

The Effects of a Gang Truce on Gang Violence in a Caribbean Community

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Abstract

Many communities have attempted to reduce gang violence through the use of truces between gangs. Although truces are a popular solution to gang violence, evaluations of their effectiveness are rare. Existing evidence suggests that gang truces might reduce violence in the short-term, but their effects decay rapidly and may even increase gang conflict in the long run. This study examines a truce negotiated between warring gangs in Trinidad and Tobago. Previous research has treated gang truces as a sort of “black box,” drawing inferences about their effects on violence without providing a detailed understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying their success or failure. This study uses quantitative and qualitative data that were unavailable in previous research. We examine the gang conflicts that led to the development of the truce, the nature of the truce itself, and the unintended consequences it may have produced. Our findings demonstrate the fragility of gang truces and suggest the conditions under which they are likely to succeed or fail.

Keywords: gangs, truces, violence, peace, Caribbean criminology

Gang violence accounts for a significant share of homicides and shootings in many urban areas (e.g., Katz et al., 2011; Levy et al., 1993; Sanchez et al., 2022). Efforts to reduce gang violence range from traditional criminal justice approaches to preventive, community-based and faith-based initiatives (Gravel et al., 2013; Spergel et al., 2006). Research on gang violence reduction is growing, but much remains to be learned (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2018). Many communities worldwide have attempted to reduce gang violence through the use of truces, but evaluation evidence on their effectiveness remains unclear (Katz et al., 2016; Katz et al., 2022; Maguire, 2013).. This study examines the effectiveness of a truce between warring gangs in Trinidad and Tobago, a small-island developing nation in the southeastern Caribbean.

Evidence suggests that gang truces can reduce violence in the short term, but their effects tend to decay over time and may even produce iatrogenic outcomes with violence increasing in the long run (e.g., Klein, 1995a,b; Ordog et al., 1995; Jones & Lloyd, 2025). Gang truces can backfire by increasing gang cohesion, creating new opportunities for conflict, and solidifying gang alliances (Katz et al., 2016; Klein, 1995a, 1995b; Maguire, 2013). Current knowledge on the effectiveness of gang truces is not yet sufficiently developed to reach firm conclusions. Public debate over their effectiveness is often driven by ideological perspectives and anecdotal evidence, rather than by rigorous empirical research. Additionally, research on gang truces often treats them as a “black box,” drawing inferences about their effects on violence without identifying specific causal mechanisms. As a result, it is difficult to know precisely how and why truces fail or succeed.

This study examines the gang conflicts that preceded a truce in a community we call Palm Grove (a pseudonym), including the establishment of the truce and the nature and duration of its intended and unintended effects. To our knowledge, this is the first study to incorporate

both qualitative and quantitative data in evaluating the effects of a truce. We analyze official crime data on shootings, woundings, and homicides, data on calls to the police reporting gunshots, interviews with various stakeholders, and detailed police intelligence on gangs and homicide incidents. We conclude with a discussion of the effectiveness of gang truces, the extent to which they are consistent with theory and research on gangs, and the conditions under which they are likely to fail or succeed in reducing gang violence.

Policy Responses to Gangs

In recent decades, a large body of theory and research has developed on gangs. A core theme of the research is that gang members are significantly more likely than non-gang-members to be both offenders and victims of violent crime (Curry et al., 2001, 2002; Esbensen et al., 2001; Laverso & O’Neill, 2021; Miller & Decker, 2001; Pyrooz et al., 2016). Gang members also disproportionately affect neighborhood crime levels in the U.S. (Huebner et al., 2016; Papachristos et al., 2013) and the Caribbean (Katz et al., 2019). These findings are robust across different methodologies and settings (e.g., Curry, 2000; Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen et al., 2001; Gordon et al., 2004; Katz et al., 2000; Laverso & O’Neill, 2021; Pyrooz et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2006). There is also evidence that gang violence is more contagious than non-gang violence, triggering more “offspring events” (additional acts of violence) than non-gang violence (Brantingham et al., 2021, p. 953). Consequently, policymakers and scholars have focused significant attention on developing strategies for addressing gang problems and mitigating the effects of gangs on public safety.

Suppression strategies have been the most popular policy approach to gangs since the 1980s (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Spengel et al., 1994; Valasik & Reid, 2019; Venkatesh, 1999).

These strategies focus multiple components of the criminal justice system on gang members through the use of targeted police patrols, intelligence databases, aggressive prosecution, and enhanced sentencing (Katz & Webb, 2006). Suppression strategies are based on deterrence theory and the principle that swift, certain, and severe penalties will deter people from joining gangs and engaging in gang crime (Braga, 2015; Klein, 1995a). By the early-to-mid 1990s, as gang problems spread, policymakers sought alternative strategies, and gang prevention programming flourished (Esbensen et al., 2013; Hennigan et al., 2015; Thornberry et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2016). Gang prevention programming aims to reduce risk factors for gang membership and increase protective factors to inoculate youth against joining gangs (Esbensen, 2000; Esbensen et al., 2013).

A growing body of research has examined the assumptions, challenges, and effectiveness of gang suppression strategies (e.g., Braga, 2015; Decker, 2003; Katz & Webb, 2006; Leverso & Lee, 2025; Saunders-Hastings, 2021) and gang prevention strategies (Esbensen & Osgood, 1997; Esbensen et al., 2001; Hennigan et al., 2015; Kolb et al., 2025; Thornberry et al., 2018). Until recently, less attention had been paid to gang intervention programming. By the 1980s, policymakers began to reject the social intervention approaches used in the past, viewing them as ineffective strategies for controlling gangs and addressing gang problems. Most intervention strategies assumed gang membership stemmed from broader social issues and that gang youth values could be redirected toward mainstream norms. As a result, many early intervention programs focused on diverting youth away from gangs or mitigating gang-related harms. Common gang intervention strategies included crisis intervention, dispute resolution, street-level counseling, youth outreach and empowerment, and, most notably for this paper, gang truces (Spergel, 1995).

Many policymakers and academics argued that these intervention-based approaches not only failed to reduce gang activity but may have inadvertently increased group cohesiveness, which, in turn, may have generated higher levels of crime and violence (Klein, 1971; Spergel, 1995). However, in recent years, there has been renewed interest in evaluating the effectiveness of various intervention strategies, though the results are mixed (Boxer et al., 2015; Butts et al., 2015; Hureau et al., 2023; Maguire et al., 2024; Pyrooz & Densley, 2022; Roman et al., 2017; Thornberry et al., 2018). Truces constitute just one type of gang intervention strategy, although their long-term effectiveness remains unclear.

Foundation for Gang Truces

Concerns about gangs often center on their strong association with violence, as extensive research has consistently shown their involvement in high levels of serious violent crime. Decker (1996) suggests that gang violence is partly driven by the group's collective norms, which actively promote both preemptive and retaliatory violence. Similarly, Cooney (1998) likens gangs to "warrior societies," highlighting the feud-like nature of their violence. Acts such as perceived slights, territorial infringements, or other forms of disrespect frequently escalate into cycles of retaliatory violence, perpetuating a spiral of conflict.

Early research found that violent gang behavior was often associated with "status management" (Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Thrasher, 1927; Whyte, 1943). Gang scholars hypothesized that youth focus heavily on image management—seeking to impress their peers and avoid embarrassment in front of others (e.g., Hughes, 2005). They postulated that gang members use violence to achieve, manage, and preserve their status. Gang members often engage in violent conflicts after weighing potential gain in status within the gang against the minimal

risk of formal sanctions from the criminal justice system (Hughes, 2005). A substantial body of research has consistently demonstrated a strong connection between status-seeking behaviors and gang violence (Anderson, 1998; Brantingham et al., 2021; Gravel et al., 2018; Jankowski, 1991; Spergel, 1995; Vigil, 1988).

Another factor associated with gang violence is group cohesiveness. The link between gang cohesiveness and violence remains an underexplored area, though some research indicates a strong connection. Early studies by Klein and colleagues (1967, 1971) and Lucore (1975) found that greater cohesiveness among gang members often extends the duration of gang involvement and amplifies participation in criminal and violent activities. Cooney (1998) further argues that close interpersonal ties within gangs foster this cohesiveness. These ties frequently stem from shared cultural and economic experiences among neighborhood youth who have often known each other for extended periods of time (Hughes, 2013).

