SOLUCIONES

The Gang Truce as a Form of Violence Intervention

Implications for Policy and Practice

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Document prepared by Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo - FUNDE
Roberto Rubio Fabian, Ph.D. – Executive Director FUNDE
Patricia Valdés – Project Coordinator SolucionES-FUNDE
Juan Meléndez – Research Technician Project SolucionES-FUNDE

Authors:
Charles M. Katz, Ph.D., Arizona State University
Luis Enrique Amaya, M.Sc.

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Background

While there is much literature describing the assumptions, issues, and effectiveness of crime suppression (e.g., Decker, 2003; Decker and Reed, 2002; Katz and Webb, 2006; McCorkle and Miethe, 2002) and prevention strategies (Esbensen and Osgood, 1997), much less attention has been paid to gang intervention programming, particularly gang truces. Little is known about how often gang truces occur, what conditions give rise to them, the role of third parties in brokering them, their transformative effects, and their effectiveness. In this policy brief, sponsored by SolucionES[1] and conducted by FUNDE, a member of the SolucionES Alliance with Arizona State University, we systematically evaluate gang truces; including reviewing prior research and presenting evidence on the effectiveness of gang truces that have been implemented in El Salvador, Honduras, and Jamaica for the purpose of identifying lessons learned should other governments or donors wish to support gang truces in these or other countries.

Summary of Findings

We found that the truce in El Salvador resulted in a reduction in homicides that was not the product of other trends or temporal factors. Thus, the truce in this country had a short-term effect in reducing the lethality of violent crime, though not necessarily in other dimensions of insecurity. By contrast, the truces in Jamaica and Honduras resulted in no impact on violence. The Jamaican and Honduran experiences therefore mirror the results of prior gang truces that have been studied to various extents, including those in Los Angeles and Trinidad and Tobago.

[1] SolucionES is multifaceted violence prevention program being implemented by an Alliance of five leading Salvadoran non-profit organizations who have come together to prevent crime and violence. The Alliance members are: Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE), Fundación Salvadoreña para la Salud y el Desarrollo Humano (FUSAL), Fundación Crisálida (known locally as Glasswing), Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES), and Fundación Empresarial para el Desarrollo Educativo (FEPADE) with partial funding from USAID/El Salvador. Together, these five organizations have widely-recognized expertise in education, health, community development, economic development, research, and youth leadership; they are bringing their combined synergy and strengths to prevent crime and violence in El Salvador. SolucionES is using a three-pronged strategy to prevent crime and violence in El Salvador: 1) Strengthen municipal crime and violence prevention capabilities and actions, 2) Increase social investment by the private sector to prevent crime and violence, and 3) Research, publish, and disseminate findings to inform decision-making on crime and violence prevention. This is one of 10 planned policy-oriented studies. The full study is available on request.

Important differences in how the various truces were negotiated may explain the different results and one important difference – the ability of government and non-gang community stakeholders to promise and immediately produce measurable deliverables – appear to be especially significant.

Prior Evaluations of Gang Truces

Little research to date has examined the effectiveness of gang truces, and much of the research that does exist has been restricted to the field of public health. Studies of a gang truce in South Central Los Angeles between the Crips and Bloods by Cotton (1992) and Ordog et al. (1993; 1995) found temporary reductions in the number of homicides and gunshot wounds during the truce, but these studies failed to point out that despite about a 35 percent decrease in homicides for the first three months of the truce, homicides then doubled in months four through eleven, compared with the pre-truce period. Similar findings were reported in Trinidad and Tobago (Maguire, Katz and Wilson, 2013), where violence declined for a brief period of time (again, for about three months), but then increased substantially over the long term (12 months). These results suggest that gang truces may produce short-term benefits, yet result in long-term adverse consequences.

Additionally these studies have suffered from a variety of flaws, including: 1) poor theoretical assumptions about gangs, including often ignoring that they might have the organizational structure and internal discipline to enforce their truces; 2) relatively weak evaluation designs that fail to account for other potential causes for, or broader trends related to, violence reductions; 3) a failure to examine the processes involved

What is a Gang Truce?

