

GANG WARFARE

A December 2015 drive-by shooting set off gang violence the likes of which Danville police had not seen before

By James Whitlow Register & Bee **Jul 6, 2019**



Danville police work the scene of a Dec. 5, 2015, shooting on Berryman Avenue. Court documents later showed it was a drive-by attack by a member of a gang named the Billys Bloods and started two years of a bloody gang battle.

File photo

Editor's note

This is the first in a series of stories.

The wave of gang violence that swept over Danville in 2016 and 2017 began with a single shooting.

It was a drive-by attack along Berryman Avenue by members of a gang named the Billys Bloods, federal and local court documents show.

SHATTERED LIVES
SHATTERED LIVES

Rival gangs believed the gunman to be Ekong Ben Eshiet — “one of the most dangerous people I’ve encountered,” a judge once remarked to him — and the shooting happened on Dec. 5, 2015.

Later that month, members of the Rollin 60s Crips gathered in a Lee Street trap house — a home used for dealing drugs or gang business — to discuss revenge. Four people picked up guns, pledging to get even.



Ekong Ben Eshiet

“This incident and the retaliatory shootings that occurred afterwards appeared to spark and escalate a gang war between the Rollin 60s and Billys,” court documents state.

And the fight was on. The shooting set off gang violence the likes of which Danville police had not seen before. While police had identified an incipient gang problem in the city as early as 2003, the department could not predict a gang war.

Officials agree that the two years following the Eshiet shooting were bloody, but there is no one reason to blame for the increase in homicides. In all, there were 30 homicides across 2016 and 2017; 15 were tied in some way to gangs.

Investigators point to national gang influence and police response being slower than needed. While the reasons for the violence are murky, what is clear is that gangs became more violent — focused on being the area’s biggest and baddest, investigators said.

As for Eshiet, he would eventually land a dozen years in prison, but not for that shooting. No sooner had he finished serving time for an offense than he was back on the street instigating a shootout at a Piney Forest Road convenience store. It

was a January afternoon in 2018 when he saw someone wearing clothes that he thought represented another gang. He likely stopped shooting only because his gun locked up, the case prosecutor said.

Strange bedfellows

In the years preceding 2016, the gangs' raison d'être was money, Capt. H.S. Richardson, of the Danville Police Department's investigations unit, said. Nuisance crimes like burglary and drug dealing were more their forte. That was to change.

Police saw evidence of more organized criminal gangs in late 2008 with a rash of burglaries believed to be the handiwork of a group called the Runners, Richardson said. Partnering with a group called WestMo, the gang was responsible for many residential burglaries until 2009.

One of the Runners' preferred thieving strategies was to send young members to knock on doors of local homes. If someone answered, the young gang member would ask for directions or a glass of water. But if nobody was home, they would signal to others waiting in the wings to break in and steal money, electronics and guns.

The group also accrued a few burglary-related homicide charges, Richardson said, but they stayed mostly nonviolent — preferring to plunder unattended houses.

For the most part, the gangs avoided violence. But as they changed their behavior and organization, the number of deaths shot up.

Being in a gang, investigators noted, is not illegal. But coordinated criminal acts involving multiple people and those done in service of a gang are. The organization of the Runners' burglaries was new to police, Richardson said.

The stories of the Runners and WestMo ended in 126 criminal charges against eight adults and nine juveniles, according to an annual report from the police department. But the city's problem continued to grow quietly after the targeted arrests of the two Bloods-affiliated groups.

After the Runners' dissolution, other gangs stepped in to fill the void — most notably new sets of the Bloods and the Crips. Today, two Danville sets of those gangs are embroiled in a pair of federal racketeering cases against more than a dozen people. Charges include murder and attempted murder.

The nationally known Crips originated from high schools in Los Angeles, California, in the 1960s. Formed by two students, the organization splintered into multiple subsets and became one of the largest street gangs in the state by 1970, according to a Stanford journal. The Bloods formed in response to the Crips' domination — for protection.

Those national gangs, from their formation, were enemies. It has almost become a cliché; dog versus cat, lion versus gazelle, Bloods versus Crips. So, close to 50 years after the gangs' formation, Lt. David Whitley of the police department's investigations unit has trouble explaining to other law enforcement that some of Danville's Bloods and Crips hung out with each other. A few even shared a house, court documents show.

The size of Danville as a city makes for unusual gang dynamics, Whitley said. As a rule, Bloods and Crips do not commingle, but Danville's local sets did and still do — even when affiliated with national arms of their respective gangs. Because their members grew up with each other, went to the same schools or ran in the same social circles, they did not clash as often.

“These gangs do not get along — they don't mesh — we have that here, but the members went to school together,” Whitley said. “So you may have two or even three groups, gangs, in the same place at the same time at a get-together, and

everybody is seemingly, tensely, getting along”

Occasionally, a hothead would flare tempers at parties, but the city was quiet for the most part.

“Even when we meet with outside agencies, when we kind of explain what we are dealing with, we get a ‘what?’” Whitley said.

