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Madison Shooting prompts call for racial equity

MADISON, Wis. — In the wake of a police shooting that left an unarmed black teen dead, officials in Madison say they welcome discussions about how to overcome the continued racial disparity that plagues the city.

Racial tension is heating up in Madison after the death of 19-year-old Tony Robinson, who was shot Friday night by Officer Matt Kenny, a 12-year veteran of the Madison Police Department.

Two demonstrations were held Wednesday in response to the shooting; additional rallies are planned in the coming days.

"This isn't just about violence against people of color," said Matthew Braunginn, a member of the activist group Young, Gifted and Black. "This conversation should be about changing policy and changing society."

Braunginn, a Madison native and graduate of Purdue University, was one of more than an estimated 600 people who demonstrated Wednesday in front of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections headquarters in Madison to demand justice for Robinson.

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Matthew Braunginn, member of Young, Gifted and Black

The protest was sponsored by three groups: Young, Gifted and Black; Wisconsin Jobs Now; and Youth Empowered in the Struggle, or YES.

In addition to seeking justice for the fallen teen, the rally was organized as a way to call attention to social, educational and economic inequities for people of color, Braunginn said.

"We have to be careful not to be too focused on reacting to the actions of the police," Braunginn said. "This is about much more than this (shooting). I'm still fighting the same fight my father fought 20 years ago. Race inequity hasn't gotten better; in fact, it's gotten worse."

The tragedy began Friday night when Kenny was among officers responding to a 911 call saying someone had been jumping in front of cars. Kenny pursued the suspect to an apartment, heard a commotion inside and went in, said Madison police Chief Mike Koval. Koval said Kenny shot Robinson, who is bi-racial — though police and an advocacy group have identified him as black — after Robinson attacked the officer, who was punched in the head.

On Monday, in an online blog post to Robinson's family, Koval apologized for the shooting, a move he said was sharply criticized by members of other police departments. "A young man is dead; he lost his life," Koval said. "It is a tragedy for the family. It is a tragedy for the community. I am apologizing for the loss of a life, not the actions of my officer. There is a difference."

A second demonstration at Wisconsin Law Enforcement Memorial was organized to show support for Madison police officers.

Adrian Alan, an officer with the Madison Police Department, called Kenny a "skilled officer" with a compassion for life.

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Chief Mike Koval, Madison Police Department

"Matt is one of the many fine officers I am proud to work alongside," said Alan, who did not attend the rally because he was scheduled to work. "On countless occasions, Matt has put his own safety at risk to come to the aid of complete strangers who needed help, and I have no doubt that's what he did on Friday night."

The Wisconsin Department of Criminal Investigation is investigating the incident, which is the third officer-involved shooting in Madison since April, Koval said.

A makeshift memorial of candles, flowers, signs and stuffed animals continues to grow outside the home where Robinson was killed including a poster with the words,

"Ferguson to Madison: Black lives matter."

But unlike the unrest in Ferguson, Mo., after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in August, demonstrations in Madison have so far been peaceful.



Protesters gather for a rally at Worthington Park in Madison, Wis., on Wednesday, March 11, 2015. (Photo: Paul S. Howell, Special for USA TODAY)

On Monday, the crowd at the Capitol included many students from Madison East High School and the University of Wisconsin. Organizers urged the crowd to be peaceful — and the rally was, local media reported.

"We don't want violence," said Maynard Jackson, a 49-year-old Madison resident who lives just blocks from where Robinson was shot. "We want the violence to end. We want to start a conversation that should have been started long ago, that black lives — all lives — matter."

In Monday's blog post, Koval acknowledged that trust in the police department has been tested by the shooting.

"Remember, we live here, we work here, we go to church here, we're your neighbors, our kids go to school with your kids, and we all want the best of what life has to offer our families," Koval wrote. "The police are the public and the public are the police."

Koval said he will focus on rebuilding trust in the community and a continued commitment to community policing.

"We don't want to be known for this incident, for this tragedy," Koval said. "We want to continue to build trust and partnerships within the community, to listen to the concerns of the people we serve. That is what we are here to do."



A group of about 40 protesters march eastward on East Washington Avenue in Madison, Wis., on Wednesday, March 11, 2015, blocking four lanes of traffic en route to a larger protest at Worthington Park. The demonstrations were in response to the shooting death of Tony Robinson, 19, on Friday, March 6, 2015. (Photo: Paul S. Howell, Special for USA TODAY)

Madison Mayor Paul Soglin said the community needs to do more to ensure people of color have equal access to jobs and education to combat racial disparity.

"The real tragedy here is that we know what works," said Soglin. "We need education. We need child care. We need to start early to fix this. What we need is for members of the corporate community to reach out, make jobs available, and help African Americans succeed."