A gang truce is a nonviolent resolution to a larger conflict between groups that has an impact on general levels of violence and other forms of criminality within a community (Ordog et al., 1993; 1995; Whitehill et al. 2012). It differs from conflict interruption, resolution or mediation efforts, which seek to rapidly intervene, typically through outreach workers or violence interruption specialists, in episodic violent events between groups in a community. Gang truces often involve dialogue and negotiations between multiple parties (e.g., gangs, government, NGO's, religious organizations) that seek to recalibrate the norms of conflict within and between groups for the purpose of reducing or eliminating violence and other crime.

in creating gang truces; 4) a failure to examine unintended consequences of the truces beyond their impact on gun violence; and 5) a lack of sophisticated statistical analysis capable of discerning overall trends, cyclic patterns, outliers, and turning points.

Overview of Study Design

This policy brief examines gang truces implemented in El Salvador, Jamaica, and Honduras including the processes undertaken with and between gangs and other stakeholders. We collected information about the processes associated with each gang truce from a variety of sources, including peer reviewed articles, books, reports, local newspaper articles, and interviews of persons with first-hand knowledge about the gang truce in each nation. We examined the impact of each truce using official data. We first performed a simple t-test comparing the homicide rates before and after the truce. We then employed time series models not used in other studies to evaluate homicide rates as a function of time, with truce period indicators included to measure the effect of the truce net of the temporal trends. We also employed supplemental models to examine and control for factors other than the truce that might have affected homicides over the study period.

Research Findings

Implementing a Gang Truce

The gang truces studied have a number of common characteristics. First, in each case a community was experiencing an uncharacteristically high number of gang related homicides over a fairly lengthy period of time, which resulted in each community placing strong pressure on the government in general and the justice system in particular to respond to the problem quickly and effectively. Second, each community had first attempted, unsuccessfully, to control gang violence through suppression-oriented strategies. Third, each community's inability to exercise traditional informal and formal social control to decrease levels of violence became self-evident to the public and government. This resulted in all involved stakeholders wanting to seek (or participate in) an alternative strategy in which brokers would formally and/or informally work directly with gang leaders to establish a truce that would reduce homicides.

Key stakeholders involved in the negotiation and establishment of each gang truce were also somewhat similar. In each case examined, the leaders of the largest and most violently involved gangs were willing to participate***. In each of these cases it was clear that the gangs sought to collaborate with the brokers not only for the purpose of reducing violence, but perhaps more importantly as a means to gain greater, more positive recognition in the community and to reap some form of benefit to themselves, their members, and perhaps their community***. In each case, while not always formally involved, government officials were at a minimum made aware of negotiations, and in some cases solicited the assistance of third parties to broker an agreement between stakeholders. In each case it was at least implicitly understood that the government would "listen" to the gang leader's expectations and offers. We found that when the government was no longer willing to "listen" to or collaborate with brokers, the truce processes ended abruptly**.** Brokers were typically comprised of a very small group (i.e., 2-3) of individuals who were perceived to be "honest brokers." In El Salvador and Honduras this included a high ranking Catholic Church official, a leader from an international diplomatic organization (i.e., OAS), and other neutral parties. In Jamaica this included a quasi-governmental organization that had been established for the purpose of brokering negotiations between gangs for the purpose of reducing violence, as well as the local university, which had access to staff who were perceived to be neutral but had an interest in reducing violence near the university.

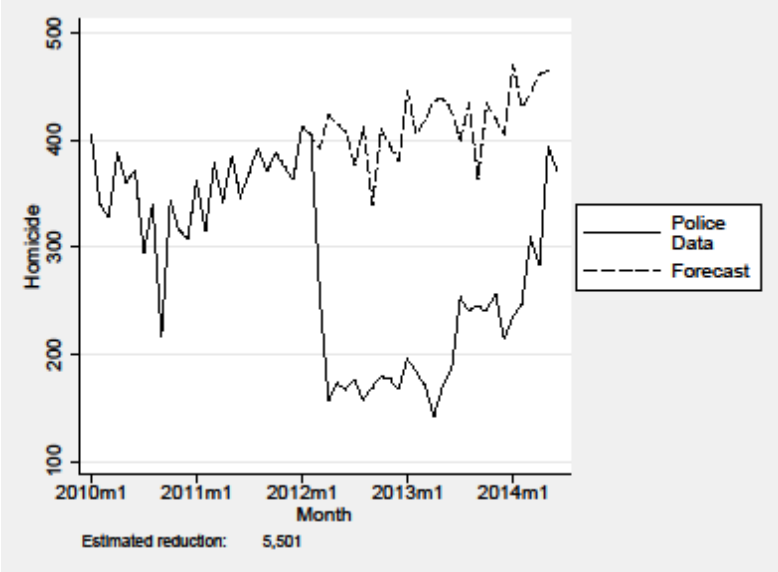
The strategies used to execute each gang truce were generally similar, but had important differences. Each involved a team of brokers working to identify common goals to be achieved and tangibles that could be delivered to the gang in exchange for the gang achieving the stated goals. They differed by how each party's promise was delivered. In Honduras and Jamaica, gang leaders traded violence reduction pledges for long-term government and social changes, such as the development of substantial public works programs to reduce unemployment. In Honduras and Jamaica, the government was asked to develop and deploy large scale social programming in a short time frame—something for which neither country had a strong track record. In El Salvador, by contrast, brokers secured promises for immediate changes in gang behavior in exchange for feasible immediate deliverables from the government. For example, in

