

Introduction to the Conflict

- In the years leading up to 1971, gang violence in New York City had reached an all-time high, showing no sign of decreasing or stabilizing.
- On December 2, 1971, Black Benjy, the Vice President of the Ghetto Brothers (the largest gang in the Bronx), was beaten to death as he attempted to negotiate with a group of teenagers from a rival gang.
- Rather than spark an all-out gang war, his death catalyzed the Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting, a summit with over 100 gang leaders from all five boroughs.
- The summit addressed the root causes of gang violence, and resulted in massive decreases in crime.

This study examines the effects of the Hoe Avenue Peace Treaty on crime and considers what conditions may have led to its noteworthy success.



Hoe Avenue Peace Meeting, December 8, 1971 (Vice)

Literature Review

Scholarly context for this question comes from multiple different disciplines, including sociology, political science, and criminology. Some of the major findings report that:

- Rebel groups, like gangs, establish order in instances where it will benefit from increased stability, particularly in cases where it facilitates the group's ability to accumulate territory and extract resources (Arjona).
- Organized crime groups often provide basic forms of security when the state cannot, acting as primitive states in certain cases (Skaperdas).

Literature Review, continued

- Consumer sentiment about the state of the economy has an important impact on robbery and property crime. This sentiment is based off of one's subjective experience of the economy, rather than conventional measures like GDP (Rosenfeld).
- In addition to conventional goals of gangs (namely, acquiring territory and accumulating resources), gangs also may value cultural cohesion as a major goal (Barrios).
- Numerous New York City gangs have attempted to shift from criminal to activist, creating educational programs for community youths and forming relationships with professionals acting as mentors to formerly incarcerated individuals. These goals were performed not for the purpose of expanding territory, but remained major priorities of the organizations (Bortherton).
- These sources provide a varied view of the ways in which gangs fill the governance gap left by ineffective states, and demonstrate how a gap may arise even in the context of a developed country.

Data and Methodology

Very few other studies have examined the utility of gang truces in the American context. However, one study on a major gang truce in Los Angeles in 1991 observed a similar phenomenon in which violence drastically decreased in the years following the agreement (Cotton, 1992).

- Cotton found that for the year following the truce, drive-by shootings decreased by 48% while gang-related homicides dropped by 62% (Cotton). Yet, he also found that law enforcement agents were incredibly reluctant to attribute these gains to the actions of gang members (Cotton, 1992).
- A similar study done on a gang truce in El Salvador in 2012 found that the homicide rate there dropped about 40% from the levels it had been in the preceding two years (Katz et al.).
- However, the researchers in the study could not explain why the crime rate rebounded after approximately two years, and assume this is due to a deterioration of the truce (although they provide no evidence for this conclusion).

From these studies we can deduce that gang truces do in fact yield important outcomes for criminality, yet they also demonstrate the reluctance on the part of the elites (state actors, scholars, etc.) to further examine the reasons or legitimacy of these gains.

Empirical Analysis

While the NYPD does not publicly publish crime statistics prior to 2000, the Federal Bureau of Investigations keeps crime records through their data management system UCR on a state-by-state basis throughout the 20th century. Thus, while it is only possible to see records for the entirety of New York State, it still presents a comprehensive picture of criminality between the years of 1969 and 1975.

Violent Crime, 1969-1975 (UCR)		Property Crime, 1969-1975 (UCR)	
1969	105,870	1969	731,340
1970	124,613	1970	779,701
1971	145,048	1971	789,974
1972	138,542	1972	666,063
1973	135,468	1973	678,881
1974	145,427	1974	766,276
1975	155,187	1975	866,010

These crime statistics show that in the two years following the Hoe Avenue Peace Treaty, there was a decrease of roughly 10,000 instances of violent crime and 111,000 instances of property crime. While these numbers reflect the entirety of New York State, the population of New York City is large enough to exert major influence on these outcomes.

Conclusion

These results show a clear and significant decrease in crime in the aftermath of the Hoe Avenue Peace Treaty of 1971. However, they leave many questions in their wake: what causes the crime rate, in this instance as well as in Los Angeles and El Salvador, to rebound after approximately two years? Is this a product of external factors, such as changes in public policy and the economy, or is it part of the nature of gang truces? This is an important avenue of study that carries crucial implications; namely, about the efficacy and potency of gang truces.

The data also reveals a crucial question in regards to policymaking: how can states work with non-state actors, such as gangs, to replicate the positive externalities yielded by gang truces while maintaining those gains long-term? Clearly, gangs have the potential to be positive forces in their communities. But, due to centuries-long legacies of institutional racism and prejudice, they have been frequently overlooked by elites. Hopefully, the results of this study can pave the way for a more holistic review of gang governance in the context of urban crime.