

NINA MOINI: A research team combed through social media and news reports to understand what happened during protests against federal immigration agents in the Twin Cities and other parts of the country. Specifically, the researchers looked at the weapons law enforcement used on crowds. Chemical irritants and projectiles fall into a category called crowd-control weapons, or sometimes less-lethal weapons, they can be referred to as. They come in a variety of products with different mechanisms, and the researchers found some law enforcement have used them in ways that are especially dangerous to the health and safety of protesters, journalists, and passersby.

Scott Reinhout worked on the project for the group Physicians for Human Rights, and he joins me now. Thanks for your time this afternoon, Scott.

SCOTT I'm happy to be there. Thanks for having me on.

REYNHOUT:

NINA MOINI: You know, it was about six months ago exactly to the day that we talked to your colleague, Doctor Rohini Haar, about some of the crowd-control weapons that we were seeing used here in the state of Minnesota. So it's important for us to continue to follow up on what is going on and what's being studied about that time period, so we really appreciate you being here.

SCOTT Yeah, of course.

REYNHOUT:

NINA MOINI: I understand you started out as a geologist, but you've studied crowd-control weapons for several years. How did you begin to focus in on this line of research.

SCOTT Yeah, when I was working as a geologist, I was living in Chile at the time. That overlapped with a period called the Estallido Social, which was this big moment of social upheaval in which there was just an unprecedented use of crowd-control weapons against protesters, many of them non-violent. And one of the things that I was seeing personally were people who were presenting with what, to my lay, looked like gunshot weapons that were supposedly coming from these crowd-control weapons or less-lethal weapons. And so that set me out on my journey to better understand more of the technical aspects of these weapons and how they can cause pretty severe harm to people.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and it's hard to know what is being used. When you're at a scene or when you're within a protest, you're just wondering, what is this plume of smoke? What is being used right now? And it's important to try to figure out what was going on and what was being used. So your team is out, this new report, which looks at three specific weapons. What led you to look at these specifically?

SCOTT Yeah, so this report came out of the work that we were doing towards a much larger report where we're tracking misuse of less-lethal weapons nationwide. And as we were conducting our research into this phenomenon, we quickly noticed that there were these three weapons that stood out in some way or another in terms of the weapons that we were seeing being used to police immigration protests, either in terms of their danger or, in the case of, for instance, the chemical obscurants that are being used in Minneapolis, their novelty. These are weapons that haven't really been seen very frequently in protests, and so their appearance that, suddenly, on the streets were a little surprising and also a little concerning, just because we don't know a whole lot about these weapons.

In terms of the use of chemical obscurants, specifically this green smoke in Minneapolis, one of the big consequences of that was that people didn't really know what it was. They could tell it seemed to be different from the regular sorts of chemical irritants that were being used-- your tear gas, your pepper agent, that sort of thing, but they didn't really where to place it. And so you started seeing these really outlandish claims about what it actually was, as well as the health effects of it.

And so that's how we started focusing, particularly in on this particular category of weapons, by people reaching out and asking, hey, we have no idea what this stuff is that's being used. Is there anything that you can tell us at all about it?

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and it's nice, too, when agencies will tell you what they're using specifically. I don't know if that's required at all or if you went to these agencies at all. Because I mean, we've seen projectiles, chemicals used on crowds from both local law enforcement agencies and federal agents. Did you break things down at all by agency?

SCOTT REYNHOUT: Yes, so in the full report, we do break it down by agency pretty granularly, looking not just at DHS as a whole, but individual agencies, such as Customs and Border Patrol, ICE, even little subunits like that. And to speak generally, one of the issues that we face is that, at the federal level, there's much, much less transparency, not only about the types of weapons that are permitted to be used for crowd control but also the circumstances in which they can be used.

Most of the people who are studying this topic were operating off of a use-of-force manual from Customs and Border Patrol that's from 2022 that is also pretty vague. It doesn't name specific weapons or specific munitions. And that does make it a little challenging to put some of the use of these weapons in context.

