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Opposing Protests Hit Madison streets after police shooting

MADISON, Wis. – Hundreds of people protesting the shooting of an unarmed biracial man by a white police officer linked arms and blocked traffic for nearly an hour Wednesday, but otherwise maintained the peaceful demonstrations called for by the man's family.

"My son was never a violent man, and I don't want to see violence in his name," Andrea Irwin, Tony Robinson's mother, said to marchers before they started on a route that included a stop at the state Department of Corrections headquarters to protest black incarceration rates.

As they reached those offices, protesters blocked three lanes and an entrance ramp to a nearby highway. They chanted, "The whole damn system is guilty as hell!" and demanded the state put less money into prisons. They then marched to the gates of the governor's mansion, with police estimating their number at 800 to 1,000.

The protesters tied a banner across the gates that read "black lives matter" and also posted a list of demands.

Meanwhile, a separate rally to show support for police drew hundreds of people to a law enforcement memorial at the Capitol. Some wore shirts that said "We stand with the Madison Police Department," and they observed a moment of silence for officers killed in the line of duty. Police estimated the crowd at that rally at 250.

Ron Torrisi of Madison held an American flag at the event.

"People think our police department is losing credibility, and I think it's important for us just to be there to support them," he said. But Torrisi said he was optimistic that Madison would not see the violence that followed a similar shooting last year in Ferguson, Missouri.

Lori Schroedl, the wife of a Madison police officer, said she came to the rally because "everybody's lives matter."

"Until all the investigation is out, the final story will never be told," she said. "You have to wait for the investigation."

Near the end of the pro-police rally, a woman looking on began chanting "Tony Robinson!" with her fist in the air and was soon joined by four others. Some supporters of the police turned to face them but most in the crowd either did not hear them or ignored the chants. As the five continued yelling, the police backers began singing the national anthem.

Police Chief Mike Koval — who had spent about 45 minutes at the other march just three miles away — mingled in the crowd, posing for pictures and thanking organizers for their efforts. He credited Robinson's family with setting the peaceful tone by consistently urging there be no violence.

Robinson, 19, was fatally shot by police officer Matt Kenny early Friday evening after Kenny was summoned to a call that the young man was jumping in and out of traffic and had assaulted someone. The officer heard a disturbance and forced his way into an apartment where Robinson had gone. Authorities said Kenny fired after Robinson assaulted him.

Koval said he spoke with Kenny on Wednesday.

"He's doing as best as he can do under these circumstances," Koval said. "It's hard to read over the phone, but he's buoyed by the support of family and friends."

Gov. Scott Walker, a likely Republican presidential candidate, called Irwin on Wednesday to express his condolences. Koval had already publicly expressed sorrow. Earlier in the day, the governor met for about 30 minutes with a liaison for the family, Boys and Girls Club of Dane County leader Michael Johnson.

"(Walker) talked about his own kids and said that he was grieving for the family and he also talked about empathy and our state showing empathy toward this family," said Johnson.

The governor's spokeswoman Laurel Patrick called the meeting with Johnson "positive and productive."

Madison city officials, most notably the mayor and police chief — who are both white — have been outspoken in supporting the rights of those upset over the shooting. Mayor Paul Soglin has repeatedly said that the unrest of Ferguson was not inevitable in Madison.

The rallies come as the state Department of Criminal Investigation, a part of the Wisconsin Department of Justice, continues its independent review of the shooting as is required under state law whenever a police officer kills someone.