Parish-Based Responses to the Philippine Drug War

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Abstract

How do local religious institutions protect communities from state-sanctioned violence? This general question has taken on particular importance in the Philippines, where populist President Rodrigo Duterte has overseen a “Drug War” that has killed tens of thousands of citizens while triggering opposition from prominent religious elites. In this paper we use an original, in-depth survey of Catholic priests and lay parish leaders in an urban area heavily impacted by Drug War violence to catalog how dozens of local parishes mobilize to protect their communities. We find two broad types of mechanisms in operation: directly impacting the localized production of violence and indirectly altering characteristics of the local community in ways likely to limit violence. Quantitative evidence documents the widespread existence of both direct and indirect mechanisms of community protection, is consistent with the more limited presence of some of the highest risk Drug War responses, and demonstrates an association between parish capacity and these protective mechanisms. Qualitative evidence traces the links between parish activities and particular cases of community protection, highlighting the coexistence of rationalistic and normative logics through which institutions reduce violence. Interviews also foreground some of the obstacles that even highly motivated and capacious institutions face in organizing local protection.

Keywords: Religion, Police, Political Violence, Populism, Philippines
Introduction: Linking Religious Institutions and Protection from Political Violence

Shortly after taking office in 2016, president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte told an audience of police officers that, under his term, drug users would be “no longer viable as human beings” (RTVMalacanang, 2016). Since then, tens of thousands of Filipinos have been killed in both officially acknowledged police operations as well as killings by unidentified vigilantes (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Amnesty International, 2017). Yet even in the National Capital Region (NCR), the part of the country most impacted by these killings, there is considerable neighborhood-by-neighborhood variation in civilian victimization during this “Drug War” (Atun et al., 2019).

Theories of political violence drawn from civil war, insurgency, or genocide only partially explain civilian exposure to more “ordinary” forms of state coercion (Balcells and Stanton, 2021; Kaplan, 2017; Kalyvas, 2006). Research into criminal violence offers important insights, yet provides less guidance when perpetrators are backed by the force of law and encouraged by popular political incumbents (Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco and Melo, 2020; Durán-Martínez, 2015). Indeed, the ongoing “Drug War” in the Philippines is intertwined with populist politics, both in Duterte's framing of drug users as symbolic enemies of the body politic, and in how his personalism has undermined formal institutions, including those designed to protect citizens from state predation (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Weyland, 2017).

Under these conditions, how do communities protect themselves? We argue that institutions that couple a normative commitment to contesting populism’s exclusion of out-groups, with an organizational capacity to intervene in the localized production of violence can protect local communities, even in the face of populism's exclusion and personalism.

In the Philippines, these two features combine most obviously in the Roman Catholic Church. The church possesses a network of grassroots-to-elite organizational infrastructure, “institutional access”

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1 Philippine National Police (PNP) Command Memorandum Circular 16-2016 established “Project Double Barrel,” which included Oplan Tokhang, a portmanteau of the Visayan terms toktok (“plead”) and hangyo (“knock”). The strategy, as set out on paper, involved knocking at doors of suspected drug users, who were then gathered and assisted to voluntarily surrender to local police officials. However, it was hounded by implementation challenges (Gacayan, 2020) and prone to abuse by some portion of officers. Official statistics from the PNP are available at: http://pdea.gov.ph/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&layout=edit&id=279
to a range of political and security elites (Grzymała-Busse and Slater, 2018) and moral commitment to the defense of human rights, a pattern of beliefs and organization tied to liberation theology (Nadeau, 2002; Moreno, 2006; Smith, 1991; Levine, 1988). We argue that these characteristics combine to constrain populist violence through a series of distinct, observable mechanisms operating both directly on agents of violence and indirectly by altering the nature of local communities. The role of local religious congregations has received significant scholarly attention in other realms, from civil rights organizing (McAdam, 1982) to immigrant support (Gamm, 1999) to genocide resistance (Braun, 2016). Here, we build on this foundation to specify and then document the mechanisms through which local religious actors may offer community protection from agents of state violence.

Despite reportage documenting religious congregations’ responses to Drug War violence, there has been little systematic investigation into how these institutions protect their communities. In this paper we introduce a systematic dataset of grassroots parish capacity and Drug War response in one major urban diocese heavily impacted by the height of Duterte’s campaign of populist violence. Drawn from over 70 interviews with parish priests and lay leaders in over thirty parishes, this data offers a unique view of the ways that parishes mobilize to protect their communities. Quantitative and qualitative portions of these interviews demonstrate widespread efforts that blend direct engagement and confrontation with local officials with more indirect effects altering the nature of communities in ways likely to promote peace and stability.

The paper is structured in five main sections. After introducing the Philippine case, we engage in a theoretical discussion of the likely links between local religious institutions and the protection of communities vulnerable to populist violence. We then introduce the parish-level dataset, detailing the research design and data collection strategy that structured this project. Next we turn to quantitative and qualitative evidence documenting the existence of distinct mechanisms across the diocese under study. We find evidence of extensive variation, both across parishes in terms of aggregate mobilizations, as well as in the particular blends of mechanisms inside each parish. We also observe a suggestive relationship whereby mechanisms that would reasonably be expected to bring highest risk to actors involved are relatively less common. We close by drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence to demonstrate the plausibility of a link between Drug War response and pre-existing parish institutional capacity. The final section highlights comparative implications and inductive observations on potential limitations on parish influence.
1. Drugs, Religion and Populist Violence in the Philippines

Then-Mayor Rodrigo Duterte earned international headlines as a candidate for his pledge to make violent antinarcotic policy a centerpiece of his administration. Duterte’s terms in office in Davao brought shadowy “Davao Death Squads” into vigilante action against alleged drug dealers and users (Oude Breuil and Rozema, 2009), with human rights groups documenting over a thousand deaths over an extended period. While Duterte’s electoral appeal was more complex than his promised Drug War, it was at the center of his campaign rallies and perceived success as Davao’s mayor. Even before Duterte’s election, targeted violence, whether against journalists, political challengers, indigenous activists, or criminal rivals, was a regular feature of Philippine life (Hedman, 2000; Kreuger, 2003). It was in this context that Filipinos responded to Duterte’s insurgent campaign by “voting against disorder” (Pepinsky, 2017).