According to court documents, the Rollin 60s and Millas joined forces in the summer of 2016 — termed tying the flags — in order to “facilitate their criminal activities,” such as drug dealing, gun trafficking and selling stolen property.



Register & Bee staff

Documents filed in both federal cases show the gangs’ cooperation was not appreciated by national Bloods higher-ups. They did not sanction the alliance, so they gave the green light for a local gang to kill the presumptive leader of the Millas. The gang with orders to kill was called the Billys, and their target was a man named Dashawn Anthony, the lead defendant in the Millas case.

It was soon after Anthony heard about the target on his back that the Millas and Rollin 60s hatched a plan to ambush him, court documents show. They would antagonize the Billys and lure them to the Southwyck Hills Apartments, where they were waiting. A day later, the trap was sprung, only the intended target was not killed.

Gunfire sounded in the Southwyck Hills Apartments as members of the Rollin 60s and Millas — fanned out throughout the complex — unloaded on a white van that rolled into the parking lot around 10:20 p.m. They hit and killed one of the van's passengers, Christopher Lamont Motley, according to federal court documents.

The two attacking gangs scattered afterward, and the guns were sold off or disposed of. But the killings persisted.

Other court documents filed in Danville and federal courts acknowledge the bloody gang conflict. In August of 2016, a criminal complaint in reference to Tredarius Jameriquan Keene, an alleged Bloods member also caught up in the racketeering cases, popped up in Virginia federal court. Buried in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agent's narrative, which describes a nervous Keene fleeing from police after a traffic stop, is a telling detail about the war.

After officers chased down Keene, discovered a gun on him and read him his Miranda rights, they asked why he — a felon — had a pistol.

He had picked it up from an abandoned house — near the corner of Colquhoun and Dame streets — used as a “stash spot.”

“He wanted to have the pistol on him because of the gang related turf wars that were going on in the Danville area,” the complaint reads.



Tredarius Jameriquan Keene

A search warrant filed in Danville Circuit Court in 2018 for a separate investigation puts it more bluntly.

“There is a known rivalry between two criminal street gangs in Danville VA dating back into 2017 or earlier,” the warrant reads. “Evidence of this rivalry was discovered through investigations into several shootings that were clearly identified as having been motivated by gang participation and gang retaliation.”

George W. Knox, of the Illinois-based National Gang Crime Research Center, noted skepticism at the notion of street gangs commingling out of childhood friendships.

Gang conflict usually stems from dislike of or need for retaliation against a rival gang — “the simple issue of enmity,” Knox said.

“It usually boils down to protecting the gang and standing up for the gang,” he said.

Members of historically rival gangs sometimes cooperate, he continued — typically when they share a supplier of drugs, are imprisoned or when the gangs are not nationally affiliated and cull their identities from internet sources or rap lyrics.

The cooperation that led to Motley’s death in 2016 has landed 21 suspected gang members in federal court.

So far, nine have pleaded guilty across three cases.

The killings

“It was always about making money,” Richardson said. “All of a sudden... they were out literally hunting each other.”

In 2016, the violence escalated.

“Those groups, with pushing and backing from people not even in the city of Danville many times, were pushing violence ... that is the first time we had that type of Bloods, Crips, neighborhoods going against each other.” Richardson said. The year 2015 going into 2016 “is when they really latched onto national groups.”

The volume of violence was uncharacteristic of Danville’s gangs, and the timing, according to federal court documents, is no coincidence.

Some people connected to national gangs moved to the city before the killing sped up, but some local members brought prison connections home to Danville after serving their time, Lt. David Whitley, of the Danville Police Department’s investigative unit, said.

Because the gangs were changing — from money-minded outfits to violent sets — police had difficulty gathering information on them and staying ahead. That, Whitley said, may have contributed to a slower police response. The department was forced to react to violent gang-driven crime instead of preventing it.

And the gangs believed they could do what they wanted — that they controlled the city, or at least certain areas of it, Whitley said. Maybe they were right, he conceded; the violence got out of hand too fast for police to respond quickly. The department did not have the resources to keep up.

“We were more reactive; we didn’t have the units, the groups, the intelligence gathering to stay on top of what was growing,” Whitley said. “We are certainly not in that situation anymore.”

Police did not expect the volume of homicides they faced in 2016, former captain of investigations Matt Carter said. And investigating gangs, he noted, is a larger task than solving one-off crimes.

“Prosecuting individuals for individual acts is relatively straightforward,” Carter explained, “when you are trying to go after an organization, that’s a whole separate animal.”

When investigating gangs, Whitley explained, police are already gathering information on potential and known gang members before a killing, and work to determine if the act is done for a gang’s benefit. The process for tracing a

homicide back to a gang requires more information than a simple name and the cause of death.

“Sometimes it’s the things we do even before a homicide... just looking at social media, getting in touch with the school resource officers,” Whitley said. “Being able to talk to a neighbor and know where the hangout is... all those things that show a connection.”