Gangs are often characterized by distinct, formalized identities—such as colors, symbols, names, and monikers—and typically exhibit at least some degree of organizational structure. However, the extent to which these structures are formalized is often exaggerated and remains a matter of debate in the scholarly literature on gangs (e.g., Bolden, 2018; Decker & Pyrooz, 2015; Howell, 2007). Most scholars find that street gangs tend to have relatively “informal and diffuse” organizational structures compared to other types of organizational crime groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015, p. 294). Nevertheless, there is evidence that certain gangs have structures that go beyond mere informal group affiliations (e.g., Nuño & Maguire, 2021). Group cohesion in gangs is reinforced by shared understandings of membership, alliances, rivalries, and territorial ties (Goldman et al., 2014). Decker (1996) observes that this cohesiveness not only enables collective

action but also binds members to shared consequences, whether from law enforcement or rival groups.

The interplay of status management and group cohesion often escalates gang violence while complicating the likelihood of success for external interventions. Violence functions as a form of informal social control within gangs, as members are unable to rely on formal institutions to resolve disputes without risking arrest, prosecution, or a significant loss of status (Anderson, 1999; Lauger, 2019). Furthermore, the collective nature of gangs amplifies both the pool of potential offenders and victims, while creating group-level obligations for retributive justice when members are harmed. In this context, violence also serves to enhance individual status within the gang, signaling loyalty and commitment. Together, these dynamics foster a self-reinforcing cycle of conflict and violence that is difficult to disrupt (Gravel et al., 2018; Hughes & Short, 2005; Melde & Esbensen, 2013).

Residents and policymakers expect police to control violent gang conflict. However, several constraints limit what police can effectively accomplish. First, gang members rarely contact the police to resolve a conflict because they fear loss of status and possible legal consequences (Katz & Webb, 2006). Residents in neighborhoods where gangs assert control are also reluctant to call the police due to fear of gang reprisals and/or mistrust of police (Adams et al., 2025; Katz et al., 2002; Spergel, 1995). Second, the modal police approach to gangs in most communities is a reactive response to incidents that have already occurred, rather than a proactive response such as intervening in disputes between gangs to prevent impending violence (Katz & Webb, 2006). Most police agencies do not have sufficient intelligence capabilities to intervene early in gang conflicts before they escalate into significant acts of violence (Fraser & Atkinson, 2014; Katz, 2003). Third, some scholars argue that police suppression strategies may

backfire by increasing gang cohesiveness, reinforcing group boundaries, and amplifying offending (Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012; Klein, 1995a; Rubenson et al., 2021).

Given these issues, there has been a renewed emphasis on community-led initiatives to reduce gang violence (Dawson et al., 2023; Hureau & Papachristos, 2025; Maguire et al., 2024). Gang truces are usually initiated by the community, the gangs themselves, or third parties such as government officials or community leaders. While many anti-gang strategies seek to reduce crime, gang truces focus specifically on reducing violence between gangs in conflict. Henderson and Leng (1999) propose that gang truces require a renegotiation of established norms within and between rival groups. During violent disputes, gang leaders and members risk appearing weak—both to their own group and to rivals—if they fail to respond with sufficient force or suggest peaceful resolutions. As conflicts intensify, the social norms governing behavior within gangs often evolve, placing greater emphasis on violence as the primary means of resolving disputes, largely because alternative options are perceived as unavailable or unattainable. Gang truces, which are often mediated by third parties, may disrupt the cycle of violence by providing gangs with a cooling-off period during which their levels of violent behavior decrease (Spergel, 1995). This approach may, at least temporarily, establish new norms of expected behavior within and between gangs. The cooling-off period is hypothesized to recalibrate norms that are more consistent with the security interests of the gang and its members (Henderson & Leng, 1999).

Evaluation Evidence on Gang Truces

Evidence on the effectiveness of gang truces is mixed. Cotton (1992) conducted what may be the first evaluation of a gang truce, focusing on an agreement between the Crips and Bloods in South Central Los Angeles. According to Los Angeles Police Department data, drive-

by shootings decreased by 48%—from 162 to 85—during the six weeks following the truce compared to the same period the previous year. Similarly, gang-related homicides dropped by 62%, declining from 26 to 10. However, the study provided limited analytical details, making it difficult draw clear inferences about the study’s methodology and findings.

Ordog et al. (1993) used emergency room data to assess the same truce's impact. Their analysis tracked changes in the daily and monthly number of gunshot wound (GSW) admissions before, during, and after the truce. They identified a statistically significant reduction in GSW admissions during the three months following the agreement. Based on their findings, the authors concluded that the truce had substantially decreased gunshot-related injuries treated at their inner-city Level 1 trauma center (Ordog et al., 1993, p. 781). A later study by the same authors used a longer follow-up period and found that the truce’s effects lasted for only three months (the length of the original follow-up period), after which the number of gunshot wound victims grew even higher than before the truce (Ordog et al., 1995). The authors concluded that the subsequent increase “negated any positive effect of the gang truce” (Ordog et al., 1995, p. 417).

Stone and his colleagues (1993,1995) 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 readers to judge the merits of their research design or conclusions. Furthermore, they could not separate the effects of the truce from the effects of other interventions implemented simultaneously.

Katz et al. (2016) studied the effects of a gang truce implemented in El Salvador. They found that the truce was associated with a significant reduction of approximately 40% in homicides. They further found that the truce was more effective in reducing violence in

municipalities with higher rates of imprisoned MS-13 gang members (Katz et al., 2016). However, a later study of the same truce concluded that its collapse resulted in a net increase in violence compared to no truce at all (Jones & Lloyd, 2024). Another study of a gang truce in Jamaica found a significant decline in homicides immediately following the truce (Katz et al., 2022). However, the authors found that the decline in homicide was part of a general nationwide decline in violence not associated with the truce. Homicides may have been displaced outside the target area briefly following the truce (Katz et al., 2022).

While the limited research to date suggests that gang truces can reduce gang violence, these findings should be viewed with caution for at least three reasons. First, some theoretical assumptions upon which gang truces are built are dubious. Prior research on street gangs suggests that many of them have limited organizational structures relative to other types of organized crime groups (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015) and may lack effective mechanisms for influencing member behavior. Scholars point out that “the idea of sophisticated gang organizations is still largely a product of the self- or organizational-interested musings of gang leaders, certain police officials, academic researchers, and media reporters based on very limited hard data” (Spergel, 1995, pp. 79-80). Thus, even if a truce is successfully negotiated, research suggests that gang leaders may not have enough control over their members to enforce it.

Similarly, prior research suggests that gangs consist primarily of young people who lack diplomatic skills (Henderson & Leng, 1999). The features of gangs that result in gang violence are the same features that may constrain the gang’s capacity to abide by a truce agreement. In sum, an implicit assumption in gang truces is the idea that gangs have the organizational and cultural capacity to create and maintain (at least for a short while) the truce’s terms. These assumptions are inconsistent with the research evidence on gangs.

Second, several studies have relied on weak designs without credible counterfactual conditions. The reductions in gang violence detected in some previous evaluations of gang truces might have been caused by several factors. For example, the Los Angeles riots occurred just before the gang truce that Cotton (1992) and Ordog et al. (1993, 1995) evaluated. Zinzun (1997) reported that conventional forms of gang violence decreased abruptly following the riots because gangs redirected their anger and frustration toward the police. The decline in GSW admissions may have resulted from a citywide decline in gang violence in the wake of the L.A. riots. Research on gang truces has also relied on aggregate data from police agencies or hospitals covering large areas, thus not permitting inferences about whether patterns of violence have anything to do with the specific gangs involved in the truce. For example, Ordog et al. (1993, 1995) relied on emergency room admissions for gunshot wounds from a 100-square-mile area surrounding the hospital, an area significantly larger than the territories of the gangs involved in the truce. Third, some previous research on gang truces has not examined the processes involved in establishing the gang truce. Details associated with the initiation of the truce, whether the gangs were pushed or pulled into participating, whether outside parties helped mediate the truce, and whether ongoing mediation was required to maintain the truce are vital.

