

THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH ABOUT GANG TRUCES IN THE AMERICAS

After a two decade long hiatus, gang truces are back in vogue in the Americas. Very generally, truces typically consist of negotiations and pacts intended to prevent and reduce collective and interpersonal violence. They are often brokered by an eclectic cast of characters - from government officials and aid workers to faith-based groups and active and ex-gang members. And while truces are generating considerable attention in the global media, the evidence base about what they really accomplish is surprisingly thin.



During the 1980s and 1990s, US-based social scientists held a dim view of gang truces. Many believed these kinds of agreements instead legitimized gangs, reinforced the authority of leaders, deepened cohesion among their rank and file, and reproduced — rather than reduced — violence. In the 1990s scholars such as Kodluboy and Evenrud argued that while mediation could “sometimes be necessary to forestall immediate violence or prevent loss of life [it] 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.”

Over the past few years gang experts from North America to Western Europe started rethinking ways of diminishing gang violence. A few enlightened practitioners know that the only way gang truces can stick is by working on the underlying conditions that give rise to gang formation. After all, gangs do not emerge in a vacuum. They are frequently cohesive groups that provide identity, meaning and security to their members. Paradoxically, young people who join gangs tend to feel safer despite being at greater statistical risk of a violent end. It is only by dealing with their marginalization, creating employment, and dealing with peer influences and other risk factors, researchers argue that gangs can be dismantled.

It is worth pointing out that gang violence is not inevitable. There are ways to alter the behavior of members, which is precisely what truces set out to do. Gang specialist John Hagedorn has shown how “gangs, militias, factions and cartels have the capacity not only to wage war, but to rein it in.” But what, really, is the experience of gang truces in the Americas and the Caribbean? The bulk of the evidence seems to show that while truces can temporarily reduce violence, gang warfare usually resumes in the absence of accompanying steps to address more fundamental political and social welfare challenges.

The truth about gang truces

The most prolific research on gang truces comes from North America. This is perhaps not altogether surprising given that there are believed to be more than 33,000 gangs in the United States with up to 1.4 million members spread across virtually every state. Studies of truces involving the most notorious gangs, notably the Bloods and Crips in Los Angeles register sharp, albeit short-term, reductions in violence. In the wake of the infamous Watts Truce, casualties arising from drive-by shootings dropped significantly after agreements were negotiated, though also reported increases several months later. Around the same time, truces negotiated in Chicago generated significant but temporary declines in gunshot injuries. In other words, short-term gains were negated by medium-term increases in violence.

More recently, a rash of gang truces have broken out across the rest of the Americas, including in Belize, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago. No one knows how many gang members there are in Latin America, with estimates varying from 50,000-85,000 MS13 and 18th Street gangsters in Central America alone. There are at least as many more in South America. And owing to the United States continued policy of deporting convicts, the problem appears to be getting worse. Confronted with spiraling violence, highly visible negotiations have been pursued across the region.

Central American countries in particular are experimenting with gang truces. Some agreements there are being backed by regional organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS), mayors, priests and ex-gang members. At least one particular truce has generated impressive dividends in improving safety and security. After the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) gang and rival Barrio 18 declared a truce in 2012, El Salvador's national homicide rates plummeted, although there are concerns it is creeping back up once more. Building on the optimism surrounding the process, similar processes were launched between the Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs in Honduras. After a promising start, there are some concerns that the Honduran initiative is faltering.

While tempting to group the Central American experiences together, there are major differences between them. Because they are better organized and more conscious of their power, Salvadorian gang members are politically savvy and superior negotiators in contrast to their Honduran counterparts. And with some having served as guerrillas in previous decades, El Salvador's gang leaders exert more control over the rank and file. Meanwhile, a truce in Belize was terminated after running out of cash and Guatemalan officials are considering prospects for mediation with gangs in the capital city.

The record of gang truces in the Caribbean has been similarly uneven. The refusal of some gang members to participate in gang truces in Trinidad and Tobago fatally undermined their success. According to Edward Maguire, those who elected to disarm were quickly targeted by competing factions since they were considered weak and vulnerable. Predictably, negotiations tend to fail when the key parties are disunited and disorganized. For a truce to work in Port of Spain, all major gangs would need to sign-up to the treaty. Making matters worse, politicians who helped broker the ceasefire have also come under intense political criticism for doing so, hampering their ability to act authoritatively - a crucial ingredient of mediation success. Evaluations of truces in Central America and the Caribbean show that they occasionally ratchet-up violence. Pitched battles are known to flare-up before agreements because gangs angle to improve their negotiating positions. And after truces are agreed, violence is also known to spill-over to new, previously unaffected, neighborhoods and cities. Analogous phenomena are regularly observed during and after the negotiation of ceasefires and peace agreements in conventional war zones around the world. Without clear terms, appropriate incentives, and adequate resources, such agreements seldom hold.

Gang truces in countries such as Brazil have endured for longer than expected, though show signs of strain in recent times. For example, a stop-start six-year truce between the São Paulo military police and the First Capital Command (PCC), a prison-based gang, recently came unstuck in 2012. It collapsed after the government was accused of violating an informal agreement that protected gang leaders and limited crackdowns on gang strongholds. As a result, the city witnessed a massive surge in reprisal killings of police and gang members. Comparable gang truces were brokered in Recife and Rio de Janeiro with similarly mixed results.

