# (Mis)Perceptions of Crime and Welfare Attitudes: Evidence from Public Housing in Brazil[*]

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**Abstract**

Globally, persistent housing deficits have driven large-scale investments in public housing, yet such programs often face resistance rooted in crime concerns. We examine whether these concerns reflect actual insecurity or misperceptions, and how they shape political support. Focusing on Brazil's *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (MCMV) program, we combine a program-embedded natural experiment, a large beneficiary survey (n $>$ 7,000), and an instrumental variable analysis of lottery participants in a major city. We find no evidence that public housing increases city-wide crime. Fewer than 1% of beneficiaries report wanting to leave due to violence, and relocation is not causally associated with insecurity or security-related claims. Instead, beneficiaries report high residential satisfaction and improved well-being. We then assess how crime framing shapes policy preferences through a pre-registered survey experiment (n = 1,974). While baseline support for public housing is high, it declines when crime is framed as city-wide. Further, higher-income respondents reduce support for public security spending unless crime is portrayed as directly affecting them. These findings underscore how perceptions, rather than crime itself, shape redistribution and security preferences.

**Keywords:** crime, redistribution, political economy, public housing, framing, Brazil

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# Introduction

Throughout Latin America, approximately 120 million individuals live in informal settlements or in housing conditions considered inadequate,[1] and nearly 24% of existing housing stock is classified as substandard.[2] In addition to quality deficits, the region faces a substantial quantitative housing shortage: as of 2024, the housing deficit averaged roughly 10%, reaching 17% in Argentina and 33% in Mexico.[3] These deficits have profound consequences for human development, including adverse effects on physical health, mental well-being, and political engagement (Krieger and Higgins, 2002; Slee and Desmond, 2023).

In response, governments across the region and ideological spectrum have made large investments in public housing. Programs such as Colombia's *Mi Casa Ya* (My House Now) and Chile's *Fondo Solidario de Elección de Vivienda* (Housing Choice Solidarity Fund) combine subsidies, savings mechanisms, and partnerships with the private sector to expand access to formal housing. These initiatives have contributed to reductions in housing deficits and improvements in living conditions, particularly among low-income households. Yet despite their material benefits, public housing programs often face intense political resistance. A central—and remarkably persistent—concern is that public housing gives rise to crime. Across diverse contexts, opponents of housing developments invoke fears of rising insecurity, declining property values, and neighborhood deterioration, fueling local opposition and NIMBY dynamics (Einstein, Glick and Palmer, 2020; de Benedictis-Kessner and Hankinson, 2019; Sahn, 2024). These claims frequently shape political debates, delay implementation, and constrain the scale of redistributive policies.

This paper begins from a critical question: to what extent is the association between public housing and crime real, and to what extent is it perceived? While housing developments are routinely portrayed as sources of insecurity, systematic evidence of their effects on crime remains mixed and context-dependent (Sandler, 2017; Aliprantis and Hartley, 2015; Freedman and Owens, 2011; Diamond and McQuade,

[1] https://www.newstoryhomes.org/blog/why-we-work-in-latin-america

[2] https://anuarioviviendalac.com/

[3] https://cre.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/confronting-housing-challenge-I.pdf ; https://anuarioviviendalac.com/



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2019). At the same time, media coverage and political discourse often present housing programs as criminogenic, potentially shaping public opinion independently of actual crime trends (Sheley and Ashkins, 1981). We argue that the political consequences of housing policy depend less on real crime effects than on perceived insecurity, and that media narratives play a crucial role in sustaining this perception gap. This perception gap, in turn, is consequential and can strongly inform support for these programs.

To make this argument, we focus on the case of Brazil's *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (MCMV). This program, launched in 2009, represents one of the most ambitious efforts worldwide to address housing insecurity, producing over 3 million housing units in less than a decade. Focusing on this program, we present a series of studies examining its effects and the consequences of its portrayal on public support. These studies are contextualized by an analysis of data from national-level news coverage of the program, documenting that media has increasingly associated MCMV with criminality over time. For an overview of our design, see Figure 1.

First, we investigate the relationship between public housing and crime. We begin by examining the program's effects on *city-wide crime*. Leveraging a natural experiment embedded in the program's rollout, we show that an exogenous expansion of public housing *does not* increase city-wide crime. This finding is robust to considering changes over time, as well as differences in effects based on sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity). We then consider the program's effects on crime experienced directly by beneficiaries, or what we call *hyper-local crime*. We do so via two complementary strategies. We first draw on survey data from thousands of beneficiaries – covering 188 municipalities and over 500 MCMV housing complexes – and demonstrate that respondents on average report middling levels of violence, and very few report desiring to move as a result of this violence. Rather, they report strikingly high levels of satisfaction with their new homes and that their lives significantly improved. We then draw on a survey fielded by Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2022) of participants in the MCMV's 2011 lottery in Rio de Janeiro, surveyed 8-9 years after. Using an instrumental variable approach, we show no causal relationship between entering the MCMV program and two measures of individual-level security. These findings challenge narratives that public housing programs systematically *produce* violence, both for beneficiaries and residents surrounding public housing communities.



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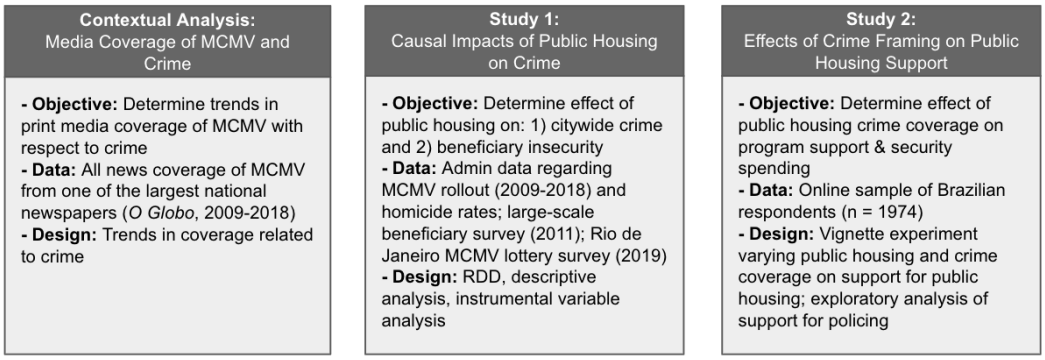



Figure 1: Overview of Research Design

In the second study, we consider this finding in light of the media's demonstrated propensity to associate the MCMV program with crime. We field a pre-registered survey experiment in which respondents were randomly exposed to hypothetical news articles about public housing that mirror real media narratives. These articles varied in whether they emphasized the program's benefits alone or introduce crime-related externalities, distinguishing between city-wide crime and crime affecting only beneficiaries (*hyper-local crime*). Our experimental results reveal a nuanced pattern. While support for public housing remains strong across income groups, it is highly sensitive to how crime is framed. Information emphasizing citywide crime reduces support across the board, whereas hyper-local crime does not. This decline in housing support translates into increased support for security among high-income respondents exclusively. These findings suggest that distributive coalitions around housing policy are less fragile than commonly assumed, but that insecurity narratives shift political conflict toward policing rather than redistribution. This is normatively important, as governments are predisposed to govern low-income populations – particularly race-class subjugated communities – through security institutions' coercive and repressive capacities (Soss and Weaver, 2017).