Likewise, prior evaluations have not examined the effects of gang truces beyond their impact on gun violence. Several scholars have argued that external mediation in gang conflict can legitimize gang leaders and increase the degree of gang identity among members, thus resulting in greater group cohesion (Haskell & Yablonsky, 1982; Hureau et al., 2023; Klein, 1995a). If these concerns are valid, then gang truces (as well as other intervention efforts) may generate unintended and unwanted consequences. Unfortunately, the distant methodologies used in existing research do not allow us to observe these dynamics. As a result, our understanding of

the full array of consequences – intended and unintended – resulting from gang truces is limited. Finally, previous research on gang truces has also not relied on methodologies capable of discerning overall trends, cyclic patterns, outliers, turning points, and other patterns helpful in understanding the influence of truces.

Methods

This paper examines the effects of a gang truce in Palm Grove, a distressed community plagued by gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago, a small-island developing nation in the Caribbean. Trinidad is located seven miles northeast of Venezuela, and Tobago is 21 miles northeast of Trinidad. Trinidad measures approximately 1,864 square miles and is home to nearly 96% of the nation's population of approximately 1.3 million people, including Palm Grove. The nation experienced a sharp increase in homicides and shootings around the year 2000. The number of homicides committed using blunt instruments, sharp instruments, and other weapons remained fairly stable from 1988 to 2005. However, homicides by firearm began rising in 2000. Research has attributed this increase to an outbreak of gang conflict among street gangs (Maguire et al., 2008). A growing body of research has begun to document the nature of gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago as well as its harmful effects on those who live and work in gang-controlled communities (Adams, 2012; Adams et al., 2021, 2025; Pawelz, 2020; Wallace, 2020).

The truce was established in Palm Grove, a small, urban community with a disproportionate share of the nation's violent crime. While it constitutes less than 1% of Trinidad and Tobago's geographic area and only about 2% of the country's population, more than 8% of homicides from 2001 to 2005 occurred in Palm Grove. This is about 30 times greater than

expected if homicides were evenly distributed by area and about four times greater than if distributed evenly by population. Despite official police data, we believe more than half the homicides in Palm Grove are gang-motivated. We conducted seven interviews with three police officers in Palm Grove who worked most closely with gangs. During those interviews, we gathered intelligence on 90 homicides that occurred in Palm Grove from 2005 to 2007. Our analysis of the intelligence data collected during these interviews revealed that 63.3% of the homicides were gang-motivated, which we defined as furthering the interests of the gang (see Maxson & Klein, 1990). This finding differs from the “official” motives determined by the Homicide Bureau, which shows that 13.3% of homicides in Palm Grove were gang-motivated. Official police classifications of gang-motivated homicides in Palm Grove appear to represent substantial underestimates.

Considering these issues, we evaluated the gang truce in Palm Grove using multiple methods. We interviewed four of the five gang leaders involved in the truce, including one who arranged for it to occur and the two warring gang leaders whose conflict precipitated it. Second, we interviewed one police investigator and two task force officers working in the areas controlled by these gangs. Third, we examined police data on violent crimes in the areas controlled by these gangs using interrupted time series analysis. Fourth, we obtained access to detailed police intelligence on homicides, gang conflict, and suspected motives for gang violence. In addition to these project-specific data collection efforts, we were also given access to numerous other sources of information that provided additional context for the project. These included attending violent crime scenes, speaking to victims and their relatives, and riding with police who patrolled gang-controlled areas. These various forms of qualitative and quantitative

evidence enabled us to build upon existing research and discover new insights about the nature and effects of gang truces.

The Palm Grove Gang Truce

The rapid increase in gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago around the year 2000 led to several governmental and non-governmental responses. Most were suppression-oriented responses focusing on enforcement, prosecution, and punishment. Others were more preventive efforts initiated by community and faith-based organizations. Some represented a mix of both approaches. Trinidad has a long history of gang truces dating back to the 1950s when “steel band” gangs adopted truces to prevent violence among young musicians and to keep the peace during the nation’s annual “Carnival” celebrations (Adams, 2005; Maguire, 2024). Local newspaper archives are replete with stories of failed truces (Heeralal, 2004; Lucky, 2004; Morris, 2005). However, none of the truces has been systematically evaluated.

At the time of the truce, there were eight primary street gangs operating within Palm Grove, according to police intelligence sources in the area. We assigned each of these gangs a letter. The eight gang territories are illustrated in Figure 1.¹

--INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE--

The leader of gang C brokered a formal peace agreement between five of the eight gangs in Palm Grove, including gangs A, B, C, E, and F. Of the five gangs participating in the truce, only gangs A and B were in active violent conflict. Our interviews with the leaders of gangs A

¹ We do not include common map features in Figure 3, such as community boundaries, streets, scale, or orientation. Our goal is to illustrate some of the spatial relationships between the gangs without revealing their identity or that of the community. The number of communities with gangs in Trinidad and Tobago is large enough that it would be difficult to identify the community based on this featureless map.

and B revealed that the conflict had lasted about two months, with each gang claiming the lives of two of the opposing gang's members. In addition, two people from Area B were shot but not killed, as well as five people from Area A.² Figure 2 provides a network diagram illustrating the relationships between the eight gangs in Palm Grove immediately prior to the truce. The information used to construct this network diagram was derived primarily from interviews with three police officers in Palm Grove who worked most closely with these gangs. It was supplemented by interviews with four gang leaders who spoke openly about their conflicts and alliances with other gangs. The diagram illustrates that the active conflict precipitating the truce was one of several conflicts ongoing in the community at the time.

--INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE--

When asked why the conflict started, the leaders of gangs A and B agreed that their reasons were petty. One said that “small talk” was the precipitating factor, echoing the findings from other research on gang violence in the region suggesting that minor disputes (referred to locally as “stupidness”) are a leading cause of violent conflict (Maguire, 2008). For example, gang leader A told us that immediately prior to the conflict, someone from gang B disrespected him when he was walking on a path linking Area A to Area B.

The leader of gang C initiated the truce. At the time, he was not involved in active conflict with gangs participating in the truce, but he was engaged in conflict with other gangs. According to leader A, leader C called him to initiate the truce. As a result, they “came together and decided enough was enough... we take it on our own to reduce the level of crime... we do it from the heart. We do it genuinely.” Leader C explained that too many “brothers” were being

² Some of these shootings are not reflected in the official police data we obtained because they were not reported to the police.

killed, and he felt compelled to intervene. Police officials had a more pessimistic view: that the truce was a way for the gangs to improve their image, curry favor with politicians in an effort to secure government contracts, and relieve pressure by police.³ Leaders A, B, and C agreed that earlier truces were not initiated for altruistic reasons: they either involved financial benefit for the gang or were timed to coincide with elections. All three leaders told us they viewed this truce as more genuine. As evidence of their commitment, leaders A and B told us that a member of gang B was charged with shooting a member of gang A, but due to the truce, the victim showed up in court and said he did not want to pursue charges against his attacker.

We monitored the relationships between the eight gangs in Palm Grove for more than three years after the truce. However, due to circumstances beyond our control, we were forced to limit the formal evaluation period to approximately seven-and-a-half months after the initial truce because, at that point, two other truces were negotiated back-to-back. One of these was a much larger truce involving gangs from multiple communities, including some of the gangs in Palm Grove. The other was limited to a handful of gangs from Palm Grove. We were concerned that both truces would confound our ability to evaluate the effects of the initial truce, so we ended the evaluation just before the onset of these truces.

Interview Findings

Our interviews with four gang leaders and police officers working closely with the gangs suggest that the five gangs involved in the truce forged a brief but peaceful coexistence lasting

³ There is a long history of connections between street gangs and politicians in Latin America and the Caribbean (Arias, 2017; Maguire, 2024; Pawelz, 2020). For example, gangs can help deliver blocs of votes for political candidates in exchange for certain benefits, such as lucrative government contracts for public works projects.

approximately five months. There are also some indications that it led to an active alliance between some participating gangs.