Whatever the combination of factors that gave rise to Duterte’s election, he has by all accounts followed through on his pledge to import the violent anti-narcotics policy from Davao to the country as a whole. While precise numbers of deaths are highly politicized, in Summer 2019, official government statistics reported 4,948 suspected drug users and dealers died during police operations from July 1, 2016 to September 30, 2018, with police acknowledging 22,983 dead in “homicides under investigation,” shadowy vigilante or death squad actions (Watch, 2019). Extrajudicial killings (“EJKs”) spread rapidly after Duterte’s election, even before his inauguration in office (Coronel, 2017), particularly in the National Capital Region of Metro Manila (hereafter, NCR). Duterte gave the lead to the Philippine National Police (PNP), with its 160,000 members and extensive community policing infrastructure in local neighborhoods (known as barangays). As Coronel notes, “Station commanders no longer needed the district chief’s nod to go after drug offenders…[they] are required to conduct drug operations and go after those on the watch list” (Coronel, 2017, p. 172). Duterte has tried to incorporate ordinary citizens into the war as well, particularly through the building of “drug watch” lists at the barangay level and construction of “Barangay Anti-Drug Abuse Councils” (Lamchek, 2017). This decentralization of the Drug War raises the possibility of significant sub-

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3 As we discuss in more depth in the theory section below, the current antinarcotics violence in the Philippines is a complex blend of official state violence, largely through the Philippine National Police, along with violence that seems consistent with literature on “death squads” (Campbell, 2000) or vigilantes (Johnston, 1996). Kreuzer (2016) terms this “official police vigilantism,” which is distinct from traditional death squads because agents of the state no longer totally avoid responsibility for involvement in antinarcotic killings.
national variation in the distribution of localized violence. Rather than necessarily leading either to “good governance” or to local dynastic capture, in this case we conceptualize decentralization as a scope condition, heightening opportunities for agency on the part of local political, security and religious elites.⁴

Relations between Duterte and the Catholic hierarchy were tense even before his comfortable victory in the 2016 election. He famously cursed Pope Francis for causing traffic during his visit to Metro Manila, and has made waves for calling God “stupid” and joking about founding a Church of Duterte. Referring to these incidents, controversies over the Davao Death Squads and Duterte’s disparaging comments about women, Archbishop Socrates Villegas, then-President of the CBCP, wrote in the days before the election, “A choice for a candidate who takes positions that are not only politically precarious but worse, morally reprehensible, cannot and should not be made by the Catholic faithful” (2016). This raised memories of elites like Cardinal Jaime Sin, the former Archbishop of Manila and staunch ally of Cory Aquino, who was central to the country’s Third Wave democratization (Claudio, 2013; Youngblood, 1990).⁵

While it took the CBCP some time to find its unified voice in opposition to the violent approach to antidrug operations, it declared without reservation in September 2017: “In the name of God, stop the killings! May the justice of God come upon those responsible for the killings!” (Villegas, 2017). Several high-profile killings, particularly of 17-year-old Kian delos Santos in August 2017, have attracted sharp condemnation from clerics like Caloocan Bishop Pablo Virgilio “Ambo” David, who has himself reported death threats for his protests. And, importantly to the theoretical argument that follows, networks of Catholic charitable centers have been closely tied to responding to Drug War violence.⁶ Such networks are frequently at the forefront of work promoting social development and monitoring human rights violations, especially those targeting poor and indigenous communities (Moreno, 2006).

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⁴ We appreciate Ellen Lust for highlighting the role of decentralization in our research design.
⁵ At the same time, even before Duterte’s rise, some had begun to question the persistence of Catholic influence over Philippine politics (Dionisio, 2014; Buckley, 2016).
⁶ It is important to note that while the official Catholic hierarchy has become outspoken in its criticism of drug war-related violence, this is not to say that “religion” as such has opposed the drug war. Cornelio and Medina document reports of one pastor providing names for drug lists to local barangay officials in a poor Manila community, along with explicitly theological arguments in favor of the drug war, particularly from some Protestant clergy (Cornelio, 2018; Cornelio and Medina, 2017).
2. Linking Religious Institutions to Community Protection

This journalistic evidence linking religious institutions to community protection resonates with a broad literature in the comparative study of political violence highlighting the agency of local communities in providing protection amid periods of political violence (Braun, 2016; Krause, 2018). Understanding the nature and logic of these institutional effects raises several more refined questions, both empirically in the Philippine case and theoretically regarding the relationship between religious institutions and populist violence. First, what distinguishes state-backed violence under populist rule from other forms of political violence, and how might religious institutions play a particular role in addressing the logic of populist violence? Second, what specific causal pathways might link religious institutions to community protection?

We take up each of these questions in turn to generate more clearly specified expectations about the links between religion and Drug War violence that have been anecdotally observed in the Philippines. First, we argue that populist violence is distinguished by the intersection of out-group targeting, an essentially normative process of exclusion from the political community, with a personalistic, anti-institutional strategic logic that degrades formal legal protections. There is reason to expect that motivated, capable religious institutions may be able to address each dimension. Second, we distinguish indirect and direct mechanisms through which religious institutions may offer community protection. Directly, religious institutions provide opportunities for local leaders to impact the localized production of violence, via initiatives specifically developed to contest populist framing and alter the costs of violence. Indirectly, parish initiatives may limit violence even without the intent of parish actors, by altering characteristics of surrounding communities to reduce the risks of interaction with police, influencing the personalistic processes through which violence is produced.

2.1. Religious Institutions and Dimensions of Populist Violence

While local dynamics of political conflict are central to comparative politics, violence associated with populist regimes presents new opportunities for theory development and testing. First, populists often mobilize support by identifying threats to the “pure people” of the nation (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). While ethnic or religious identity often denotes the normative construction of populist out-groups, in other cases purported “criminal” or “deviant” behaviors become the salient dimension. For example, Pratt (2007) and others identify “penal populism,” a style of politics emphasizing tough, law-and-order policies designed to bolster political support rather than ameliorate
crime (Curato, 2016; Johnson and Fernquest, 2018). In such cases, individuals alleged to be involved in criminality are excluded from the body politic as threats to the people whom the populist claims to represent.

In addition to this normative process of exclusion, populists’ personalist, crisis-driven political strategy undermines formal institutions (Weyland, 2017). Populists reject and erode institutional constraint in many forms, whether from legislatures, the judiciary, political parties, or due process protections. Latin Americanists have focused on _mano dura_ (“iron fist”) politicians promising the suppression of criminality over legal protections or international human rights obligations (Fuentes, 2005; Krause, 2014).