In all, our analysis makes a handful of contributions. First, we not only extend analyses of the causal impact of public housing on crime – which have largely been based on evidence from the U.S. (e.g., Sandler, 2017; Aliprantis and Hartley, 2015) – to Latin America, but demonstrate a lack of systematic evidence for such a relationship. This is vital as such a perception can reinforce stigma, negative stereotypes of beneficiaries (Motley and Perry, 2013), and perceptions of deservingness (Skigin, 2024). These



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dynamics can, in turn, reduce support for these programs overall (Layton, 2020). Moreover, we demonstrate the widespread nature of mass media coverage that forwards this conclusion, and highlight how certain frames can undermine crucial support for these programs. This support is essential for policy survival.

Second, our analysis contributes to the broader literature on the perceived social assistance-security tradeoff (e.g., Altamirano, Berens and Ley, 2020, 2024; Laterzo, 2024). While previous work has highlighted how victimization and perceptions of insecurity within one's neighborhood can affect demand for public welfare provision, our analysis demonstrates how *who may be victimized* matters as well. While victimization restricted to beneficiaries does little to shift preferences, if insecurity may spread beyond them, support for these programs can suffer. More broadly, this contribution also speaks to newer literature on dynamic preferences for welfare distribution among direct beneficiaries (Vanegas, 2026), and how such preferences may hinge on the potential externalities (positive and negative) incurred by both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (Holland, 2023).

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. First, we present our theoretical framework and situate our contribution in terms of the literature on public housing and its consequences, as well as perceptions of social assistance and support for related policies. We then provide contextual information regarding Brazil's public housing programs over the past two decades. Next, we outline our research design and empirical strategy, highlighting the two studies within our article, and present each study's methodology and results sequentially. We then conclude.

## Theoretical Framework

The notion that public housing may create conditions for increased crime is empirically debated, but has strongly informed public discourse. This fact is not only important in itself, but has implications for the political viability of public housing programs. In this study, we consider this popularized and feared relationship, the body of evidence behind it, and the weaknesses inherent to it. Drawing on existing research, we consider what may contribute to this popularized concern – namely media narratives – and



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how such narratives can shape public support for related programs.

## Public Housing and Crime

Housing insecurity poses a persistent and distinct set of challenges to those who are faced with it. It has negative impacts on educational, psychological, and financial outcomes (Hock et al., 2024); among young children facing housing insecurity, there are higher incidences of poor health, lower weight, and development risk (Cutts et al., 2011). Given this, it is unsurprising that providing housing security has systematic benefits, such as causing wealth accumulation, increased social mobility for young households, and amplifying wealth accumulation for older households, among other benefits (Galiani et al., 2017; Sodini et al., 2023; Armentano et al., 2024). Often with these factors in mind, governments around the globe have invested in public housing programs, or programs where home ownership or rental is made to me more affordable (if not free) for individuals determined to be in need.[4]

Despite these benefits, programs designed to reduce housing insecurity have faced persistent and intense resistance among segments of the population. One of the most quintessentially cited reasons for such resistance is the supposed relationship between related housing programs and crime.[5] In the United States, for example, diverse demographic groups perceive dense and public housing developments as leading to more crime in their neighborhoods, with these perceptions often tied to negative stereotypes about race and class (Tighe, 2012; Trounstine, 2023). While empirical evaluations of support for similar programs outside the U.S. and Western Europe are limited (Zavisca and Gerber, 2016), anecdotal evidence paints a similar picture: In cities such as Buenos Aires, opposition to urban integration projects has invoked concerns about rising insecurity and the arrival of "delinquency" from informal settlements. In Chile, neighborhood resistance to social housing relocation programs has frequently centered on fears of crime and declining public order. These examples indicate that the association between subsidized housing and insecurity travels beyond the U.S. context, even where institutional and demographic dynamics

[4]We use the term "public housing" to also refer to "social housing" which is often used to refer to the same or a similar style of government-funded program.

[5]https://coloradosun.com/2023/03/13/boulder-group-home-nimby-property-value-crime-children-opinion/



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differ.

However, the scholarly consensus on this relationship is mixed, and much is based on evidence from major cities in the U.S. For instance, both low-income housing developments (Freedman and Owens, 2011; Diamond and McQuade, 2019) and home ownership incentive programs (Disney et al., 2023) have been shown to have negative relationships with crime. While studies have highlighted a potential relationship, much of this evidence drawn from the case of Chicago. Among these studies, scholars have found that with public housing demolition, crime and other negative externalities decreased (Sandler, 2017; Aliprantis and Hartley, 2015). Other studies have taken a more nuanced approach, noting that public housing units may exacerbate the insecurity of their residents (i.e., beneficiaries), largely due to social isolation, but has limited capacity to generate violence beyond the housing developments in question (Griffiths and Tita, 2009). Evidence from outside the U.S. is limited, although some scholars have similarly highlighted risks associated with public housing. In Medellín, anthropological research has demonstrated how poor construction and design of public housing complexes can facilitate the ability of criminal groups to exert power over local residents, exposing them to crime-related threats (Müller, 2019). However, overall, systematic analyses remain sparse and evidence is highly contextual.

All in all, this evidence presents a gap between generalizable empirical findings and public belief. This gap suggests that the political challenges facing housing programs may stem not only from their material effects, but also from the social construction of their consequences. Understanding how and why the association between public housing and crime becomes salient, credible, and politically powerful is therefore crucial for explaining both public opinion and the policy sustainability of housing programs.

## Perceptions and Policy Support

Regardless of the empirical reality, what citizens believe has political consequences. Public opinion on an issue is one of the most proximate causes of policy (Page and Shapiro, 1983; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Perceived links between public housing and crime can lead citizens to oppose affordable housing projects (Tighe, 2012). Indeed, groups of mobilized citizens have successfully thwarted or curtailed these projects in light of concerns about crime or other factors that groups of citizens and politicians have deemed "un-



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desirable" (Brouwer and Trounstine, 2024).[6] In particular, concerns about crime can motivate feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger (Ley, 2022), emotions known to be strongly motivating for citizens to engage in politics (Salamon and Van Evera, 1973; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015). This may be particularly salient in Latin American contexts, where citizens are disproportionately victims of crime and concerns about security are ever salient (AmericasBarometer, 2023).

One of the most powerful shapers of perceptions of the world around us is the media, which has "the potential to, at the same time, distort perceptions and enlighten about social reality" (Lutz and Bitschnau, 2023). Both positive and negative stories can shift perceptions of issues as diverse as immigration (Unan, 2025) and vaccine safety and efficacy (Dixon and Clarke, 2013; Loomba et al., 2021), among others. Perceptions of crime, too, are sensitive to media narratives, with news coverage regarding crime often leading to a biased perception that crime is rising (Pfeiffer, Windzio and Kleimann, 2005); these attitudes can – in turn – affect support for different types of crime control policies. Such patterns are even visible at the national level. For example, more negative news coverage of immigration has translated to widespread support for restrictive immigration policies (Vétois et al., 2025). This work suggests that similar patterns may be present in the case of public housing policy, which is already subject to significant stigma, including its perceived nature as "crime ridden" (Motley and Perry, 2013).

