Gender-based Violence and Organized Crime

CAF Policy Brief*

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October 22, 2025

1 Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a severe human rights violation and the most pervasive form of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean.[1] Yet it is often hidden. This invisibility perpetuates inter-generational cycles of violence and deprives marginalized communities – those most likely to be victimized – of institutional support. Our research suggests that the presence of organized crime exacerbates GBV. **What is the impact of organized crime on violence against women in Latin America? What public policies can address gender-based violence in territories where criminal groups are present?**

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, GBV is widespread yet undercounted. Much of it occurs in private settings, is perpetrated by intimate partners or acquaintances, and never reaches official statistics (United Nations Women 2024; Palermo et al. 2014). The burden is not evenly shared: women facing intersecting forms of marginalization—Afro-descendant and Indigenous women, adolescents, migrants, and those living in territories governed by criminal groups—are at heightened risk. Brazil illustrates the scale and profile of the problem. In 2022, authorities recorded 1,410 femicides (roughly one every six hours)

*Prepared for the CAF Authors' Workshop on Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean in Bogotá, October 9, 2025. Do not cite or circulate without the authors' permission.

1. We follow the United Nations in defining gender-based violence (GBV) as any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will that is rooted in socially ascribed gender differences and unequal power relations, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm as well as threats, coercion, and deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life. Although GBV can affect people of all genders, it is well-documented that women and girls are disproportionately impacted (U. Women 2009). We focus on GBV perpetrated by men against women and girls.

with the vast majority committed by current or former partners and most occurring inside the home. Black and brown women were overrepresented among victims (62%). Reports of rape have continued to rise: in 2023, 83,988 cases were registered, implying an incident about every six minutes (FBSP 2023).[2] Within Brazil, risk is spatially uneven. Rio de Janeiro stands out: survey evidence indicates that four in ten *carioca* women reported some form of GBV in 2022, well above the national average of one in three (FBSP 2023). This exposure sits alongside intense criminal and police violence that may shape both the prevalence of GBV and survivors' ability to reach state authorities for protection (Arias 2006; Maré 2023).

This report addresses an empirical puzzle that has real implications for women's safety amid criminal governance. Scholars have documented that certain territorial organized criminal groups (OCGs) claim to prohibit sexual violence in the areas they govern (Arias 2006, 2017; Barnes 2017, 2022; Lessing 2021; Magaloni et al. 2020). In these areas, organized criminal groups have written codes of conduct which ostensibly prohibit GBV (Lessing and Willis 2019), and have been observed punishing perpetrators of GBV in the public square (Arias 2006, 2017). One potential takeaway from this vein of the literature is that organized criminal groups protect women, and women are safer living amid criminal governance than in its absence.

In contrast, other studies show that these codes of conduct are merely a way for OCGs to enforce social control. These accounts demonstrate that GBV is brutally punished for some perpetrators, but OCGs turn a blind eye when their friends, allies, or fellow criminals perpetrate the same acts (Arias 2006). These studies have documented OCGs condoning GBV and even perpetrating it in Brazil (Dias 2009; Manso and Dias 2018), Mexico (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; López Ricoy et al. 2022), and even using horrific acts of sexual violence as part of gang initiation rituals in Central America (Wolf 2016).

These conflicting pieces of evidence suggest that GBV might not be *lower* in communities governed by OCGs, but might be distributed differently than in communities where OCGs are absent, and thus, might require different tools to measure and address it. Existing studies fail to systematically document how women navigate life under criminal rule or how GBV is adjudicated inside and outside state institutions. Similarly, while underreporting of GBV to the police is widely acknowledged, its extent in OCG-controlled areas remain poorly understood and measured.

This report addresses these knowledge gaps in two ways. First, we present the results of a meta-analysis of interdisciplinary literature on gender and organized crime across Latin America, reviewing common themes related to gender in the burgeoning criminal governance

2. See also *The Guardian*, "Violence against women in Brazil reaches highest levels on record," July 18, 2024.

literature. Much of the literature on women and organized crime comes from Mexico, Brazil, and Italy. Across regional contexts, studies overwhelmingly focus on drug trafficking and human trafficking organizations. We present the frequencies of several hand-coded topics related to gender, finding that most studies focus on women being victimized by organized criminal groups and explaining female participation in organized crime.

Second, we complement the meta-analysis with a detailed case study focusing on women's victimization in areas where organized crime is strong. We elaborate potential policy solutions to GBV amid criminal governance in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.[3] This study draws from three high-frequency sources of data to document the association between criminal governance and GBV, and explain how criminal governance influences reporting of GBV. We leverage (1) event-level data about GBV reported to the police, (2) anonymous tips to a non-profit hotline (*Disque Denúncia*) about GBV, and (3) panel data about criminal governance within the city of Rio de Janeiro to conduct these analyses. We conclude this section by explaining the available policy tools for survivors of GBV who live in areas where criminal rule prevails.

Our findings indicate that criminal governance shapes both the incidence and the visibility of GBV. Most scholarship foregrounds women's victimization by criminal organizations and seldom substantiates claims of "protection," and our evidence from Rio is consistent: GBV clusters in micro-areas where criminal groups exercise authority, while reporting patterns diverge across police and a third-party channel depending on governance type. Our evidence suggests that policies aimed at preventing and facilitating reporting of GBV need to be different in communities where organized crime is strong. This report combines the findings from our meta-analysis and case studies to make both immediate and longer-term policy recommendations that account for the presence of organized crime.

2 Meta-analysis: GBV in criminally governed areas

To assess the state of knowledge on GBV and organized crime, we conducted a systematic meta-analysis of interdisciplinary literature published between 2000 and the present. This review elucidates persistent gaps in the literature on criminal governance—particularly around how violence against women and women's interactions with criminal organizations are characterized.

We systematically searched the Web of Science database using a combination of Boolean

3. This case study draws from our co-authored working paper, "Under the Radar: Estimating Underreporting of Gender-Based Violence to the Police." (Montini and Trudeau 2025)

operators to focus our identify interdisciplinary literature on gender and organized crime.[4] This search yielded an initial sample of 610 articles. We did not restrict by discipline in order to capture relevant contributions across fields such as political science, sociology, criminology, anthropology, public health, and law.

Next, we hand-coded individual studies by title and abstract to remove irrelevant studies. Our inclusion criteria focused on studies that (1) had a positivist social science approach (e.g., we eliminated normative legal scholarship and scholarship focused on arts or literature about organized crime); and (2) engaged substantively with questions of organized crime and criminal governance, rather than simply referencing violence or victimization. We excluded articles focused on women politicians or elites targeted with violence, in general (when the targeting was not linked to a criminal organization), as well as articles analyzing public health outcomes (drug consumption, sexually transmitted diseases) in a strictly public health frame where gender and exposure to violence or crime victimization were presented in passing alongside many other covariates. This meta-analysis draws from the remaining 261 articles included for analysis.

We then hand-coded nine variables related to GBV for each article. We collected categorical data on (1) the country of focus and (2) the criminal group's industry, and constructed binary variables if the article referenced (3) criminal governance, (4) women as victims of criminal organizations, (5) women being sexually exploited by criminal organizations, (6) female minors or girls interacting with criminal organizations, (7) women as criminals or women as part of a criminal organizations, (8) women being protected by criminal organizations, and (9) women resisting criminal organizations. Each article could take on a value of "1" for multiple categories (and often did). We provide a codebook and a list of the corpus of articles in Table 6 in the Appendix.

Our meta-analysis sheds light on several important trends and knowledge gaps. First, as shown in Table 1, much of our understanding about GBV and organized crime comes from the countries that dominate the literature on organized crime, in general: Mexico, Brazil, and Italy.[5] There are several cross-national studies (25), and a smaller but perceptible amount that are cross-national studies within Latin America (4).

Second, Table 2 shows the distribution of articles by criminal industry.[6] An overwhelming share of the articles focus on drug trafficking organizations. Next, given our focus on

4. The search terms included: (women OR gender OR female) and ("criminal governance" OR "organized crime" OR mafia OR cartel OR "street gang" OR "drug gang").

5. This table excludes countries where only one or two articles were written. Please refer to 5 in Appendix for the complete list by country.

6. This table again excludes industries where only one or two articles were written. A complete list is shown in the Appendix.

