RESEARCH, THEORY, AND SPECULATION ON GANG TRUCES

Edward R. Maguire
American University

Gang violence is responsible for a significant share of interpersonal violence in many communities throughout the world. As governments struggle to find the right mix of strategies to address gang violence, their efforts are often grouped into three general categories: suppression, intervention, and prevention (Klein and Maxson 2006). *Suppression* involves the use of the criminal justice system to monitor, arrest, prosecute, and punish gangs. Across the world, suppression is the instinctive policy choice of governments. Research evidence shows that suppression can work well if it is administered thoughtfully, with proper attention to procedural justice and the rule of law. When executed poorly, as it often is, it can backfire and increase gang violence. But even when executed well, suppression is widely acknowledged to be an incomplete solution. Thus, scholars and policy makers have focused significant attention on developing programs and policies that can supplement or serve as alternatives to suppression.

Intervention efforts focus on those who are already in gangs and encourage them to leave the gang, provide them with new skills or opportunities that can provide alternatives to gang life, or encourage them to mitigate the severity of their behavior if they decide to remain in the gang. Since violence is the typical method used by gangs to resolve disputes, a common approach to intervention involves encouraging gang members to choose nonviolent dispute resolution options. *Prevention* efforts are designed to keep youth from joining gangs in the first place. Prevention is an essential component of any comprehensive approach to dealing with gangs, but it is a long-term solution with less applicability to gang violence problems in the moment. Every community with a gang violence problem relies on suppression strategies, but not all of them rely on intervention and prevention strategies. Even fewer communities pay serious attention to research evidence on which strategies are most effective.

Research demonstrates clearly and consistently that gang members are more involved in violent crime, as both offenders and victims, than non-gang members (Battin-Pearson et al., 1998; Curry et al., 2001; Curry et al., 2002; Esbensen, et al. 2001; Huff, 1998; Katz, Maguire, and Choate, 2011). Since violence generates substantial costs for communities, in both social and monetary terms, communities beset by gang violence have sought to find appropriate strategies for addressing the problem. Prevention strategies are often distant from violent events. If we invest in children now, it may pay dividends down the road, but that is of little comfort to a community in which young men are dying on the streets *today*. Similarly, suppression strategies can also be useful if executed well, but many suppression approaches are only triggered *after* a

violent event has occurred. Suppression is sometimes viewed in the same light as closing the barn doors after the horses have already escaped. Thus, intervention strategies that attempt to forestall gang violence in the moment are very popular.

Gang truces are a well-known form of intervention for dealing with gang violence. They fall in the middle between suppression efforts, which often involve responding to crime after it has already occurred, and prevention efforts, which focus on preventing crime before it occurs. Gang truces involve bringing gangs together to negotiate an end to the conflict and violence between them. Truces are initiated by a variety of entities, whether governments, non-governmental organizations, community activists, or by the gangs themselves. Although gang truces have been negotiated in communities around the world for many years, the empirical research evidence on them is unfortunately quite limited. What little evidence there is suggests that they may be successful in producing short-term decreases in violence followed by longer-term increases. Although the empirical research evidence is thin, scholars who specialize in the study of gangs have consistently questioned the wisdom of gang truces. These opinions are based in part on theory about how gangs function and how gang violence propagates throughout gang networks. These opinions are also based in part on the experience of researchers who have spent much of their careers studying gangs and learning how gangs function. Thus, the scholarly community provides us with a mixed foundation of research evidence, theory, and speculation on the effectiveness of gang truces.

This brief report begins by summarizing research evidence on gang truces in the United States. It then discusses evidence from a recent study of a gang truce in Trinidad and Tobago. It then provides a brief reflection on gang truces from the perspective of scholars who specialize in the study of gangs. Based on this body of scholarship, the paper closes with some general observations about the effectiveness of gang truces and the need to carry out more regular and rigorous evaluations.

RESEARCH ON GANG TRUCES IN THE UNITED STATES

Unfortunately, gang truces in the United States have received insufficient attention from researchers. Only a handful of studies have evaluated the effectiveness of gang truces. All of them have treated gang truces as a black box, examining outcome data like murders, shootings, or gunshot wounds before and after truces. They provide little insight about the conditions that

give rise to gang truces, the role of third parties in brokering gang truces, or the effects of truces on the relationships between gangs or gang members. As a result, this scholarship provides a useful but incomplete basis for thinking about the viability of gang truces as a policy option.