Identifying “enemies of the people” while degrading institutional protections distinguishes populist forms of state violence. However, certain locales still manage some degree of protection. We expect protection where local actors can contest the creation of symbolic enemies and circumvent the weakening of institutional protections. Normatively, out-group construction is open to challenge from actors with moral authority and commitment. In rationalist terms, the degradation of formal procedures also increases bureaucrats’ discretionary power, opening opportunities for organizations with grassroots capacity to intervene in the localized deployment of state coercion. While not necessarily tied to religion, we argue that organized religious movements often possess the raw material, that, if mobilized, can blunt populist violence. While religion’s effect on violence will be “contingent” (Philpott, 2007) in that it can both spur and dampen violence, it does offer considerable organizational resources that can be deployed both within and without formal political institutions (McAdam, 1982). It also boasts a reservoir of language, symbols, and repertoires that promote commitment to action via a “transformation of political consciousness” (Mainwaring, 1987, p. 8).

Prior research around Catholic institutions in Latin America, in particular the influence of liberation theology, highlights how parishes can combine characteristics the may deliver community protection. As an “insurgent” movement within the Catholic Church (Smith, 1991), liberation theology’s normative emphasis on the concrete plight of the poor channeled religious institutions into vulnerable communities. This activism was sustained even under conditions of considerable risk and repression (Mejía and Villalobos, 2019, p. 209). Today, drawing on similar theological resources and organizational networks, Catholic actors in some settings criticize populist movements, whether Pope
Francis contesting right wing populist parties in Europe or Brazilian bishops critiquing President Jair Bolsonaro.

One dimension of liberation theology’s influence corresponded to the normative aspect of religious institutions’ work in community protection from populist violence. Whether operationalized as “political theology” (Philpott, 2007) or “doctrine” (Grzymala-Busse, 2012) the idea of a higher-order moral obligation can provide powerful motivation for action, even in the face of risk (Smith, 1991; Krause, 2018). Liberation theology involved a dedication to becoming a “church of the poor” (Dionisio, 2011) that, during the Cold War, challenged the normative construction of indigenous and impoverished communities as hotbeds of terrorism or Marxism.

Normative commitment alone, however, is insufficient to constrain populist violence. To borrow from Froehle’s (1994, p. 146) analysis of Venezuela, “It is one thing to be religious, and another to be organized.” “Even when national elites consistently protest genocidal policies,” Braun (2016, p. 129) writes, “the actual willingness and capacity of constituents to actively resist mass killing depends on subnational networks and norms.” This directs our attention to the role of local religious infrastructure; as Gamm tells us “no institution is so successful in coordinating neighborhood action as the Catholic parish” (1999, p. 58).7

The capacity of local institutions should be especially important in empowering their ability to disrupt the personalistic, anti-institutional nature of populist violence. Local networks anchored in congregations can more effectively protect themselves and credibly threaten transgressors (Bohara, Mitchell and Nepal, 2006). Liberation theology encouraged precisely this type of diffusion of religious infrastructure into vulnerable communities, notably through the growth of “basic ecclesial communities” (BECs) that combined religious worship with livelihood programs in impoverished communities (Levine, 1988; Mainwaring, 1987). Yet to intervene in the production of populist violence, the grassroots must also “scale up” (Mattiace, Ley and Trejo, 2019) to interface with political

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7 As we detail below, parishes are appropriate locales to track institutional responses to the Philippine Drug War because of they coordinate collective action not only for religious worship but also an array of community outreach and public affairs initiatives. But this ability should be considered as a variable: in some setting religious infrastructure plays a lesser role in coordinating community action, perhaps, for example, because attendees increasingly drive to religious institutions and are thus less embedded in local communities around the parish sites. One parish in our sample, for example, did reference the nature of the church as a “commuter parish” as being responsible for limiting involvement in local public affairs in that parish.
processes, connect with elites, and convey credible information to outsiders (Hale, 2018). This is “institutional access,” a form of influence in which religious elites “share sovereignty with secular politicians,” through informal control of policy formation, vetoing, and vetting (Grzymala-Busse, 2015, p. 48).

Particularly where populists demonize outgroups and degrade institutional protections, organized religion’s ability to leverage normative authority in contesting out-group construction, and organizational avenues to intervene even while formal institutions decay, can protect communities. To paraphrase Lowden’s analysis of the Vicariate of Solidarity, a Catholic initiative to shield citizens from the depredations of Chilean military rule, only when moral opposition is institutionalized can it realize systematic protection (1995, p. 129). But while both normative contestation and organizational capacity are necessary, neither is fixed. Religious actors can be co-opted, cowed, make tactical decisions (or mistakes), and face contexts that activate or sap their moral authority or organizational reach (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Buckley, 2016; Trejo, 2009).

2.2. Direct and Indirect Mechanisms of Community Protection

Normative contestation and institutional capacity to intervene in personalist politics jointly matter, yet provide less guidance over precisely how such protection might operate. Here we distinguish between direct and indirect channels of influence. Direct effects intervene in the production of state violence, largely by changing the incentives facing the agents or managers of that violence. Indirect effects change the character of communities, passively increasing their resistance to violence. While some mechanisms detailed below may seem to correspond more closely to the normative or rationalist dimensions of populist violence, in most cases we believe that these mechanisms blend a moral and material causal logic.

Three “direct” mechanisms may be at work, in which local religious institutions offer community protection by intervening in the proximate production of populist violence.

- First, religious institutions may raise attention by highlighting victims and perpetrators of violence. As centers of moral authority and sites of mobilization, local religious institutions can contest populists’ exclusionary framing while drawing on regular church services, charitable networks in the community, and even media access to disseminate information
effectively. Examining Colombia’s civil war, Kaplan argues “communities can protest and ‘go public’ to denounce aggression and abuses and shame armed actors...communities may engage in marches or other symbolic acts and link with external NGOs and IGOs to help magnify wrongdoings” (2017, p. 50).

• Second, religious institutions can offer sanctuary for persecuted individuals through safe houses and escape networks (Braun, 2016). Cavendish (1994, p. 187) uses the apt metaphor of “protected spaces under the Church’s umbrella of safety” to describe this mechanism’s operation in Brazil. Such informal protection may be particularly important in the context of populism’s weakening of formal institutional checks on violence. In these cases, moral imperatives motivate clergy and laity to thwart the state despite high risks, including retaliatory violence.

• Third, religious actors may disrupt enforcement, convincing state agents to avoid deploying discretionary violence, redirecting their interest, or accepting substitute punishments. In conditions of civil war, citizen groups and community elites “engag[e] armed groups for negotiations and the gathering and dissemination of information” (Krause, 2018, p. 78). In other cases, religious elites have served as “brokers” (Harpviken and Roisli, 2008) or an “information bridge” (Cao et al., 2018) between local citizens and official actors. The personalistic roots of this access may increase its efficacy in the context of populism’s degradation of formal institutions.