Table 1: Literature about women and organized crime, by country

Country	N
Mexico	40
Global (Cross-national)	25
Brazil	22
Italy	15
USA	13
UK	8
China	5
Latin America (Cross-regional)	4
Kosovo	4
Spain	4
Peru	3
Malaysia	3
Canada	3

gender, we found many articles that focused on human trafficking, and to a lesser extent, sex trafficking and criminal prostitution rings. While we do not have comparable data for a meta-analysis of criminal governance, in general, we suspect these topics received outsized attention when considered through a gendered lens. Several articles (20) examined women and organized crime across several types of criminal organizations, and street gangs (12), mafia groups (11), extortion rackets (7), and migrant smugglers (5) also received considerable attention in the literature.

There are several important takeaways when examining the distribution of hand-coded topics in the literature about women and organized crime, shown in Table 3. First, studies on criminal governance appear to follow broader trends, as criminal governance as a concept has gained traction across disciplines (Arias 2017; Arjona 2016; García-Ponce 2025; Lessing 2021; Uribe et al. 2025). Forty-four percent of the studies we considered emphasize criminal governance when explaining the relationship between women and organized crime (e.g., Varese 2013; Dow et al. 2024).

Second, we consider several victimization-related topics, and find that a nearly two out of every three studies in our sample (63.6%) depict women as victims of organized criminal groups. Certain studies identify specific types of victimization that we cataloged for more detailed analysis: 29.5% of studies documented women being sexually exploited by criminal

Table 2: Literature about women and organized crime, by criminal industry

Criminal Industry	**N**
Drug Trafficking	115
Human Trafficking	43
Survey article (many types)	20
Street Gang	12
Mafia	11
Extortion	7
Sex Trafficking	5
Migrant Smuggling	5
Prostitution Ring	5

groups (e.g., Izcara Palacios 2023; Selmini 2020), and 21.1% clarified that the victims themselves were girls (see Ducharme et al. 2025; Devries et al. 2019). Nearly all of the studies on gender-related criminal industries (human trafficking, sex trafficking, and prostitution rings) depicted women as victims, and most of the articles focused on minors fell under this category as well.

Third, there is an expansive literature that emphasizes female membership in organized crime. There are a few common themes that emerge from these studies. A minority of articles document the role of women's leadership roles in organized crime, focusing on traditional mafia organizations and as *madams*, leaders of sex trafficking or prostitution rings (e.g., Allum and Marchi 2018). More common are studies of incarcerated women that focus on risk factors for joining criminal groups (e.g., De Campos and De Oliveira 2023; Sumter et al. 2024) or women's treatment in prison (Ribeiro and Martino 2022). Of the drug trafficking articles, many that focused on women members depicted them as drug mules (see, for instance Campbell 2008), and described specific risks related to smuggling drugs across borders.

One of the key (and perhaps surprising) findings of our meta-analysis is that very few studies mention women being protected by criminal organizations (1.9%) (Carey 2014; Smith 2021; Moore and Stuart 2022; Dow et al. 2024; Niño Vega 2018)[7]. One interpretation of these findings is that women being protected by criminal groups is understudied. Another interpretation, and the one we favor based off of this evidence, is that researchers should

7. There are other studies conducted in Brazil, for instance that draw from qualitative interviews with criminal group members who claim that criminal organizations punish perpetrators of sexual violence and prohibit domestic violence in the communities they govern. They weren't included in this review because the search terms are not included in the title and/or abstract (see Barnes 2025; Lessing and Willis 2019)

Table 3: Key topics in the literature about women and organized crime

Topic	**N**	**Percent (%)**
Criminal governance	116	44.4
Women as victims of criminal organizations	166	63.6
Women sexually exploited by criminal organizations	77	29.5
Female minors or girls and criminal organizations	55	21.1
Women as members of criminal organizations	154	59.0
Women protected by criminal organizations	5	1.9
Women resisting criminal organizations	31	11.9
Total	261	100%

be circumspect when claiming that criminal governance protects women, especially when considering the external validity of these claims. These findings corroborate Arias' (2006) and Barnes' (2022) concerns – also drawing from Brazil – that women are only "protected" by criminal groups when it is convenient[8].

Finally, we measured the prevalence of literature documenting women and women's organizations resisting organized crime. Only 11.9% of the articles we reviewed focused on resistance. Those that did focused on three major themes: escaping and resisting violent atmospheres (López et al. 2024), including unwilling membership in organized criminal groups (Cayli 2016), activism on behalf of victims of organized crime, especially the disappeared (*desaparecidos*) (Salazar Serna and Castro Pérez 2020), and collective resistance organizations, from women's collectives to neighborhood arts groups (Fahlberg et al. 2023; Hincapié 2017).

In sum, the literature establishes that women's experiences with organized crime are overwhelmingly documented as victimization, far less as protection, and only selectively as resistance or agency. That evidence is concentrated in a handful of countries and industries. Work that focuses on the governance aspects of organized crime has grown, but even these studies rarely measure how governance shapes what is seen in official data versus what is silenced, nor do they reconcile parallel reporting pathways (police, health, hotlines, social services) or parallel authorities (state and criminal groups). As a result, we know a great deal about harms, but much less about the mechanisms that shape reporting or mitigate risk, and almost nothing about how these patterns vary at the territorial scale where criminal rule

8. This is consistent with the idea of *selective governance* in (Arjona 2016)

is exercised. The case study that follows takes up these gaps in Rio de Janeiro by pairing police reports with anonymous tips and a high-frequency panel of criminal governance, to show how GBV clusters in specific micro-areas and how channel-specific biases shape what enters the record.

3 Case Study: Organized Crime and GBV in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Building on the gaps identified in the meta-analysis, the case of the state of Rio de Janeiro provides an especially salient setting to examine how organized crime intersects with GBV. There is impressive variation in criminal governance in Rio de Janeiro: in the municipality alone, there are criminal monopolies, shared governance between the state and criminal groups, criminal warfare (with each other and with the state), overlapping forms of criminal and police violence, and deeply uneven access to state protection (Arias 2006, 2017; Barnes 2025; Lessing 2017; Magaloni et al. 2020). There is a range of impressive sub-municipal sources of data that scholars use to estimate these "micro-level armed regimes" (Arias 2017), including police reports and non-profit estimates of violence, that we leverage to study how this variation in criminal governance correlates with GBV. We follow a long line of scholarship that leverages these same granular sources of data to analyze Rio de Janeiro criminal governance at the neighborhood-level (Barnes 2022; Magaloni et al. 2020; Monteiro and Rocha 2016; Trudeau 2022). We briefly summarize the context in Rio de Janeiro in Section 3.1, introduce the data in Section 3.2, present descriptive findings about the relationship between organized crime and gender-based violence in Section 3.3, explain the challenges of estimating GBV amid organized crime in Section 3.4, and conclude by explaining the avenues for recourse that are available to victims of GBV in Rio de Janeiro in Section 3.5.

3.1 Crime and Violence in Rio de Janeiro

In Rio de Janeiro, criminal territorial control is organized at the scale of micro-territories. The city is parceled into tightly bounded spaces–*favelas*, *comunidades*, *assentamentos irregulares*–that sit alongside the formal "asphalt," producing block-by-block variation in who governs and how. As a result, even within a small space, there are micro-regions where some groups can govern. Against this backdrop, we turn to the principal actors that shape governance across these spaces.

Multiple non-state actors govern communities in Rio de Janeiro. The state tends to govern the formalized "asphalt" areas of the city, where most middle- and higher-income

neighborhoods are located and where public goods provision is more reliable. By contrast, most favelas are located in the hills and peripheries, where, in the contemporary setting, governance is contested both between state and criminal organizations and among rival criminal organizations themselves (Fischer 2008; McCann 2014; Perlman 2010). A first major set of actors are the drug trafficking factions, often described as prison-based gangs that expanded into the urban periphery during the cocaine boom of the 1980s and 1990s (Leeds 1996; Lessing 2008). Three main groups dominate this space: *Comando Vermelho* (CV), *Terceiro Comando Puro* (TCP), and *Amigos dos Amigos* (ADA). These factions operate through a franchise model: each local leader (*dono*) manages day-to-day governing semi-autonomously while remaining tied to the broader criminal network through symbolic allegiance, prison connections, and inter-factional warfare. Their authority extends beyond drug sales into the regulation of community life, including the provision of security, dispute resolution, and sometimes basic welfare.