Danville Police Chief Philip Broadfoot addresses the media in November 2016

File photo

In response to the violence, then-Danville Police Chief Philip Broadfoot put more officers on the streets and created a temporary investigative team to focus on issues of gangs and violence in late 2017. After 14 years as chief of police in the city, Broadfoot said he is still puzzled by the number of killings that took place during that period.

“I have not been able to make sense of those two years... they are aberrations,” he said. “I’m still scratching my head over why so many people would commit murder.”

Broadfoot’s temporary unit became permanent when Scott Booth took over as Danville’s chief of police in February 2018.

Booth, who has worked in law enforcement in Richmond and Washington D.C., came into the job with goals of reducing violent crime and increasing community engagement.

“I have not been able to make sense of those two years... they are aberrations. I’m still scratching my head over why so many people would commit murder.”

Former Danville Police Chief Philip Broadfoot

Through engagement programs like community walks and coffee shop meet-ups, along with the creation of a new division tasked with managing, planning and conducting this outreach, the department attempts to show police officers as members of the community. The hope, Booth has said, is to build rapport between officers and those they serve.

Forging trust between communities and police is a long-term process. But if accomplished, communities provide police information, enabling them to better solve and prevent crimes.

Investigators agreed the gang problem is difficult to stay on top of without support. The best way to combat it, Richardson said, is to seek assistance from the people who live in the city — those on the streets witnessing and living the problem every day.

“The gang atmosphere in this town is an ever-changing atmosphere,” he said. “So that is why we need to have the community’s help.”

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

In Danville's gang wars, Nitaya Adams, 16, was the youngest to die

By James Whitlow Danville Register & Bee Jul 13, 2019



Danville Police Chief Scott Booth, who took over from Philip Broadfoot in early 2018, made his predecessor's temporary gang task force a permanent addition to the police department.

James Whitlow/Register & Bee

Editor's Note

This is the second in a series of stories.



Nitaya Adams' friend, Jakeva Johnson, straightens the tassel from George Washington High School's graduation ceremony on Nitaya's grave. The cord is faded, she explained, but it used to be more purple.

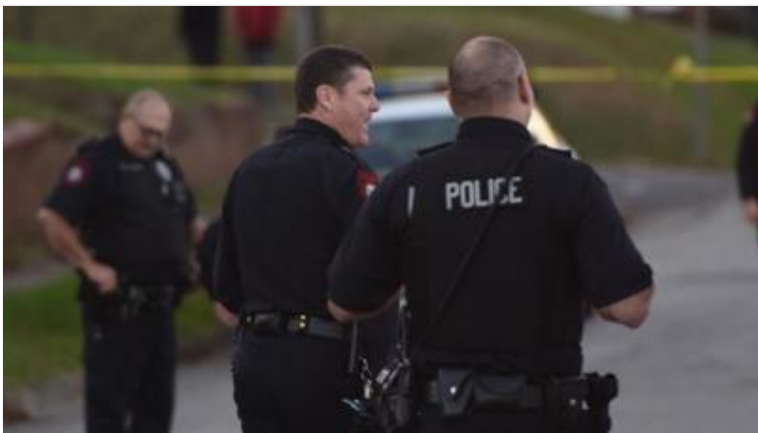
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[A December 2015 drive-by shooting set off gang violence the likes of which Danville police had not seen before](#)

Friends and family talk about 16-year-old Nitaya Adams' wide smile, distinctive laugh, and rejoinders — how she adopted “ballout” as a nickname, even though she hardly ever touched a basketball.

“The life of the party” her cousin Anneka Betts, 23, called her.

They also remember Aug. 6, 2017, when she was shot and killed on Paxton Street. That date is tattooed on Betts' back.

In all wars there is collateral damage — when innocent people are caught up in the fight. The gang war that hit Danville years ago was no different. Adams was among the youngest to die.

Betts first heard the news around 6 a.m. Word was that an argument broke out at a party earlier that morning. Guns were drawn. Bullets flew, hitting parked cars. People scattered. One shot struck Adams in the back, and she died at the hospital.

She was a rising senior at George Washington High School who was already planning out her graduation before her final school year even began — she dreamed of college and pursuing a career as a nurse.

Instead, she died three days short of starting her senior year. She was one of the youngest victims of the gang-fueled killing spree that rocked Danville for two years starting in 2016.

The once-lively teen is buried in the southwest corner of Oak Hill Cemetery with her phone and the \$10 her father customarily allowed her when she went out stashed in its case.

“She probably never had in her head that she was going to go this soon,” Betts said, standing next to her grave one warm August day.

Adams' death was not a novelty in 2017 or the preceding year. Danville was a small city with a big, violent problem.

Homicides more than doubled from 2015 to 2016, leaving 16 dead. A further 14 people were killed in 2017, discounting one death from a vehicle crash and another homicide cleared by a grand jury as self-defense.

