







## Street-level bureaucrats under COVID-19: Police officers' responses in constrained settings

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 poses unprecedented challenges for Street Level Bureaucrats (SLB). Whereas there are discussions about the pandemic impacts on health care workers, less is known about how it affects police officers' responses. Drawing upon an inductive qualitative research that follows the ethnographic sensibility inspired approach on a major Brazilian police force, we argue that conflicts concerning political, occupational culture, and material dimensions can negatively affect police officers' responses in financially and institutionally constrained settings. By unveiling how the identified conflicts can jeopardize the efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and suggesting that the usual discretion of street-level bureaucrats can be both a blessing and a curse, our work informs existing SLB literature and sheds light on practical issues that police officers in constrained settings face when dealing with the pandemic.



### KEYWORDS

COVID-19; occupational culture; police officers; political conflict; street-level bureaucrats

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges worldwide. Actions to prevent the dissemination of the virus, provide medical care, supply goods and services to the population, and enable financial support to underprivileged citizens are key to coping with the crisis. If this unparalleled situation is already grave for developed countries, the issue is even more pressing for developing countries with significantly more constraints.

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) such as health professionals, social workers and police officers are responsible for delivering services through daily interactions with citizens and they create policy through their day-to-day activities (Lipsky, 1980). They are the central frontline workers in the response to the disease. While attention has been devoted to the important role of health professionals in COVID-19 (Calisher et al., 2020), the role of other relevant SLBs, such as police officers, has been less discussed. Further to their regular crime control tasks, police officers play a central role in the COVID-19 pandemic enforcing restrictive measures to contain the spread of the disease, and supporting other government agencies to assist affected communities. The several tasks assigned to this special group of SLBs, who are also exposed to high

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contamination risks, raise additional concerns that must be addressed in effective government responses to the pandemic in both developed and developing countries. Studying police officers' responses in financially and institutionally constrained settings is useful to understand decision-making features of the delivery of care that affect the vast majority of the world population. It also allows us to shed light on conceptual aspects that can foster or hinder SLB responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

Drawing upon inductive qualitative research that follows the ethnographic sensibility inspired approach (Herzog & Zacka, 2019; McGranahan, 2018) on a Brazilian police force, in this essay we analyze the elements influencing police officers' responses to the pandemic in a more constrained context. Brazil is the second most infected country in the Americas and is one of the world's coronavirus epicenters. The combination of constant dialogs with key informants during the crisis, accumulated ethnographic research in the focused police force, and thirty-one years of experience of one of the authors within the force, has allowed us to identify critical dimensions shaping effective responses of police officers in an extreme case where the phenomenon of interest is salient (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Our research helped us to demonstrate COVID-19 is likely to generate dual outcomes in the context of the pandemic. On the one hand, the police forces' crime control values (Rubinstein, 1973) align with political and police occupational culture dimensions. On the other, and in line with recent public administration scholarship, we identify conflicts in the police work (de Graaf & Meijer, 2019) as well as in the interactions between police and society (Eterno, Barrow, & Silverman, 2017) in relation to three dimensions: political, occupational culture, and material which can negatively affect police officers' responses to COVID-19. By analyzing police officers in constrained settings, we add to the literature of street-level bureaucracy by identifying tensions that can influence officer's responses when routine and non-routine tasks coexist and sometimes diverge, trust between SLBs and target populations are not the rule, and when previous bias drive a public officer's actions (Harrits, 2019). Existing tensions can leverage discretion that may support both creative responses and inability to react (Newswander, 2012). Such heterogeneous responses in a pandemic is worrisome for citizens and the public officers involved. Finally, we propose some implications that emerge from our results, thus helping us to shed light on the issues SLBs face in combating the pandemics in constrained settings.

### **Street-level bureaucracy and emergency responses**

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) usually work in critical situations of lack of resources, high workload, unpredictability, and high ambiguity (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). Under such circumstances, SLBs have considerable discretion to take decisions and oftentimes act as policymakers (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010). Critical conditions at the street level can lead to situations of suffering, demotivation, alienation, decoupling and coping practices (Johnson & Vaughn, 2016; Lipsky, 2010; Mastracci & Adams, 2018; Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015).