To be sure, support for public housing is not only subject to concerns about its supposed negative effects. Rather, it falls under the broader umbrella of redistributive policies, as it reallocates public resources to expand access to affordable housing and reduce market-based inequalities in shelter and neighborhood quality (Rains, Krishna and Wibbels, 2019; Xu, 2023). These policies have their own contours of support and opposition, which have been widely studied. Traditional theories of redistribution suggest that such policies are primarily supported by left-leaning citizens and low-income groups, as they are the most likely to directly benefit (Huber and Stephens, 2012; Pribble, 2013; Feierherd et al., 2023; Franko, 2016;

[6]For example, in 2025, the Mjølnerparken complex in Copenhagen, Denmark was closed after claims that predominantly immigrant residents did not adhere to "Danish values." This complex has also been the target of significant attention for its above-average crime rate. https://theworld.org/stories/2025/04/07/as-denmark-tears-down-homes-in-non-western-areas-to-force-assimilation-residents-fight-back-in-court, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/how-denmarks-ghetto-list-is-ripping-apart-migrant-communities



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Rueda, 2007; Rehm, 2009, 2011; Cusack, Iversen and Rehm, 2005). These dynamics of support have been identified as a broader limitation for the expansion of inequality-addressing public investment, as cross-class coalitions that push for and support these policies are difficult to form (Holland and Schneider, 2017). However, studies have shown that even "unlikely" supporters are possible, and that under certain circumstances right-leaning citizens and governments, as well as wealthier individuals, are also inclined to tacitly and even actively support welfare programs (De La O, 2015; Fairfield and Garay, 2017; Castiglioni, 2020; Lupu and Pontusson, 2011; Berens, 2020).

As scholars' understanding about coalitions of support for redistribution develops, we are increasingly turning to concepts of self-interest to understand support for redistributive policies. Recent studies, such as Holland (2023), have highlighted the role of self-interested cost-benefit analysis in shaping support for public policy: citizens are willing to pay for policies as long as they perceive a benefit – even indirectly – to themselves. But the converse is also true. If no benefit is perceived and only costs, or the benefit is perceived as inadequate, support is unlikely (Holland, 2023; Vanegas, 2026). In turning to crime as a salient perceived "cost" of public housing, this suggests that highlighting such as cost may have a salient negative effect on redistributive policy support, particularly among those who do not perceived strong benefits to themselves (e.g., they are not potential beneficiaries).

But beyond individual-level cost–benefit calculations, crime as a "cost" itself is of theoretical relevance, as perceptions of insecurity also reshape broader evaluations of the state's role and priorities. As Altamirano, Berens and Ley (2020) argue, perceptions of insecurity and direct victimization have distinct consequences for social policy preferences. While victimization can increase support for certain forms of welfare provision, heightened perceptions of insecurity are associated with a reduced demand for welfare provision, as they reflect a sense that the state is failing in its most basic function: the provision of public security. When insecurity is seen as widespread, citizens prioritize the restoration of order over redistribution, reallocating their support toward security provision (Altamirano, Berens and Ley, 2024; Laterzo, 2024; Berens and Karim, 2024). In this sense, insecurity does not merely generate fear; it can also crowd out support for welfare policies by shifting expectations about what the state should be doing.

In all, prior work suggests that the media can have powerful effects on support for policy. This may be



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particularly strong in instances such as discussions of negative externalities like crime, where it may engender emotions such as fear, anxiety and anger. With respect to public housing, this type of coverage may overlap with existing gaps in support based on coalitions of potential beneficiaries vs. non-beneficiaries. In all, in contexts where media highlights that public housing is associated with crime, individuals are likely to deploy cost benefit calculations in evaluating their own support, balancing the degree to which this cost affects them versus the potential benefits they may incur.

## Public Housing in Brazil

In 2009, the Brazilian government launched the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* program (MCMV, My House, My Life in English) under President Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (PT). Through a combination of subsidies and interest-rate incentives, the program sought to improve access to housing for those within certain income brackets. Specifically, the program targeted three income brackets, and among residents in the lowest bracket (*faixa 1*), subsidies reached up to 95% of the cost of a home. As part of its effort, the government – in partnership with private real estate – also constructed over 3 million housing units across the country in only seven years.[7] MCMV maintained this overall structure until Jair Bolsonaro was elected to office in 2018, when he re-structured the program and renamed it. When Lula returned to office in 2023, MCMV was restored.

In general, the program has been evaluated positively. Satisfaction among beneficiaries was reported to be quite high during the first phase of the program.[8] In the Northeastern Region, the program was reported to have decreased the housing deficit by 2.6%.[9] Scholars evaluating the MCMV program have shown that beneficiaries of the program report a higher quality of life compared to non-recipients (Menezes and Mourão, 2017) and lower-income beneficiaries experienced both better formal employment outcomes and lower levels of welfare dependency (Belchior, Gonzaga and Ulyssea, 2023). To be sure, the

[7]https://www.gov.br/cidades/pt-br/assuntos/noticias-1/conheca-o-programa-minha-casa-minha-vida

[8]https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/04/17/completando-10-anos-minha-casa-minha-vida-enfrenta-dificuldades/

[9]https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/04/17/completando-10-anos-minha-casa-minha-vida-enfrenta-dificuldades/



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program is by no means perfect. Some scholars have found, for example, that incentives of developers pushed housing units towards the outskirts of the city, increasing segregation and urban sprawl (Biderman, Hiromoto and Ramos, 2018; Stiphany and Ward, 2019; Xu, 2023).

Beyond the popularity among beneficiaries, MCMV has been popular across ideologically and income-diverse groups (Bueno, Nunes and Zucco, 2022). This popularity translated into important political dividends: both presidential and mayoral incumbents performed better in areas where MCMV was rolled out, compared to localities where it was not (Bueno, Zucco and Nunes, 2023). At the individual level, it is actually non-beneficiaries – who only benefit from the program indirectly, and for whom the details of implementation matter less – reward incumbents more for MCMV than beneficiaries (Bueno, Zucco and Nunes, 2023).

However, shortly following the beginning of the MCMV program, anecdotal and journalistic evidence circulated regarding a potential link between the program and crime. In 2015, one newspaper claimed that "all" MCMV housing complexes were targets of crime. The cited report noted that organized criminal groups had moved in and victimized residents, with one case of a group forcing out all 80 families to then distribute them to who they wished.[10] Indeed, reporting along these lines was particularly common in the city of Rio de Janeiro,[11] although reporting in other large cities emerged noting similar dynamics as time progressed.[12] In one case, one drug trafficker was reported to have killed a pregnant woman in an MCMV complex, subsequently hiding her body.[13] These concerns continue and have been elevated to the national level. In 2025, the Minister of Cities stated that organized crime had taken over various public housing complexes built by the government in the state of Rio de Janeiro, calling the situation an "epidemic."[14]

[10]https://cbic.org.br/todos-os-condominios-do-minha-casa-minha-vida-no-rio-sao-alvos-do-crime-organizado/

[11]https://www.observatoriodasmetropoles.net.br/retomada-do-programa-minha-casa-minha-vida-violencia-precarizacao-e-o-desafio-da-permanencia/

[12]Such as Feira de Santana, Bahia and Campinas, São Paulo, according to O Globo (2015).

[13]https://extra.globo.com/casos-de-policia/em-condominio-do-minha-casa-minha-vida-dominado-por-playboy-trafico-mata-gravida-esconde-corpo-16423172.html

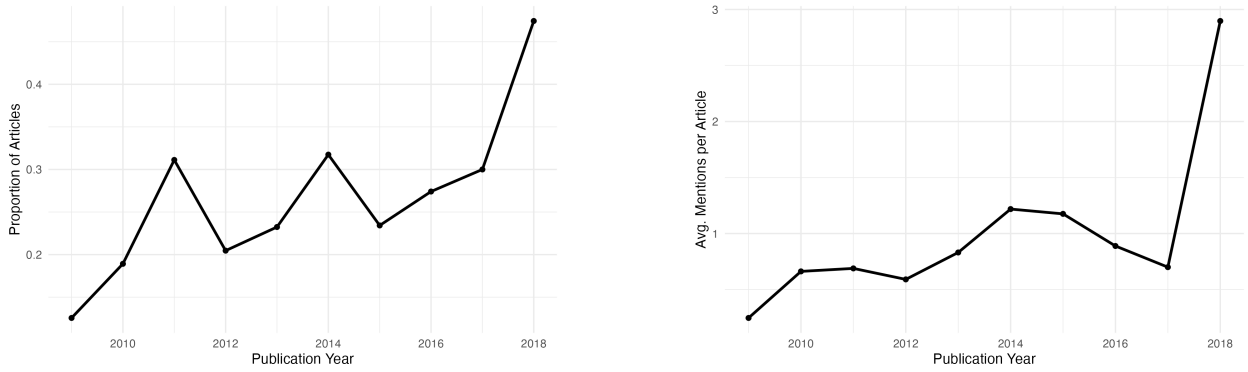
[14]https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2025/10/07/crime-organizado-em-condominios-populares-e-2018epidemia2019-diz-ministro