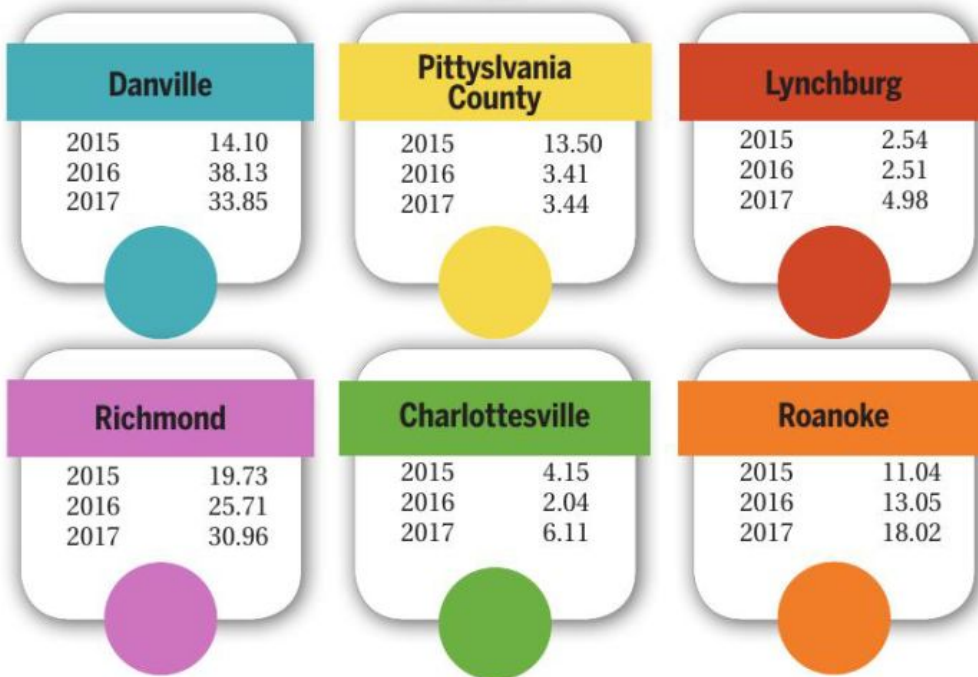
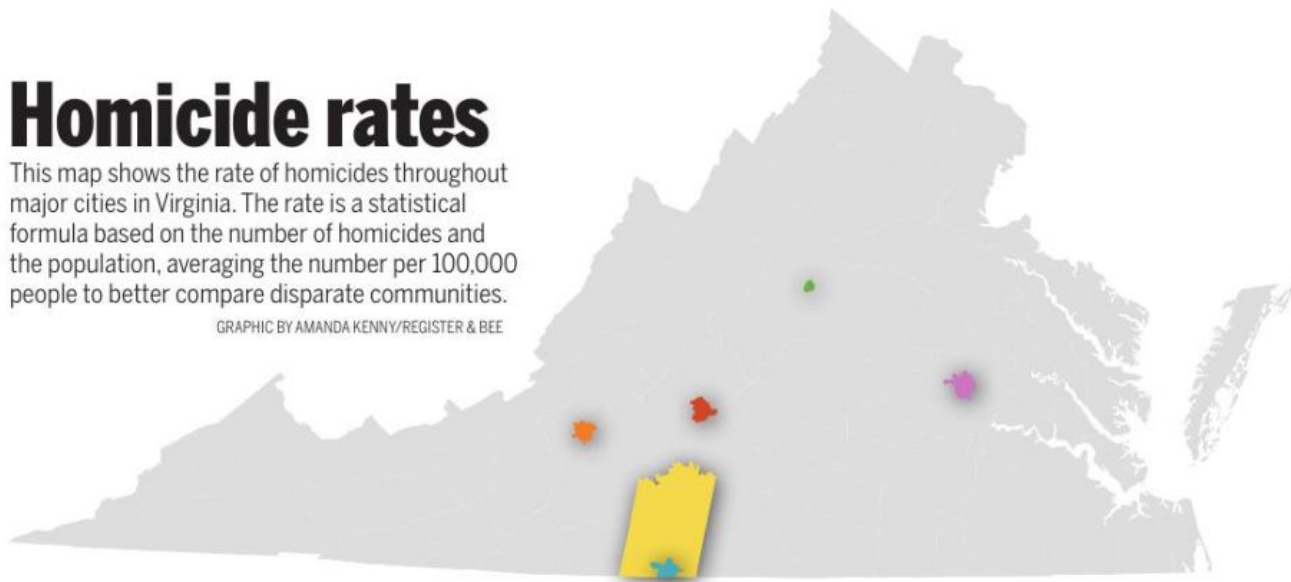


Nitaya Adams

Homicide rates

This map shows the rate of homicides throughout major cities in Virginia. The rate is a statistical formula based on the number of homicides and the population, averaging the number per 100,000 people to better compare disparate communities.