Our analysis of police intelligence (based on interviews with police officers) on the 29 murders in Palm Grove during the post-truce period reveals that 19 were gang-motivated. Fifteen involved at least one of the Palm Grove gangs (as victims or suspects), and twelve involved at least one of the five gangs participating in the truce. Only two homicides were carried out *between* gangs in the truce, though truce participants carried out two homicides against their own members and three against victims not affiliated with gangs. Furthermore, members of gangs participating in the truce carried out three homicides against non-truce gangs and were victims of two homicides carried out by those same gangs. During the post-truce evaluation period, the five gangs participating in the truce were suspected by police of carrying out at least ten homicides. Additionally, six members or affiliates of the participating gangs were killed during this period.

In evaluating a gang truce, it is important to go beyond simply determining whether participants complied with the truce's terms and examine how the truce affects the relationships between the parties involved and the broader context of violence within the area. This includes an appraisal of whether the truce generated unintended or unanticipated consequences. We paid close attention to the network of relationships between gangs before and after the truce. This information was derived from our interviews with police officials and gang leaders. Figure 3 contains a network diagram illustrating the conflicts and alliances of the eight Palm Grove gangs at the end of the evaluation period.

--INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE--

During the evaluation period, the pattern of alliances and conflicts shown in Figures 2 and 3 changed significantly. Five new conflicts emerged between gangs A & H, C & H, E & G,

E & H, and F & G. One new alliance was formed between gangs A & B, the two gangs whose initial war led to the truce. However, that alliance lasted only about five months and is therefore not depicted in Figure 3. The truce altered the social network of relationships between gangs in Palm Grove, ultimately stimulating more conflicts than alliances. These conflicts represented both unintended and unanticipated consequences of the truce.

One way to understand the context in which the truce was negotiated is to examine the gang-related murders that occurred in Palm Grove after the truce. During the evaluation period after the truce, Palm Grove experienced 29 homicides, 19 of which were gang-motivated and 15 of which involved at least one of the eight Palm Grove gangs as either victims or suspects. We will discuss some of those homicides most relevant to the evaluation.

During the fourth week of the post-truce evaluation period, members of gang D killed a member of gang E by mistake in an effort to kill the leader of gang F. This murder resulted from a longstanding conflict between gangs D and F. That ongoing conflict was one of the reasons why the leader of gang D and his allies in gangs G and H refused to participate in the truce. Truces may be able to quiet emerging conflicts, but it may be difficult for gangs to forgive and forget other, more resilient memories of past harm by their rivals.

Members of gang F committed two murders in the seventh and ninth week after the truce. The leader of gang F had one of his members killed for committing unsanctioned offenses and attempting to leave the gang. Members of gang F also killed an innocent man for working in the area without their permission. The gang was making a clear statement that it was responsible for sanctioning (and therefore receiving a cut from) any work taking place within its territory. Though the leader of gang F participated in the truce, these murders were permissible within the terms of the truce because they did not involve the other participating gangs.

In the tenth week after the truce, a murder triggered fundamental changes in the relationships between gangs in Palm Grove. Slinky (a pseudonym) from gang E was murdered by members of gangs G & H and a rogue member of gang A, whom we will refer to as Crazy (another pseudonym). Though Slinky was a member of gang E, he was also a longtime personal friend of the leader of gang C. Slinky, together with the leader of gang C, had played an instrumental role in forging the truce. Gangs G and H had refused to participate in the truce and opposed it. Police viewed this murder as a deliberate effort to disrupt the truce. Though gang A had participated in the truce, Crazy was viewed by the police as a “loose cannon” whose loyalties were unclear and unstable; his participation in the murder of Slinky, an ally of his own gang, was not sanctioned by the gang. The leader of gang A responded by “giving him licks” (local parlance for beating him severely) as punishment for participating in the unsanctioned murder of an ally. Crazy then left gang A as a result of the beating and joined gang H.

In the aftermath of Slinky’s murder and Crazy’s defection from gang A to gang H, four new conflicts emerged. Gang C (Slinky’s former gang and ally) and gang E (Slinky’s current gang) were now at war with gangs G and H, the architects of Slinky’s murder. A member of gang G was murdered the day after Slinky’s murder, a clear case of retaliation. Gang A was also now at war with gang H due to Crazy’s defection. One additional conflict unrelated to the truce developed during the evaluation period. It was based on a financial dispute over approximately five U.S. dollars. This conflict illustrates the fragility of gang peace – minor disagreements can easily trigger violent conflict. During the 12th week after the truce, Palm Grove police foiled a bid to kill the leader of gang C. Because the suspects escaped, police were unable to identify them. They suspected that, like the murder of Slinky, this attempt on leader C’s life represented a deliberate attempt to disrupt the truce.

In the 21st week after the truce, members of gang A murdered an affiliate of gangs A and B in the heart of gang B's territory. Police were unsure what prompted the homicide, but it violated the truce and ended the fledgling alliance between gangs A and B. During the 28th week after the truce, members of gang A struck again, murdering a member of gang B. After that, members of gang B murdered a non-gang member who associated with members of several gangs in the area. Police believe members of gang B killed him because of his relationships with other gangs, including gang A. Several other gang-motivated homicides occurred during the post-truce evaluation period, but they were largely unrelated to the truce. The evaluation period ended approximately 32 weeks after the truce.

During the 33rd week after the truce, some of the gangs in Palm Grove participated in a large peace march with members of gangs from Palm Grove and other communities. Then, in the 35th week, members of several Palm Grove gangs held another truce meeting. This one ended in bloodshed. Following the evaluation period and the two additional truces, the war between gangs A and B continued, resulting in several additional homicides.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis of the gang truce relied on data from police logs and calls to police. Police logs were used to determine the number of violent events during the 12-plus months before the truce and the approximately seven months after the truce. We extracted from the logs the number of murders, attempted murders, shootings, and woundings. We obtained the number of reported gunshots from calls made to police. The data were aggregated to both the weekly and monthly levels. The average number of violent events before and after the truce is shown in Table 1, both for the weekly and monthly levels of aggregation. The general

impression from this table is that violence remained relatively unchanged after the truce with a small increase in the average number of violent events and gunshots.

--INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE--

Each type of violence has a relatively low base-rate from a statistical perspective, limiting the analytic options for determining whether the level of violence changed beyond random fluctuations following the truce. For the analyses discussed below, a composite measure of violence was created reflecting the simple sum of each type of violence: attempted murder, murder, shooting, and wounding. Each of these distinct types reflects interpersonal violence that differs primarily in the outcome and not the nature of the violent act itself. As such, we believe that this composite index is meaningful.

Figures 4 and 5 show the number of violent events per week and per month, respectively. The timing of the truce is indicated with a vertical line. Examining the weekly time series shows that many weeks have zero (23 of 87) or one (30 of 87) violent event. The most violent week, occurring after the truce, had eight violent events. Examining the monthly time series shows a range in monthly violent event counts from a low of two to a high of 17. The two lowest months occurred just after the truce (February and May, 2006), although the next four lowest months occurred before the truce (June, 2005 with 3 violent events, January and August, 2005, with 4 violent events, and March, 2005, with 5 violent events). The smoothed horizontal line in both figures represents the smoothed locally weighted regression line (*lowess*) and is a helpful descriptive guide to visualizing trends in these data. The general visual impression is that violence increased slightly throughout this time period.

--INSERT FIGURES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE--

Ideally, these data would be analyzed using an interrupted time series analysis. Such an

analysis requires multiple pre- and post-intervention time points to achieve reasonable statistical power. A recent simulation study recommends a minimum of 24 data points for such an analysis (Turner et al., 2021). The monthly data are not sufficient for such an analysis. The weekly data have a sufficient number of time points but are less stable (i.e., a high degree of noise relative to the signal) and are skewed. A Box-Cox transformation improves the shape of the distribution but does not produce a normal distribution, given that 0 and 1 are the most common values. Because of these data limitations, several different statistical approaches were used.

The simplest analytic approach is a *t*-test comparing the event rate before and after the truce. The *t*-test for both the weekly and monthly data were statistically nonsignificant ($t = 0.55$, $df = 85$, $p = .61$; $t = 0.80$, $df = 18$, $p = .43$; respectively) with the mean difference in the direction of an increase in violent events. This analysis ignores the possibility of autocorrelation in the time series data and as such may be biased. This bias can be adjusted using the Newey-West variance estimator as implemented in Stata (StataCorp, 2005). Applying this method to these data produce *t*-values that are similar ($t = 0.70$, $df = 18$, $p = .49$; $t = 0.77$, $df = 18$, $p = .45$; respectively). These simple analyses suggest that the minor observed differences between the two time periods may reflect random fluctuations.