A second major set of actors are the *milícias*, paramilitary groups that grew out of police-linked "death squads" (formerly known as *mineira*), composed largely of off-duty or former police officers, firefighters, and other state security personnel (Paes Manso 2020). Initially justified as community self-defense against traffickers, these groups have become entrenched political-economic organizations that monopolize local markets (e.g., informal transport, gas distribution, real estate) and extract rents from residents through extortion (Cano 2013; Misse 2009). The Rio state legislature's inquiry commission (*CPI das Milícias*) documented systematic collusion—cover-ups, protection rackets, and electoral links—between senior police officers, high-ranking politicians, and *milicianos*, showing how parts of the security apparatus and local politics shield and benefit from militia rule (Paes Manso 2020; Pantaleão and Montini 2025).

Violence is a daily occurrence in Rio de Janeiro, given that rival drug factions, *milícias*, and the state govern daily life in such close proximity. This is most acute in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, which are marked by high exposure to gun violence: 37% of residents—around 1.6 million people—report having been caught in crossfire between police and/or criminal groups. On a daily basis, rival criminal groups engage in lethal firefights with each other, often over territory and access to illicit markets (Barnes 2022). Data from the monitoring NGO *Fogo Cruzado* indicate that between 2016 and 2021 there were over 35,000 recorded shootouts in the metropolitan region, with nearly 6,000 people killed and more than 7,000 injured, highlighting the staggering scale of armed conflict across the city (Cruzado 2021).

Criminal groups also frequently engage in lethal shootouts with the state, usually confronting the militarized arms of the state-level Military Police or Civil Police. These confrontations often occur during *police operations*, which are large-scale incursions into favela

territories involving armored vehicles, helicopters, and heavily armed tactical units. The stated purpose of such operations is to capture traffickers, seize drugs and weapons, and reassert state presence in areas deemed under criminal control. In practice, however, these operations are often criticized for their indiscriminate use of force, lack of judicial oversight, and devastating effects on civilian life, such as school closures, deaths of bystanders, and mass displacement. Police lethality is particularly severe: in 2019 alone, law enforcement killed more than 1,800 people,[9] making Rio's police among the deadliest in the world (Magaloni et al. 2020; Trudeau 2022). Scholars have long noted that policing in Rio is not only repressive but often entangled with the same illegal markets it claims to combat, perpetuating cycles of violence rather than ensuring security (Cano 2013; Misse 2009; Pantaleão and Montini 2025; Zaluar and Conceição 2007).

Yet violence in Rio de Janeiro is not constrained to criminal-criminal or criminal-police conflict. Brazil – and especially Rio de Janeiro – remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women. Survey evidence indicates that 40% of *carioca* (from Rio de Janeiro) women reported some form of GBV in 2022, a rate above the national average of 33% (FBSP 2023). In 2022, Brazil recorded 1,410 femicides—an average of one woman murdered every six hours—the highest figure in recent years. Most of these killings (81.7%) were committed by intimate partners or ex-partners, and 65.6% occurred in the home. Black and brown women were disproportionately affected, accounting for 62% of femicide victims. Sexual violence is also widespread and rising. In 2023, there were 83,988 rape reports, meaning that every six minutes a woman was raped in Brazil (FBSP 2023). Alarmingly, the majority of survivors were children aged 13 or younger (61.6%), and most assaults (84.7%) were perpetrated by family members or acquaintances.[10]

3.2 Data and Measurement

We consider three main sources of data to estimate the correlation between criminal governance and GBV: (1) police reports of GBV and other crimes to the Institute for Public Safety (ISP, *Instituto de Segurança Pública*), aggregated at the police precinct-month level, (2) civilian complaints about GBV and other crimes to an anonymous non-profit tipline (*Disque Denúncia*), also aggregated at the police precinct-month level, and (3) monthly panel data on criminal governance at the favela-level, drawn from the original database in Trudeau (2024). The study focuses on a panel from 2008 to 2023 in the state of Rio de

9. See *BBC*, "Rio violence: Police killings reach record high in 2019," January 23, 2020. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51220364.

10. See *The Guardian*, "Violence against women in Brazil reaches highest levels on record," July 18, 2024. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/18/violence-against-women-in-brazil-reaches-highest-levels-on-record.

Janeiro.

The first source consists of police reports obtained from the Institute of Public Safety of Rio de Janeiro (ISP). These records include all registered crime reports from each of the state's police precincts (CISPs). We obtained records at the level of the individual incident, and aggregated to the CISP-month level. Each observation contains metadata on the exact day and hour of the report, the police precinct of registration, the type and subtype of crime, if the crime is prohibited by a certain piece of legislation, and victim-level covariates such as age, gender, race, and relationship to the perpetrator. The ISP records are highly detailed, and there are more than 70 specific crimes and 400 sub-crimes that are recorded in their database, with a total of around 6 million reports in our study period.[11]

For our analyses, we focus on two crime outcomes that fall under the broad umbrella of gender-based violence (GBV). Within this category, we distinguish between two crimes. The first is rape, which is defined by ISP as both attempted and completed rapes, as well as sexual violence against minors. The second crime is violence against women (VAW), where we focus on physical aggression[12]. To construct the VAW variable, we sum three distinct ISP crime records: (1) physical injury (*lesão corporal*) that is protected by *Lei Maria da Penha*,[13] (2) physical injury that is sub-classified as domestic violence, and (3) femicide. These three records are a parsimonious set of crimes that could be considered VAW, reflecting the basic crimes mentioned in the *Lei Maria da Penha*. Though there is substantial overlap in the ISP records between categories (1) and (2) and categories (1) and (3), it is not perfect, so we use these three filters to include all relevant acts of VAW.

The second source contains the universe of *Disque Denúncia* (DD) call logs for the same period. *Disque Denúncia* is a civil society organization, independent from the police and other public agencies. It runs a 24-hour hotline that classifies anonymous tips and forwards life-threatening emergencies to law enforcement while safeguarding callers' identities.

We processed approximately three million *Disque Denúncia* records (i.e., all calls between 2008 and 2023 in the state of Rio de Janeiro), which we geocoded to enable spatial analyses at both the police precinct level and at more granular latitude–longitude coordinates. For the main analyses presented here, we aggregate DD calls to the precinct-month level to match the structure of the police report data. Each DD record includes a complaint type and subtype, as assigned by the call center worker, and may involve multiple categories (e.g.,

11. For example, *theft* is a crime category and *theft of a cell phone* is a sub-crime category.

12. We claim it is important to separate these two forms of violence because of the different pathways of reporting that each of then entail, with health institutions serving as the key gateway for women who decide to seek help after experiencing violence.

13. The *Maria da Penha* Law (Law 11.340/2006) is an omnibus law at the national level aimed at reducing domestic violence and GBV. It increases the severity of penalties, the coverage for crimes that can be prosecuted, and provides additional legal and support resources for survivors.

drug trafficking, threat, extortion, noise, violence against women, rape, illegal possession of weapons, police abuse, etc.). Records also contain short text summaries and keywords that provide additional qualitative detail. In line with the police data, we focus on two types of GBV: rape and VAW, both of which are main categories in DD's classification system (which is distinct from the police's). DD does not use the police's classification system because people often call about non-crime nuisances, problems with service provision, or to complain about the state and public servants (including the police).

The third source contains information about criminal governance at the *favela*-level within the city of Rio de Janeiro, drawn from the original data described in detail in Trudeau (2024) and summarized here. Subsequently, our analyses that focus on criminal governance will also be circumscribed to the city of Rio de Janeiro, not the entire state. This dataset draws from the original *Disque Denúncia* reports and uses text processing methods to filter the text summaries of the complaints for the three drug trafficking factions (ADA, CV, TCP) and for *milícia* groups in Rio de Janeiro. Then, using a combination of machine processing and hand-coding tools, Trudeau (2024) aggregated text summaries for each favela to identify which criminal faction(s) were present in a favela, or if it was in a state or conflict (turf war) for each month-year observation.

