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Chicago's top cop on Trump's 'Feds' tweet: 'I have no idea what he's talking about'

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President Trump's threat to "send in the Feds" to combat crime in Chicago is stirring consternation among law enforcement and policing experts, who say the president's comments could be interpreted as anything from sending in the National Guard to upping federal funding for law enforcement.

Chicago police Superintendent Eddie Johnson responded Wednesday to Mr. Trump's tweet about the city's "horrible 'carnage,'" telling the Chicago Tribune that he was baffled by the comments.

"The statement is so broad. I have no idea what he's talking about," said Superintendent Johnson, adding that he would oppose any plan that included deploying the National Guard to quell the violence.

In the Tuesday night tweet, Mr. Trump cited 228 shootings and 42 homicides in Chicago so far this year — statistics showcased earlier that night on Fox News. White House press secretary Sean Spicer sought to clarify the president's comments Wednesday.

"What he wants to do is provide the resources of the federal government. It can span a bunch of things," Mr. Spicer said, citing federal aid that could be requested by the Illinois governor or provided to the local U.S. Attorney's Office.

Mr. Spicer said the next step in addressing the city's violence will involve a dialogue with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel "to figure out what a path forward can be."

Mr. Emanuel, in a Tuesday night interview that aired before Mr. Trump's Twitter comments, said the federal government does have a role in helping combat crime — citing measures he supports such as federal gun control measures, funding to support the hiring of police officers, investments in after-school or mentoring programs in impoverished neighborhoods, or help from federal law enforcement agencies in investigating and prosecuting crimes.

"Over the years, the federal government's stepped back their resources, which we have stepped up," Mr. Emanuel said in the WTTW-TV interview.

Mr. Spicer said he did not believe the Chicago mayor has reached out to the White House since they met during the transition period.

While the federal government can take varied actions to help local police combat crime, policing experts say one thing is clear — the federal government can't simply take over as the chief law enforcement agency in the city.

“The feds don't do policing,” said Daniel Nagin, a criminologist and professor of Public Policy and Statistics at Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College. “A critical ingredient to getting this under control is going to require aggressive police action. Only the Chicago police can do that.”

Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice, said the federal law enforcement agencies could all be asked to step up coordination with the Chicago Police Department, and likely have already done so. He suggested the U.S. Marshals Service, for instance, could prioritize cases in order to help locate potential witnesses to unsolved homicides in an effort to make arrests, while the Federal Bureau of Investigation or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives might add extra resources in the Chicago area to target illegal gun runners or wanted offenders police believe are tied to ongoing violence in order to get them off the street.

“This has already been going on to some extent though, so when Mr. Trump says, ‘I will take further action,’ it's not immediately clear what he means,” Mr. Lynch said. “If it goes beyond, then it could be very disturbing in terms of what he perceives the role of the federal government to be in situations like this.”

James Pasco, executive director of the National Fraternal Order of Police, said Wednesday that he interprets Mr. Trump's comments as directing more federal law enforcement to assist Chicago police, not instructing them to take over.

“The feds can be tremendously helpful, and we support the president's call for assistance,” said Mr. Pasco, noting that Chicago police have the principal responsibility and are best equipped to lead the efforts to reduce crime. “They are there to assist, not to take over.”