The above analyses were also performed on the reported gunshot data (see Figures 6 and 7). The *t*-tests for weekly and monthly data were statistically non-significant ($t = 0.34$, $df = 85$, $p = .74$; $t = 0.06$, $df = 18$, $p = .95$; respectively) with the mean difference in the direction of an increase in the number of reported gunshots. The Newey-West variance adjustment produced very similar results ($t = 0.30$, $df = 85$, $p = .77$; $t = 0.07$, $df = 18$, $p = 0.94$; respectively).

--INSERT FIGURES 6 AND 7 ABOUT HERE--

Despite the known limitations of the data, we performed an interrupted time series

analysis on the weekly violent events and reported gunshot data. Visual inspection of the data suggested a slight upward trend in the series. To stabilize the series, the data were differenced (analyses on an undifferenced series produced highly similar results). Examination of the autocorrelation and partial autocorrelation plots suggested that a time-series model with a single autoregression parameter and no moving average parameter would best fit these data. The ARIMA models found statistically non-significant effects of the truce on violent events and reported gunshots. Models testing for both a permanent constant change (i.e., a mean change) and a temporary change were examined and neither found an effect of the truce.

These ARIMA models are a weak test of the effect of the truce, however, given the low base rates for both measures. Only a fairly dramatic effect on violence would be detectable. However, the overall level of violence and the number of reported gunshots was slightly higher, on average, for the period following the truce than for the period prior to the truce. From these data, it appears that the truce did not reduce the overall level of violence within this community.

Discussion

This study examined the effectiveness of a gang truce on gang violence and other outcomes. Truces have received much more attention from policymakers and community activists than from researchers. Only a handful of studies have evaluated their effectiveness, and their findings are mixed. Existing evaluation research has treated gang truces like a sort of black box, analyzing violence outcomes before and after truces but not examining in detail the intergroup relationships and dynamics between gangs. Little is known about the conditions that give rise to gang truces, the role of third parties in brokering these agreements, their long-term impacts on relationships within and between gangs, or their effectiveness in reducing gang

violence. The current study attempted to fill these gaps by conducting a comprehensive study of one gang truce using multiple methods and data sources.

Several themes are evident from our findings. First, the truce produced a brief “cooling off period” in the conflict between gangs A and B, but the peace lasted only five months (e.g., Kennedy et al., 1996; Klein, 1995b). During the peace, gang leaders A and B reported that residents who had moved away because of the violence had now returned; people could now walk the streets safely without fear of being caught up in the conflict between warring gangs. They told us that if any problems emerged to threaten the peace, they would work together to solve those problems. Unfortunately, their optimism was insufficient to guarantee a prolonged peace, and the killing resumed within five months. The break in violence does not appear to have resulted in a long-term change in behavioral norms associated with violence.

Second, while the gangs in the truce promised not to engage in violence against each other, they continued to be involved in violence, both as offenders and victims. During the post-truce period, participating gangs were suspected by police of carrying out at least ten gang-motivated homicides. Six members or affiliates of these gangs were killed in gang-motivated homicides during that same period. The truce represented a unique anti-violence pact that allowed certain killings but not others. Gangs could continue to kill non-gang members, members or affiliates of other gangs, and their own members without violating the truce. Gang truces are typically intended to reduce retaliatory violence. Assessing their impact requires focusing on the parties involved in the truce and their continued involvement in intergang violence. Violent interactions with parties outside of the truce, whether expressive or instrumental, continue to require attention from the police.

Third, the truce involved only some of the gangs in Palm Grove. However, the interview findings made it clear that these gangs are immersed in a larger network of gang relationships throughout Trinidad and Tobago, including those in neighboring communities. The relationships between gangs are complex. When a truce influences only a portion of a larger network of intergang relationships, its effectiveness may be limited. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the conflicts and alliances among Palm Grove's eight gangs. Even keeping track of which dyads are friendly and which ones are at war is difficult. Each new act of violence, like the murder of "Slinky" described earlier, can reverberate throughout the gang network and stimulate new conflicts or acts of retaliation. The notion of triadic interactions is useful for thinking about the relationships between gangs: "the friend of my friend is my friend; the friend of my enemy is my enemy; the enemy of my enemy is my friend" (Lee et al., 1994, p. 333). Although scholars have applied a social network perspective to the study of individual gang members (McGloin, 2005), it is also useful to test organizational network models outlining the relationships between gangs as a whole (e.g., Descormiers & Morselli, 2011; Nakamura et al., 2020; Radil et al., 2010). Static network models could be used to predict patterns of intergang conflict and alliances, while dynamic models could be used to test hypotheses about stability and change in the relationships between gangs (Gravel et al., 2023; Short et al., 2014).

Fourth, a recurring theme in interviews with police officers and gang leaders was that certain conflicts are too deeply rooted and entrenched to be resolved peacefully. For instance, the leader of gang F showed us scars from gunshot wounds he had sustained in several previous gun battles, most inflicted by members of other gangs trying to execute him. During the post-truce evaluation period, members of gang D made another attempt on his life, inadvertently killing the wrong man. Police investigators explained that nothing short of death would ever resolve the

longstanding conflict between the leaders of gangs D and F. One police commander, when discussing the pattern of retaliatory killings in Palm Grove, told us: “these people, they do keep hate.” His comment underscored a key dynamic: past acts of violence are not easily forgotten and often continue to fuel animosity and retaliation. More generally, it is worth considering whether a brief intervention like a gang truce is capable of overcoming longstanding conflicts between people who have killed each other's friends or relatives and who have made attempts on each other's lives.

Fifth, truces typically do not involve all the gangs in a community. Some may support the truce but choose not to participate, while others may oppose it. Our interview findings reveal that in Palm Grove, three gangs (D, G, and H) opted out. For example, the leader of gang C, who organized the truce, told us that the leader of gang D (who did not participate) "wouldn't like us to slow murders down," as the conflict benefited his gang by reducing police attention. Nonparticipants opposed the truce so strongly that they killed one of its architects in the tenth week after it began. We have encountered similar cases elsewhere in Trinidad and Tobago in which “peacemakers” were killed. In this sense, truces can provoke such strong resistance that people are killed as a direct result – an unintended consequence that is worthy of further attention.

Finally, there is limited evidence to suggest that the motives for carrying out the truce in Palm Grove may have been strategic. The truce generated substantial media exposure for the gang leaders, particularly for the leader of gang C (now dead) who organized the truce. It also allowed the gang leaders involved in the truce to meet with high-ranking politicians, during which they attempted to negotiate for government contracts. It also reduced the amount of police coverage in their communities during the period of relative calm that followed the truce. The

media attention, the exposure to politicians, and the reduction in police attention may have contributed to an increase in the perceived legitimacy of the gang leaders. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that possible common ingredients in the formation of gang truces include gang leaders receiving (or being promised) benefits from government officials and less oversight by criminal justice officials toward gang members for their participation in a truce (Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016; Katz & Amaya, 2015; Katz et al., 2022). The truce may have helped them solidify their image as community leaders, Robin Hood figures who helped provide jobs and other resources for their communities (Jaffe, 2013; Maguire et al., 2008). If this is true, then truces may have the unintended effect of increasing the legitimacy and power of gangs, an issue that several researchers have raised but that has not yet been thoroughly studied.

Although the findings reported here contribute to the growing body of research on interventions for reducing gang violence, we acknowledge certain limitations. First, the truce we evaluated occurred about two decades ago. While we believe street gang dynamics in Trinidad and Tobago remain similar today, the truce occurred at a time when certain social dynamics, such as the widespread use of social media, were different. Second, although we were fortunate to interview several gang leaders from the Palm Grove area, we were not able to interview all of them, which introduces some possibility of bias in our findings. Finally, while we were able to interview gang leaders, we did not have access to gang members for this study. Gang members may have offered a different and potentially complementary perspective that we were unable to capture. Despite these limitations, this mixed-methods study provides a unique and meaningful contribution to the literature on the effectiveness of gang truces in reducing violence.