exchange for a reduction in gang violence, the government agreed to immediately relocate imprisoned gang leaders to less restrictive prisons and provide them some privileges. Following the successful execution of the first part of the Salvadoran truce, which resulted in near term success for both parties, they began to negotiate broader issues that would take longer for both sides to deliver. ***Our findings suggest that some promised deliverables need to be easily and quickly delivered by both parties early in the process to achieve trust and serve as a first test of gang leaders' ability to deliver.*** Stakeholders have only a brief period of time to provide promised benefits before trust is lost, meaning that tangible benefits need to be delivered in weeks or months, not years.

The Impact of a Gang Truce

El Salvador. We found that El Salvador's gang truce had a definite impact on the homicide rate. The mean number of monthly homicides declined from about 354 prior to the truce to about 218 following the truce, for a net decrease of about 136 homicides per month. Our data show that between March 2012 and June 2014 the truce had saved about 5,501 lives (see exhibit 1). From a hypothetical stand, it is possible to make the assumption that a number of these deaths averted could have been transformed in disappearances and therefore they were not counted within the official homicide statistics. However, the results from the analysis point out that the number of disappearances was not significantly related with the change in the global behavior of homicides. Additionally, over the period of analysis (January 2010 to June 2014), there was no significant change between the pre-truce and post-truce periods in the number of thefts, extortions, robberies, rapes and auto thefts/robberies.

Exhibit 1: Forecast of homicides without gang truce.



We also found that the gang truce did not result in a homogenous decline in violence across municipalities. About 61 percent of municipalities experienced a decline in homicides, but the decline in violence varied substantially between municipalities. We studied this issue further by examining the impact of the initiative "Free Violence Municipalities" and it was found that the behavior of violence in those municipalities was not significantly linked to the initiative but rather to the general dynamic of the truce process nationwide. Additionally, we parsed out the relative influence of the number of MS13 and 18th Street gang members on the street and in prison from each municipality. Our analyses indicated that following the truce, the number of MS13 and 18th Street gang members on the street in a municipality was not significantly related to a decline in homicide, but the number of imprisoned MS13 and 18th Street gang members from the municipality was. In particular, ***the number of imprisoned MS13 gang members from a municipality was associated with a significant decline in homicides in that municipality following the gang truce and the number of imprisoned 18th Street members from a municipality was associated with a significant increase in homicides in that municipality following the truce.*** These findings lend support to the idea that MS13 is more organized than the typical street gang and that imprisoned MS13 gang members exhibit strong influence over their fellow gang members on the street. Our findings also suggest, however, that the gang truce had a boomerang effect in municipalities with high numbers of imprisoned 18th Street members, implying that 18th Street might not have as much organizational capacity to regulate violence on the streets as MS13. The truce provided incarcerated MS13 and 18th Street gang leaders an opportunity to negotiate with high-ranking officials and influential diplomats, including representatives of the Organization of American States. This may have increased their legitimacy, inside and outside of their gangs. It appears that MS13 was able to exert its span of control over the communities in which they had influence, and they were able to deliver on the terms of the gang truce negotiations. In the case of 18th Street, however, incarcerated gang members may not have had the same organizational capacity for communicating and carrying out directives. In fact, a review of the gang truce indicated that there was a conflict taking place between two factions within 18th Street. Consequently, the organizational structure and culture of 18th Street might be more diffuse than that of MS13,

and its leadership structure might not be as strong because of the internal fractures within the gang. This might further explain why homicides increased in 18th Street communities. The internal fractures within the 18th Street gang may have resulted in intra-gang violent conflict that was largely contained within 18th Street controlled territories.

