

Polycentric Governance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazilian Favelas

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Paper abstract:

This article examines the polycentric nature of the governance of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazilian informal settlements, known as favelas, in the face of science denialism and government neglect. During the COVID-19 pandemic, then-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro refused to acknowledge the gravity of the public health crisis. Bolsonaro ignored lockdown mandates and physical distancing recommendations and suppressed data on the virus's spread and lethality. At the state and municipal levels, government responses overlooked the realities of favelas and their residents who, in most cases, could not practice social distancing or stay home. In response, community-based organizations mobilized private and public actors and resources to protect their communities from virus transmission, hunger, and misinformation disseminated by the president at the time. I analyze the polycentric arrangements mobilized by favela organizations in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo to counter such realities. These governance systems relied on past and new local, informal, and formal institutional mechanisms, resources, and actors to deal with increasing oppression, threats, and rights violations. Finally, I reflect on the roles of such polycentric arrangements for urban governance and democratic processes in Brazil and elsewhere.