In addition to these direct effects, religious congregations may also indirectly influence populist violence by altering the nature of local communities.

• First, local institutions could shrink vulnerable populations through social welfare activism that can attenuate the production of potential victims. For example, we may expect that congregation-based drug treatment and rehabilitation programs drive down local levels of drug activity, reducing opportunities for agents of state violence to carry out operations in the community.

• Second, religious institutions could build local solidarity to reduce opportunities external actors use to exploit conflicts (Kalyvas, 2006). This could take the form of religious mediation to prevent low-level community disagreements from escalating to involve state agents (Krischke,
1991; De Juan et al., 2015). More diffusely, community involvement in church activities lessens “isolation, passivity, and fear” (Donoso, 1991, p. 191) while building social capital that reduces petty disputes. Even “conventionally religious” activities without political content may promote this effect by strengthening social capital and a sense of empowerment (Mainwaring, 1987, p. 6).

• Third, religious institutions could assist victims’ families in ways that impact the future production of violence. Families left behind by state violence often face both material crisis brought on by the death of a bread-winner and the threat of potential social exclusion by association with a target of state dehumanization (Dionisio, 2020). In providing assistance, these institutions may prevent some from falling into the type of illicit behavior that encourages future violence, as well as signaling to the community that such family members remain a part of the local community.

Importantly, these distinct mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and we do not set out in the research design that follows to falsify one in favor of the other. However, they point to distinct causal processes and discrete observable implications, consistent with the normative exclusion and anti-institutional structure of rule that characterized populist violence.

3. Research Design

To document and trace the operation of these distinct mechanisms related to institutional capacity, we turn to an original set of congregational indicators collected during interviews with Catholic clergy and lay parish leaders. Interviews took place between trained, local research staff and clergy and lay leadership from a set of effectively randomly selected Catholic parishes across one diocese of the National Capital Region. We confine parish-based data collection to this area of the NCR for several reasons. First and foremost, the Duterte administration’s Drug War has been centered on the country’s urban areas, particular the NCR. This reflects Duterte’s background as a big city mayor in Davao City, as well as the popular frustrations with urban criminality that fueled his national political rise. Second, the NCR is substantively large, containing over 13 million residents (over 10% of the total population of the Philippines) living in over 1,700 barangays. While the area we sample is only one portion of the

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8 The particular names of each parish, total number of parish sites, and name of the diocese remain undisclosed to minimize risks to human subjects.
NCR, it still contains significant internal variation useful for analysis. Finally, confining attention to the NCR helps minimize variation in state capacity. While state control across the Philippine archipelago is uneven, few areas within the NCR are out-of-reach to the state’s coercive apparatus.

In each parish, researchers attempted to schedule multiple interviews with clergy and lay parish leadership. This included prioritizing the parish pastor (the leading clergy member in the congregation) as well as the lay leadership of the parish’s governance body, commonly referred to as the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). The PPC chairperson would, in general, be expected to have the most comprehensive understanding of the parish’s institutional capacity and initiatives related to public affairs, including potential responses to the Drug War. Many Catholic parishes are large, complex organizations, and so where judged appropriate by research staff, additional interviews took place, for example with the head of the parish ministry involved in charitable work or social communications. Moreover, in some parish settings the current priest or lay chair of the PPC was relatively new to that position. In these cases, research staff adjusted their sampling strategy to interview a prior parish leader, for instance a former head of the PPC, who would be the most appropriate source for valid measurement of the relevant parish indicators.

Data collection began in early 2020, with face-to-face interviews taking place in several parishes with over two dozen subjects. In March 2020, the research team halted data collection because of the global outbreak of COVID-19. The Philippines, particularly the NCR, entered extended periods of mandated community lockdowns. As it became clear that COVID would be an extended obstacle to face-to-face data collection, the research team began to transition to phone and video conference-based data collection. Team members revised the questionnaire for the new environment, and began to reschedule virtual interviews via mobile phone and secure video conferences in October 2020. The post-COVID interview instrument continued to yield a high completion rate, in spite of occasional technical difficulties.

The choice of preferred interview medium post-COVID was left to interview subjects, with the intention of allowing individuals to best judge whether landline, mobile telephone or internet-based video conferencing would most reduce risk of virus exposure and comply with local lockdown guidelines, which fluctuated in the post-COVID research phase. Throughout pre- and post-COVID stages, enumerators secured informed consent from subjects and observed data security protocols designed to minimize risk.

Data collection, cleaning, and coding is ongoing at the time of writing (September, 2021) and conclusions should thus be considered tentative.
In these interviews, priests and lay parish leaders answered a series of questions designed to assess the direct and indirect mechanisms through which parishes might impact Drug War violence, as well as aspects of parish capacity unrelated to the Drug War. The interviews contained both closed- and open-ended items, a design intended to permit some comparability across parishes while allowing unique attributes of parish experiences to refine our theoretical approach. The specific questions related to the drug war were developed by combining the theoretical literature highlighting direct and indirect mechanisms identified above with the rich case literature, derived from both reportage and advocacy work, on the Philippine case. We also dialogued with our local partners to identify potentially neglected or otherwise useful questions. The result was a set of disaggregated, discrete activities which we sorted into the overarching mechanisms.

A final mechanism, related to formal collaboration with authorities, was included to help capture the reality of supportive relationships with state authorities around conduct of the Drug War. While we do not see this as perfectly inverse of the other, more constraining mechanisms, we do suggest that it captures a potentially different set of interactions between Church and State.

Table 1 presents both the individual indicators designed to measure particular activities, as well as the overarching mechanisms into which we have sorted them.