The record of gang truces in the Americas and the Caribbean is uneven. There is a real concern that gang truces may in fact generate conflict and solidify alliances among violence entrepreneurs. Veteran observers are pessimistic about the likelihood that gang truces will reduce violence in the medium to long-term. They cite the long legacy of gangs resorting to instrumental violence, the importance they attach to status maintenance, their weak command and control, and the unintended effects of bolstering gang cohesion as key factors influencing truce outcomes. The National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCSC) concluded in 1995 that gang truces are "rarely successful and indeed risky." But are they really?

The recent gang truces cropping up in Central and South America are different from those of the 1990s in the United States. They are being negotiated by, and on behalf of, very different types of gangs. The "gang warfare" being waged in countries like El Salvador and Honduras is deeply influenced by transnational crime networks as well as political elites. Gangs and gang truces are not purely domestic affairs shaped by discrete neighborhood interests and localized disputes over territory. Gangs are themselves connected to corrupt actors, who often exploit their positions to profit from international drug trafficking or more local racketeering.

The spate of truces in Central and South America and the Caribbean share more in common with peace agreements negotiated in the world's war zones than domestic mediation carried-out with Latino and African-American gangs in North America. And while some military analysts are exploring ways in which war-fighting can be adapted to tackling gangs, there is a surprising silence in academic circles about how lessons from peace negotiations could be applied in non-conflict settings. It could be that some of the traditional tools of peace-making, peace-building, negotiation and other contact-based strategies could gain traction in containing violence meted out by drug cartels, mafias, youth gangs, and militias.

Reflections on gang violence reduction

A limitation of gang truces can be traced to their failure to address the underlying motivations and social dynamics of gang violence to begin with. Notwithstanding their involvement in international drug trafficking or the people smuggling and trafficking, violence perpetrated by gangs is often engendered by local factors - perceived disrespect, territorial disputes, tension over status and prestige. Killings are often symbolic, undertaken as a form of retaliation, out of revenge, or as a result of internal power struggles.

Unless gangs exhibit a high degree of internal coherence, decrees from above may have little purchase below. As a result, gang truces may afford legitimacy to leaders, rather than changing dynamics among lower-ranking members.

Gang experts contend that truces may be a necessary, but insufficient, means of preventing violence over the long-term. They fear that the narrow focus on truces alone may actually be part of the problem. This is because gangs are themselves often linked to wider transnational illicit markets and systems of political patronage. The focus on mediation with leaders may also neglect the localized social and economic conditions that enable and sustain gangs to begin with. After all, most gang members themselves herald from marginalized and lower-income communities. Unless their structural conditions are improved, as some aid agencies maintain, gang wars will continue. It may be impossible to eliminate gangs, according to Irving Spergel, but reducing gang-related violence is a tenable goal.

One way to improve the record of gang truces in Latin America and the Caribbean may be to harness the power of transnational networks - including those related to gangs and civil society actors. This is because gang accords in places like Belize, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago all exhibit transnational characteristics, even if many of the drivers of gang violence are also local. It is true that former Salvadorian refugees and deportees in Los Angeles were instrumental to the rise of the maras. And yet Los Angeles-based priests and mothers of slain gang members living in California have joined transnational advisory groups together with former gang members to strengthen the truce in El Salvador since 2012.

There is also some evidence of sharing of experience and expertise between gangs across borders. The most obvious examples are exchanges between governments, police departments, gangs and civil society groups

in the United States and their Central American and Caribbean counterparts. Yet there are also exchanges emerging between and within countries across the region, including Mexico and neighboring countries in Central and South America. For example, mediators responsible for negotiating the gang truce in El Salvador also recently started working with leaders of Honduran maras, with support from the OAS. There are also examples of efforts to initiate dialogue between gang leaders in El Salvador and others in Guatemala.

Do gang truces have a future?

There is a surprisingly wide array of experiences with gang truces across North, Central and South America and the Caribbean. While all unique in form and content, many of them share commonalities. Most of them also bare more than a passing resemblance to traditional peace agreements, ceasefires and amnesties agreed by warring parties in conventional armed conflicts.

For instance, gang truces frequently include clauses designed to promote confidence-building and verification of commitments, disarm and demobilize, adhere to clear milestones and benchmarks, and ensure periodic gatherings to review and monitor progress. In some cases gang truces are brokered by third party parties, including professional conflict negotiation firms.

A healthy dose of caution is warranted when assessing gang truce “success”, particularly since many of them collapse. It may also be worth noting that the record of negotiated solutions for wars is equally patchy: at least 20 % of conflicts restart within a few years of ending. It is worth recalling that the study of gang truces in the Americas is still in its infancy and supporting evidence is still partial. A cursory review indicates that comparatively few gang truces have yielded enduring reductions in violence. To the contrary, many have in fact consolidated gang authority, in some cases reinforcing their authority. This raises questions about the limitations of gang truces on their own, but also the importance of undertaking mediation in combination with other strategies addressing structural causes of gang formation and persistence.

In a best case scenario, gang truces can help end violent conflict and create the necessary space for addressing underlying structural causes leading to the emergence of armed groups to begin with, but without an ongoing process, the back-slide into renewed violence seems almost inevitable. The same holds true in civil wars: peace agreements, which ideally include concrete steps to resolve the issues over which the conflict is being fought, fail less often than mere truces. But this is because as most negotiators know, peace agreements are the start and not the end of a process. The challenges are legion. The evidence also suggests that negotiated peace agreements are less likely to prevent conflict recurrence than outright military victories. Mediators across the Americas and Caribbean would do well to take note.

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