After bloody weekend, police say CeaseFire will be asked to help
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Following a bloody Memorial Day weekend in Chicago, police Supt. Garry McCarthy on Tuesday defended his efforts to stop retaliatory shootings — and said the Chicago Police Department will enlist CeaseFire Illinois for the first time to help.

Ten people were shot to death over the weekend and the city’s 2012 homicide tally reached 200 on Sunday, a nearly 50 percent increase over the same period of 2011.

Experts have several theories for the spike — from this year’s record-breaking warmth, to the splintering of Chicago’s street gangs thanks to the prosecutions of their leaders to lax gun possession enforcement.

But whatever the cause, law enforcement can’t slow the violence alone, said Arthur Lurigio, a criminologist at Loyola University.

“The real story is that cops play a limited role in homicide reduction,” Lurigio said. “Do they play some role? Of course. ... But the police can do only a little to affect crime rates — and even less to affect homicide rates — unless they coordinate with institutions in the community to mediate the violence.”

McCarthy’s plan to work with CeaseFire in the city’s neighborhoods — and give the group city funding for the first time — would do just that.

The group, affiliated with the University of Illinois at Chicago, sends “interrupters” who are often convicted felons into the streets to mediate gang conflicts.

“We are going to take CeaseFire to another level and kind of tie it in to our violence reduction strategy,” said McCarthy, standing at a news conference with Mayor Rahm Emanuel and other officials outside the Washington Park Fieldhouse on the South Side Tuesday.

Tio Hardiman, director of CeaseFire Illinois, said he met with McCarthy and agreed to work closely with the city on reducing gang violence in the high-crime Grand-Crossing, Pullman and Ogden police districts.

Hardiman said CeaseFire was promised city funding to hire 90 staffers — 30 for each district. In the past, CeaseFire has received money from the state and Cook County, but not the city, he said.

“We will be establishing truces in those areas between the various gang cliques,” he said.

The police superintendent also said he remains confident in a strategy to provide beat officers with up-to-date intelligence on gangs to allow them to prevent retaliatory shootings.

McCarthy said “gang audits” of the city’s 23 police districts have identified 59 gangs and 625 gang factions. Under the department’s strategy, beat officers will be able to use data terminals in their squad cars to access information about gang turf and associations.
When there’s a gang-related shooting, they can use the information to respond quickly to areas where retaliation is likely, officials say.

“The mission is to prevent the next shooting from occurring once an incident occurs — and a big part of this goes to our technology and our gang-audit mapping system,” McCarthy said.

Chicago’s street gangs have evolved, with factions — sometimes from rival gangs — banding together to control drug sales in specific areas. Less common are the corporate-structured gangs of the past, with a chairman giving orders down a chain of command to thousands of members.

Part of the Chicago Police Department’s crime-fighting strategy to keep up with violence tied to feuding gang factions is to establish its own ballistics unit, McCarthy said. He said it currently takes up to six months after a shooting to get back information on bullets and guns. By that time, it’s virtually “irrelevant,” he said.

“One gang will use a gun five times,” McCarthy said. “Four people might use that gun. We can start making that link and get even further out in front of what’s happening.”

Lurigio, the Loyola criminologist, said he supports the police strategies discussed Tuesday.

Lurigio said he thinks it’s a good idea for the department to form a direct relationship with CeaseFire, even though many cops distrust the organization because convicted felons do much of the mediation work and some have been re-arrested for new crimes while working for CeaseFire.

“People who the gang members trust must be allowed to mediate conflicts,” Lurigio said.

Roseanna Ander, executive director of the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab, said there’s no simple explanation for the city’s rising homicide numbers — or how to bring them down.

She said it’s too early to know what impact McCarthy’s evolving crime strategies will have on Chicago’s homicide rate in the long-term. But one possible factor for the short-term rise in murders is the unseasonably warm weather, Ander said.

“The vast majority of Chicago’s homicides are committed with illegal firearms and the majority also occur outdoors or in public places,” she said. “The warm weather increased the number of people — including people who were potentially carrying guns illegally — who were outdoors, and by extension, increased the likelihood for a violent or lethal altercation.”

Last year, about 16 people in 100,000 were homicide victims in Chicago, compared to nine per 100,000 in Los Angeles and six per 100,000 in New York. Philadelphia was the only one of the 10 biggest U.S. cities to have a deadlier rate: 21 per 100,000.

Asked why New York’s murder rate is far lower than Chicago’s — and why their murder totals are going in opposite directions — Ander said a possibility is a difference in how gun crimes are handled in both cities.
She said New York has a zero-tolerance for illegal gun possession, as evidenced by the two-year prison sentence that NFL star Plaxico Burress received after he accidentally shot himself with an unlicensed handgun in 2008.

“In New York, simply carrying a gun illegally is considered to be a very serious crime and the courts don’t make exceptions even if you are a rich and famous NFL player,” Ander said. “I am not sure the same is true across the board in Cook County courts.”

Ander also said Chicago’s gang problem is much worse than New York’s.

The mayor noted “70 or 80 percent of the increase in both shootings and homicides are gang-on-gang violence.”

“We have to interject ourselves to stop the shootings, which is the only way you can stop the homicide rate increase,” Emanuel said. “The police department has to get itself in a position to be proactive, rather than reactive.”

“When you have a shooting and it’s between gangs, where is the most likely retribution?” he said. “[Until now] that information and that technology was ‘silied.’ It was not shared with the beat officer. Both through the technology of what they have now in the cars and their information, they can finally make sure everybody in the police department is fighting the gangs.”

Not everyone is convinced the current strategy is a good one.

Some police officials believe the department should never have scrapped citywide crime-fighting units like the Mobile Strike Force and Targeted Response Unit, credited with bringing down homicides under the regimes of former police Supt. Phil Cline and Jody Weis.

Ald. Carrie Austin (34th), chairman of the City Council’s Budget Committee, stood behind Emanuel and McCarthy frowning as the city’s latest anti-gang strategy was unveiled Tuesday.

Afterward, Austin said she’d pretty much heard it all before.

“Do the innocent [people] have to suffer until some of these little a------ are off the street?” she said. “It’s still the same for me and I want to see what’s going to be different.”