

## Regional

# Dennis Mares has a clue about criminal gangs

Crime is always a big issue. Some people think that the solution to it is to put more police officers on the streets. Others think there are smarter ways to deal with the problem. Among them is Dennis Mares, an assistant professor of criminal justice studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Mares was born in Maastricht, the Netherlands. He received his combined bachelor's and master's degree in cultural anthropology from Utrecht University in the Netherlands and his master's and doctoral degrees in criminology and criminal justice from the University of Missouri. He began his career as a research director of the Latino Drug Abuse Research Center at Florida International University in Miami.

One of the areas he has been studying the most involves youth gangs and juvenile delinquency — an area where surprisingly little research has been done.

"Gangs have always been around," Mares said. "We tend to think that they are much more commonplace because a lot more people dress as if they were the stereotypical gang members, and also because of rap music, TV shows and some movies.

"But the fact of the matter is that gang-related crime rates have been going down over the last few years."

As a researcher who has studied the phenomenon of gang violence in Europe, Mares said he finds that the level of gang-related violence in the United States is much higher. "In Europe, it is much lower because there is less access to guns," he said.

That fact does not, said Mares, mean that gun control is the easy solution.

"I am conflicted with gun control," he said. "I agree that the regular citizen should have the right to own guns. The real problem in this country is that it is so easy to access them

## Aldemaro Romero College Talk

on the streets. Most guns used in crimes are acquired illegally."

Mares also said he does not believe that simply sending more people to jail is the answer either.

"We cannot prevent gangs from emerging," he said. "Kids are around with too much unstructured time. Currently we have 2.2 million people in U.S. prisons. Policy solutions should address strengthening neighborhoods, education and families. Those are more effective than jail time."

Mares sees a direct correlation between poverty and gang violence. "Most gang members have tried narcotics, but most are not hard core users because that interferes with the way they do business," he said.

He added that a conversation that is currently taking place among experts is whether the decriminalization of the possession and consumption of small quantities of marijuana will lessen violent crime rates.

"In Europe, marijuana use is decriminalized," Mares said. "That means that for gangs in Europe, the sales of narcotics is not relevant." He added that this is a touchy subject in America.

"I would advocate a public health approach to the use of drugs," Mares said. "The American population is still split about legalization of marijuana and for politicians it is a minefield."

Some new technologies are now being put in place in order to prevent and respond to crime more effectively. One of those approaches has been the development of crime mapping, which allows police depart-

ments like the one in St. Louis to use their resources more efficiently.

"Criminals are creatures of habit," said Mares. "They have a 'comfort zone' where they like to operate. We use maps to figure out where police resources should be put in place."

Another area of work he has been involved in is the use of an acoustic gunshot detection system as a tool to reduce crime. "These are microphones that are placed in specific locations to pinpoint, by triangulation, the exact location where shots are fired so we can send responders immediately," Mares explained. "This system is currently in place in St. Louis and about 20 or 30 other cities in the U.S. But the system is expensive. To cover an area of two to three square miles you need to invest between a half-million to one million dollars in equipment and maintenance."

When asked about what new projects he is working on, Mares said that he is looking at the correlation between weather and crime. He is finding that the hotter the weather, the greater the incidence of violent crimes, particularly crimes of "passion."

"I will be comparing the relationship of criminality between St. Louis and Miami and weather," Mares said about his upcoming research. "In Miami, hot conditions are more consistent while St. Louis is more seasonal. I also want to look at the possible relationship between rain and crime, since it appears that the more rainy days, the crime index is also slightly higher."

*Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at [College\\_Arts\\_Sciences@siue.edu](mailto:College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu).*



Shan Lu /SIUE

Professor Dennis Mares, a Netherlands native, on the SIUE campus.