In the last five decades, the literature of SLB has discussed the fact that the use of discretion by frontline professionals is influenced by various factors, such as political,

organizational, professional, and personal ties, which may engender both creativity and divergence during policy implementation (Gofen, 2014; Lipsky, 2010). Whereas most of the SLB research has been carried out analyzing contexts of routines, in which SLBs develop patterns of practices or of reactions to pressure (Tummers et al., 2015), much less research has analyzed contexts of emergency at the street level (Henderson, 2014). Emergencies are characterized by a lack of regularity and previous experience (Carter & May, 2020). These contexts disrupt the status quo and change power relations (Newswander, 2012) which may in turn open more space for discretion but may also make decision making far more difficult.

Research on SLB has also not explored how these professionals act in emergency situations that put them at risk. Moreover, most of the research on SLBs has been carried out in developed countries and liberal democracies, where public agencies are expected to provide equal access to shared resources in accountable ways. In developing countries, besides the problems of lack of resources, SLBs also act in institutionally constrained settings, in which weak institutions, poor accountability standards and lack of trust in government are the rule. In order to contribute to the SLB research, we explore responses to emergency situations in constrained settings of police officers, a particular group of SLBs who exercise large amounts of discretion.

## Method

To analyze the role of police officers from a developing country in the COVID-19 crisis, we adopt an inductive qualitative approach that follows the ethnographic sensibility inspired approach (Herzog & Zacka, 2019; McGranahan, 2018) for data collection and analysis. The ethnographic sensibility “is attention to the conditions and experiences of life as actually lived. It is an attunement to worlds shared via participant-observation that extend beyond the parameters of a narrowly defined research question” (McGranahan, 2018, p. 7). In so doing, our approach applied to a state-level Brazilian police force (SPF) permitted us to obtain practice-oriented observations reflecting the realities of everyday organizational life of relevant SLBs (Brodin, 2012; Zacka, 2017). SPF has more than 75,000 officers (the New York Police Department has 36,000 officers). To circumvent the limitations posed by the newness of COVID-19, we benefited from the previous interactions of two authors directly involved in the data collection. The first (hereafter referred to as the Police Officer) has been an SPF officer for 31 years now. When the COVID-19 started, he was collecting ethnographic data based at SPF for his PhD (see Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The other author (hereafter referred to as the scholar) has been carrying out ethnographic police research over the last 8 years. In so doing, we claim we are using an ethnographic sensibility research style, not an ethnography due to the short time the research has started to focus on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research for this paper is a small part of a larger project that was already following the ethical research guidelines of the academic institution (reference to be added after peer review) of the scholar and the police officer in order to assure voluntary participation and informed consent as well as not to cause any harm those who were involved. Such guidelines also preserve the confidentiality of information and the

anonymity of the research participants. Police officers in a pandemic situation are a vulnerable population and we sought to develop responsible scholarship to minimize the possible harms of our research (Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau, 2018).

Considering that gathering data from key informants is a central data collection tool for ethnographic research (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001), when COVID-19 arrived in Brazil, the scholar and the police officer contacted different key informants at the SPF who were already taking part in a larger research project. Due to the instructions to keep social distance to reduce COVID-19 contamination, we decided to have informal chats with these key informants three times a week asking how the organization was dealing with COVID-19. We spoke to a total of 12 key-informants, 8 were commanders (referred to in the paper as CM 1 to CM 8) at different command ranks and 4 were low-ranking (referred to in the paper as LR 1 to LR 4) police officers. The newest key-informant has been in the SPF for less than 3 years and the longest an informant who has been in the police force 35 years. We cannot provide details of each of the research informants to ensure the anonymity of the research subjects. For this paper, we use data from about one and a half months of these informal conversations (from March 2nd to April 16th). In addition, the police officer started to take daily detailed notes on how COVID-19 was affecting his work and the organization.