We further aggregate this favela-month level data to the police-precinct-month level to match the ISP and DD data. We assign a police-precinct-month observation a value of "1" for *milícia* presence if any of the favelas within that precinct are governed by *milícia* groups during a particular month. We do the same for a binary drug trafficking variable, assigning an observation a value of "1" if *any* of the drug trafficking factions are present for a certain month, and the same for a criminal conflict variable. All of these indicators are non-mutually exclusive, as it is possible for a police precinct to encompass one favela in each category. The proportion of police-precinct-months that have at least one favela governed by drug factions, *milícias*, or in conflict are shown in Table 4, presented alongside "no criminal governance" where none were present as a reference category.

Table 4: Proportion of police-precinct-months with criminal governance presence, by type, in the municipality of Rio

None	**Drug Trafficking**	**Milícia**	**Conflict**
8.9%	70.6%	85.4%	20%

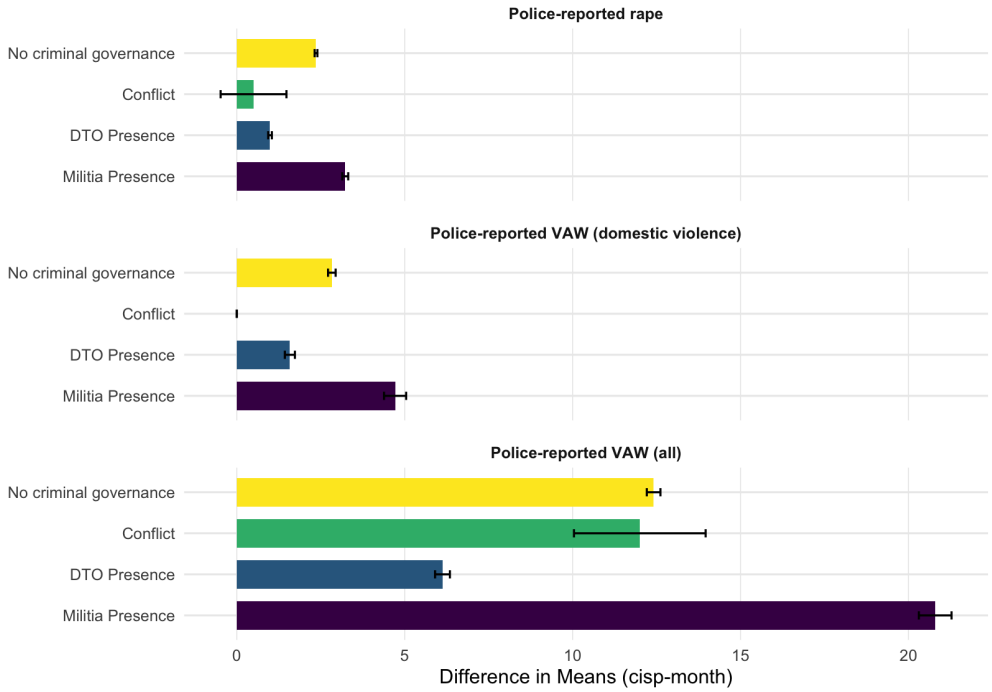
3.3 Organized Crime and GBV

This subsection links the meta-analysis to the case of Rio de Janeiro by examining how GBV varies across different criminal governance contexts and how criminal governance affects the visibility of GBV. The results from the meta-analysis suggest that women may be victimized by organized crime, participate in it, or, to a lesser extent, be protected by it. While we cannot measure membership or protection directly using the police reports or *Disque Denúncia* data, we use these two complementary sources to measure the extent of the association between GBV victimization and criminal governance.

We begin by comparing reported GBV to the police within the city of Rio de Janeiro across different criminal governance arrangements. We calculate difference in mean GBV reports to the police across criminal governance categories, shown in Figure 1 with 95% confidence intervals. Each bar in Panel A shows the difference in mean levels of reported rape to the police for police precincts *with* a particular type of criminal governance vis-a-vis precincts without that type. On average, there are three more reported rapes per police precinct (CISP) per month in precincts with a *milícia* presence than precincts with no *milícias*. The gap is smaller between precincts with drug trafficking gangs and with active conflict, with only one and 0.5 more reported rapes than in precincts without, respectively. The *no criminal governance* category mechanically will always fall in the middle of the other three, because all precincts that fall in the other categories take on a value of "0" for *no criminal governance*. Nevertheless, it is useful for interpretation as a reference category given that the three criminal governance variables are non mutually exclusive. These difference-in-means for Panel A tell us that reported rape is most highly correlated with precincts where *milícia* groups are present, and least correlated with precincts with active conflict.

Panels B and C of Figure 1 show the difference in means for the subset of VAW crimes that are specifically classified as domestic violence, and all VAW crimes, respectively. Both of these types of crimes follow similar trends as reported rape, showing that precincts with *milícia* presence are most highly associated with domestic violence, specifically, and violence against women, in general. We find no evidence of women reporting domestic violence in precinct-months with an active turf war, and 2 more incidents of domestic violence occur in precincts with a drug trafficking faction present than in precincts without. Panel C shows that the scale of violence against women is much larger when including violence against women events classified under the *Lei Maria da Penha* legal instrument and femicides. On average, 21, 12, and 6 more events of violence against women are reported per month in precincts with *milícia* presence, with an active turf war, and with drug trafficker presence, respectively.

Figure 1: Difference in Means of GBV Reporting in different criminally controlled areas

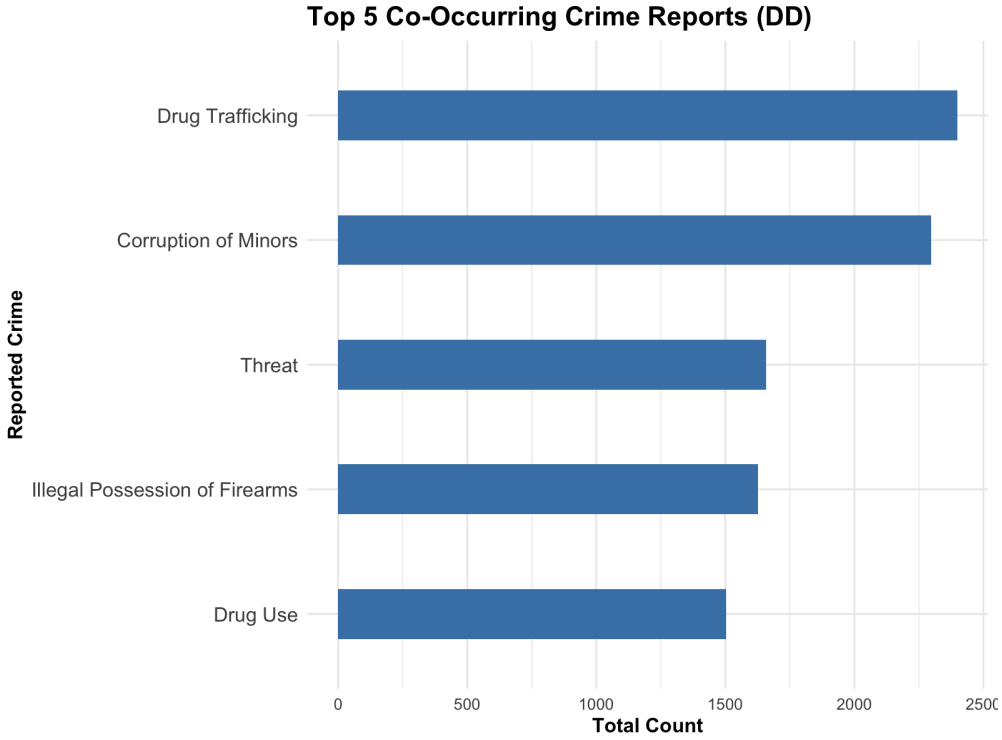


Bars show differences in mean outcomes (with 95% CIs) across police-precinct–months (CISPs) classified as *Militia presence*, *DTO presence*, *Conflict* (contested), or *No criminal governance*.