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To demonstrate this pattern empirically, we provide a descriptive assessment of the nature of reporting of the MCMV program in national news. We gather all articles that mention the MCMV program in the national newspaper *O Globo* from 2009-2018.[15] In 2015, *O Globo* had the second largest circulation in the country.[16] With these data, we analyze the degree to which articles covering MCMV also included crime-related coverage. To measure coverage of crime, we create a custom dictionary of words related to insecurity (see Appendix X for details). With this dictionary, we count the number of times articles mention these crime-related terms, and calculate the average crime mentions over time (e.g., number of crime mentions divided by the number of articles that year) as well as the proportion of articles mentioning crime. Patterns from this analysis presented in Figure 2 demonstrate that coverage related to crime increased in frequency, both in terms of the proportion of MCMV-related articles including terms related to crime, and in terms of the average mentions of crime-related terms per article. Crime coverage reached a peak in 2018, with almost 50% of articles mentioning crime and articles including almost three crime related terms, on average.

Figure 2: MCMV News Coverage Over Time (O Globo)




Overall, these results indicate a consistent increase in crime-related coverage associated with the MCMV program. Given the widespread circulation of O Globo, such reporting likely reached a large audience. This pattern is especially consequential in light of evidence that negative news tends to attract greater

[15] This results in a sample of 2,545 articles. We collected these articles via Proquest. While Proquest does also include coverage from *Folha de São Paulo*, this is limited to four years in our sample (2009-2012). We are expanding this analysis to include additional newspapers.

[16] https://www.poder360.com.br/poder-midia/estadao-e-folha-puxam-alta-na-circulacao-de-jornais-impressos/



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attention than positive news (Robertson et al., 2023), as well as prior findings on the influence of crime-related coverage on public opinion in the region (Krause, 2014). This trend is also noteworthy given the broader context of physical insecurity in Brazil during this time period, where the intentional homicide rate grew from 27 murders per 100,000 residents in 2009 to a peak of 31 in 2017, dropping back to 27 by 2018.[17] Thus, increased crime news may also reflect a broader pattern of increased focus on insecurity generally speaking during this time.

At the same time, the persistence of the program's popularity amid such serious reporting is not straightforward to explain. It remains unclear whether incidents of violence in MCMV complexes are a consequence of the program's implementation, how widespread these concerns are, and whether they reflect a systematic relationship between public housing and crime. Addressing this gap is the central objective of our analysis.

## Research Design & Empirical Strategy

Based on this existing work, we argue that debates over public housing often hinge less on the *real* relationship between housing provision and crime than on the *perceived* relationship—and that these perceptions, once politicized, can shape the coalitions that sustain (or constrain) redistributive policy. To adjudicate between reality and perception, we combine two complementary studies that move from program effects to political consequences.

In Study I, we evaluate whether MCMV plausibly generates crime. We distinguish between (i) *city-wide* effects that would appear in municipal-level crime outcomes and (ii) *hyper-local* insecurity experienced by beneficiaries. Leveraging a discontinuity in program design that induces an exogenous jump in housing supply, we estimate the causal effect of housing expansion on homicide rates (both generally and across demographic groups). We complement this with analyses of two surveys. First, drawing on a large-scale survey of beneficiaries nationwide ($n > 7{,}000$), we bring to bear descriptive evidence characterizing beneficiaries' exposure to violence, satisfaction, and move intentions. Second, we analyze data

[17] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=BR



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from a survey of MCMV lottery participants (originally gathered by Bueno, Nunes and Zucco, 2022), including both winenrs and non-winners, and leverage an instrumental variable analysis to estimate the causal effect of relocating to an MCMV unit on safety perceptions and security-related claim-making.

Study II examines the political implications of these narratives. In a pre-registered vignette experiment, we randomize exposure to positive program information and to crime-related externalities (hyper-local vs. citywide framing) to test how citizens update their support for public housing and related policy priorities. Relying on a cost-benefit logic, we hypothesize that due to the enormous benefits of the MCMV program, potential beneficiaries have the most resilient support, even in the face of negative externalities (i.e., news coverage highlighting crime). Those who do not stand to benefit – principally the economically secure – may be more easily shaken in their support, withdrawing it in light of crime which is framed as negatively affecting them. We also explore potential effects on investment in security, in line with work on the penal-welfare nexus (e.g., Altamirano, Berens and Ley, 2024). We present these studies sequentially – including their methods and results – in the following sections.

## Study I: The Real Effects of Public Housing on Crime

To test the potential link between public housing and crime, we rely on two data sources and analytical strategies. Specifically, we consider the impact that public housing may have on crime beyond the borders of a complex (*citywide crime*) and potential direct exposure of residents (*hyper-local crime*).

### Citywide Effects

To evaluate *citywide crime*, we take advantage of natural experiment in the design of the MCMV program. Beginning in June of 2011, MCMV introduced a differential price cap for transactions related to MCMV unit costs in municipalities above and below 50,000 residents (R$100,000 vs. R$80,000, respectively).[18] In simple terms, this discontinuity translates to a jump in how much housing developers can charge, which others have shown have corresponding to an increase in the social housing supply (Gontijo1 et al.,

[18]These price caps changed slightly over time, but the population threshold remained. Prior to June 2011, the price cap for all municipalities below 250,000 individuals was $R80,000 (Gontijo1 et al., 2018).



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2018; Xu, 2023) and which we confirm in Appendix XX. Thus, we use the 50,000 population threshold as an instrument to evaluate the impact of a surge in MCMV housing units on crime, as proxied by homicide rates.[19] To do so, we compile of the number of housing units built via government subsidy across all municipalities from 2011-2019[20] from the Brazilian Ministry of Cities and unite this with municipal-level data on homicide rates drawn from Brazil's death records (DATASUS-SIM).[21] Common to studies on insecurity (e.g., Novaes, 2024; García-Ponce and Laterzo-Tingley, 2026), we rely on homicide rates as the most reliable measure of intentional violence, as homicides are processed yb forensic and medical authorities; other forms of violence often go under reported, or are subject to statistical manipulation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Municipalities and Cumulative MCMV Units by 2018

| | Min. | Median | Mean | Max. | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Over 100k Inhabitants (n = 316)** | | | | | |
| Total Units | 0 | 1479.50 | 2310.53 | 26502.44 | 2925.57 |
| Per Capita Units | 0 | 6.35 | 8.99 | 67.24 | 9.43 |
| **50k-100k Inhabitants (n = 349)** | | | | | |
| Total Units | 0 | 570.00 | 705.51 | 3945.00 | 639.02 |
| Per Capita Units | 0 | 8.63 | 10.15 | 51.48 | 8.98 |
| **Less Than 50k Inhabitants (n = 4898)** | | | | | |
| Total Units | 0 | 40.00 | 82.87 | 3085.00 | 154.21 |
| Per Capita Units | 0 | 3.88 | 8.33 | 157.31 | 12.51 |

Examining cities around the 50,000 resident threshold is beneficial for a handful of reasons. First, the threshold represents a typical case of cities in Brazil. Indeed, 94% of cities in the country are less than 100,000 residents.[22] Further, these cities are well distributed across the country, and even fall into some of its largest metropolitian zones.[23] Second, examining trends in smaller cities allows us to better make

[19] While other pricing thresholds at other population cutoffs exist, we exclusively examine the 50k threshold for a handful of reasons. First, as of 2010, 4,839 out of 5,565 municipalities were under 50,000 residents, about 87% (Campolina Diniz and Vieira, 2016). The next most appropriate threshold would be that of 100k, however this price ceiling change was not introduced until later, limiting number of observations(Gontijo1 et al., 2018).