Jamaica. In Jamaica, at first glance, our impact findings appeared to show that the gang truce might be an effective mechanism for reducing violence. Bivariate analyses showed a significant decline in homicides immediately after the truce was implemented. This explains the work previously published by policymakers, researchers, and news reporters. Upon closer examination of the data, however, comparing change in the target area to other areas in Jamaica, and accounting for temporal trends, we found that the decline in homicide was part of a larger nationwide decline in violence and that the gang truce was not responsible for the decline. The only significant effect that we uncovered was the possibility that homicides were displaced outside the target area for a brief period of time, but then returned to previous levels.

Honduras. Our impact findings from our analysis of data from Honduras tell a very similar story as Jamaica. Initial analysis showed that the number of homicides, on average, declined across municipalities following the gang truce. Specifically, the mean number of homicides declined by 1.2 per 100,000 population, from an average of 6.87 per 100,000 population in each municipality before the truce to an average of 5.66 thereafter. However, after we examined the effect of the truce through time series analysis, and included a variable (month) to control for the temporal trends in the data, the impact of the truce we observed in our bivariate analysis was no longer significant. Our findings, as in Jamaica, suggest that the decline in homicides was less a consequence of the gang truce than of a broader short to medium term trend. And, importantly, in both Jamaica and Honduras, the respective governments failed to deliver on gangs' demands for large-scale social and employment programs.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Over the last several years, there have been a number of naturally occurring experiments involving gang truces in a variety of nations and regions. Findings from evaluations of gang truces are mixed. In El Salvador the gang truce could be characterized as an effective short term strategy to reducing homicides. It is worth mentioning that despite homicides rates are above truce levels, they continue slightly below pre-truce levels. In Jamaica and Honduras the gang truce had no short or medium-term impact on overall violence. In Los Angeles and Trinidad y Tobago there was evidence that violence decreased for at least ninety days, but then increased substantially beyond those rates observed prior to the gang truce. Thus, the effectiveness of the truce in El Salvador appears to be isolated and must be evaluated within the context of other truces that have failed to reduce homicide violence. Policy makers must evaluate whether the conditions that allowed short term effectiveness of the gang truce in El Salvador (such as the ability to promise and deliver immediate results) exist in other violent areas before evaluating whether a truce strategy might be appropriate. And they should be heavily cautioned that ***the potential for long term negative consequences might outweigh the potential for short term benefits.***

Indeed, it is important to note that a number of scholars have noted that gang truces are likely to result in a boomerang effect, with gang violence increasing over the long run because of enhanced cohesion within the gang (Klein 1995). Maguire (2013) notes that when government officials negotiate a truce with gangs, they might "inadvertently be acknowledging gangs as legitimate social entities" (p. 11). This in itself might increase cohesion among gangs, which has been found to be associated with increased levels of criminality (Decker et al. 2008; Klein 1971; Maguire 2013). Hence, it is important to consider the fact that gangs are illegal groups in El Salvador and it should be cautious when carrying out dialog or negotiation processes with them. Further research is needed to examine how gang truces might impact group cohesion and, if it does, whether the cohesion created could be effectively directed toward more productive non-violent endeavors. Gang truces convey the well-intentioned image that violence has been addressed and policymakers are doing something about the problem, but unless the

truce is implemented in a manner and under conditions where immediately achievable results can be promised, delivered and measured, there remains a significant chance that the truce will fail, or worse yet, backfire. Thus, it is imperative that any type of concession made by Governments to gangs within a truce framework should be transparent, so that all sectors of society have certainty that every action is being done within the existing rule of law[2].

In the case of El Salvador, the truce arises from to the absence of effective public policies and practices for violence control and prevention. The truce was planned as a strategy to reduce gang-related homicides. During the process different organizations got involved, including religious (facilitating and protecting human rights), non-government (managing and facilitating dialog and negotiation processes), international (providing funding for insertion programs), and government (facilitating and providing certain conditions for dialog and negotiation) organizations. Some of the concessions that the Government provided in order to achieve a reduction of homicides were within the law, but others generated confusion and they seemed to be close to the legal or socially acceptable limits. This fact, along with the poor transparency of authorities in the management of the practice with public media and public weakened the process and postponed its continuity.