GRAPHIC BY AMANDA KENNY/REGISTER & BEE



Other Virginia cities

| | Year | Homicides | Population | Homicide Rate |
|----------------|------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| Hampton | 2015 | 16 | 138,626 | 11.54 |
| | 2016 | 24 | 137,492 | 17.46 |
| | 2017 | 18 | 136,743 | 13.16 |
| Harrisonburg | 2015 | 1 | 53,875 | 1.86 |
| | 2016 | 2 | 54,224 | 3.69 |
| | 2017 | 3 | 54,689 | 5.49 |
| Manassas | 2015 | 0 | 41,577 | 0.00 |
| | 2016 | 1 | 41,616 | 2.40 |
| | 2017 | 3 | 41,783 | 7.18 |
| Newport News | 2015 | 26 | 183,454 | 14.17 |
| | 2016 | 30 | 183,218 | 16.37 |
| | 2017 | 24 | 182,155 | 13.18 |
| Norfolk | 2015 | 28 | 247,189 | 11.33 |
| | 2016 | 46 | 247,087 | 18.62 |
| | 2017 | 36 | 246,256 | 14.62 |
| Portsmouth | 2015 | 30 | 96,874 | 30.97 |
| | 2016 | 15 | 96,179 | 15.60 |
| | 2017 | 17 | 95,440 | 17.81 |
| Virginia Beach | 2015 | 19 | 453,500 | 4.19 |
| | 2016 | 21 | 453,628 | 4.63 |
| | 2017 | 14 | 454,448 | 3.08 |

| | | | | |
|----------|------|-----|-----------|------|
| Virginia | 2015 | 382 | 8,351,542 | 4.57 |
| | 2016 | 480 | 8,411,808 | 5.71 |
| | 2017 | 455 | 8,470,020 | 5.37 |

US cities

| | Year | Homicides | Population | Homicide Rate |
|---------------------|------|-----------|-------------|---------------|
| Chicago | 2015 | 468 | 2,717,534 | 17.22 |
| | 2016 | 765 | 2,725,153 | 28.07 |
| | 2017 | 650 | 2,716,450 | 23.93 |
| Greensboro, N.C. | 2015 | 26 | 285,950 | 9.09 |
| | 2016 | 36 | 287,019 | 12.54 |
| | 2017 | 42 | 290,222 | 14.47 |
| New York | 2015 | 352 | 8,550,861 | 4.12 |
| | 2016 | 335 | 8,566,917 | 3.91 |
| | 2017 | 290 | 8,622,698 | 3.36 |
| St. Louis, Missouri | 2015 | 188 | 317,095 | 59.29 |
| | 2016 | 188 | 314,507 | 59.78 |
| | 2017 | 205 | 308,626 | 66.42 |
| Washington, D.C. | 2015 | 162 | 672,228 | 24.10 |
| | 2016 | 138 | 681,170 | 20.26 |
| | 2017 | 116 | 693,972 | 16.72 |
| United States | 2015 | 15,883 | 320,896,618 | 4.90 |
| | 2016 | 17,250 | 323,127,513 | 5.30 |
| | 2017 | 17,284 | 325,719,178 | 5.31 |

Source: FBI; Greensboro News & Record; New York Daily News; St. Louis, Missouri Police Department; U.S. Census Bureau; Virginia State Police

Among cities of 40,000 or more, Danville had the highest homicide rate per capita in the commonwealth of Virginia those two years, according to a review of Virginia State Police data. When looked at as a per-capita rate, a mathematical formula often used by statisticians to compare disparate population centers, there were approximately 38 homicides per 100,000 people in the city in 2016 and about 34 per 100,000 in 2017.

In comparison, Richmond — with a population of more than 221,600 people — had the greatest number of homicides among Virginia cities in 2016 with 58, and again in 2017 with 69. But its per-capita rate of 26 and 30 per 100,000 for those years is, respectively, below Danville’s.

“Crime statistics are most commonly expressed in instances of 100,000 population,” professor of statistics at Virginia Tech Fred Faltin explained. “It normalizes the number of incidents appropriately to the population of any given geographic region.”

Meanwhile, the average number of homicides per-capita across the commonwealth of Virginia was approximately 5 in 2016 and 2017, according to that same police data.

Simply put, life in Danville was dangerous.

Adams

The last time Malcom Plummer spoke to his daughter was the August day she hopped into a car with friends, bound for the party, and after-party, where she would die.

His final words to her, he recounted in a shaky voice, were “I love you.”

The youngest of three sisters, Adams was built solidly, her father recalled — athletically almost. Her eyes and mouth were free of worry-lines concomitant with old age and stress in the last school photo taken of her.

Plummer gained custody of Adams when she turned 3 and raised her in his hometown of Danville while her mother lived in Norfolk.

Father and daughter lived in the Cardinal Village apartments on Danville's southern end — within blocks of seven of the homicides recorded in 2016-17. Of those killings, six were gang-related.

Though the violence swirled around their two bedroom apartment, Plummer said that generally, everybody who lived in the complex got along.

When Adams died, Danville gangs' "turf war," referenced this way in a federal court document, was still in swing.