[20] We stop in 2019, as program changes were then made by President Bolsonaro

[21] We focus on units corresponding exclusively to the lowest income bracket (*Faixa 1*) for the program. These types of units correspond to housing "blocks", or complexes, which were financed by the federal government from the outset.

[22] As of 2012, there were 4952 cities of less than 50,000 residents and 324 between 50,000 and 100,000 residents.

[23] For example, in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro city, there are multiple municipalities with less than



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conclusions without the danger of potential compositional effects. That is to say, municipalities around the threshold (50,000 residents) are smaller, and change in crime in one area is more likely to be detected in municipal-level statistics. Further, jumps in crime in small cities are salient to the full community, rather than restricted to certain neighborhoods, and have the capacity to generate generalized senses of insecurity (Frey and Novaes, Working Paper).

With these data, we implement a fuzzy regression discontinuity design based on population data from Brazil's Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), estimating the effect of the surge in MCMV housing units right above the threshold on homicide outcomes (see Appendix A2 for further details). We examine potential changes in general homicide rates differentiating by race and age, as young and marginalized communities are typically most at risk of violent victimization (Novaes, 2024). We examine both yearly rates and rate changes for 1, 2, and 3 year time windows. Following best-practices (Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik, 2019), we rely on the optimal bandwidth that minimizes the mean-squared error (MSE), use a triangular kernel for observation weighting, and report robust standard errors. We cluster standard errors at the municipal level, and include fixed effects for year as well as mayoral incumbency and PT membership.

### Hyper-local Effects

Second, to analyze the experiences of MCMV beneficiaries (*hyper-local crime*), we draw on two surveys of beneficiaries. These surveys offer us a complementary and robust picture of beneficiary experiences with violence, and allow us to leverage both descriptive and causal identification strategies, analyze beneficiaries at different points in the programs history, and across different geographies.

First, we analyze a data from a satisfaction survey (n = $>$ 7,000) conducted in 2013 by the country's Ministry of Cities, covering 589 new public housing communities nationwide across 188 municipalities.[24] This survey, obtained through an access-to-information request, captures respondents' perceptions of insecurity as well as their reported access to public services. Respondents were asked their

100,000 residents, including Rio Bonito, Cachoeiras de Macacu, and Japeri.

[24]Participants all belonged to Faixa 1. All respondents had lived in their new homes for at least 6 months before responding.



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satisfaction with their new home, their perceived violence, and if they plan to move in the next year. If they did indicate the desire to move, they were subsequently asked for motivations. We analyze these data descriptively, and examine predictors of respondents' desire to move, including perceptions of violence.

Second, we analyze data from a survey of 2011 MCMV lottery participants in the city of Rio de Janeiro conducted by Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2022).[25] An additional benefit of this survey is that it was conducted in a context where much of the crime coverage regarding MCMV originated, providing a particularly hard test for examining this relationship. This survey was conducted 8-9 years following the lotteries in question, and included both lottery winners and losers.[26] This survey included two questions measuring respondents experiences related to violence: perception of security in their current neighborhood of residence, and claim making related to security.[27] Given that the lotteries are randomly assigned, but not all lottery winners actually move into MCMV units, we conduct an instrumental variable analysis where lottery victory serves as an instrument for relocation to an MCMV unit.[28] This strategy allows us to estimate the causal effect (local average treatment effect, LATE) of relocation to an MCMV unit on perceptions of violence and security claim making for individuals who comply with the lottery assignment, while ensuring this effect is not biased by factors that would influence both move likelihood and our outcome variables (Angrist and Krueger, 2001).

## Results

Figure 3 reports coefficient estimates for our regression discontinuity design, including homicide outcomes differentiated by demographic group, time horizon, and rates vs. rate changes. Only one estimate

[25] See also Bueno, Zucco and Nunes (2023) and Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2025).

[26] This survey was conducted in 2019-2020, but focused on respondents who participated in the 2011 lottery, thus reflecting comparisons of participants in the lottery who both won and lost but 8-9 years after they participated. In this way, we are able to compare the realities of those who entered the program vs. those who qualified to enter the program, but did not, at the same point in time.

[27] Specifically with respect to claim making, respondents were asked if they contacted the government, an NGO, or a local-level leader with a request related to security in the recent past.

[28] As Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2022) note in their analysis, some of their survey participants secured MCMV units via other mechanisms, and not the 2011 lottery in question. We remove these individuals from the analysis as they are not randomly assigned to treatment.



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is positive and statistically significant at the $p < 0.1$ level (young individuals, change of rate over three years). Overall, these results provide no evidence of a robust, causal relationship between the construction of MCMV units and citywide crime (crime at the municipal level). That is to say, an increase in MCMV units around the threshold *does not* correspond to an increase in insecurity across demographic groups. Full results with all coefficient estimates are reported in Appendix A3.

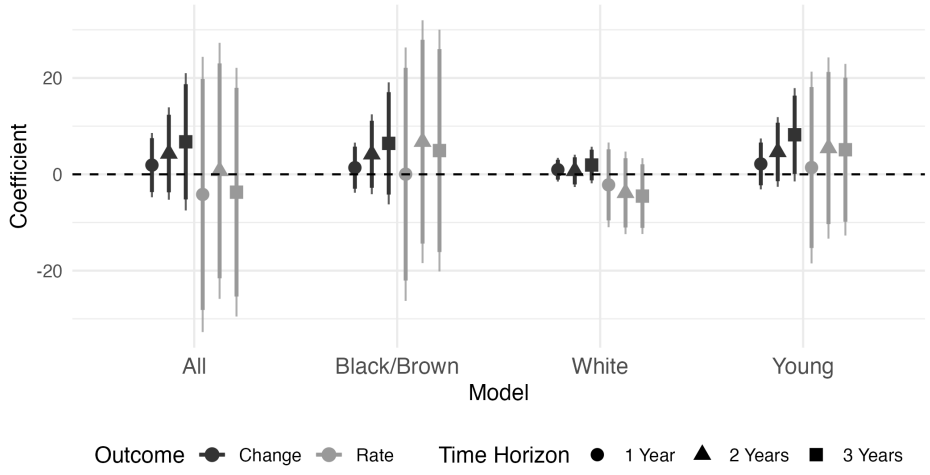



Figure 3: Effect of Surge of MCMV Units on Change in Homicide by Demographic Groups

Results corresponding to the national beneficiary survey – our first analysis of *hyper-local crime* – are presented in Figure 4 and Table 2. In Figure 4 we plot the average level of agreement of respondents (normalized 0-1) with questions asked about the improvement in their lives as a result of MCMV, their likelihood to move, the overalls satisfaction with their neighborhood, and if there is significant violence in their neighborhood.[29] There is a strikingly high degree of satisfaction with one's neighborhood and the impression that their lives have improved. Move intention is close to zero. Interestingly, respondents on average report middling levels of agreement with the fact that their neighborhood suffers from violence. If examining those who intend to move in a binary fashion, among those who report that they intend to move (n = 365, or 4.7% of respondents), 15% of them report that the primary reason they wish to do so is

[29]Individuals were asked (from left to right): "We intend to move from this house in the next few months," "We are very satisfied with our neighborhood", and "This neighborhood has a lot of problems with violence." All individuals were asked to answer on a scale of 1-7, where 7 was total agreement and 1 was total disagreement. We normalized responses from 0-1.