**Table 1: Individual Indicators and Composite Mechanisms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Individual Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Mechanisms</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise Attention</td>
<td>Spoken to media, lawyers, or human rights groups about a case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spoken to church authorities about a case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spoken in public about killings, such as funerals or in sermons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Sanctuary</td>
<td>Mobilized bereaved families and/or parishioners for advocacy against the killings and other human rights violations associated with the campaign against drugs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provided shelter, either within or outside the parish territory, to someone in the parish who was at risk of antidrug violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting Enforcement</td>
<td>Spoken to the barangay captain to try to remove someone from the drug watch list, or to find out information about someone arrested or killed for drug-related crimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect Mechanisms</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrinking Vulnerable Populations</td>
<td>Rehabilitated drug users, either directly through a parish rehabilitation program or via a diocesan rehabilitation program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Solidarity</td>
<td>Provided financial, livelihood, or educational assistance to the families of those arrested, killed, or disappeared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting Victims’ Families</td>
<td>Provided assistance in obtaining, paying for, and/or negotiating wake and funeral expenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive Mechanism: Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Participated in the MASA-MASID(^\text{12}) program.</td>
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</tbody>
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In addition to these particular indicators of responses to the Drug War, interviewers also collected data on parish-based indicators that might be thought of as pre-existing the Drug War, but involved

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\(^{11}\) Philippine National Police (PNP) Command Memorandum Circular 16-2016 established “Project Double Barrel,” which included Oplan Tokhang, a portmanteau of the Visayan terms takedown (“plead”) and banggo (“knock”). The strategy, as set out on paper, involved knocking at doors of suspected drug users, who were then gathered and assisted to voluntarily surrender to local police officials.

\(^{12}\) The MASA-MASID is a community-based anti-drug program centered on the barangay, designed to include participation from government, police, and community leaders.
in parish response, particularly the parish’s organizational capacity. Indicators of organizational capacity are designed to assess the internal activity of the parish, more specifically its capacity to organize in public affairs, such as its history of organizing domestic election monitors. Table 2 presents these individual indicators.

**Table 2: Indicators of Parish Capacity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Individual Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Capacity: Public</strong></td>
<td>Existence and activity level of ministries related to public affairs:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facing Ministries</strong></td>
<td>• Public Affairs Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social Services and Disaster Management Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family and Life Ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ecology Ministry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Social Communications Ministry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. **Evidence of Parish Responses to the Drug War**

Our initial interest is to catalogue variation in the engagement of the seven mechanisms related to the Drug War. Parishes are the major institutional presence through which our hypothesized mechanisms operate, and so for subsequent analysis, we report statistics that have been collapsed to that level of analysis. To briefly describe: as noted above, each question was asked to each interview subject, leading to multiple interviews per parish. We designed the survey in this fashion to account for information siloes, differences in tenure, and differences in memory. When we encountered conflicting information, we considered any “yes” by any interviewee a “yes” for the parish in general on that particular indicator. Mechanism indices were then produced by summing the number of indicators with any affirmative response in an interview at the parish, divided by the total number of indicators in that mechanism, multiplied by 100.

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13 To give a hypothetical example, Parish X consisted of two interviews, one with the parish priest and one with the BEC coordinator. If the priest answered that the parish did not participate in the MASA-MASID program, but the BEC coordinator claimed that the parish did participate, we considered that the parish did participate in the MASA-MASID program.
Figure one shows kernel density plots (Gaussian) of the distribution of the scores of the six primary mechanisms of Drug War response across all parishes in the sample, with reference to their two sub-categories (direct and indirect). For each, mean values of that particular mechanism score are shown in parenthesis.

**Figure 1: Distribution of Indirect (Right) and Direct (Left) Mechanisms (Mean Value in Parenthesis)**

Figure one prompts several preliminary observations:

- First, mechanisms are clearly uneven in their presence across our sample of parishes, suggestive of both between-parish and across-mechanism variation. Most notably, parish scores ranged from literally zero to 100 for multiple indirect mechanisms, and a slightly more compressed, but still varied, range of parish scores representing the direct mechanisms. Mean values for *indirect* mechanisms are generally higher in our sample: Raising Attention has the
highest average value among the direct mechanisms, but even this is lower than the average parish-level score for the mechanisms of Building Solidarity and Shrinking Vulnerable Populations.

- Second, those mechanisms that might be reasonably expected to expose local actors to the highest levels of risk are relatively less common in our sample. This is particularly noticeable with Offering Sanctuary, which has a mean parish level of 13.1 and is entirely inactive in a majority of the parishes under study. Similarly, Disrupting Enforcement, which relies on direct interaction with security forces or local political elites on behalf of vulnerable civilians, is relatively less common than other mechanisms across the parishes.

This resonates with a regular theme in qualitative interview evidence: the constraining role of fear in Drug War response. As a leader in Parish M1 put it, “Those who know about drugs, they are scared to say so to whomever, so it’s difficult to publicize.” Fear presented logistical challenges, primarily by limiting the ability of parishes to recruit volunteers for some activities, while also shaping some priests’ willingness to publicly address cases, both for fear of drawing unwanted attention to their flock and of alienating congregation members who may be supportive of the violence. The quantitative evidence in Figure 1 is consistent with the expectation that mechanisms most likely to raise risk are least widely distributed among parishes.

- Third, the independent mechanism plots raise the question of whether indirect and direct responses may be correlated with one another, or represent a sort of tradeoff where parishes engage in one set of responses to the Drug War rather than another. Evidence is consistent with the expectation that various mechanisms are positively correlated, rather than representing a zero-sum trade off. Figure 2 reports a straightforward, strong correlation atop a scatterplot and fitted line showing the positive relationship of these mechanisms at the parish level of analysis.
Figure 2: Direct and Indirect Mechanisms

It is fair to mention that, while it has the benefit of being relatively systematic, our quantitative evidence does have drawbacks. Conceptually, it rests on individuals being able to map their own diverse and particular, parish-level activities into basic yes-no questions. In terms of measurement, the reader will note that certain mechanisms feature multiple constituent activities while others feature only one. While inevitable given our concerns to mimic the activities that the theoretical and case literature identified, there may be a risk of unfairly dichotomizing particular mechanisms that may be more multi-faceted and complex than the menu presented to the interviewee. Finally, our decision to create variables that minimize information siloes---treating any individual’s yes response as a yes for the parish---may artificially inflate the scores across the board and flatten meaningful variation, effectively treating a parish where only a fraction of the interviewees mention an activity the same as one where every interviewee mentions an activity as being in operation. These points should be kept in mind.

To better understand the operation of these mechanisms, and also attempt to alleviate some of the concerns inherent in the quantitative material outlined above, the following section uses the open-ended questions embedded alongside the standard indicators to detail the causal processes through
which these initiatives offer community protection and highlight the blend of moral suasion and formal capacity involved in that process. We present this evidence here disaggregated by mechanism.

4.1. Direct Mechanisms

“Attention Raising” was the most regularly reported form of direct Drug War response across our interview sample. Clergy and lay leaders spoke of the importance of open, public discussion of Drug War violence given the “fear factor” (Parish V6)\(^{14}\) that drives a “culture of silence” (M1) around killings. Interview subjects reported “very vocal condemning of [Drug War] killings” (D2) in homilies, “so parish members know exactly where [the priest] stands” (R1). Priests also noted how they used these opportunities to directly challenge dominant narratives of drug users as a reviled out-group, with one (M6) analogizing Drug War victims to biblical innocents killed by Herod and the “good thief” crucified with Christ. As another priest (V1) put it, “They are victims…we need to make people realize these are children of God, a part of this church.”