Do these findings prove that women are at higher risk of GBV in *milícia* dominated territories, and at lower risk in trafficker-dominated territories? Not necessarily. Other studies from the city of Rio de Janeiro suggest that criminal governance differentially affects reporting to the police for many types of crimes, including GBV. Certain drug trafficking factions that publicly claim to prohibit GBV and enforce the rules within their communities do so to consolidate social control and ensure that the police do not interfere with their clandestine business (Arias 2006; Barnes 2022). If so, women living under drug trafficking regimes may be discouraged from calling the police or calling outside authorities, and encouraged to report GBV to the local traffickers to "handle" internally. This may be especially true when conflict is active and when drug traffickers are especially sensitive to police presence.

To paint a more complete picture of the relationship between criminal governance and GBV, we then focus on the *Disque Denúncia* data across the entire state of Rio de Janeiro. We analyze the co-occurrence of GBV with other crime categories in DD to infer the underlying incidence of GBV alongside other crimes that are commonly associated with organized criminal groups. In each DD report, the call center worker can classify a call by "primary topic" and "secondary topic." We filter complaints when either type of GBV (rape or VAW) is the primary or secondary topic, and compare other primary or secondary topics that GBV

Figure 2: Crimes Co-Occurring with GBV



Note: When crimes are reported to Disque Denuncia, the call center workers may classify a report in multiple categories. These are the top 5 crimes that co-occur with reports of GBV.

is commonly paired with. This analysis frees us from some of the territorial constraints in the above exercise, and clearly demonstrates what other criminal behaviors are co-occurring alongside GBV. We pool complaints related to rape and VAW to show which other crimes occur with GBV, in general.

In Figure 2, we plot the most common crimes co-occurring with GBV. Notably, drug trafficking is the top category, meaning that it is the most likely crime that callers report in the same complaint when they are denouncing rape or violence against women. We interpret this as a strong signal that drug trafficking gangs are also perpetrators of GBV. The second most frequent crime category that co-occurs with GBV is corruption of minors, which mirrors the results from the meta-analysis, suggesting that a substantial share of the victims of GBV in Rio de Janeiro are minors. Threats and illegal possession of firearms are both likely behaviors for either drug trafficking factions or *milícia* groups, and drug use is likely to be more strongly associated with neighborhoods governed by drug gangs than *milícias*, though there is recent evidence of widespread drug usage and sale in *milícia*-dominated communities as well (Ventura et al. 2024).

These patterns suggest that GBV is not independent of broader criminal dynamics: women often experience or witness violence in the same spaces where criminal groups exert

territorial control. Both police reports and *Disque Denúncia* are imperfect sources to measure GBV, but together, they paint a sharper image. When analyzed together, Figures 1 and 2 suggest that the level of GBV *incidents* are similarly high across criminally governed areas, but they might be reported differently.

3.4 Measuring GBV Amid Criminal Governance

The above section provides correlative evidence that both drug trafficking and *milícia* presence are associated with GBV. Drug trafficking presence and conflict appear tightly intertwined with GBV cases in the DD records (Figure 2), whereas militia presence is associated with higher police-reported GBV (Figure 1). Read together, these findings suggest that governance type may shape which channel better captures GBV incidence rather than whether GBV occues. This raises a core measurement challenge: are differences in crime reporting across criminal governance types driven by true incidence, by differential reporting patterns, or both?

Survivors face high private costs to reporting (retaliation risk, stigma, economic dependence), and perpetrators are often intimate partners or acquaintances, which depresses willingness to engage the state (see, for instance, Córdova and Kras 2020; Felson et al. 2002; Gracia and Herrero 2007; Heron and Eisma 2021; Wieberneit et al. 2024). In Rio de Janeiro, as in many places, reporting pathways are fragmented across institutions (police precincts/women's police stations, hospitals and clinics, hotlines, social services), each with distinct procedures and outcomes. Empirically, we see this: in the police data, cases appear as logged police reports only after survivors clear bureaucratic hurdles; in the DD data, anonymity emboldens survivors to report but obstructs relevant public sector agencies from adequately following up.

There are also reasons to expect criminal governance to reallocate GBV across channels. In faction-controlled areas, gatekeeping by armed actors and fear of retaliation may suppress police reporting while leaving anonymous or third-party channels relatively more accessible. As Barnes (2025) notes, the *lei* imposed by traffickers prohibits residents from contacting the police, but they are unlikely to intervene in a domestic dispute (Arias 2006). Similarly, NGO reports state that state services cannot reach and enforce protective measures in DTO-controlled areas (Maré 2023), leaving women dependent on alternative channels. In *milícia* zones, where actors monetize legal and quasi-legal markets and often maintain ties to state agents, police reporting may be administratively more feasible even as victims remain vulnerable. Health providers can operate as a safety valve in both contexts, especially for sexual violence, because care may be sought without immediate police contact, generating

cases that appear in hospitals but never convert into B.O.s (Higa et al. 2008). These channel-specific frictions motivate a side-by-side comparison of police and DD data at the precinct level.

Figure 3: Average levels of rape and VAW, by precinct and reporting channel

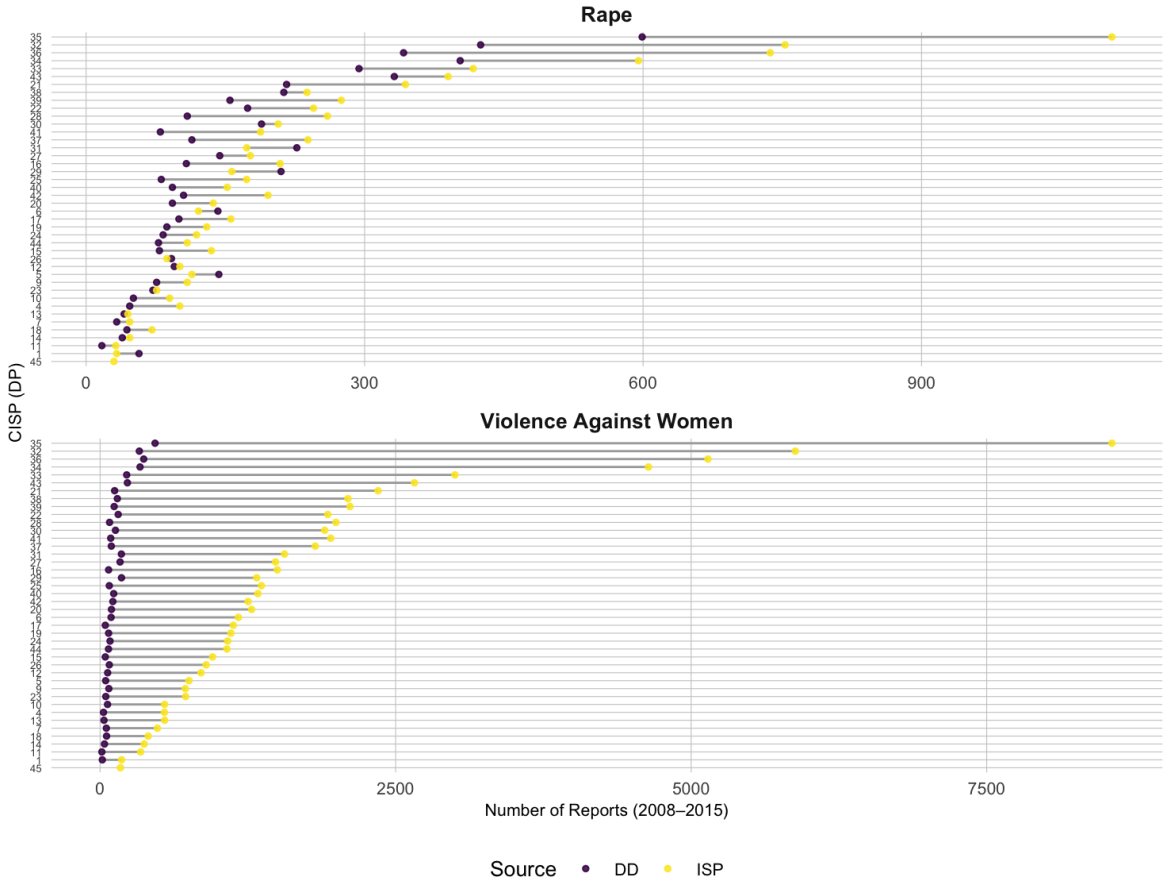
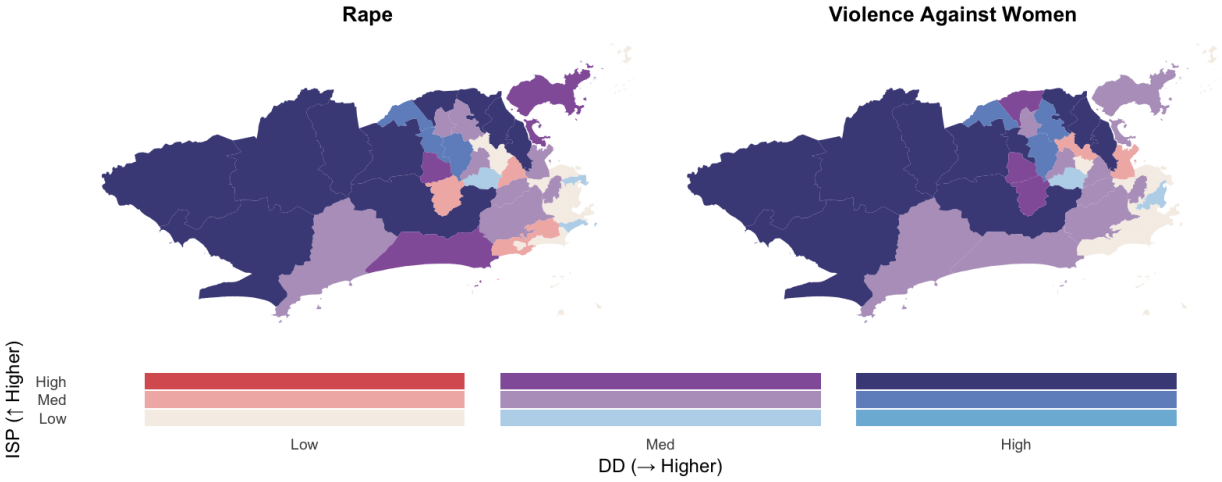