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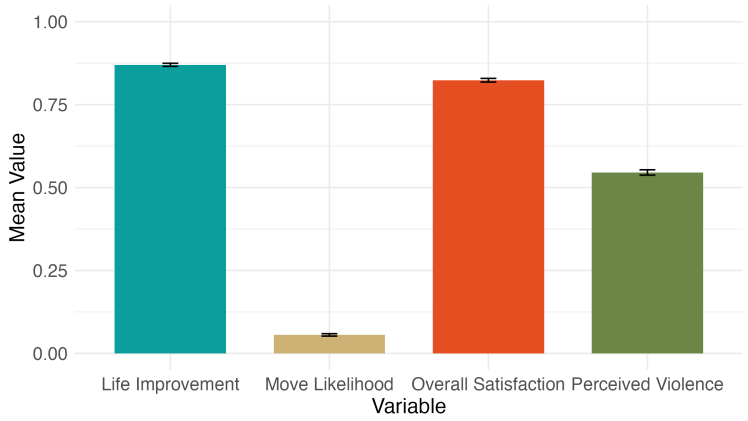



Figure 4: MCMV Beneficiary Housing Perceptions

related to violence and security (n = 57). In all, this represents less than 1% of respondents reporting that the primary intention they would leave their house in due to violence.

This provides interesting support for our expectations: even if violence is present, it does not present a strongly salient "cost" to beneficiaries, given the large benefits. Indeed, given the landscape of social segregation in Brazil – particularly urban areas – this may not be surprising. Many low income individuals live in urban "slums" (*favelas* or *comunidades*), which in many cases may involve the presence of organized criminal groups (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo, 2020). Thus, even if violence is present at middling areas in new MCMV communities, it may not be a relative increase if their previous neighborhood faced issues with violence. That is to say, MCMV could provide a substantial improvement in security for beneficiaries, particularly those coming from organized crime-dominated communities.

Table 4 presents further results regarding if violence drives move intention among the few who report that they may seek to move in the coming months. Results demonstrates that violence represents a driving factor, but notably the magnitude of this effect is much less than other negative externalities, such as increase spending on transportation. Importantly, in tandem with the overwhelming perception that beneficiary's lives have improved, this result suggests that violence is only a driving factor for a very small subset of beneficiaries.

We next turn to our instrumental variable approach leveraging the survey of MCMV lottery participants fielded by Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2022). Results are presented in Table 3, with the second stage 2SLS estimates (columns 3 and 6) and their corresponding first stage F-statistics. We also present



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Table 2: MCMV Beneficiary Move Intention Predictors

| | *Dependent variable:* | |
|---|---|---|
| | Move Intention: | |
| | (1) | (2) |
| Violence | $0.030^{**}$ (0.012) | 0.006 (0.011) |
| Neighb. Satisfaction | $-0.052^{***}$ (0.011) | $-0.028^{**}$ (0.011) |
| Nearby Hospital | 0.005 (0.014) | −0.001 (0.011) |
| Nearby Public Transport | 0.011 (0.012) | $0.046^{***}$ (0.011) |
| Home Location | $-0.026^{**}$ (0.012) | $-0.070^{***}$ (0.012) |
| Increase Spending Transport | $0.034^{***}$ (0.012) | $0.047^{***}$ (0.011) |
| Cheaper Price | $-0.029^{**}$ (0.011) | −0.006 (0.011) |
| House Satisfaction | $-0.169^{***}$ (0.014) | $-0.136^{***}$ (0.014) |
| Life Improved | $-0.177^{***}$ (0.014) | $-0.217^{***}$ (0.014) |
| Mun FE | ✓ | |
| Indiv. Controls | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 7,620 | 7,620 |
| $R^2$ | 0.261 | 0.142 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.241 | 0.141 |
| *Note:* | $^{*}$p<0.1; $^{**}$p<0.05; $^{***}$p<0.01 | |

Table Note: Dependent variable is a respondents reported likelihood to move in the next six months (not at all likely to very likely), normalized from 0-1. Individual level controls are the following: respondent gender, race/ethnicity (white), higher education, and age.



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naive OLS models (columns 1 and 4) and the reduced form estimating intent-to-treat (ITT) effects of the lottery alone. As indicated by the F-statistics, the lottery is a strong predictor of one's eventual relocation to an MCMV unit. Across all model specifications, we find no evidence that relocating to an MCMV unit changes one's perception of neighborhood safety or likelihood of claim making related to security. These results provide causal evidence of this null relationship, and further credence to results presented earlier in this section.

To be sure, instances of victimization of residents do occur. However, our results regarding hyper-local crime bring to bear evidence of both a descriptive pattern across Brazil's territory, matched with causal evidence from one of Brazil's cities most affected by violence. In all, our results strongly suggest that MCMV residency vastly increases beneficiary's lives and did not systematically increase their exposure to violence.

Table 3: MCMV Relocation, Perceptions of Violence, and Violence-Related Claim Making (Instrumental Variable Approach)

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Satisfaction with Local Safety* | | | *Claim Making: Security* | | |
| | OLS | Reduced Form | IV | OLS | Reduced Form | IV |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Win Lottery + Relocate | −0.065 | | −0.201 | −0.011 | | 0.040 |
| | (0.242) | | (0.590) | (0.009) | | (0.029) |
| Win Lottery | | −0.049 | | | 0.010 | |
| | | (0.143) | | | (0.007) | |
| Pre-treatment controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| First-stage F-statistic | | | 383.61 | | | 390.13 |
| Observations | 2,073 | 2,073 | 2,073 | 2,082 | 2,082 | 2,082 |
| $R^2$ | 0.005 | 0.005 | 0.005 | 0.002 | 0.003 | −0.007 |
| *Note:* | $^*p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$ | | | | | |

Table Note: Data originally collected by Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2022). Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. In line with Bueno, Nunes and Zucco (2022), pre-treatment controls include age, gender, race, CadÚnico registration, number of years in formal employment according to RAIS from 2003-2010, and average logged income for formal employment from 2003-2010. IV specifications instrument compliance with lottery assignment. Satisfaction with local safety is measured on a 1-10 scale with high values indicating more "satisfaction" with the level of violence in their local community, with a mean of 3.78. Claim making: security is a binary variable, where 1 indicates the respondent contacted the government, an NGO, or local leaders to request improved security, and 0 otherwise. The mean of this variable is 0.03.



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## Study II: The Effects of Media Framing on Public Housing Support

Drawing on the evidence provided in Study I and on the media analysis, we design a study to investigate how media coverage of public housing can affect public support for policies like it. Specifically, we consider how news coverage of the positive effects of public housing programs on beneficiaries, coverage that highlights potential spikes in crime for the city (*citywide crime*), and coverage that highlights victimization of beneficiaries (*hyper-local crime*) – in line with coverage analysis – can affect such support. Given that MCMV and programs like it are often means-tested, we consider how support may differ based on individuals' income level. As previously discussed, income (or one's potential to be a beneficiary) which may generate a different cost-benefit analysis.[30] We summarize our pre-registered expectations in Table 4. In addition to assessing effects on support for public housing itself, we also consider support for policing initiatives in an exploratory analysis.