In the midst of 2016's violence, then Danville Police Chief Philip Broadfoot tried to calm the community, noting that most law-abiding residents did not need to fear for their safety. He said the targets of gang violence were typically young men involved with drugs and criminal activity.

"Many of them have been repeatedly involved in the juvenile justice system with no sign of improvement in their behavior," he said during a news conference held to address the violence in late 2016.

But keeping away from the people blamed for such mayhem proved difficult for many, especially when the average resident could bump into gang members every day at school, on the sidewalk, in the store or at work.

Those accused of gang membership are lifelong residents who sing in the church youth choir, maintain B-average grades, march in ROTC uniforms in high school, work as welders, nurses, and fast-food cooks, and look forward to birthday parties and Fourth of July cookouts, show documents in the ongoing federal racketeering case.

Plummer said he knew his daughter was not perfect, but he knows she was no gang member. She couldn't lie to him, he said.

"Some friends you have to worry about, and some friends you don't have to worry about," he said, peering over his rectangular glasses. "Everybody has good friends and everybody has bad friends."

Those bad friends, he explained, are hard to avoid, especially when they live in the same neighborhoods as everyone else. Brushes with gang members can hardly be prevented when they live on your block — or are members of your family.



Nitaya Adams' gravestone is situated in a quiet corner of Oak Hill Cemetery. The 16 year old's last Facebook post serves as her epitaph, and the tassel is from her posthumous graduation ceremony.

James Whitlow/Register & Bee

On Nov. 6, federal prosecutors charged LaQuonte Tarvares Adams with racketeering conspiracy connected to the case against the gang known as the Rollin 60s Crips. He is Adams' brother. Her friends said the two were close, and publicly viewable Facebook photos show them together. It is unknown if he was connected to the people who began shooting at the party where she died in 2016.

Reading down the list of flower bearers in Adams' funeral program, two women stick out. They are currently entangled in same the federal racketeering case — accused of being members of the Rollin 60s Crips, and charged as accessories after the fact to murder and attempted murder.

One of the women was at the party where Adams was killed, Betts said. It is not known whether she had any connections to the people who drew weapons that night.

It also is not known whether Adams thought any of her friends might have gang connections.

Adams' mother would not comment on her son's indictment.

At 16, Adams was at that age when “her friends became her family” and children naturally peel away from their parents, Plummer said. At the time, he was working long, late hours as a cook at Ma Hollins Convenience Store on South Main Street, so whenever she was asleep, he was awake, at work or preparing to punch in.

Plummer knew Adams liked to hang out with friends — some underage drinking may have been involved, he conceded — and he knew his daughter was going to a cookout the night she died. He did not know about the kick-back — the late-night after-party on Paxton Street where she would be shot.

More than a year later, like Adams’ friends, Plummer has plenty of memories to pore over. Settled back into a plush black armchair and squeezing a Newport cigarette between two fingers, he remembered his daughter as the girl who, with help from friends, emptied a whole bottle of hot sauce into his food as a prank — a girl who was friendly to everybody.

So when a friend woke him at 3 a.m. Aug. 6, 2016, and said his daughter had been shot, he thought there was no way it was actually happening.

“I’m thinking I’m dreaming, you know. I’m half-asleep,” he said.

A crowd gathered to search for Plummer and let him know what happened. After he woke up and sped to the hospital, the mob of people followed him, he said.

By the time Plummer reached the hospital, Adams’ mother was there. They tried to go back into Adams’ room to see her, but hospital staff told them to wait in the chapel. Sitting in the windowless room with Adams’ mother and sister, Plummer was afraid he would have to bury his daughter.

“The next time I saw my baby, she was lying on a slab in the morgue,” he said.



A blue flower decorating Adams' gravesite. Her friends say blue was her favorite color.

James Whitlow/Register & Bee

Plummer

Adams was outgoing and kind — feisty, the father remembers. Her memory stays with him, even as milestones and birthdays pass without her.

She was supposed to graduate from George Washington High School in June 2018, with the commencement ceremony held on a Saturday morning at Averett University's north campus.

Instead, Plummer attended in his daughter's place, seated in the front row next to a framed picture of Adams and what would have been her graduation cap and gown.

Principal William J. Lancaster, speaking before the 277 graduates, noted her absence and the framed photo.

“Please know we have one empty chair here, the chair that was supposed to have Nitaya Adams sitting in it,” the principal said, before holding a moment of silence for her and other students across the region that had died during the school year.

Adams was “an Eagle that was lost too soon,” he added, referring to the school's mascot.

Plummer stepped up on the stage to receive his daughter's diploma, which hangs on his living room wall today. He wore a white shirt that bore a silhouette of a graduation cap and the words "My Daddy did it for Me" in cursive script. He had it specifically made for that day.

As the crowd clapped, someone shouted "Nitaya!" The father walked along the stage and eyed the framed diploma his daughter never got to touch.

He then hoisted it above his head for all to see.

"I really wanted her to be there beside me to get it," he said. "That is the only thing I was thinking."