NINA MOINI: Can you go over again the couple of the weapons that you looked over that were used here in Minneapolis or in the state of Minnesota? Because one was the bright green smoke that we talked about but also some of these scattershot munitions that I understand were also used by the LAPD, Los Angeles.

SCOTT REYNHOUT: Yeah, so we looked at three weapons-- scattershot munitions, the so-called muzzle-blast rounds, and then these chemical obscurants. The scattershot weapons are largely a Los Angeles phenomenon. It's really, really uncommon to see them used outside of carceral settings, for protests in the United States, at the very least, with Los Angeles being the biggest exception to that.

There are a few potential incidents when these were used in Minneapolis but not nearly to the same extent as Los Angeles. What you did see used more frequently were muzzle-blast rounds, as well as your green smoke, your chemical obscurants. The muzzle-blast rounds, technically, are called powder blast dispersion munitions, and they fire this puff of a chemical irritant at people.

And one pattern that we did see used in Minneapolis in particular is the use of these weapons at point-blank range within three to five feet of the target and also aimed straight at the head. This is essentially the most dangerous way you can possibly use these weapons, and we saw that a decent bit in Minneapolis.

The chemical obscurants were the more noteworthy weapon that was used in the Twin Cities, largely for, I think, the media pull it got, both in conventional as well as social media and these sort of unusual claims about what they actually consisted of.

NINA MOINI: And can you say what they did consist of or what was the level of concern around these?

SCOTT
REYNHOUT: Absolutely, yeah. So the concern ranged from-- you had people calling it nerve agent. You had people calling it obsoleted, chemical weapons from the pre-Vietnam era. And when looking at the forensic evidence, that is to say open-source records of what the canisters actually looked like as well as comparing the actual mechanism of the devices that were caught on video, it seems likely they're a class of chemical obscurants known as pyrotechnic signaling smoke. So these are loosely based on US military grenades.

And in terms of the actual health consequences of the smoke itself, it doesn't seem to be the worst offender as far as known harms. It's sort of similar to smoke grenades or smoke bombs that you'd see used at sporting events. What is concerning is the pattern of use that we did observe it being used in in the Twin Cities, as well as elsewhere, where it's partnered with CS gas.

So for instance, in the Mueller Park incident, we did a time sink of four different videos that captured that incident and showed that not only were these chemical obscurants, this green smoke being used, but it was being used alongside tear gas. Police manuals as well as the manufacturers indicate that there may be some sort of synergistic effect if you use both of them together.

And this was somewhat alarming to us as researchers, because we're not aware of any scientific or medical studies that have studied this phenomenon. What are the effects of tear gas if you use it in an environment that's already pretty polluted or pretty saturated with some other sort of particulate matter? We don't really have a good sense of what the potential health consequences of that use might be.

NINA MOINI: OK, so Scott, just to close things out here, what do you hope or what becomes of these findings, this larger study you mentioned that's coming out later this summer? Is this something you plan to share with lawmakers, or what are you doing with it?

SCOTT
REYNHOUT: Yeah, so one of the motivations for the timeline of this particular study is, at the federal level, there's not a whole lot of regulation governing the use of these weapons. We have to approve the budget for DHS to acquire some of these weapons. And so one of the patterns that we're seeing is that a lot of the weapons that they are requesting more of, they aren't showing a consistent pattern of being able to use them correctly or transparently.

And so I would hope that, at the federal level, this information can be used to either get some more transparency out of what and how these weapons are being used or should be used but also governing whether or not we think that it's appropriate that they should get more. We also hope that it'll be useful at the state and local level whenever that's relevant.

NINA MOINI: Sure. All right, thank you so much, Scott, for sharing about your work with us. Really appreciate your time.

SCOTT
REYNHOUT: Of course. Thanks for having me on.

NINA MOINI: Scott Reynhout is a researcher working with Physicians for Human Rights to study the use of crowd-control weapons.