Attention Raising frequently went beyond condemnations from the pulpit, with regular participation in ringing of parish bells at a set time in the evening to protest killings, a parish march featuring “testimonies on EJKs” (J8), social media campaigns about cases (L7), and flags and banners posted outside the church to show opposition to killings (B3). Attention raising occurred outside the parish as well, with one priest (S1) describing “masses for victims…I bless the place where the killing happened.” Clergy and laity in multiple parishes also linked attention-raising to accountability, primarily through speaking to outside authorities, both human rights lawyers (J3) and figures in the church hierarchy (R1). One leader (O6) related the story of a local addict who “was able to share his experiences in front of [the diocese’s bishop], who cried upon hearing his story. He didn’t say anything, [the bishop] just hugged him.”

“Enforcement Disruption” also appeared regularly in quantitative data, if with a bit more of an uneven distribution. Qualitative evidence clarifies the importance of informal rather than formal interactions with police and political officials, a feature consistent with the personalist, anti-institutional nature of populism, and further supportive of the role of decentralization as an important scope condition. We note that formal institutional channels linking religious leaders to Drug War violence do exist:

\(^{14}\) All qualitative parish data is referenced with randomly generated alphanumeric identifiers to maintain human subject protection.
“Barangay Anti-Drug Action Committees” (BADAC) and the “MASA-MASID” program, are designed to “promote community involvement” in combatting drugs…including faith-based organizations. However multiple interviewees were either entirely unaware of such programs, or reported that they were not actively implemented in their barangay. Leaders reported difficulty receiving referrals from the official channels (R1) and signing necessary bureaucratic agreements (B9).

In place of formalized channels, there was regular evidence of the type of personalistic interaction to influence enforcement characteristic of populist rule. As one priest (O6) put it, “The parish is [very near] to [a police post]. If you give them food, you become friends with them.” Clergy emerged as key interlocutors with local government and police officials. One described “eyes in the parish” alerting him to violence, including “the barangay captain or police informing me if there are Oplan Tokhang operations.” Another discussed offering local police some protection from “pressure from above” to “reach a particular quota in killings” (J2). Clergy most commonly intervened with local barangay or police officials to remove individuals from “watch lists” that serve as a source of Drug War violence. One priest (S1) described:

“A child of [parish staff] was tagged as an addict…we went to the PNP and I talked to the police in charge, I vouched that the kid is not an addict. The kid was eventually removed from the list.”

At times this included direct involvement with police operations, with one priest (M6) describing appointing a parishioner to accompany the police going house to house in anti-narcotic operations only “to know if the police are doing things right...not to cooperate with them.” Lay leaders in P5 and J2 similarly described joining police “going house to house,” both offering protection for civilians and laying the foundation for later rehabilitation work.

“Offering Sanctuary” was the least commonly reported mechanism in quantitative data, and also received relative limited attention in qualitative interviews. Investigative reporting has detailed an “underground sanctuary network” (Willis, 2019) to physically shelter, as one bishop put it, “people who feel that their lives are in danger” (David, 2019). This includes immediate protection at prominent

parishes before potential victims are evacuated to more remote locations under church protection. Some bishops have reportedly offered sanctuary to police officers who have spoken out against the Drug War, which has triggered threats of obstruction of justice charges and even violence against church officials (Esmaquel II, 2017; Williams, 2017). In our interviews, one priest described contentious work like providing protection as necessarily “below the radar” and a leader in another parish (L2) described such efforts as initiatives of “the parish priest personally” rather than an institutionalized feature of parish response. Subjects in G4 and F1 declined to provide further detail beyond confirming the quantitative indicator that the activity had taken place. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of these efforts given their unique sensitivity, but they may be substantial: in one piece of reporting, an activist priest claimed “at least 20” potential victims were offered protection or spirited away, while other church sources placed the number in the “hundreds” (McPherson, 2017; Watts, 2018).

4.2. Indirect Mechanisms

“Shrinking Vulnerable Populations” was the most commonly reported quantitative mechanism associated with responding to Drug War violence. Indicators related to this mechanism particularly focused on the provision of rehabilitation services through parishes. All sampled parishes feature a social development ministry (SSDM), while two thirds have dedicated resources to drug rehabilitation programs. Many interviews referenced the fact that rehabilitation work coordinated higher up the Catholic hierarchy, whether at the diocesan or vicariate level, was essential to their program’s success. While program specifics varied to an extent from parish to parish, they commonly involved aspects of scripture study, psychological counseling, and job placement services after the program’s completion. Programs were frequently labor intensive, including “weekly [meetings] for six months until [the individual] graduates” (M1). Parishes sometimes recruited local individuals threatened with Drug War violence (P5) while other times relying on referrals from local barangay officials, which could at times be “a struggle” (L7). One parish’s restorative justice ministry was over 20 years old, a point which we discuss in some detail in the next section.

While we conceptualize shrinking vulnerable populations as exogenous to the Drug War, and indeed many ministries to drug users predate the populist violence of the Duterte presidency, there was evidence that such activity “revived” (Z3) in response to Oplan Tokhang. Priests and parish leaders regularly referenced stepping up rehabilitation services to produce lists of graduates to “certify their
repentance” to barangay authorities (K9). As one priest summarized, “There are parents of a drug user asking for my signature for the rehabilitation program” to take to the barangay. Another priest (S1) reported that “[barangay officials] take your word, so you must have deep knowledge of the people whom you are helping.” This credibility extends to the ability to reassure drug users of their physical safety from state violence. A leader in V1 observed, “Perhaps [users] did not initially want to take part in this because they might be thinking that this program is a trap…we are able to make them feel secure.” Another describes how in R6:

“We kept reassuring [users] that as long as they are in the program, they will not be touched. That’s what we are led to believe. So far, it’s been okay, with the past 4-5 batches that we have had, it was okay. No one was killed.”