Conclusion

The gang truce in Palm Grove initially reduced violence among participating gangs, but these effects were temporary. The truce was associated with unintended consequences, including new conflicts and gang alliances. This study drew on qualitative and quantitative data, employing a mixed-methods approach that yielded new insights about the fragility of gang peace agreements. As noted by previous scholars, gang truces may inadvertently legitimize gang leaders and increase gang cohesion (Katz et al., 2016; Klein & Crawford, 1967). More rigorous methods are needed to develop a deeper understanding of gang truces and the conditions under which they are most likely to succeed or fail. The evidence so far suggests that truces are not a panacea and should not be relied upon to address long-term gang violence issues (Jones & Lloyd, 2024; Katz et al., 2016; Katz et al., 2022). It remains unclear whether pairing them with more comprehensive strategies may produce more beneficial effects.

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Table 1. Average Number of Violent Events Before and After the Truce

Type of Violence	Mean		SD		N	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Weekly						
Attempted Murder	0.02	0.00	0.13	0.00	55	32
Murder	0.67	0.91	0.92	1.17	55	32
Shooting	0.18	0.06	0.51	0.25	55	32
Wounding	0.64	0.81	1.02	1.23	55	32
Total Violence*	1.51	1.78	1.48	1.86	55	32
Reported Gunshots	0.67	0.75	0.90	1.22	55	32
Monthly						
Attempted Murder	0.08	0.00	0.28	0.00	13	7
Murder	2.85	4.43	1.82	2.94	13	7
Shooting	0.77	0.29	1.17	0.49	13	7
Wounding	2.85	3.29	1.95	2.87	13	7
Total Violence*	6.54	8.00	2.47	5.74	13	7
Reported Gunshots	2.92	2.86	2.18	2.79	13	7

*Sum of attempted murder, murder, shooting, and wounding.

