

Platteville panel analyzes Ferguson shooting, response

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PLATTEVILLE, Wis. — While a grand jury deliberates the fate of a white police officer who fatally shot a black teenager in August, a four-person panel in Platteville discussed the issues surrounding the Ferguson, Mo., case that's garnered national attention.

University of Wisconsin-Platteville hosted "Making Sense of Ferguson: Race, Police and Community Rights" tonight in Doudna Hall. More than 300 people attended the forum sponsored by the UW-P College of Liberal Arts and Education's ethnic studies program, social and environmental justice program and department of criminal justice.

Patrick Solar, an instructor of criminal justice, doubts the grand jury will indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot Michael Brown on Aug. 9.

A county grand jury is expected to announce any day whether it will indict Wilson, and federal authorities also are investigating the shooting for potential civil rights violations. Concerned about reactions if Wilson is not indicted, police are bracing for protests, which previously turned violent and destructive, and Missouri's governor has activated the state National Guard.

However, he thinks Brown's family will file a civil lawsuit on the grounds that Michael's civil rights were violated.

Solar, a retired Illinois police chief, speculated about what Wilson knew.

"Brown was described as a robbery suspect," he said, adding Wilson had "reasonable suspicion" to stop Brown.

Solar wondered if the used of deadly force was justified. He pointed out the "robbery suspect" allegedly stole a package Swisher Sweet cigars and questioned whether people should be shot for that.

Solar discussed the U.S. Constitution's Fourth Amendment that protects people against unreasonable searches and seizures of people or property by police or other government entities.

"Justice means following procedure. Unjust results (occur) when cops screw up," he said. "Injustice is the fact that thousands of black men are shot in America."

Panelist Frank King, assistant professor of ethnic studies, discussed the militarization of the police force.

"Police are seen as being friends, part of the community, but that doesn't always pan out in communities of color where they're often seen as a threat," he said.

That "threat" didn't help with the activation of the federal 1033 program that gave \$5 billion worth of military equipment to U.S. police departments, King added.

“The militarization of the police, the absolute authority over people, was a major contradiction of what our beliefs are in the ‘land of the free,’” he said. “The military fights the enemy of the state. The police serve people.”

Rosalyn Broussard, professor of political science, traced America’s history, particularly the South, and its poor treatment of blacks. She referenced a particularly graphic torture and lynching of a black man in Texas and the Jim Crow laws.

“Police enforced the South’s segregation laws,” Broussard said, adding that the war on drugs became “a war on black, brown and poor people.”

Nor is there often community policing in black communities.

“When police come around only to arrest, and the majority of the police are white, you have a bigger problem,” Broussard said. “The justice system is very unjust and breeds mistrust and unresolved anger. The next step is America must move forward, and how do we resolve that anger?”

The Associated Press contributed