The first published attempt to evaluate a gang truce was Cotton's (1992) study of a truce in South Central Los Angeles between the Crips and Bloods. Data provided by the Los Angeles Police Department indicated that over the 6-week period immediately after the truce, drive-by shootings decreased by 48 percent compared to the same 6-week period the prior year, decreasing from 162 to 85. Likewise, gang-related homicides dropped by 62 percent, from 26 to 10. It is not clear whether the drop in gang-related homicides was citywide or only in the South Central Los Angeles neighborhood where the gang truce took place. The limited follow-up period and weak evaluation design make it difficult to know how much faith to place in the findings from this study.

Another study by Ordog et al. (1993) examined the effects of the same gang truce in Los Angeles using emergency room admissions data. The study examined changes in the number of emergency room admissions for gunshot wounds before, during, and after the truce. The catchment area for the emergency room was 100 square miles, thus it is not clear to what extent the study area lined up with the areas controlled by the gangs involved in the truce. Also, the authors noted that while they were able to identify the start date of the gang truce from media accounts, they were uncertain about its end date. After 12 weeks, the authors regarded the truce as finished for evaluation purposes because it was no longer being discussed in the media and gunshot wound admissions began to increase. The authors concluded that the gang truce had "reduced the number of gunshot wound victims" seen in the hospital trauma center (Ordog, et al., 1993: 781). However, a later study by the same authors found that these effects lasted for only three months, after which the number of gunshot wound victims grew even higher than before the truce. The authors conclude that the subsequent increase "negated any positive effect of the gang truce" (Ordog, et al., 1995: 417).

Stone and his colleagues (1995) reported that a gang truce implemented along with two other police-related interventions in Chicago in 1992 produced a significant but relatively brief reduction in firearms injuries. Unfortunately, the authors did not provide sufficient analytical detail to enable the reader to judge the merits of their research design or their conclusions.

Furthermore, they were unable to separate the effects of the truce from the effects of other interventions implemented simultaneously.

These studies constitute the empirical knowledge base on which to judge the effectiveness of gang truces in the United States. Unfortunately, a number of factors – including short follow-up periods, weak research designs, and a lack of textured knowledge about how truces influence gangs – make it difficult to draw firm conclusions. These studies suggest that truces may produce short-term reductions in violence. The one study with a sufficiently long follow-up period reports that the short-term decrease in violence was followed by a long term increase.

RESEARCH ON GANG TRUCES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Trinidad and Tobago, a two-island nation in the southeastern Caribbean, has a long history of gang truces dating back to the 1950s when "steel band" gangs adopted truces to prevent the ongoing violence among young musicians and keep the peace during the nation's culturally significant "Carnival" celebrations. Local newspaper archives are replete with stories of failed truces. However, none of the truces has been systematically evaluated. My research team followed three gang truces in Trinidad and Tobago closely, monitoring one of them as it unfolded, actively participating in a second one, and carrying out a systematic empirical evaluation of a third one.

The gang truce we evaluated took place in Palm Grove, a pseudonym for a distressed community plagued by gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013). Trinidad, the larger of the nation's two islands, measures 1,864 square miles, and is home to nearly 96 percent of the nation's population of approximately 1.26 million people, including Palm Grove. Trinidad and Tobago experienced a serious violent crime outbreak starting in approximately 2000. Research showed that the number of homicides committed using blunt instruments, sharp instruments, and "other" weapons remained fairly stable over time. The outbreak was largely confined to shootings and homicides carried out with firearms (Maguire, et al., 2010; Maguire and King, 2013; St. Bernard, 2010). Homicides in the nation are heavily concentrated in a handful of geographic areas within Trinidad (Maguire, et al., 2008). Palm Grove is one of the areas with a disproportionate share of the nation's violent crime. Our analysis of police intelligence data showed that most homicides in Palm Grove were gang-motivated.

