

[THEME MUSIC]

NINA MOINI: A string of shootings involving Somali youth has set off questions around youth, gun violence and what law enforcement are calling gang violence. Some Somali leaders say this could fuel more racist rhetoric against the Somali community. For more context and perspective on gangs and gun violence, we have Metro State University Professor James Densley on the line. He's an expert on gangs. Thank you for your time this afternoon, James.

JAMES DENSLEY: Oh, my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: We're happy to have thoughtful conversations about what is going on and what could be some solutions that would help things to get better, regardless of who might be participating in violence, the goal of making things better for everybody. And the conversations that we're hearing, a lot of folks having right now, were really set off by a shooting that happened outside an Eden Prairie High School football game last Friday. We know that the two people who were injured there are expected to survive.

There have been other shootings since. From what you're hearing, when you're listening to some of these conversations that when we hear from law enforcement-- we are hearing a lot of anecdotal information, a lot of just things that don't sound like facts. They sound a lot like opinions some of the time. We're working to learn some more hard numbers about what's going on. But what is your take on this conversation that you're seeing occurring, James?

JAMES DENSLEY: Well, I think you're right. We don't know a lot of the facts at the moment. The landscape seems to be shifting quickly. But what we do know from the research on gangs is that violence tends to be concentrated in tiny networks.

The research will show it's a fraction of 1% of young people who are involved in these types of shootings. So you fix this by knowing exactly who those kids, who are the ones at the center of these networks, and getting to reach them first. And it's a recognition that retaliation is really the engine for this violence. So one shooting creates the reason for the next.

And the best predictor of who gets shot is who just got shot and who their friends are. So we really need to be very targeted and very specific in the action that follows. And I think that's the way you get to prevention and to good solutions.

NINA MOINI: Well, we're hearing law enforcement attributing the shootings to what they are saying are gangs comprised of Somali youth. Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher said he knows of around 300 youth, he said. He said he could name at least 12 gangs that he described as Somali gangs. So those are some of the numbers we're hearing. But again, we don't have a lot to back it up.

We're also hearing from people saying they do have people who are very targeted and focusing on, again, what they're calling Somali gangs. And they say things like, we are in touch with these people. We know what their beefs are, claiming they know what they're mortgage payments are, their monthly rent payments may be, is what we've been hearing from some-- I will say, some law enforcement officials, not all. But what do you make of that?

JAMES DENSLEY: Well, there is evidence-based practice in gang intervention. It's known as focused deterrence. You sit down with a small group of people who are driving the shootings. You tell them plainly, the shooting has to stop or the whole group will pay for it. But at the same time, there's also help for those of you that want it. And the research shows that results in drops in gun violence.

But here's the key. It works best when police, community voices, and service providers are all delivering that message together. Minneapolis has used that model before. The question is whether it has the right staff and the follow through now. Because you really need those credible messengers to get people out of these conflicts.

If this is concentrated within the Somali community, there's a couple of things to think about. Somali elders, imams, coaches, young men who maybe have been involved in gangs themselves, are now out of that lifestyle, maybe have served time in prison, they're the credible messengers that can send that type of information and have it resonate. But you've got to avoid stigmatizing the Somali community. If Somali parents feel that their kids are being hunted, they'll stop calling the police, and the tips that you need to solve these cases will dry up.

And that's doubly true with federal immigration enforcement in the background, everything that we saw here in the Twin Cities earlier this year. So if you arrest a whole neighborhood's teenagers, and you make them feel like a gang, that's not going to solve this problem. It has to be a much more targeted and much more in conversation with and in collaboration with the community.

NINA MOINI: One of the other things-- and I should clarify. I'm using some of the language and the numbers we heard from Chief Booker Hodges of Bloomington. So this is one account. We've heard others that seem to support some of what he's saying.

But I know what you have worked and you've researched gangs over many years and how they've progressed. One of the other things we hear is these are not the gangs of the '90s, and these are not the gangs of before. These are very much based on social media beefs and things like that. What do you think about that?

JAMES DENSLEY: Yeah, the traditional gang was always thought of as being a hierarchical organization. We often think about the groups that came out of Chicago in the '80s and '90s, for instance, that had their influence in Minneapolis. In some ways, though, the traditional American gang was never such a thing. They've always been quite fragmented groups, loosely organized.

At the end of the day, we have to remember that these are teenagers. They're not necessarily sophisticated, organized criminals. They don't have a boss or a bank account. What's holding them together is really the feud.

Now, the social media component, though, does change the dynamic a little bit. If a kid posts a taunt and thousands see it, backing down now cost them in front of everybody. So what happens with the phones is that what used to just be a minor insult becomes this public debt that has to be paid. And so the dynamics that we see today with modern technology and these more fragmented groups can mean that things bubble up very quickly and things escalate very quickly, which is another reason why they have to be monitored well. And you have to be using those local community resources to spot where retaliation is most likely, to ensure that people are not just responding to what's going on social media and that another shooting occurs.

NINA MOINI: What do you think changes in either the perception or the response when acts are referred to as gang violence versus gun violence?

JAMES DENSLEY: Yeah, the most interesting thing I think with the gang dynamic is that it's a group process. So when you think about individual-level violence, you're working on the motivations of that one person. In the gang context, things can become escalated because you've got that group dynamic involved. And there's also all the status and reward systems that gangs have that are slightly different.

So for me, it's the group dynamic that makes gang violence both durable. It's why we've had gangs for generations and that they persist. But it's also, in some ways, what makes it actionable because you can look for ways to get people out of the gang lifestyle. The thing that draws people to it is often a sense of needing safety, trying to find protection, or in some cases, trying to make money.

If you can find a paycheck and a schedule for a young person, then the interest in the gang starts to wane. If you feel safe in your community, and if you feel safe in your home and in your school, you don't feel like you need the protection of the gang. Then the gang becomes less viable. So addressing those underlying needs for why you get into the group in the first place can also be really important for thinking about how to get people out of these groups once they're in them.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And just kind of building on that, and then lastly, James, what does it look like to really be in touch and be intervening with young people? Again, I mentioned law enforcement says we actually are in touch with a lot of these people, and we're kind of keeping tabs on what's going on. What would you say makes the extra difference to create a breakthrough there or a change?

JAMES DENSLEY: It's often about meeting young people where they're at. So a lot of this takes the patience and persistence. The thing that is actually one of the most common findings in gang research is a lot of people think that gang membership is a life sentence. But actually most kids are in and out of gangs within about two years. That's what the research shows.

Most people age out of this phenomena. It's not cool to be hanging out on street corners when you're in your 20s. So there's something about this to be thinking about. Am I there to meet somebody where they're at when they need me, when they start to become disenchanted with the gang, when they start to question the value of the gang, when the violence starts to fatigue them? Are you there to pull them out at that critical moment?

And sometimes that happens even in places like hospital settings. At the bedside is an important moment. A kid with a gunshot wound is scared, and they're listening. And you can reach them right there at that moment before their friends decide what's going to happen next. So a lot of this is just being prepared to meet people where they're at, at that time when they're starting to question the value of this so that you can pull them out and help them.

NINA MOINI: James, thank you very much, as always, for joining us. We really appreciate your perspective.

JAMES Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

DENSLEY:

NINA MOINI: James Densley's a professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Metro State University.