The present study suggests that gang truces should only be used as a means of last resort, and then only under certain conditions. Given the risks associated with a gang truce, communities with high levels, or at least modest levels, of formal social control should rely on other more promising gang control strategies such as pulling levers (i.e., Boston Ceasefire), community oriented policing, and the Gang Resistance Education and Training (aka GREAT) program. Only when the state has limited or greatly reduced capacity for social control should a truce be considered. Concomitantly, a gang truce should be considered as an alternative only when a community is experiencing a substantial amount of gang violence. Communities that are experiencing minimal to modest amount of gang violence may risk more from the

[22] Pragmatically this issue is complicated. On the one hand, transparency is a foundational element within a democracy and is necessary to ensure proper oversight of the government. On the other hand, it might not be possible to implement a gang truce with too many actors having a voice. Policymakers might consider creating a policy that allows such negotiations take place but requires particular actors (such as a judicial body) to be informed of the process to ensure transparency and adherence to the rule of law.

establishment of a gang truce than they have to gain. Additionally, our findings suggest that a gang truce might only be feasible when gangs are sufficiently well organized to be able to regulate their members' behavior and cause their members to behave less violently. In El Salvador there is evidence of the strong organizational structure of gang MS13. Among other factors, the magnitude of its membership, the chain of command from its leaders in prison and the discipline of its leaders in the streets seemed confirmed. On the contrary, the organizational structure of gang Barrio 18 – divided in two factions fighting over the leadership – showed to be a less stable counterpart within the truce.

Finally, dialog and negotiations processes with or between gangs must have the capacity to promise and deliver immediate benefits to the gangs that gang members can see or experience in order to secure their continued participation in the truce, as well as the capacity to monitor and respond to truce violations. Most importantly, any effort aimed at reducing violence is important and should be examined and assessed but it must have a transparent foundation, especially when it affects population rights as a whole.

General recommendations

Gang truces are conjunctural strategies. States who suffer from gang-related violence must establish permanent public policies for crime control and prevention. A government that considers implementing a gang truce should be aware that it cannot become the center strategy of its public policy for citizen safety.

Gang truces should only be used as a means of last resort, and then only under certain conditions. Stakeholders must determine whether a process of dialog or negotiation with gangs is legal, ethical, and feasible.

Stakeholders must anticipate demands that are likely to arise, and their response options. Some demands may be easily met, such as improved prison conditions. Others are much more difficult and amorphous, such as: community development through more integrated violence prevention programs (such as those implemented by SolucionES in El Salvador); local economic development programs; or economic reinsertion of ex-gang members.

Stakeholders should incorporate immediately achievable and demonstrable deliverables. Long-term goals and promises are unlikely to create the trust needed to sustain a gang truce.

Stakeholders must first determine the position in which they are negotiating, the incentives that are possible to deliver, and the boundaries and limits they face. Gangs are mostly likely to trust representatives from NGOs, community-based organizations, and members of the faith based community as brokers because they are considered more reliably neutral advocates for peace. They need to understand the capacity of the government to deliver promises in a timely manner.

Governments have to make a choice about the visibility and transparency of its participation. This decision needs to be made in the context of the national and local laws, the public's expectations of transparency, and patterns of practices of the past.

Governments must be strategic in their support for truce initiatives. Some donor funded programs run by the government prohibit gang member participation; and if the government does not receive approval from the donor, it may risk the donor withdrawing its sponsorship of the program.

Governments must ensure an inter-institutional coordination for the management of truces to avoid the responsibility to be of a single government institution. It is necessary to generate or collect reliable and pertinent data that can be used to analyze and assess the process.

It is necessary to implement an effective monitoring system of the truce process, similar to that used in the full report, as it can help parties understand what is working and who is delivering on their promises. More specifically, the monitoring and truce management system should be able to identify truce violations and be prepared to respond through the use of legal and effective practices if stakeholders do not comply.

Finally, it is necessary to develop evaluations of gang truces and monitoring programs, and support violence prevention activities, local economic development activities, and pilot programs to support the reinsertion of ex-gang members into society. Clearly national governments, municipal governments, NGOs, and community-based organizations need

increased capacity and resources to discourage the growth of gangs among at-risk youth. It is therefore increasingly important to create economic opportunities for gang members willing to leave the gangs and find other legal employment. Developing and sustaining those opportunities in nations with high incidences of poverty will require significant international funding.

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