Following the ethnographic sensibility, we produced detailed field notes and memos (Emerson et al., 1995) from our data sources about the impact of COVID-19 in the SPF. All this formed a field note diary that was coded line by line in order to see emergent domains (Spradley, 1980). To do this, we read all the data three times and started to realize that the SFP COVID-19 situation was being influenced by issues associated with conflicts between different levels of government, by expressions of cultural values of police officers and also by a shortage of supplies. We call the conflicts among different levels of government the political dimension, the expressions of cultural values of police officers the occupational culture dimension, and the references to the materials needed to deal with COVID-19 the material dimension. All the data for this paper were recorded and analyzed in Portuguese. From our data, three key dimensions related to COVID-19 in the context of SPF emerged: political, occupational culture, and material.

## Results

### *The police force (SPF) and COVID-19*

SPF is a state-level agency subordinated to a democratically elected state governor and is in charge of crime prevention and control. Crime in Brazil is a significant challenge and it is common to observe police officers performing other out-of-duty tasks to earn enough money for a living. High rates of suicides, occupational diseases, and deaths are common (França & Duarte, 2017). Police-citizen interactions in poor areas are surrounded by low-levels of trust from both sides with various instances of the police brutality and poor accountability structures (Cabral & Lazzarini, 2015). These very challenging working conditions are common in developing countries and make police work even more extreme. This means that when COVID-19 started to spread in Brazil, SPF already faced several complex issues.

SPF has a robust military organizational culture. Resembling other police forces in the world, officers perceive crime-fighting related activities, such as chasing criminals, as their main duty. They consider administrative tasks or care activities like the ones performed by police nurses and doctors with contempt as if they are non-real police work (e.g. Rubinstein, 1973).

When COVID-19 started and social distancing policies were implemented, there was a decrease in crimes such as smart-phone robbery and an increase in crimes such as security van and bank robbery. According to CM6 on 2020, March 3, “there are far fewer people on the streets, and this means less opportunity for criminals. Also, organized crime is not exporting drugs as much as they do. Criminals are migrating. They are making bank related attacks to keep the money coming.” Referring to the pandemic, CM3 said on 2020, March 4 “What we do best is fight crime! We already have a strategy in place to deter the bad guys!”

While alignment is observed on the role of police forces preventing crime during the pandemic, we were able to observe instances of misalignment that can affect police responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Political dimension***

In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, the Brazilian President and former Army Capitan, was elected with strong support from police officers. During the elections, a police officer said to the scholar “If Bolsonaro is elected, it will be great for us.” Despite an initial alignment between the president and the governor of the state in which SPF is located and a speech pro-police forces, some contingencies changed the harmonious scenario and tensions rose. At the end 2019, the governor signed a wage increase that was far below police officers’ expectations. At the same time, the President and State Governor became political opponents. Frictions between the State Governor and police officers were visible: “Our governor gives us a command and when the media asks why the police took action, he says he gave no command to us. It is bad to have a boss who you cannot trust” (CM1 9th March 2020). Our previous and current interactions with SPF allow us to claim that for a considerable number of police officers, the State Governor cannot be trusted.

Once the pandemic unfolded in the state, the Governor took steps to implement social distancing. On the other hand, several voices, including the President, repeatedly made critical comments about the state policy arguing that it was also necessary to protect the economy and that social distancing would mean worse consequences for people than the virus itself. With the pandemic growing in Brazil, a strong divide was created between supporters and critics of social distancing. According to the critics “citizens need to work.”

In a particular media interview, the State Governor said he would order SPF to arrest people who defied social distancing. As said by CM 8 on 2020, April 14 “How can my troop arrest someone if the constitution assures freedom of movement?” Moreover, some police officers’ unions made public statements arguing: “the Governor wants to put the police against the population. How can we arrest the good citizen who wants

just to work?” Police officers were complaining to each other with phrases such as “He is a dictator,” referring to the State Governor when speaking to the police officer.