Table 4: Summary of Expectations based on Income Bracket

| **Hypothesis** | **Information Exposure** | **Effect Type** | **Expected Effect on Support** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **Low Income** | **Mid/High-Income** |
| *H1* | Positive effects only | Uniform | Increase | Increase |
| *H2* | Positive effects + hyper-local crime | Uniform | Increase | Increase |
| *H3* | Positive effects + citywide crime | Heterogenous | Increase (H3A) | Decrease (H3B) |

### Methods

We recruited 1,974 survey participants via Opinaia's online panel in February-March 2025 to match Brazil's population in terms of age, gender, education, and region of residence. See Appendix A3.1 for a full description of our survey. Given our interest in income-bracket specific effects, we defined two groups of individuals based on whether their family earns above or below 8,000 reais per month (about 1,500 USD), approximately the level at which a family is eligible to apply for some level of MCMV housing support at the time of our survey.[31] Within income blocks, respondents were randomly assigned to

[30] We base the income benchmarks in our survey on those in the MCMV program.

[31] https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/economia/noticia/2025-04/entenda-ampliacao-do-programa-minha-casa-minha-vida



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one of four experimental arms (control vs. three treatment conditions), such that our study employs a between-subjects, unpaired design.[32]

Table 5: Vignette Experiment (Treatments 1, 2, and 3)

**Prompt:** In Brazil, the government has invested in housing programs in recent years. These programs have given eligible citizens access to affordable housing, including the possibility of purchasing a new home or residence at a discounted price. The article below discusses the program:

**Article Title [Treatment 1]:** *News: Families receive new homes*
**Article Title [Treatment 2]:** *News: Families receive new homes, but they are victims of organized crime*
**Article Title [Treatment 3]:** *News: Families receive new homes, but organized crime in the city increases*

**Common Text:** On Thursday, another 1,800 families received the keys to their new homes under the government's housing program. A government official who worked on establishing this low-income housing project said: "We feel a sense of accomplishment in delivering these developments, which are equipped with green areas, gym equipment, and other amenities. It is a dignified environment, with sewage, electricity, and paved roads." For Juliana, who will live in the new residence with her husband and four children, the feeling is one of accomplishment. "We are happy because everything worked out. We were living with friends, and now we will have our own home," she said.

**Treatment 2 Additional Text:** Unfortunately, in some new low-income housing communities such as these, new residents have reported being victims of criminal groups

**Treatment 3 Additional Text:** Unfortunately, reports indicate that in cities where similar government housing programs have been established, the number of victims of organized crime in the city has increased.

The experiment varied information about public housing, all based on real coverage of public housing programs discussed above. Treatment conditions are provided in Table 5. Treatment 1 included an article discussing positive outcomes of a public housing program in Brazil. Treatments 2 & 3 both build on this article, but add a discussion of how the program resulted in victimization of program beneficiaries (T2) or crime that spilled over into the broader city (T3), respectively. While all conditions are based on real coverage, respondents were informed that all stories were hypothetical and were debriefed at the end of the survey to reinforce the hypothetical nature of these stories. In the control condition, respondents read an unrelated story about the increase in pet ownership in Brazil.

[32]Given that our hypotheses are conditional on respondent income, we remove all participants who did not answer questions related to income. Within each block, respondents had a 0.25 probability of being assigned to the control or to any of the three treatment conditions.



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Following treatment assignment, respondents participated in a fixed budget allocation exercise designed to assess their support for public housing vs. investment in other public services (financial assistance programs, security and policing, and education). Budget experiments are useful to gauge support while mimicking real-life tradeoffs and minimizing "cheap talk" (Cafferata, Gingerich and Scartascini, 2023; Holland, 2023).[33] We also include a series of questions following the experiment regarding respondents' emotional response to the vignette as a manipulation check.

Our main analysis involves a series of OLS models. For H1 and H2, we analyze the behavior of all respondents (pooled sample), examining the effect of seeing T1 (positive news only) and T2 (positive news + local crime) versus the control on average budget allocation for public housing. H3A and H3B anticipate heterogenous effects. Thus, we assess the effect of seeing T3 (positive news + citywide crime) versus the control on average budget allocation for public housing by income group. In all models, we control for respondent gender, ideological self-placement, and education level. For simplicity, we present all tests both pooled across income categories, and subsetted by income.

## Results

Main results for Study II are reported in the top Figure (top panel). Our analysis suggests that both potential beneficiaries (low income respondents) and higher-income respondents express support for public housing when presented with information about its positive effects and when potential costs are localized (e.g., limited to crime in specific areas). Substantively, the estimated treatment effect for all respondents in T1 corresponds to an increase of 0.16 coins, or an approximately 7% increase in budget allocation from the control baseline.[34] These findings provide support for Hypothesis 1 (positive effects only) and Hypothesis 2 (positive effects + hyper-local crime).

However, once these costs are framed as widespread (T3) – affecting the city more broadly – this positive effect disappears. This suggests that information about widespread negative externalities offsets the

[33]Respondents were askd the following: "Governments invest their resources in various policy areas, but they have limited resources. Imagine that the government has a total budget of ten (10) coins to distribute among four policy areas in your municipality. Distribute the ten (10) coins among the policy areas below as you see fit. You can assign as many coins as you want to each of the measures. You must use all ten coins."