“Victim Assistance” primarily takes place after the initial production of Drug War violence, but was regularly cited by parish leaders as not only an obligation to those left behind, but also a means for limiting future violence by challenging populist framing of victims as outcasts beyond the pale of the political community. A lay leader (R1) described “visiting wakes of victims of the campaign” as a way “to create greater awareness about the violence.” Leaders in V6 summarized working with “a group of lawyers to consolidate a group of victim families for interviews about human rights issues.” Other parishes, including M1, reported working with lawyer groups to provide “free legal counsel,” as killings often leave impoverished families in need of basic legal documents that can be dangerous to obtain for remaining women and orphans. Parish leaders in O6 reported, “We don’t normally allow siblings to be enrolled in our scholarship program simultaneously, but we have one case where we allowed that when both of their parents were killed.” Multiple parishes also reported that such victim assistance provides a source of information important to monitoring potential future violence. In N7, a mother was killed, leaving behind multiple young daughters. Such individuals could be subject to future threats related to the killing, or to other forms of local exploitation, so “[parish leaders] check up on the little ones, providing food and money along with access to school.” While not a direct intervention in violence, such publicized victim assistance feeds back into the Attention Raising mechanism, providing one means of, in the words of a leader in L7, “making people aware and challenging them to be part of the response.”
Finally, broader efforts to “Build Community Solidarity” also appeared regularly in quantitative and qualitative data. A parish’s physical and social embeddedness in a community conceivably mitigates neighborhood disputes that may otherwise attract state violence. Describing how the Drug War’s notorious “kill lists” are constructed, Amnesty International noted how “local officials’ reliance on community members in compiling ‘watch lists’ has, at best, encouraged a practice of spying on neighbors and, at worst, given people a way to get rid of personal or political rivals” (2017, p. 20). Reportage offers numerous examples of this dynamic: “The night before the murder, Raymart and a neighbor had a heated argument that ended with the latter going to the barangay hall to accuse Raymart of many things, like selling marijuana” (See, 2017). Mitigating such disputes was cited in multiple interviews as tied to limiting Drug War violence. As a leader in G9 put it, “In the barangay, there are problems relating to land and family. There are some who were talked to and encouraged to talk it out instead of risking a life. There were no police during that time.”

Parishes build solidarity and defuse local grievances through mediation over myriad contentious issues, including land titles for informal communities (E5), labor negotiations (B9), and construction permits (G4). As a priest in Parish F0 summarized, “I provide an opportunity for community members to work out their differences. That is where our community bonds are strengthened.” Election violence has been a persistent problem in the Philippines, and USAID-sponsored analysis identified church-based monitoring networks as a key “countervailing force” able to constrain the violent influence of local political clans (Creative Associates International, 2012). Indeed, almost all parishes in our sample mobilize domestic citizen election monitors in local barangays, with a leader from one parish describing a pre-election “Peace Mass” at which local candidates gathered to sign a peace covenant for their followers on Election Day (M6). Over 90% of parishes report having a “Base Ecclesial Community” (BEC) that organizes parish members for devotional activities, for instance Marian processions or weekly rosary sessions in poor areas. While BEC activity may appear “conventionally religious,” scholars have demonstrated it has broad effects through “reinforc[ing] ideas of egalitarianism” and promoting “solidarities” that can counteract “mutual suspicion” (Levine, 1988, p. 252). A parish BEC leader described promoting community cohesion through tracking the welfare of BEC “victims” of forced relocation among informal settlers (B9) in precisely the types of communities most impacted by Drug War violence.
4.3. A Note on Formal Collaboration

Before concluding this section, we should note that these individual mechanisms, whether directly or indirectly, all assess activities that one would expect to constrain populist violence facing communities threatened by the Drug War. However, extant research gives reason to suspect that some religious leaders support the Drug War to varying degrees, and thus parishes may engage in forms of behavior that encourage police activity. Data from our parishes does document some activities consistent with collaboration, although such activities are fairly rare, with ~75% of parishes reporting no such activity (Figure 3). Qualitative evidence emerges of some enthusiasm for the Drug War, particularly from some lay parish leaders (as opposed to priests). One subject (V6) claimed to “leave the drug-related issues in the hands of the police,” while another defended the police from claims of extrajudicial killings: “EJK (sic) must be proven first…the church will always favor the campaign against drugs. The so-called process of killing, of course we would be against that.” While striking, these were minority views in qualitative data. Some leaders even reported eschewing government collaboration because they viewed such initiatives as ploys to get the parish to inform on its members, which one priest (M6) described as “traitorous.”

Figure 3: Collaborating Formally (Mean Value in Parenthesis)

In sum, this data shows the regular, if unevenly distributed, operation of multiple direct and indirect mechanisms that could provide community protection. In the next section, we introduce quantitative
and qualitative data documenting an initial correlation between a parish’s organizational capacity, much of which pre-dates the Drug War, and the robustness of their response to that violence.

5. Correlates of Drug War Activism: Pre-Existing Parish Capacity

Just as data shows responses to be uneven at the parish level, all parishes are not created equal in terms of their pre-existing institutional involvement in public affairs. In particular, we suspect a correlation between a parish’s level of internal organizational capacity, conceptualized and measured as the operation of various offices and initiatives broadly engaged in public affairs, rather than functions like music for worship services. As discussed above, we focused in the questionnaire on the presence or absence of seven separate offices: a Public Affairs Ministry, a Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), a Social Services and Disaster Management Ministry (SSDM), a Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC), a Family and Life Ministry, an Ecology Ministry, and a Social Communications Ministry. We expect that such initiatives both lower rational barriers to effective collective action, and also promote strong normative dedication to church activities.

Figure 4: Distribution of Organizational Capacity (Average Value in Parenthesis)
While parish-based variation does clearly exist, parishes in our sample all showed at least moderate levels of organizational capital. The index summarizes the existence and perceived activity level of seven potential ministries within the parish. No parishes report having no ministries active in public life, and in fact the vast majority report multiple active ministries. This includes the universal presence of a ministry involved in the provision of social services, which frequently conducts charitable work that could be expected to relate to the shrinking vulnerable populations mechanism. Nearly 90% of parishes sampled have a Basic Ecclesial Community, the structures tied to the history of liberation theology that are particularly focused on building solidarity and community among poorer members of society. And every parish maintains a Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting, the domestic citizen election observation body that mobilizes hundreds of thousands of precinct-based observers for national and local elections in the country, which are frequently associated with heightened community tensions among local elites.