Police officers on the street were also reporting that they were getting calls about shops that were open despite the state government prohibition. The officers said when they arrived at the shop, they would kindly ask to the shop owner to close the doors. However, as time progressed, police officers were reporting they were not enforcing the state government policy and complained about not having legal instruments to impose fines on social distancing offenders, for example. Despite the implications on the dissemination of the virus, CM3 on 2020, April 16 complained “the police are caught in the middle of a dispute between the President and the Governor. This impacts on how my police officer works.” Misalignment and tensions between SLBs and elected officials are evident.

### ***Occupational culture dimension***

Police occupational culture relates to the underlining ideas officers have of their roles and their assumptions about the social world that informs officers’ daily conduct (Manning, 1977). Masculinity is the key element of police occupational culture around the globe (Loftus, 2010). Police officers self-perceive themselves as (macho) crime-fighters (Brown, 2007) where the physical attributes of masculinity, as well as courage to face danger, is crucial (Crank, 2004). Police officers tend to regard it as natural to display “tough and forceful” behaviors (Silvestri, 2003) for acceptance in the police occupational culture. All these elements are noticeably present in the SPF.

In general, officers said they do not fear death because they perceive it as “natural” for police officers’ lives to be under threat. So, “if you die of COVID-19, it is part of our business,” said LR3 to the police officer on 2020, March 4. Some even mentioned that for those who are used to dealing with bad criminals, a virus is not a threat. This leads to careless working attitudes that conflict with the accepted standards of how to deal with COVID-19. For example, the following story was told to the police officer who is one of the authors of this paper: upon going to work feeling many of the COVID-19 symptoms, an officer who, was later on sick leave due to the disease, told his police car partner that he was a suspected COVID-19 case. He suggested to his partner not to work with him and to seek help from the police hospital when his partner replied: “F\*\*\* coronavirus, let’s work!” In SPF, calling in sick is usually perceived as a way to avoid work. However, some police officers regard fear with contempt. For example, LR1, known for being rude, mentioned to colleagues on 2020, April 2 that the virus situation was making him a “sissy” unable to sleep and feeling anxiety.

Moreover, CM 7 and CM3 mentioned they were asking their police officers to do less “stop-and-frisk” while patrolling and to avoid contact with people. According to CM7, those initiatives of avoiding physical contact were “against the DNA” of the police officers. They see arresting criminals as real police work (Crank, 2004). LR2 on 2020, March 30 commented, “When my shift started, I was not stopping anybody and was very concerned about public exposure. As the shift went on, we started to stop cars, search people and go on business as usual.” Overall, our results indicate that the SPF

occupational culture is likely to hinder effective responses of these SLBs against COVID-19.

### ***Material dimension***

Protection against COVID-19 for frontline SLBs, such as police officers, has a material dimension, based on resource availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) to avoid being contaminated by the virus. All over the world, the shortage of PPE has been a concern in the pandemic. In the early stages of the pandemic SPF was having trouble finding PPE for police officers meaning that they were working unprotected. CM3 told the scholar on 2020, March 10: “Professor, I am really pissed off. We have no hand sanitizer for my troop. We all knew this was coming, why did our top management not buy this for us?” As time went on, several SPF officers were able to get the first PPE by non-official means. To get hand sanitizer for his police officers, CM2 on 2020, March 11 told the scholar “I phoned a businessman who loves our force. He always helps us. I told him I needed hand sanitizer and he gave a lot to us.” This businessman said to the commander that he would give as much as hand sanitizer to his battalion as needed. However, the commander complained that this would mean he would need “to help” the businessmen when he needed. Some days later, CM6 mentioned, “well, I had to send some of my officers to close down a drug-dealing place at the request of that businessmen.”

In the police masculine culture, masks and gloves are associated with caring which is a typically female job. Using PPE is a clear display of fear, something which is not well considered in police culture. CM5 on 2020, April 5 said, “police officers easily use the hand-sanitizer because no one sees it. Wearing a mask is a totally different game. Using it is to tell people you are not brave enough.” As time went on, all the police officers said they had the necessary PPE for protection. Nonetheless, some police officers were even taking the masks and gloves home that they received from the police to give their family members to use. Furthermore, to date (2020, April 15) tests to identify COVID-19 were not available to all police officers, suggesting that SLBs responses can be inhibited by material constraints along with cultural traits.