Figure 3 shows the reporting gap across police and *Disque Denúncia* for the two main types of GBV: rape and VAW, shown for precincts within the city of Rio de Janeiro. For each precinct (shown on the y-axis), we averaged over all month-year observations to plot the average monthly number of reports to the police (yellow dot) and reports to DD (purple dot). We find that reporting to the police consistently outpaces reporting to DD for VAW (although the magnitude of the reporting gap varies by police precinct), but rape reports exhibit much more variation across channels. Most precincts have more rapes reported to the police, but some register relatively more complaints through DD. We interpret both of these as evidence of distortions in reporting to the police. Under theoretically perfect, safe conditions (that, in practice, do not exist anywhere), a channel like *Disque Denúncia* would not be necessary if women had full access to and trust in the police. That there are some

precincts where DD receives more reports than the police for rape, and that the gap is so varied across precincts for VAW suggests multiple forms of underreporting of GBV to the police. It further suggests that rape reporting is not only less frequent but also noisier across channels, reflecting differences in how cases reach state versus third-party institutions.

As demonstrated in Section 3.3, although police reports and DD are imperfect metrics of the unobserved incidence of GBV, we can learn much from them when considering them together. Figure 4 shows that reported rape and VAW are both imperfectly but highly correlated across sources. Most of the areas with high GBV incidence, per the police reports, *also* have high GBV incidence per the ISP data (represented in the bivariate maps as as dark purple polygon). In a related working paper, we document this positive correlation more rigorously, using a two-way fixed effects design (Montini and Trudeau 2025). This suggests that despite idiosyncratic sources of bias for each source (e.g., some criminal groups might discourage reporting to the police more than others), the two sources can identify the relative prevalence of GBV from one precinct to the next, even if there is some measurement error in identifying the true, unobserved amount of GBV in any one precinct.

Figure 4: Levels of reporting of rape and VAW by source, by precinct



Another important takeaway from Figure 4 is that GBV and GBV reporting demonstrate significant sub-municipal variation. This is consistent with trends that have been documented for other crimes, specifically the "law of crime concentration at place" literature, which argues that crime, especially violent crime, is concentrated in a small number of micro-regions within a city (Weisburd et al. 2004).[14] Authors have demonstrated its validity in Latin America, showing that 50 percent of crimes are concentrated in 2.5 to 7.5 percent

14. Weisburd's "law of crime concentration at place" holds that a small proportion of micro-locations, such as street segments or blocks, accounts for a disproportionately large, relatively stable share of a city's crime (2004)

of street segments across Latin American cities (Ajzenman and Jaitman 2016; Chainey et al. 2019). Though none of the authors in these studies tested for the concentration of GBV, qualitative evidence suggests that there are also micro-regions within a city where it is more widespread than others (see, for instance, Maré 2023).[15]

To summarize, sub-municipal variation in reporting patterns do not necessarily reflect the true incidence of GBV. As our meta-analysis underscores, the presence of criminal groups fundamentally reshapes how women navigate state institutions, often producing systematic underreporting in the very territories where violence might be most pervasive. Ethnographic evidence from Rio's *favelas* shows that criminal groups not only regulate everyday security, but also act as intermediaries (or perhaps gatekeepers) in disputes involving GBV. Residents frequently appeal to drug traffickers to resolve intimate partner violence or sexual violence cases in the community, given both the risks of retaliation and mistrust in contacting law enforcement (Arias and Barnes 2017; Arias and Rodrigues 2006). More recently, Barnes (2025) argues that such reliance on gangs for so-called "dispute resolution" reinforces criminal actors' social control while further discouraging formal complaints to law enforcement. Therefore, low reporting rates to police in certain precincts may signal not an absence of GBV, but its adjudication (or turning a blind eye) through parallel criminal governance structures that remain invisible in official statistics.

3.5 Policy Tools to Help GBV Survivors

We conclude our case study by enumerating the available policy channels for survivors of GBV to seek help. In Rio de Janeiro, there are dozens of ways to seek help after being victimized, some of which lead to a police report (or *Boletim de Ocorrência*, B.O.) being filed. Based on our interviews with law enforcement actors and service providers, we enumerate the potential pathways in Table 5 and discuss them below. Despite these varied channels, many choose not to report at all. According to FBSP, 45% of women who experienced GBV did nothing following the incident, not even confiding in friends or family, even though a large share of them report having a witness present at the time of violence (FBSP 2025).

The first and most direct way to report GBV is through law enforcement. Survivors can file a B.O. in person at either a general police station or a Women's Police Station (DEAM), digitally via online portals and apps, or indirectly through emergency calls and hotlines. In practice, however, these routes often converge on the same outcome: a police

15. In a recent report by Redes da Maré, one of the largest favela-based NGOs in Rio, extensive survey and ethnographic evidence shows that women living in gang-militia boundary lines, for instance, are at higher risk for crime victimization. They also show that in such areas, some public services to enforce GBV protection (e.g., "Patrulha Maria da Penha") reportedly refuse to enter, not only putting women at higher risk, but preventing them to receiving protection if victimized.

Table 5: Institutional pathways for gender-based violence reporting and support in Rio de Janeiro

Category	Sub-Channel	Action Taken	Outcome
Law Enforcement	In-person visit to general police station (*delegacia comum*)	Survivor files police report (B.O.)	B.O. filed
	In-person visit to women's police station (DEAM)	Survivor files B.O.	B.O. filed
	Police apps and websites (e.g., delegacia online, Maria da Penha Virtual)	Survivor files B.O. digitally	B.O. filed
	Call to police emergency phone line (190)	Patrol dispatched; survivor taken to hospital and/or precinct	B.O. filed
	Call to national women's hotline (180)	Case forwarded to state-level police	Re-directed to police
	In-person visit or call to Guarda Municipal	Case forwarded to police	Re-directed to police
Health System	SUS hospitals/clinics	Survivor receives care	B.O. filed*
Judiciary	Public Prosecutor's Office (MP)	Survivor or third party petitions directly	Re-directed to police; B.O. filed*
Social Services	Call to (national human rights hotline) Disque 100	Case forwarded to police/social services	Re-directed to police
	Call to (municipal citizen hotline) Disque 1746	Case forwarded to police/social services	Re-directed to police
	Social assistance centers (CEAMs, CRAS/CREAS, Casa da Mulher Carioca)	Survivor receives psychosocial/legal support	Re-directed to police
Third-Parties	Anonymous call to Disque Denúncia	Operators log complaint	No further action

* B.O. is filed only if the survivor consents.

report is filed and logged in the state system. Despite their centrality, interactions with police can be retraumatizing, marked by bureaucratic demands, insensitive treatment, or fear of retaliation, which explains why many women avoid these channels altogether (FBSP 2025; Córdova and Kras 2020).