If it is true that these dimensions of pre-existing parish capacity lay the groundwork for the mechanisms of direct and indirect Drug War intervention, we might expect to see basic covariance between the indicators of those mechanisms and parish organizational capacity. Figure 5 charts these basic correlations at the level of the parish, with the correlation coefficient identified in parenthesis. Note that as above, this also depicts indirect mechanisms on the left, and direct mechanisms on the right.
Figure 5: Scatterplots of Organizational Capital Against Specific Mechanisms (Two-Way Correlations in Parenthesis)

![Scatterplots showing correlations between different mechanisms and organizational capital.](image)

All results are generally as expected: positive correlations across direct and indirect mechanisms. The differences are modest, so should be interpreted with caution. To better understand these general patterns, we turn to qualitative material from interviews, where a connection between parish organizational capacity and Drug War response appeared regularly. In Parish S1, an interview subject referenced that a working group formed to coordinate Drug War response efforts involved “the coordinators of all other parish ministries…education…SSDM. We are ten in all, all coordinators handling [response] because it is quite heavy and difficult.” BECs, those institutional legacies tied to liberation theology historically, were mentioned in several parishes as crucial infrastructure for contacting the impoverished communities where Drug War violence fell most heavily. Leadership in Z3 described BEC leaders as coordinating rehabilitation efforts “since the surrenderees came from their communities.” A leader in another parish referenced the role of BECs in monitoring actual or threatened violence around the parish: “We will surely get a report about that because of our BECs.” The success of victim assistance and rehabilitation efforts also regularly rested on long-term charitable programs in parishes, for instance job placement in Parish J2 that meant “the parish already had an
idea as to where to assign the [rehabilitation] graduates after the program.” Even in high capacity environments, such initiatives posed organizational challenges. However, as a leader in Parish L2 summed up, “Since the parish has the resources and there are people willing to [help], why not take it on?”

Interviews also clarified that this capacity was human in addition to organizational. Leaders in A5 referenced clergy and lay leaders with formal training in psychology that was essential to successful rehabilitation and victim assistance work. The leader of a parish rehabilitation program was both a practicing medical doctor and a PhD in psychology, who observed, “[At my job], I get paid. Here, it's just for God… I would hope to provide [users and victims] with psychological, emotional, and spiritual counseling that they could not afford because consultations with psychiatrists and psychologists are very expensive.”

Consistent with expectations about a correlation between pre-existing capacity and Drug War response, this tie emerged not only in more active parishes, which could be thought of as positive cases, but also as an excuse for relatively lower engagement among less active parishes. Leaders at parish H3, which reported some of the lowest levels of active mechanisms in our sample, referenced one parish leader “who was supposed to handle [such initiatives] here had to leave the parish, and no one wanted to take over.” At parish B3, another of the least active in Drug War response mechanisms, a parish leader reported that the structure of the parish, which served a very small area and drew many members on a commuter basis, “go to [this parish’s] mass, but serve in their respective communities outside of the scope of the parish,” meaning that there was limited ability to organize locally in response to the Drug War. A priest at a third parish, P6, with few Drug War response mechanisms in place referenced “difficulty getting volunteers” even for relatively core functions like social services in their fairly impoverished parish. As he continued, “We are trying our best to be involved, however, the circumstances in the parish community make it difficult.”

It should be emphasized that even parishes with fairly high levels of evidence of Drug War response regularly referenced challenges in organizational capacity posed by this sort of activism. As a leader at Parish K9 observed, “If this were medicine, [parish volunteers] were trained in general medicine, but [drug response] is specialized.” A leader of another parish fairly close to the average levels of Drug War response referenced having to turn away potential charity cases “because we do not have the
capacity to entertain all clients.” Another leader at O6, one of the more active parishes, observed that rehabilitation in particular may be a “weak link” because of its unique financial demands on parishes. While these obstacles remain, for any community institution, there is evidence that higher capacity parishes are more capable of surmounting them through a combination of organizational and human capital.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our study is the first to systematically document how local Philippine Catholic parishes have responded to a wave of populist violence against the vulnerable. Qualitative and quantitative evidence consistently points to the widespread operation of both direct and indirect efforts to offer protection from Drug War violence, as religious institutions contest the normative exclusion of victims of violence and draw on organizational capacity needed to impact the production of violence in the context of weak institutions and personalistic politics. While not assessed systematically, there does seem a relationship whereby mechanisms associated with significant physical and legal risk are less widespread. This highlights the role of fear in constraining local responses to state violence, even for religious institutions with high levels of moral authority.

One theme emerges inductively, primarily from qualitative interview material, and merits particularly focused additional research. While we highlight a correlation between organizational capacity and Drug War response, a different factor, pre-existing social and community ties, also emerged regularly in discussions of effective parish response. The relational embeddedness of parish leaders, whether through family ties to local elites or parish involvement in securing promotions for police officers, provided the access needed to shape discretionary, localized decisions from state officials about the production of violence. It may be that this form of social capital merits further attention alongside the organizational capital encouraging effective community protection.

The documentary exercise of this paper suggests that the true counterfactual is not the absence of all mechanisms, but varying blends of these mechanisms. As such, an obvious next step would be situate cross-parish variation as a dependent variable, tying parish capacity to political or economic features of a neighborhood, or exploring why certain parishes are more likely to adopt particular mechanisms, or blends of mechanisms, than others. Pre-existing capacity may itself be a function of the socio-economic status of the surrounding neighborhood, or perhaps of local levels of political or religious
competition. We might expect that parishes in wealthier areas possess more extensive public engagement, due simply to increased resources, but the story could be more complex. BECs, for instance, are generally intended to serve impoverished sectors of parish communities, and could be especially present in lower socio-economic status areas.

Relatedly, we do not know how or when local parish figures’ personal commitment to civilian protection comes into play. It is one thing to have capacity to intervene, but shifting from latent organizational power to active community protection in some degree likely depends on the willingness of local leadership – both religious and laity – to deploy the institutional weight of the parish. This is an important source of variation, both in the underlying attitudes towards drug users (and the Drug War), as well as differing thresholds of risk tolerance and fear, sense of efficacy, and personal priorities. Somewhat relatedly, and in light of evidence that at least some clergy self-censor to avoid alienating congregants who support the Drug War, other research has considered the high-level risks to the (institutional) church’s reputation for becoming involved in “petty politics” (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). More sophisticated research on the interaction of these relatively abstract issues with more immediate concerns of personal safety will likely illuminate important aspects in religious mobilization.

Finally, the Philippines offers one example of how locally-rooted religious institutions might mobilize to offer community protection. The patterns we identify, however, may generalize to other cases where populists have turned state power against symbolic enemies, for example in Bolsonaro’s Brazil, or even populist rhetoric regarding policing practices in the United States that has drawn contestation from religious leaders in the Black Church. The extent, diversity, and variation in local institutional response to populist violence that we document in the Philippines points to a rich field of research at the intersection of religion, populism and community protection.
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