Figure 1
Gang Territories in Palm Grove

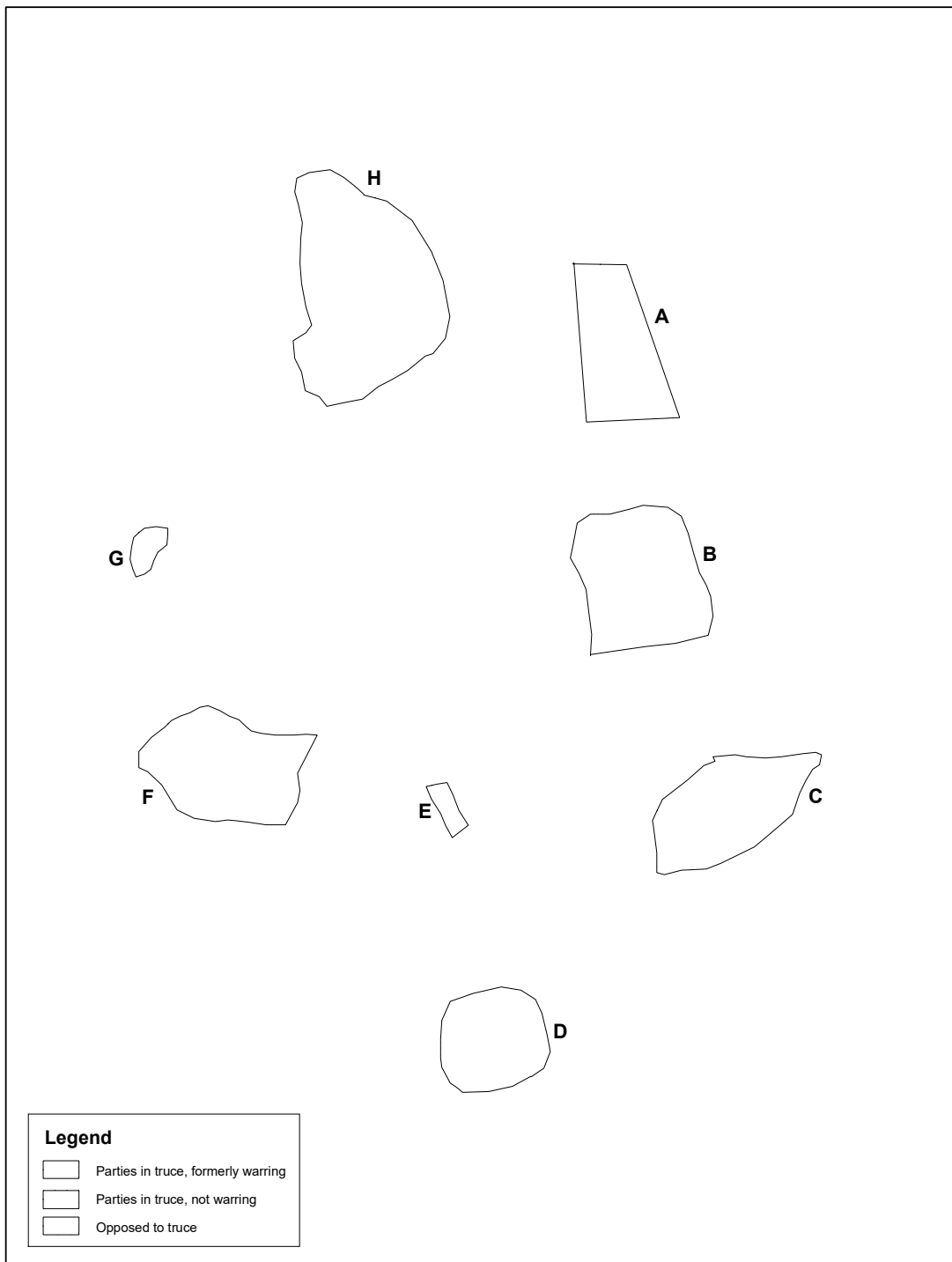


Figure 2
Gang Relationships before Truce

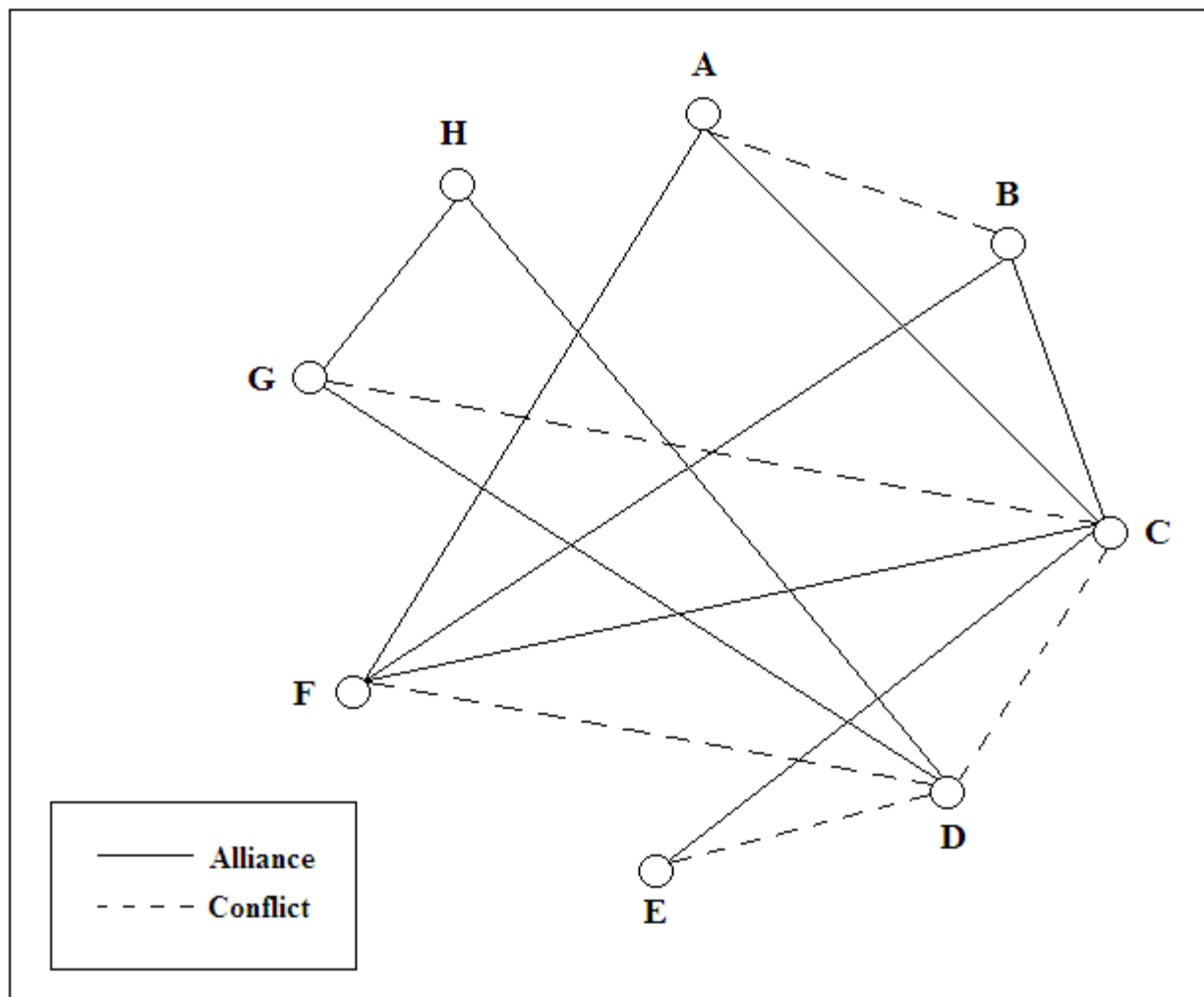
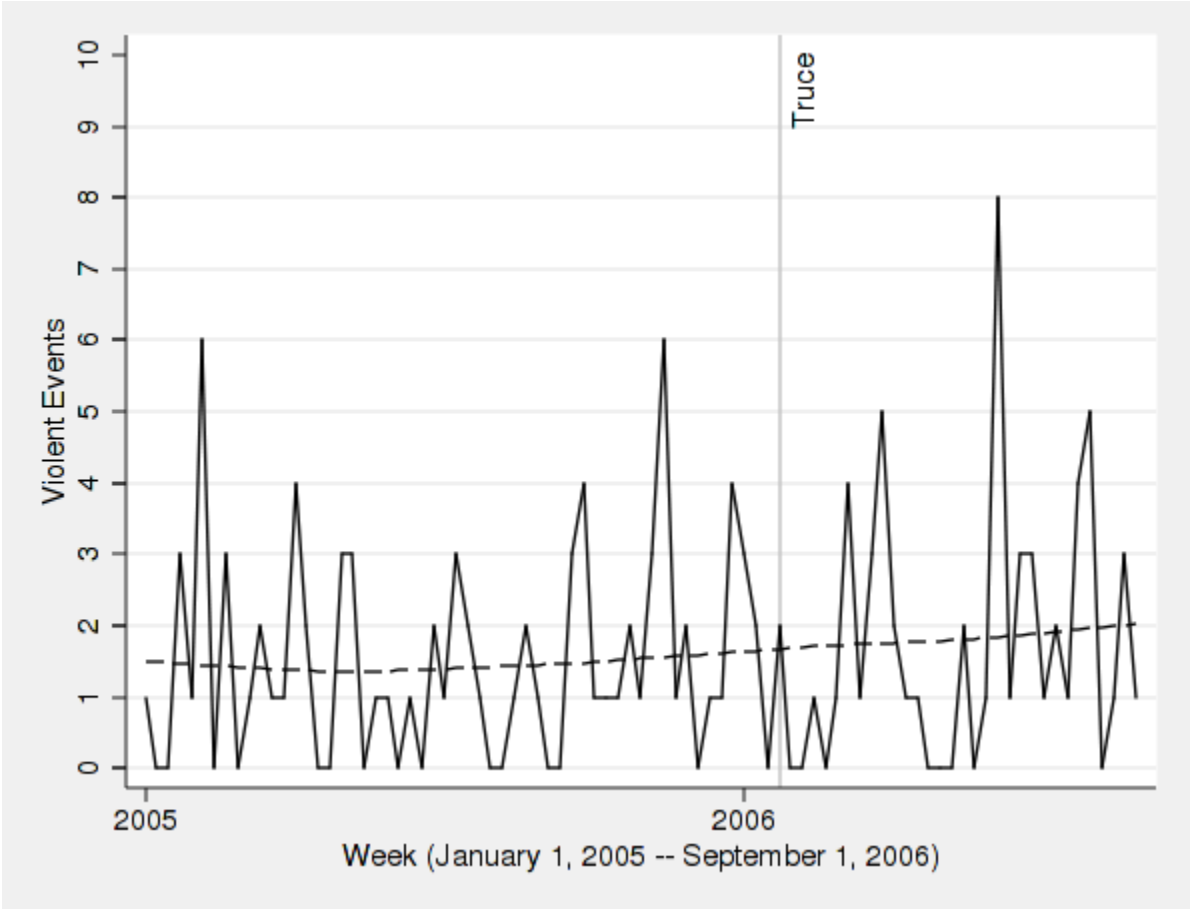
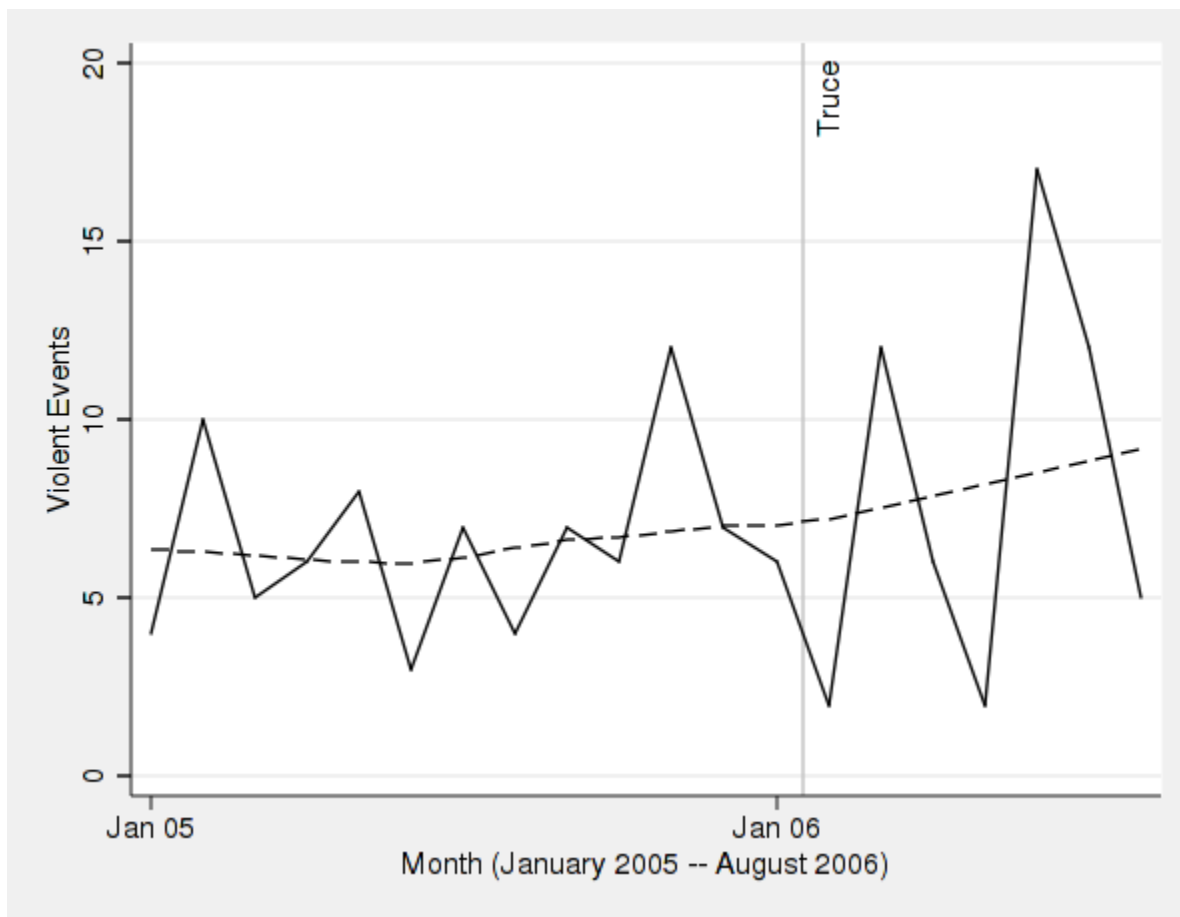