A second pathway runs through the health system. Survivors of physical or sexual assault may seek care at public hospitals or clinics, where they can access emergency contraception, prophylaxis, or psychological support, and in some cases undergo forensic exams. These services are legally available regardless of whether a B.O. is filed, but survivors are given the support if they decide to. For some, this represents the only point of contact with the state after violence, as medical professionals focus on care rather than criminal registration (Higa et al. 2008). This makes the health system one of the most common entry points for women seeking help, particularly because hospitals are perceived as less threatening and more accessible than police stations. Women often turn to these services to avoid the negative externalities associated with filing a police report.

Third, women occasionally engage directly with the judiciary, typically the Public Prosecutor's Office or courts, in pursuit of protective measures such as restraining orders. Survivors are typically redirected back to police precincts to file a B.O. before legal proceedings can

move forward. The police report thus functions as the gateway to judicial protection.

Fourth, social services and hotlines—such as municipal citizen helplines (*Portal 1746 RJ*), human rights hotlines (*Disque Direitos Humanos*), and local assistance centers like CEAMs or Casas da Mulher Carioca—provide crucial resources like psychosocial counseling, legal advice, and even welfare support. Yet when women request legal protection, these institutions direct them back to the police, reinforcing the primacy of the B.O. These organizations are crucial for addressing survivors' broader needs, including mental health and economic security to leave violence situations.

Finally, some survivors bypass the state altogether by turning to third-party organizations like *Disque Denúncia*. Unlike police or health services, DD operates outside the state, offering anonymity and a perceived neutrality that can make it more approachable for women who fear retaliation or mistrust authorities. While this option avoids direct interaction with the police, it also limits access to legal remedies or protective measures, functioning more as symbolic registration than a pathway to protection.

Survivors must grapple with the fact that filing a police report is essential to accessing justice in the future. The B.O. is the formal document issued by police when a crime is reported, either in person at a precinct or through online systems. Importantly, B.O.s are not specific to GBV but apply to all categories of crime, from theft to homicide. Once filed, the B.O. is entered into the state's integrated police registry, where it becomes a logged incident that can trigger investigative procedures and, in cases of GBV, access to protective measures under the *Lei Maria da Penha*.

GBV survivors must have a record of filing a B.O. in order to access most legal, physical, or financial protections offered by the state. Survivors can only access the following policy instruments after presenting a B.O. as supporting documentation: (1) requesting an urgent restraining order (*medida protetiva de urgência*) from the court; (2) follow-up visits or monitoring by specialized GBV units to ensure compliance with restraining orders, with mandatory arrest of the perpetrator in cases of violation; (3) initiation of criminal proceedings against the perpetrator, including both investigation and eventual prosecution; and (4) documentation required for family court proceedings such as divorce, alimony, or child custody arrangements.

There are several takeaways when considering the different reporting pathways for survivors. First, survivors can access multiple entry points: hospitals and clinics, social services, legal aid, hotlines and police stations. Despite this diversity, the B.O. is the gateway to most longer-term and legal protections. As such, most state institutions recognize this dependency and routinely re-direct survivors to file a B.O. first, which effectively makes police the operational gatekeepers of protection.

On paper, these reporting tools exist for all women in the state of Rio de Janeiro, regardless of their socioeconomic or employment status, existence in the formal sector, or whether they live under criminal governance. In practice, however, the presence of organized criminal groups obstructs access to each reporting pathway, making it more difficult for women who need help the most to seek it. With respect to law enforcement pathways, this brief has demonstrated that women who live amid drug trafficking factions strive to keep law enforcement far from their communities; for women who live among *milícia* groups, they may fear that their community's *milícia* leaders are colluding with the police and a call for help would provoke retaliation. Similarly, women in either drug trafficking or *milícia*-dominated communities may fear heightened retaliation by involving the court system (retaliation not only by the perpetrator, but by the criminal group for drawing the eyes of the justice system to their community). With respect to health and social services, our interview evidence suggests these organizations are likely to be safe havens for women who live under criminal governance, but there are fewer health clinics or hospitals, social assistance centers, and access to resources, in general, in the marginalized communities where criminal groups tend to govern.

Our case study yields three core contributions. First, we provide nuanced evidence of a correlation between criminal governance and GBV, while showing that interpretation must be anchored in Rio's institutional context and in the distinct biases of each reporting channel. Second, we offer a framework for how to think about measurement bias in GBV under criminal rule—separating suppression (retaliation/gatekeeping), substitution (migration to non-state or health channels), selection into institutions, and classification differences. Using the case of Rio de Janeiro, we demonstrate how combining police B.O.s with DD tips provides a clearer picture of unobserved GBV in areas under criminal control. Third, we map the concrete pathways through which survivors seek help and identify how each is made more or less accessible by criminal actors. Below, we combine these case-specific findings with those from the broader meta-analysis to provide suggestions for future research and policy recommendations for the entire Latin American region.

4 Avenues for further research

Combining the findings from our meta-analysis and the evidence presented in our case study, we identify several potential avenues for future research. First, one common yet undertheorized phenomenon is the role of women inside criminal organizations. Research on women in organized crime should move beyond the familiar "mules" or "madams" framework to map their ranks, potential roles, and constraints across different types of criminal organiza-

tions. Such findings could help inform not only scholarly work, but also policy interventions focused on prevention and exit programs. Relatedly, criminal groups' regulation of gender deserves systematic documentation. Two domains seem particularly revelant: internal rules for members (e.g., sanctions for intimate partner violence or sexual assault) and external rules imposed on residents. This can help to clarify if certain criminal organizations are truly protecting women, as some suggest, or if doing so is merely the means to an end.

Second, it is clear that the measurement of GBV needs to reflect governance structures on the ground. This report demonstrates that measures of GBV – notoriously difficult to measure even in the absence of criminal governance – are sensitive to local criminal governance structures. Our case study shows that GBV in Rio de Janeiro is reported through police records, health services, hotlines, and social services, but many criminal groups adjudicate cases informally. A multi-systems approach that links ISP, DD, health, and judiciary data, and harmonizes case definitions could bound the true, unobserved level of GBV and help estimate underreporting to the police. We provide an example of how to do this using the Rio de Janeiro data in a related working paper (Montini and Trudeau 2025). We expect similar dynamics to be present in other places with parallel authority structures, particularly in Latin America where criminal governance is so prevalent (Uribe et al. 2025).

Third, further theoretical and empirical work is needed to separate the mechanisms driving underreporting across different criminal governance areas. While we show that *suppression* (through threats and gatekeeping) depresses police reports, *substitution* might shift cases to health institutions or third-party channels like DD. One potential avenue is through survey experiments on willingness to report under different authorities, or the leveraging of quasi-experimental designs with the opening of new reporting channels in a particular area.[16]

Finally, the state is not a monolithic entity, neither in Rio de Janeiro nor in other Latin American contexts. Existing work on policing demonstrates that coordination across different state agencies can lead to widely varying outcomes at the sub-municipal level (Flom 2022; Flom and Post 2016; González 2020). If criminal governance makes implementing state policies more challenging, for a range of actors, more research should be conducted to understand how the presence of organized crime obstructs inter-agency cooperation with respect to GBV reporting and care.

16. The literature on women-only police stations employ these credible design strategies (Córdova and Kras 2020; Jassal 2020; Perova and Reynolds 2017), but criminal governance has not been an area of focus.

5 Policy recommendations

5.1 Quick wins

- **Expanded access to third-party channels:** In areas where criminal groups govern, there may be overlapping reasons why reporting GBV to the police is risky. Increased funding for, publicity of, and the creation of third-party channels such as *Disque Denúncia* can immediately provide survivors with a safer outlet to report GBV. While third-party channels have the disadvantage of not being able to deliver resources to survivors as directly as the state, the data from these channels can inform policymakers about general trends and care gaps.