His daughter's slaying remains unsolved and hard to make sense of, Plummer said. To him, there is one solution to the larger problem of violence in the city – a problem that starts and has to end on the streets, addressable only on an individual, moral level.

"Somebody has got to say, 'this is enough, man,'" he said. "Until then, it's going to continue to happen."

ATTRACTING ATTENTION

Even before the flurry of killings in 2016-17, Danville was known to federal agencies for its issues with drugs, guns and gangs

By James Whitlow Danville Register & Bee Jul 20, 2019



Flanked with Dan River Region officials, U.S. District Attorney Thomas Cullen announced suspected gang members and associates had been indicted in a news conference in June 2018.

File photo

Editor's Note

This is the final story in a series.

SHATTERED LIVES
SHATTERED LIVES

A graphic logo for 'SHATTERED LIVES'. The words 'SHATTERED LIVES' are written in a bold, fragmented, sans-serif font. Below the text is a stylized outline of the state of North Carolina. The logo is positioned in the bottom right corner of the page.



In Danville's gang wars, Nitaya Adams, 16, was the youngest to die



A December 2015 drive-by shooting set off gang violence the likes of which Danville police had not seen before

It started with a phone call and an argument.

On Aug. 20, 2016, Dashawn Romeer Anthony — leader of Danville’s Milla Bloods gang who pleaded guilty in February — put in a not-so-friendly call to a rival gang leader. Later that day, a man was dead — gunned down in the parking lot of the Southwyck Hills Apartments. The chaos that followed lasted for more than a year.

LaQuante Tarvares Adams, admitted member of the Rollin 60s Crips, recounted that day as part of his plea agreement with federal prosecutors. Anthony, he said, was on the phone with the leader of the Billys Bloods, a rival gang. The two men — and their respective organizations — were not on good terms. They had been warring since December 2015, according to court papers, when a Billys member pulled the trigger on a man from their turf. That led to retaliation, which fed more shooting — rocketing Danville up the list of most dangerous cities in Virginia per-capita.

The call was supposed to provoke the Billys, and it begot a plan: lure the head of the gang to Southwyck Hills and gun him down. Gang members fanned out across the complex, armed and waiting. One accused gang associate hid in her apartment with her child while other armed members posted up at the windows, ready to shoot. Around 10:20 p.m., they did, opening up on a white van that rolled into the parking lot. The van was riddled with bullets from multiple directions, according to court documents, and a passenger, Christopher Lamont Motley, was killed.

The shooters scattered, hopped in cars, bolted for the nearby woods, and scrambled to nearby apartments in the complex. Adams saw Motley’s body on the ground and ran.

But that shooting — and the many that preceded it — did not go unnoticed. Unbeknownst to gang members, who chiefly concerned themselves with local police, federal officials took notice. Just shy of two years later, the accused gang members were under federal indictment — most staring down the possibility of a lifetime in prison.

Danville is not the only city with violence and gang issues, former U.S. Attorney for Virginia’s Western District Timothy Heaphy said. But the city’s problems were significant enough to capture federal attention when Heaphy served as U.S. Attorney from 2009 to 2015. Even before the flurry of killings in 2016-17, the city was known to federal agencies for its issues with drugs, guns and gangs.

“Danville has always been on our radar,” Heaphy said. “Danville, historically, had a whole host of criminal justice challenges.”

The Register & Bee interviewed Heaphy in 2018 before he accepted a position as legal counsel for the University of Virginia.

Danville police did not work alone to solve the city’s gang problem, which left eight dead in 2016 and seven dead in 2017. Federal agencies had been watching the city for years and working in tandem. But their fight did not always go smoothly, Heaphy said.

Efforts to curb gang violence began years before the deadly street war kicked off, though they were hampered because there were problems sharing information between federal, state and local agencies, Heaphy said.

Problems mounted when all the involved law enforcement bodies came to the table around 2010 — Danville police, the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and others, Heaphy said. All agreed something needed to be done, but they had trouble coordinating their efforts.

“The only way this works ... is you’ve got the FBI, ATF, the state police and local agencies sharing information,” Heaphy said. “We had trouble assembling that.”

None of the people interviewed for this story — police, commonwealth’s attorneys and representatives of the U.S. Attorney’s Office — would identify the origins of those problems

It wasn’t just a failure to share information, the former attorney general said: agencies could not reach a consensus on the course of action they should take.

“We prioritized Danville, but did not get the traction we hoped,” Heaphy said. “Unless you are willing to put people on the ground and work across agencies, you are not going to get results.”

The city’s geography further compounded the problem. Located along the Virginia and North Carolina border, Danville is a good distance from the nearest federal office, making a round trip to and from the city onerous, said Matt Carter, former captain of investigations at the Danville Police Department. The closest federal law enforcement offices are an hour away in Lynchburg and several more away in Roanoke.

“It has been challenging when we do not have any agencies actually seated here in Danville,” Carter said. “The U.S. Attorney’s Office, they do not have an office here, none of the federal agencies have an office here, so they are having to drive.”