We evaluated the nature and effects of the gang truce in Palm Grove using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. We conducted interviews with various stakeholders involved in the truce, including those who arranged for it to take place, the warring gang leaders involved in the truce, and police investigators and task force officers working in the areas occupied by these gangs. Our quantitative analysis included interrupted time series analyses of police data on homicides, shootings, woundings, and reported gunshots in Palm Grove. We were given access to police intelligence on gang conflict and suspected motives for gang violence. We also rode along with police on patrol through the areas occupied by these gangs. Together, these various forms of qualitative and quantitative data enabled us to improve on existing research and contribute new insights about the nature and effects of gang truces (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013).

At the time of our evaluation, there were eight primary street gangs operating within Palm Grove, according to police intelligence sources in the area. In January 2006, the leader of one of these gangs brokered a formal peace agreement between five of the eight gangs, including his own gang. Of the five gangs participating in the truce, only two of them were in the midst of active violent conflict at the time. According to our interviews with the leaders of the two warring gangs, the conflict had lasted about two months, with each gang claiming the lives of two of the opposing gang's members. In addition, seven other people were shot as part of this emerging conflict. The active conflict was one of several that were ongoing at the time within the community. The conflict that precipitated the truce resulted from a feeling by the leader of one gang that a member of another gang had disrespected him (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013).

The idea for the gang truce was initiated by the leader of a gang who, at the time, was not involved in active conflict with any of the other gangs involved in the truce. Importantly, though, he was involved in active conflict with gangs that were *not* part of the truce. The gang leaders told us they initiated the truce because "enough was enough… we do it from the heart. We do it genuinely." Police officials in the area had a much more pessimistic view – that the truce was a way for the gangs to appear altruistic and to relieve some of the pressure being placed on them by police. The three gang leaders we interviewed agreed that truces negotiated in the past were not initiated for altruistic motives: they either involved some type of financial benefit for the

gang or they were timed to coincide with elections. However, they viewed *this* truce as more genuine (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013).

We monitored the relationships between the eight gangs in Palm Grove closely for six months after the truce, after which we were forced to suspend the evaluation because the truce was eclipsed by another larger truce incorporating gangs from multiple communities in the area. Our findings suggest that the five gangs participating in the truce continued to carry out violent acts against either their own members or members of other gangs, but consistent with the terms of the truce, they did not take violent action against one another during the evaluation period.[1] Most notably, the intense war that had prompted the truce was transformed into an active alliance, which is one of the unintended consequences that can result from truces. We observed this same phenomenon in a separate truce that we monitored closely but did not evaluate systematically. While the specific terms of the truce appear to have held, the truce itself also appears to have triggered a variety of new conflicts with gangs that did not participate in the truce (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013).

Our quantitative analysis of the effect of the gang truce on violent events relied on data from police crime logs and calls to police for the 12 months prior to the truce and the 6 months following the truce. We focused on the weekly number of attempted murders, murders, shootings, woundings, and reported gunshots. We found that these phenomena remained relatively stable, with a small *increase* in the average number of violent events and gunshots after the truce (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013). Our results are consistent with theorizing which suggests that gang truces may create new opportunities for conflict and solidify alliances between gangs (Klein, 1995).

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[1] Though our formal evaluation period ended after six months due to the emergence of a competing intervention, we continued to follow events in Palm Grove for several years. Shortly after the end of the six-month follow-up period, the peace between the gangs involved in the truce began to crumble.

THEORY AND SPECULATION ON GANG TRUCES[2]

Although research evidence on the effects of gang truces is disappointingly thin, gang scholars appear to have a decidedly negative outlook on the likelihood that truces will reduce gang violence. For instance, Malcolm Klein, the pre-eminent gang researcher in the United States, concludes that "over many years, truces arranged by outsiders have generally been ineffective (or have even backfired)" (Klein, 1995: 232-233). The National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC) concludes that gang truces are "rarely successful and are indeed risky" (NGCRC, 1995). The NGCRC (1995) report echoes Klein's concerns: "We have found no such lasting truce between gangs anywhere. What we have found are ways for gangs to gain additional power, prestige, and recognition in the process of conning otherwise responsible adults into believing that criminal organizations can rehabilitate themselves." Kodluboy and Evenrud (1993: 285) adopt a similar stance, concluding that although mediation between gangs may "sometimes be necessary to forestall immediate violence or prevent loss of life... such mediation increases the risk of validating the gang as a legitimate social entity, thus buying short-term peace at the price of long-term persistence of the gang."