Figure 4
Time-Series of Weekly Violent Events Data



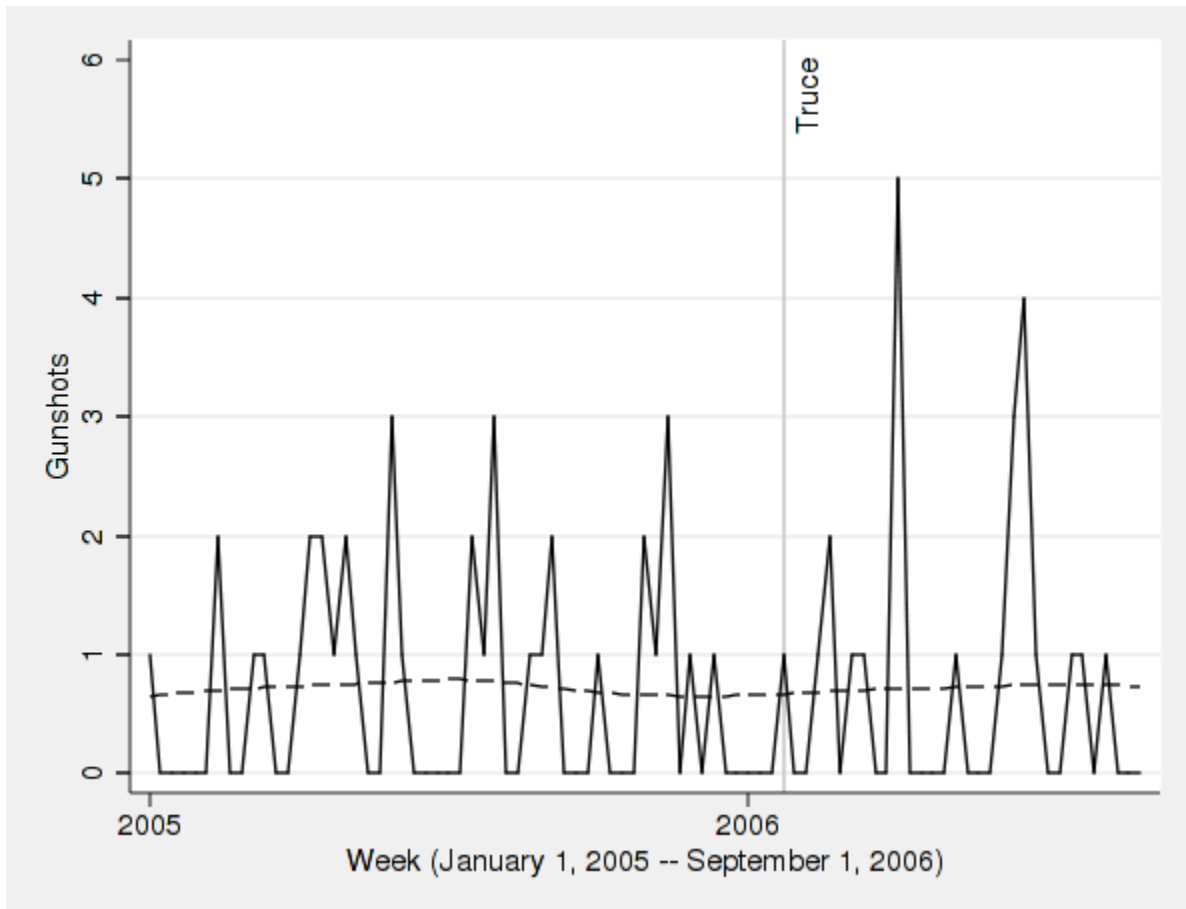
*Chart includes time-series of weekly violent events data for January 1, 2005 through August 4, 2006 with locally weighted regression line (*lowess*)

Figure 5
Time-Series of Monthly Violent Events Data



*Chart includes time-series of monthly violent events data for January 1, 2005 through July 31, 2006 with locally weighted regression line (*lowess*)

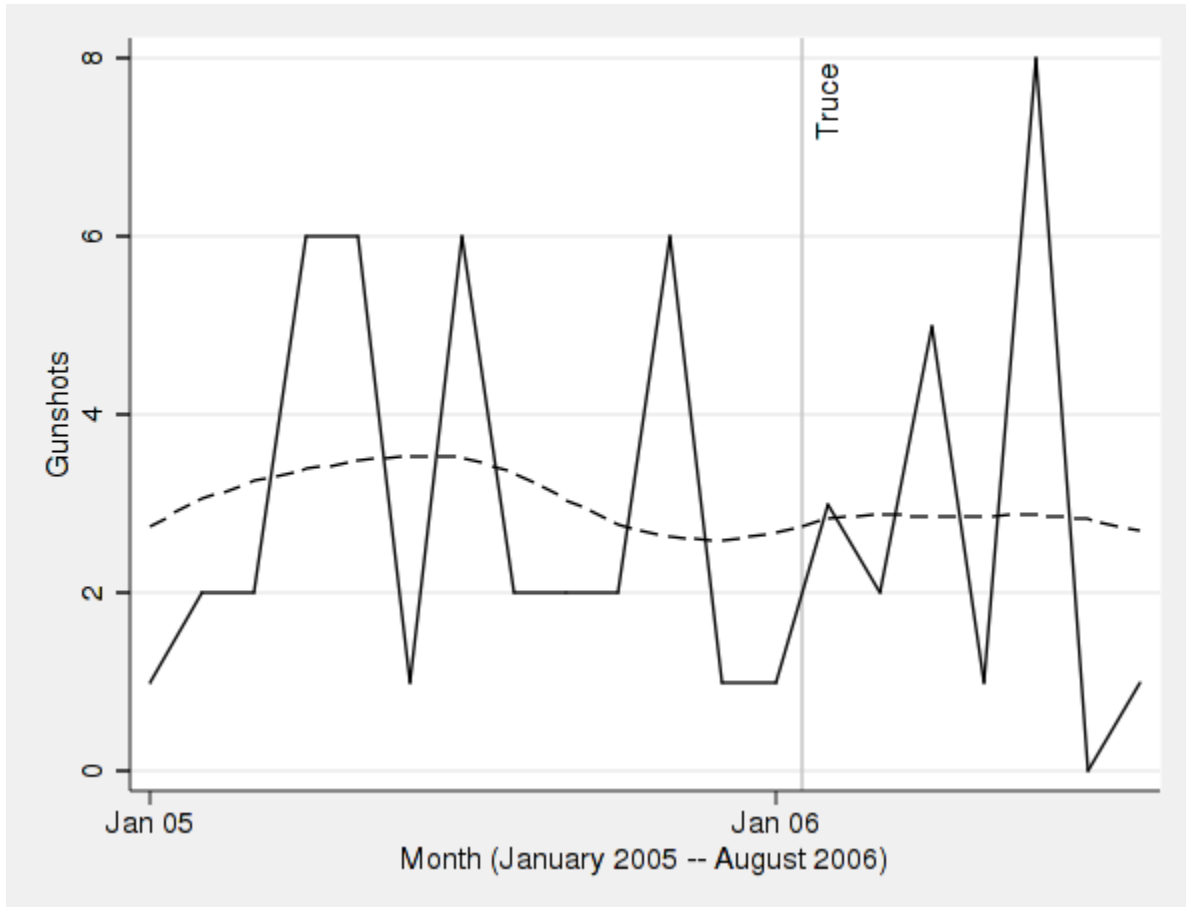
Figure 6
Time-Series of Weekly Reported Gunshot Data



*Chart includes time-series of weekly reported gunshot data for January 1, 2005 through August 4, 2006 with locally weighted regression line (*lowess*)

Figure 7

Time Series of Monthly Reported Gunshot Data



* Chart includes time-series of monthly reported gunshot data for January 1, 2005 through July 31, 2006 with locally weighted regression line (*lowess*)