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Colloquium focuses on racial profiling

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Though often thought of by many as an unfortunate occurrence of the past, research conducted by Oakland University Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Criminal Justice Program Jay Meehan indicates that racial profiling of African-Americans by the police continues to occur in white suburban areas.

Meehan presented his research findings, before a full audience in the Oakland Center's Gold Rooms, in a lecture titled "Racial Profiling and the Police" on Feb. 7 at the first President's Colloquium of the year.

Meehan said that though racial profiling has occurred across many races and contexts – for example, since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks many Arab-Americans have been targeted while boarding planes – he chose to review African-Americans who have been stopped while driving by police for no other reason than because they are black.

Meehan began by stating that racial profiling more than likely was an unintended result of institutional discriminations, and a link could be seen to America's war on drugs in the 1980's, which focused disproportionately on African-Americans in urban areas. Meehan also pointed out that racial profiling is a result of race and place, or a notion carried by a police officer of "who belongs where."

Statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice indicate that African-American drivers are more likely to be stopped, searched and ticketed by the police. But due to a lack of police statistical evidence, profiling is difficult to measure – Meehan estimated that 25 to 50 percent of all police traffic stops are not recorded. This led him to his primary research question: "Do police proactively surveil black drivers and stop them at a higher rate?"

The answer, he discovered, is yes. Meehan conducted his research – in cooperation with the police – with a team including his colleagues and students. They began by compiling over 3,700 in-car police computer queries made by over 1,000 officers where the officer proactively chose to run a driver's license plate. They also compiled data by undertaking a roadway composition study, involving driving eight routes for three-hour periods, five times per day for two weeks. This resulted in over 6,000 observations of traffic stops in 35 sorties. Meehan's findings indicated that black drivers were more than twice as likely as whites to be proactively queried, and this disproportionate ratio rose higher as black drivers ventured into more white, residential, suburban neighborhoods.

Meehan also examined proposed solutions to this problem. Prohibiting profiling by passing legislation, he said, has shown to be more symbolic than substantive. Mandatory recordings of traffic stops are not enforced enough. In-car police cameras have been used, but this represents a misplaced belief in technology as a solution to a social problem. And cultural sensitivity training misses the underlying structural problem that produces the racial problem. Even increasing the diversity of the police forces has not solved the problem, Meehan said, because his research found that black officers were just as likely as white officers to stop black drivers.

"We want to blame the police, but this is not all about them," Meehan said. "Our approach is that these patterns reflect that we live in a racially segregated society. How the police conduct themselves is particularly important, but this is also about attitudes formed in our daily contact with minorities in society."

Meehan received a standing ovation following his presentation, which concluded with an emotional anecdote about his adopted son. When a white police officer stopped his son, who is black, in a traffic stop in a suburban neighborhood, the officer asked him, "What are you doing so far north of Eight Mile Road?"

"It's a nice wrap-up to see it presented before such a diverse crowd," said Tiffany Dorozenko, a senior sociology and criminal justice major who attended the colloquium. "Everyone seemed to have a positive response to it. What's most impressive is that it's really the first study of its kind, and done in such an in-depth manner."

Ken Corr, a worker for the Oakland County Road Commission, said that as a black man, he understands Meehan's passion for the subject.

"It takes a personal encounter with the subject of profiling to have a true understanding of it," Corr said. "It was a wonderful, in-depth presentation on a difficult subject. I think in order to solve this problem education has to be first. This presentation was a very poignant first step."

A follow-up discussion on Meehan's lecture was held the following day in the Oakland Center's Fireside Lounge, with Meehan and Lieutenant Mel Gilroy of the Oakland University Police Department on the panel. Meehan gave a synopsis of his research before taking questions from the audience. Gilroy responded to several questions by saying that the law and its application should be "color-blind."

"After 30 years in law enforcement, I feel there has been a substantial improvement in law enforcement," Gilroy said. "Community policing is really keeping the lines of communication open between the police and the public and helping the public understand how and why the police conduct their business."

The President's Colloquium Series at Oakland University was established in 1995 to showcase achievements of Oakland University researchers, to promote communication and collaboration among scientists and to recognize the outstanding work of 'Nobel Class' scientists. The next series presentation is March 13, when Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Virinder Moudgil presents breakthroughs in his research on breast cancer.

SUMMARY

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