Current U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Virginia Thomas Cullen also acknowledged the city’s geographic issue. He was appointed to his post in 2017, so while not at the helm when the violence began to ratchet up in Danville, he heard of it. Because federal agencies had no offices in Danville, Cullen explained, their agents were only visitors — peripatetic enforcers doing episodic work. That gave criminals time and space to expand when federal authorities receded from the city.

“The problem historically from a federal law enforcement standpoint in Danville: there are no federal [stations] in Danville,” Cullen said. “We would achieve some success and, in the vacuum, these pockets would fill back in.”



Capt. of Investigations Matt Carter took his job shortly before the homicide rate spiked. The spate of violence, he said, took the city and police department by storm.

James Whitlow/Register & Bee

But federal agencies have taken a new tack to reduce gang influence and violence in Danville, Cullen said. The two federal racketeering cases involving 20 suspected gang members speak to that. More is to come, he said.

The more to come

Motley's shooting death has been the centerpiece of charges against accused members of the Rollin 60s Crips and Milla Bloods since federal indictments were handed down in June 2018. The two cases are separated by gang affiliation, though court documents show that did not matter much on the streets.

As it turns out, Danville's Bloods and Crips did not carry on the historic rivalry of their national gangs. Instead, they cooperated with each other; some even lived in the same house. Court documents illustrate that the two gangs met and agreed to "tie the flags" to be better criminals.

But that confederation was not sanctioned by national higher-ups and earned the Billys' ire. National Bloods leaders, in turn, put out a hit on Anthony — the Milla's leader. Before long, both the Millas and Billys had standing orders to shoot each other's members on sight, court documents show.

The two cases against the Bloods and Crips are part of a collaborative program dubbed Project Safe Neighborhoods, which targets violent offenders in high-crime areas.

The program was revived by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions in a clamp-down on violent offenders. The two gangs' prosecution is a direct result of it. The program is a mixture of crime fighting, with federal and local law enforcement hunting criminals, and community outreach, where nonprofits and community groups work to keep the peace.

The enforcement angle, with the arrest of more than a dozen accused gang members, has already begun, Cullen said. And because the cases are referred to federal courts, that could mean stiffer sentences for those found guilty.

The community programs are the next step. The Department of Justice hopes to direct \$120,516 of grant money to community organizations throughout the western district of Virginia, U.S. Attorney's Office regional spokesman Brian McGinn wrote in an email.

Taking lessons from the communication issues that hampered the local fight against gangs before his time as U.S. Attorney, Cullen said federal officials are keeping close ties with local prosecutors and police.

"Historically, folks in this office did work with the Danville Police Department," Cullen said. "But I think it's fair to say ... that the relationship today is as strong as it has ever been."

Today, there are at least weekly meetings and phone calls between federal and local police, Capt. H.S. Richardson of the Danville Police Department said.

"We are regularly working with every federal agency, local prosecutors, federal attorneys," he said. "I can tell you we have information that gangs have taken notice that Danville is not a good place to be doing that kind of work right now."

At least once a month, the U.S. Attorney's Office and relevant federal and local agencies sit down with Danville prosecutors to decide whether local cases are a better fit for state or federal court, Danville Commonwealth's Attorney Michael Newman said. That determination is made jointly, considering potential federal prison and state jail sentences among other factors.

"You are going to see more federal cases come out of Danville in the next few years," Cullen said. "I will not view my tenure a success if we do not do more of these cases."

That effort, coupled with Danville police's outreach programs, has made progress, Chief of Police Scott Booth said.

"Since I walked in the door, I have felt very good about our relationships with our federal and our state partners," he said.

Booth and others in the department stressed that the cooperation between federal and local agencies is at a high point. Cullen agreed.

"This is really the first time we've had an ongoing and collaborative relationship," Cullen said. "The results speak for themselves"

But the Rev. William Avon Keen, president of the Virginia Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said there is a ways to go before the problem is solved. In his view, youth are lured to kill and join gangs because television, music and other media romanticize them. He believes that poverty, unemployment and improper education are also among the chief drivers of violence in the city. Prevention is his remedy for the problem.

“[Youth] are not being educated properly on the value of life,” he said. “Something needs to be done to change that atmosphere in the community.”

He lauded the police for taking steps to improve community relationships, but he said that trust is slow to build — especially in impoverished neighborhoods where some people feel they have to commit petty crimes to make ends meet.

“You have got to give the police credit for the work they are doing,” he said. “The people want police to protect their communities, but a lot of times, when police are in the community, they have confrontations.”

Since the indictments against the Bloods and Crips were passed down, Danville has seen gang killings wane. The police department has seen only one six months into 2019. From January to July of 2016, there were three gang-related killings, all of which are still under investigation. Police accounted for four in the same period in 2017. Two of those are still being probed.



Danville Police Chief Scott Booth, who took over from Philip Broadfoot in early 2018, made his predecessor's temporary gang task force a permanent addition to the police department.

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