Why are gang scholars so pessimistic about the promise of gang truces in the face of such an incomplete body of empirical evidence? The most likely source of pessimism is a large body of theoretical and descriptive scholarship about gang dynamics that scholars have developed over several decades. This body of scholarship suggests several reasons why gang truces may not work, or may even backfire and produce increased levels of violence. First, violence is a well-established norm in many gangs, and truces may lack sufficient mechanisms to alter these behavioral norms (Decker, 1996). This is especially the case for gangs that have a long history of violent conflict with other gangs. Old wrongs are often difficult to forget. Second, status management is paramount in gang life (Hughes, 2005; Short and Strodtbeck, 1965). Gang violence often results from perceived threats to one's status. For example, during our work in Trinidad and Tobago, gang members routinely told us that disrespect was the primary cause of gang violence. When I asked one gang member in Trinidad why people were killing each other, he responded: "it's a ranking thing." By that, he meant that gang members would try to

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[2] This section of the report draws heavily on collaborative insights from a paper I wrote with Charles Katz of Arizona State University and David Wilson of George Mason University (Maguire, Katz, and Wilson, 2013). I am particularly indebted to Professor Katz for his ideas about violence norms, status management, cohesion, and legitimacy among gangs.

command higher status than others, which was often perceived as an act of disrespect that deserved to be met with violence. Once again, truces may lack sufficient mechanisms to undo the central role of status in gang life. Moreover, the truce itself may generate perceived status violations in the gang community, thus triggering additional violence.

Third, gang truces may have the unintended consequence of legitimizing gang leaders and generating greater group cohesion within gangs (Haskell and Yablonsky, 1982; Klein, 1995). When governments negotiate truces with gangs, they may inadvertently be acknowledging gangs as legitimate social entities. Increased legitimacy is thought to enhance internal cohesion within the gang, which is associated with increased violence (Decker, 1996; Klein, 1971; Lucore, 1975). Gang leaders often demand concessions from government leaders in exchange for promising reductions in violence. One of the gang leaders I interviewed for the evaluation of the Palm Grove truce had just returned from speaking with a Member of Parliament. That same night, I watched him give a lengthy interview on a television news show. His ability to operate in such circles no doubt provided him with significantly enhanced legitimacy within his own community. It is not difficult to imagine young boys looking up to him as a role model. The golden rule of gang cohesion is to avoid any activity that validates the gang as a legitimate social entity. This is just one of many examples of how governments can generate harmful unintended consequences in their efforts to reduce gang violence by granting concessions to gang leaders.

Fourth, gang truces are based on the implicit assumption that gangs have sufficient organizational capacity to control the behavior of their members, but research suggests that this capacity is much more limited than is popularly thought (Decker et al., 1998; Decker, Katz, and Webb, 2008). Thus, even if a leader is able to keep the lid on violence temporarily, old patterns are likely to re-emerge eventually. Fifth, negotiating a ceasefire between warring gangs can inadvertently alter the balance of power among gangs, which can trigger violence. This can happen in several ways. Truces can generate unintentional alliances between gangs, thus potentially making them more powerful. Truces can also lead some gangs to appear weak when they lay down their guns, thus rendering them more vulnerable to attacks by other gangs. Finally, truces can trigger violence by redirecting the attention of police from gangs involved in the truce to other gangs not involved in the truce. A gang whose business interests are disrupted by increased police attention following a truce is likely to lash out at gangs that are involved in the truce.

CONCLUSION

The gang world is a complex and fragile social network, much like an ecosystem (McGloin, 2005; Papachristos, 2009). It is easy for an event in one part of the network to propagate throughout the network in ways that are sometimes unexpected. The most obvious example is when a gang leader is killed or imprisoned, which often triggers an outbreak of violence. In such a complex environment, it is easy for well-intentioned outsiders to put in place interventions that trigger unintended and unwelcome consequences. Understanding the effects of gang truces is vital given their popularity among some policy makers. Unfortunately, prior evaluations of gang truces have relied on relatively weak evaluation designs without sufficient comparison areas or control groups. Every gang truce should be evaluated using rigorous social science research methods. This will help to establish a more credible body of research on how to control gang violence. As a result, future policies and practices enacted to reduce gang violence can be based more on research evidence and less on speculation.

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