[34]In the control group, the mean coin allocation for security is 1.98

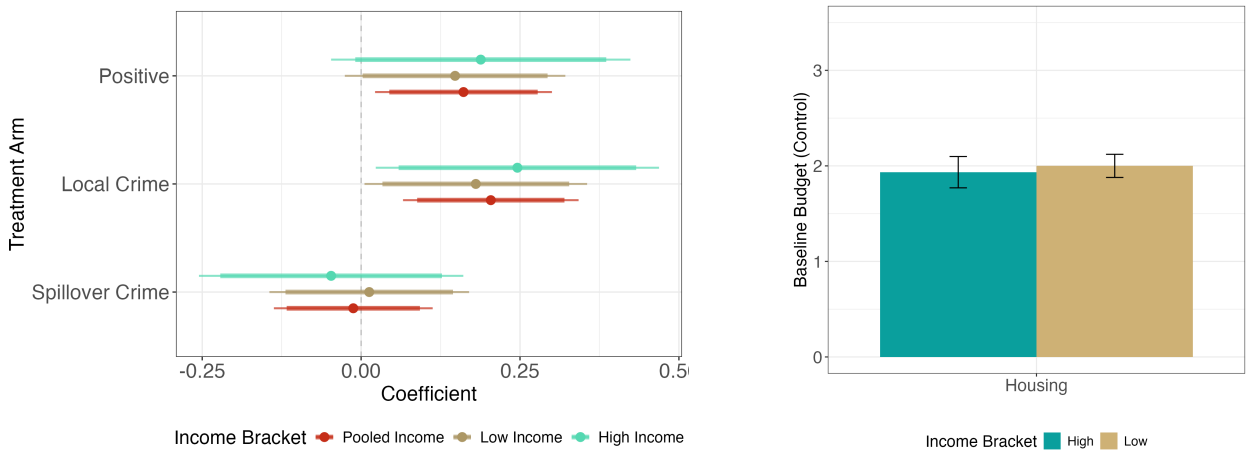


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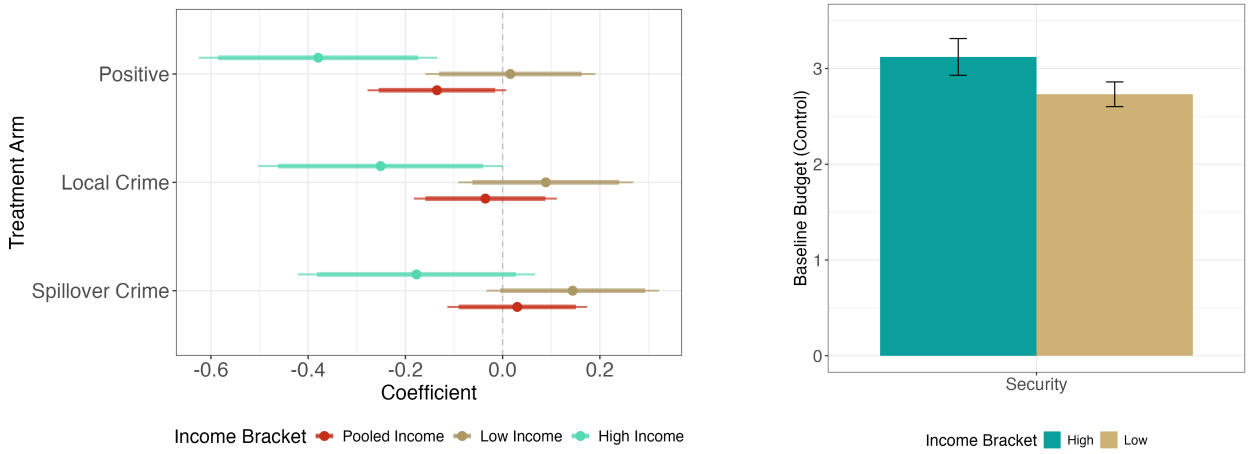
positive effects of program benefits: neither low-income nor middle/high-income respondents express higher support relative to the control. Supplementary analyses examining respondents' support for housing in their municipality (see Appendix A6) indicate that this negative shift is particularly pronounced among middle- and high-income respondents, who decrease their support for local housing programs when exposed to information about citywide crime. This pattern is broadly consistent with H3b, even though the effect is less clear in the main budget allocation measure. By contrast, we do not find evidence supporting H3a: low-income respondents do not display higher levels of support when citywide crime is mentioned.

Figure 5: Budget Allocation for Public Housing and Security

(a) Public Housing




(b) Security






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We also analyze effects on security budget allocation.[35] Results are provided in Figure (panel b). Strikingly, positive information regarding public housing alone – without discussion of security – does not change security spending for low-income respondents, while it does for high-income respondents. This suggests an innate association between public housing and crime among the latter group. High-income reduce their security spending when presented with positive information, although this effect may wane negative crime-related externalities are introduced. Given their higher baseline support for security, this result suggests that high-income respondents revise their willingness to invest in policing when provided with information that social assistance is beneficial, or at minimum, not harmful to them. Low-income respondents, on the other hand, show more stable support for policing, increasing it only in response to wider-spread crime.

In Appendix X, we provide additional analyses. First, we analyze potential differences between respondents based on their previous experience with public housing. We demonstrate that among those who directly or indirectly benefited from public assistance, positive information and information regarding local crime does not change their – relatively high – levels of investment in public housing.[36] citywide crime, however, leads them to decrease investment. Among non-beneficiaries, positive information and information regarding local-level crime results in increased investment, while information regarding citywide crime leads to no change in investment from the control. This pattern suggests that non-beneficiaries respond positively to favorable portrayals of housing programs, but that their support vanishes once broader crime-related costs are highlighted. Further, in Appendix section A5 we include respondents' vote in the second round as a covariate to check whether partisanship affects the estimated treatment effects. While our main results are remain robust to this variable, as expected, vote choice is a significant predictor of several outcomes: voters for Lula report higher support for housing and neighborhood policies, more support for municipal initiatives, and lower support for security spending. Importantly, including vote choice does not substantively change the estimated effects of the treatments.

[35] These results are exploratory. In our pre-analysis plan, we pre-registered our intention to analyze security budget allocation, but did not specificy hypothess.

[36] We consider indirect beneficiaries as those who report a family member benefitting from a public assistance program



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# Discussion & Conclusion

Adequate and safe housing is an essential ingredient in a formula of human well-being, but this reality is far from being achieved. Even despite large-scale government programs to improve housing deficits, a central barrier to progress are societal concerns regarding potential negative affects of these programs. A central and persistent point of concern is that public housing generates criminality, despite little systematic evidence of this effect across contexts. This article investigates this issue, unpacking the way in which such perceptions are produced by the media, the basis of perceptions in reality, and their implications on cross-class support for public housing programs. Our analysis studies the objective consequences of public housing on crime (both citywide, and exclusively among beneficiaries), and the consequences of media frames emphasizing this connection. Leveraging a natural experiment, a large-scale beneficiary survey, and an original survey experiment, we demonstrate that while increases in public housing stock do not increase crime, media narratives that emphasize this relationship – which are prominent and increasingly present through a program's duration – can break down coalitions of support. We demonstrate these relationships in Brazil, investigating one of the region's largest public housing programs, *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* which delivered over 3 million units, but has been widely criticized for fomenting crime in affected communities.

Specifically, exploiting a population-based discontinuity in MCMV's pricing structure, we find no causal evidence that public housing expansion increases citywide crime—a null result that is robust across demographic subgroups, temporal windows, and model specifications. Beneficiary survey data reinforce this conclusion: program recipients report markedly improved living conditions, and insecurity ranks well below structural factors as a driver of relocation intentions. That these findings diverge so sharply from prevailing public narratives is not incidental; it is the central analytical puzzle this paper addresses. The question is not whether public housing generates crime, but why so many citizens and political actors behave as though it does—and with what consequences.

Our survey experiment provides a direct answer. Support for public housing is not primarily structured by income or beneficiary status, as standard distributional theories would predict. Rather, it is structured by the framing of externalities. When program costs are spatially contained—affecting only



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beneficiaries—cross-class support holds. When insecurity is framed as citywide, that coalition fractures: higher-income respondents withdraw support for redistribution and redirect preferences toward security provision. This substitution effect is theoretically important. It suggests that the welfare-security tradeoff documented in prior work is not driven by victimization per se, but by the perceived scope of victimization—a distinction with direct implications for how media coverage shapes mass preferences.

These results are particularly important, as a foundational tension in the political economy of redistribution concerns the conditions under which cross-class coalitions in favor of such programs form and endure. Existing accounts emphasize income position, ideology, and institutional design as the primary determinants of redistributive support, yet largely treat program externalities as fixed features of the policy environment. We argue that this assumption is consequential and often incorrect. The political salience of program costs is itself socially constructed—shaped by media narratives, discursive framing, and the scope of perceived victimization—and this construction, rather than the underlying material reality, governs coalition dynamics. Evidence from Brazil's MCMV program substantiates this claim and, in doing so, identifies a mechanism through which insecurity narratives systematically undermine redistributive politics in unequal democracies.

These findings revise existing theories in two respects. First, they demonstrate that the fragility of redistributive coalitions is also a function of framing, not solely of socioeconomic position. Cross-class coalitions are more durable than conventional accounts imply when externalities are localized, and more fragile than benefit-focused theories suggest when costs are portrayed as collective. Second, they establish that insecurity narratives do not merely constrain redistributive policy—they actively reconfigure political conflict by shifting mass preferences from redistribution toward insecurity. In contexts like Brazil, where security institutions have historically operated in coercive and racially targeted ways against low-income populations, this substitution is not a neutral reallocation of preferences. It represents a politically consequential reorientation of state priorities that compounds existing inequalities.

What this analysis establishes is that the political sustainability of redistributive programs cannot be understood by studying their effects alone. When media narratives systematically associate housing provision with insecurity—irrespective of actual program effects—they generate the political conditions under



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which redistribution loses and policing wins. This is not merely a problem of communication or agenda-setting. It reflects a structural feature of politics in unequal societies: the ease with which insecurity, once politicized, displaces demands for redistribution altogether.

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