### **SLB Responses to COVID-19: Implications for police officers in constrained settings**

By focusing on a particular category of SLBs, police officers, we find that when dealing with crime fostered by the pandemic, police officers have their work aligned with the needs of the public. However, our data indicates that the effectiveness of police officers’ responses to the new demands brought by COVID-19 is contingent to the interplay between three dimensions: political, occupational culture, and material. In the political dimension, our findings suggest that disputes between political leaders at state and federal levels along with the lack of unambiguous regulation to guarantee the enforcement of social distancing can jeopardize the efforts to mitigate the widespread of COVID-19. This is not only a reality in developing countries. In the U.S. the President and State Governors have also conflicted over social distancing. The misalignment between core

values of the established police occupational culture (i.e. machismo and heroism) and the protocols to deal with the pandemic can not only make these SLBs careless with the virus, but ironically, make police officers a vector of the disease, harming those who they should take care of. The lack of resources in constrained settings (see material dimension) amplifies the pervasive effects of the occupational culture on the efforts to combat the pandemic.

Our results may inform practice and theory in some dimensions. First, like other street-level bureaucrats, police officers exercise considerable discretion in the pursuit of organizational goals (Gofen, 2014). However, in the context of a pandemic, discretion can be both a blessing and a curse. Despite the fact that the exercise of discretion can foster innovation and creativity and generate new responses to the crisis, as in the case of the lack of PPE discussed above, the inherent uncertainties of COVID-19 call for a more intensive use of protocols to protect officers and citizens alike (Carter & May, 2020). These routines besides restraining the role of discretionary action contribute to leverage tensions when SLB values diverge from the values of elected officials (Brodkin, 2012). In our case, the situation is even worse because political leaders at different levels disagree about which policy should be implemented, thus offering SLBs dual possibilities of alignment. These findings contribute to the SLB literature showing the importance of observing different types of alignment (political, material and cultural) in order to manage SLB discretion in an emergency situation. Reducing conflicts and creating convergence to lower policy ambiguity and increasing enforcement are key to effective responses to the pandemic, and they are also key elements to manage conflicts at the street-level (Matland, 1995).

Second, collaboration and facilitative leaderships are central to effective emergency management (Waugh & Streib, 2006). Police leaders must lead by example and reinforce the importance of caretaking protocols instead of risk-taking attitudes. Moreover, senior officers can identify lower-ranking officers who are informal leaders and more likely to convince colleagues to adopt caretaking attitudes. Changing embedded values is far from easy, but engaging informal leaders could be a possibility. Furthermore, assigning police officers who are able to conciliate caregiving and regular crime protection tasks to frontline positions should be considered by police leaders. The SLB literature has already stressed the importance of leadership in policy implementation, considering that leaders may influence, encourage and punish SLBs (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 1980; Tummers & Knies, 2013). Our data add to this indicating that one of the main roles of leaders during a pandemic is to promote practices of realignment between political, cultural and material dimensions. In this extreme context, leaders should also be able to manage conflicts and ambiguity in order to improve creativity and reduce divergence.

Third, allocating budget and assuring material conditions is necessary to enable police officers to respond safely to COVID-19 circumstances. However, in this pandemic the lack of PPE supplies to SLB is a reality even in developed countries. The pressing need for PPE supplies for police officers in constrained settings requires extra coordination efforts to promote intergovernmental collaboration (McGuire & Silvia, 2010) and circumvent burdens imposed by thick red tape procedures (Koliba, Mills, & Zia, 2011). Fostering police officer's creativity to find solutions such as seeking donations or



adapting existing equipment to the needs of officers may be necessary steps to guarantee the supply of equipment that can save lives. However, excess of creativity and discretion can, besides engendering non-efficient solutions, threaten accountability standards (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Attention is needed to avoid the malignant consequences of discretion in the context of a pandemic in both constrained and unconstrained settings.

Overall, our findings suggest the importance of improving the analysis of SLBs' working practices in developing countries and in the context of emergencies. Future research in these settings, in which daily problems may be exacerbated are desirable.

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