Vigário Geral. Rodrigues’s data were based on recorded conversations and handwritten notes of observations. What appears in this text are primarily direct transcriptions of conversations. Arias’s research is based on handwritten notes written shortly after conversations took place. As such, they reflect the subject and tone of the conversation but without the accuracy of recording. Rocinha and Vigário Geral are the real names of specific places in Rio. Tubarão, Cenzinho, and Santa Ana are pseudonyms, as are all personal names. Confidentiality was guaranteed to all informants because of the sensitive nature of the data being elicited.

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