- **Information campaigns about the outcomes for using various reporting channels:** In Rio de Janeiro, there are a multitude of ways to ask for help with GBV, as demonstrated in Section 3.4. This is not just a Rio de Janeiro phenomenon, but is true in other Latin American contexts as well. Often, the consequences of reporting GBV can be life-threatening or put the survivor in further danger. A quick win for policymakers seeing GBV on the rise would be information campaigns explaining the benefits and potential outcomes of reporting to different channels to expediate help and access to care. For example, if a woman is seeking a restraining order but goes to the court first before getting a police report, she is wasting precious time by not getting the police report first. Demystifying the process of accessing resources could protect more women, quicker.

5.2 Medium and long-term reforms

- **Better communication and referral protocols between channels:** Establish standardized, referral pathways with response-time targets, standardized protocol for confidentiality, privacy, and care for survivors and witnesses, and, shared checklists to minimize survivors being bounced between institutions. This requires agencies to coordinate the sequence, flow, and hierarchy of processing GBV complaints between agencies.

- **Improve data quality for GBV reporting:** Build a secure, privacy-protecting data backbone that links police reports, health service encounters, court protective orders, and third-party channels. For example, in the case we looked at in Rio de Janeiro, to overcome measurement bias, policymakers should standardize and harmonize the above data sources to create a unified database that accurately tracks GBV clusters

and audits gaps in service delivery. As the findings from our case study point out, integration across sources can be an important step for bounding the true, unobserved level of GBV. That being said, integration has limits. Rules should be established for which actors can see *other* entries or personal information within the database, to ensure survivor privacy and confidentiality.

- **Hospital-to-protection pipeline:** Allow health providers to trigger protective measures (with survivor consent) without requiring an in-person police visit first (e.g., remote police report filing from hospitals for all GBV cases[17]), immediate scheduling for forensic exams, and automatic notification to specialized GBV units.

- **Legal pathways for third-party reports to trigger protection:** Where feasible, reform statutes so vetted third-party channels (e.g., *Disque Denúncia*, women's shelters) can initiate time-limited protective measures with the survivor's consent or at least pre-register cases, reducing the cost and risk of the first contact with the state.

- **Sustained funding for third-party channels:** Provide multi-year support to health and social service centers (e.g., in Rio de Janeiro, CEAMs and *Casas da Mulher*, shelters) and trusted NGOs to act as low-barrier entry points, with paid community navigators who accompany survivors across institutions. Maintain hotline capacity with contingency staffing.[18]

- **Increased funding for women to access reporting channels in criminally governed areas:** Women need to "bypass the enemy" when reporting GBV. At times, the enemy are COs. At others, it seems to be the state. One potential remedy is to strategically locate and provide sustained funding for community-based front-doors in criminally governed areas.

- **Law enforcement accountability reforms:** Strengthen internal affairs and external oversight to address collusion and retaliation risks across police precincts. This requires rotation policies for police leadership in high-risk areas and anonymous reporting for police misconduct. As the case study notes, the deployment of heavily armed police units and high police lethality erodes trust (Cruz 2009; Trudeau 2022), directly contributing to suppression of police reports in criminally-governed territories (Montini and Trudeau 2025). Reform must shift the focus from militarized force to

17. For example, in our case study, sexual assault victims need to visit a police precinct in person to file a police report.

18. We address the consequences of under-staffing of DD during night-time hours for GBV reporting in (Montini and Trudeau 2025).

civilian safety, tying GBV reporting, response times, and protection order compliance to command evaluations to ensure institutional responsibility.

- **Capacity building and trauma-informed practice:** Train police, health workers, prosecutors, and judges on GBV dynamics under criminal governance (risk assessment, confidentiality, retaliation mitigation), with periodic audits.

6 Conclusion

This report shows that organized crime reshapes both the incidence and the visibility of GBV. The meta-analysis finds that scholarship overwhelmingly documents women's victimization—and rarely substantiates claims of "protection"—while the Rio case demonstrates that GBV concentrates in micro-areas under criminal authority and that reporting diverges across channels depending on governance type (Arias 2017; Barnes 2022). Our exercise that triangulates police reports with third-party tips helps to bound the true, unobserved incidence of GBV, and links high GBV regions of the city with criminal governance and areas where state resources are most constrained.

The relationship between organized crime and GBV in Rio de Janeiro paints a stark picture. We suspect that, across the Americas, where criminal groups are present, women might live in a similar state of uncertainty and fear. We urge policymakers that focus on GBV to consider it alongside their city, region, or country's broader public security crisis. Persistent armed conflict and high police lethality generate trauma, erode community safety nets, and limit the reach of essential prevention and protection programs. Efforts to reduce GBV require not only investments in survivor-centered health, psychosocial, and shelter services but also integrated strategies to curb armed violence, strengthen local safety infrastructure, and ensure coordination between health, social assistance, and security institutions. Without safer territorial conditions, even well-designed GBV interventions struggle to reach the women most at risk.

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Appendix A. Codebook and Research Design

A1. Study universe and unit of analysis

- **Population**: Peer–reviewed journal articles and scholarly books/chapters published between 2000–present that substantively engage with organized crime and gender in Latin America and beyond.
- **Unit of analysis**: Individual publication (article, chapter, or book). When a book has multiple chapters authored by different authors on distinct topics, chapters are coded separately.

A2. Search strategy

- **Database**: Web of Science
- **Search string (Title/Abstract/Keywords)**:

  (women OR gender OR female) AND ("criminal governance" OR "organized crime" OR mafia OR cartel OR "street gang" OR "drug gang")

- **Time window**: 2000–present.
- **Discipline filter**: None (to include political science, sociology, criminology, anthropology, public health, law).

A3. Screening and inclusion/exclusion

- **Stage 1 (title/abstract)**: Remove items that are out of scope.
- **Stage 2 (full text as needed)**: Apply inclusion criteria:

  1. Positivist social science orientation (empirical description, theorization with empirical grounding, or systematic evidence).
  2. Substantive engagement with organized crime/criminal governance (beyond passing mentions of "violence" or "crime").

- **Exclusions**: Normative legal essays; arts/literature analyses; studies of violence against women in politics not linked to OCGs; public health outcomes where gender/victimization only appear as control covariates.

A4. Variables and coding rules

Table 6: Codebook: variables, definitions, and coding guidance

Variable	Definition & coding guidance	Type / Values
country	Country primarily analyzed. If multi-country, code "Cross-national". If work covers many with no clear focus, code "Global".	Categorical
group_market	Primary criminal industry of the focal group: *drug trafficking*, *extortion*, *natural resource* (e.g., illegal mining, logging), or *survey* (used when the study spans multiple industries or is a review/synthesis). Choose best fit; if multiple are truly co-equal, list both separated by semicolon.	Categorical (single; allow multi if needed)
crimgov	Codes 1 if the study analyzes criminal *governance* (rule-making, dispute resolution, social control, service provision, or territorial regulation by OCGs). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)
women_criminals	Codes 1 if women are analyzed as *participants* in OCGs (members, accomplices, workers, leaders). Code 0 if women only appear as victims or bystanders.	Binary (0/1)
women_victims	Codes 1 if women/girls are analyzed as *victims* of OCGs or OCG-linked violence (e.g., IPV connected to criminal governance, kidnappings, threats, coercion). Passing mentions do not qualify.	Binary (0/1)
women_protected	Codes 1 if the study presents evidence that OCGs *protect* women (e.g., prohibiting GBV, punishing perpetrators). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)
women_sex	Codes 1 if the study documents *sexual violence or sexual exploitation* perpetrated by OCGs (including trafficking for sexual exploitation). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)
women_resist	Codes 1 if women or women's groups *resist* OCGs (collective action, advocacy, exit/defection strategies, or community mobilization). Otherwise 0.	Binary (0/1)

General coding notes.

- Code a binary as 1 only if the theme is a finding, core case, or explicit theorization, not just a passing mention.

- When in doubt, leave as 0 and flag in a notes field for secondary review.
- For *group_market*, prefer the single best-fit label; use ";" to record co-equal markets only when justified by the study's core contribution.

A6. Inter-coder reliability

- **Double-coding**: A random subsample will double-coded blind in future iterations.
- **Reconciliation**: Discrepancies are resolved by discussion; codebook updated with examples.

Appendix B. Results from Meta-Analysis

Figure 5: Full distribution of countries in meta-analysis