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OPINION

Our Criminal Justice System on Trial

Needed reforms a lesson of Ferguson

BY MARC H. MORIAL

The funeral is over. The protests have died down. The lax and listless wheels of justice in Ferguson, Missouri are beginning to turn. A St. Louis County grand jury has convened to consider whether to bring charges against Officer Darren Wilson for the Aug. 9 shooting death of 18-year-old, unarmed Michael Brown.

As I have said before, I have never witnessed a situation more poorly handled than this one. While we are pleased that the grand jury has begun its work, questions of fairness in the St. Louis County criminal justice system and in the culture of policing in Ferguson continue to



demand answers.

The latest slap in the face to the Ferguson community occurred last month when Missouri State Sen. Jamilah Nasheed, after initially being threatened with arrest, was finally able to deliver a petition with 70,000 signatures to the office of St. Louis County Prosecutor Robert McCulloch.

The petition calls for McCulloch to recuse himself from the Michael Brown case because of his close ties to the police and previous questions of impartiality. McCulloch's father, brother, uncle and a cousin were all police officers. In addition, in 2000, McCulloch refused to prosecute two white police officers for the shooting deaths of two unarmed black men who it was later determined were not advancing towards the officers.

Some wonder if McCulloch's decision to release the video of a convenience store altercation

involving Michael Brown was a blatant attempt to taint a potential jury pool. As of this writing, the prosecutor has failed to arrest or charge Officer Wilson who remains on paid administrative leave. McCulloch has vowed to stay on the case unless Gov. Nixon orders him to recuse himself. Established legal procedures and the concerns of the Ferguson community continue to be ignored.

The heavy-handed, militaristic tactics employed by Ferguson and St. Louis County police in response to citizen protests following the killing of Michael Brown are also a powerful wake-up call.

While there were isolated aggressive acts by a few rogue protesters, the majority of protests and protesters were peaceful. Yet, the use of tear gas, stun grenades and armored vehicles was reminiscent of ugly police confrontations with citizens dur-

ing peaceful voting rights demonstrations in the south during the 1960s.

It is unthinkable that we find those tactics acceptable today. That is why the National Urban League last month joined a coalition of more than a dozen national civil rights organizations in issuing "A Unified Statement to Promote Reform and Stop Police Abuse."

Our statement proposes a number of police reforms in Ferguson and elsewhere that are designed to ensure a greater reliance on community policing and that police departments are more reflective of the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of the communities they serve. These reforms include:

An independent and comprehensive federal investigation by the Department of Justice of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown; a comprehensive federal review and reporting of excessive use

of force generally against youth and people of color and the development of national use of force standards; the universal use of dash cameras in police vehicles and police officer body-worn cameras; and taking concrete steps to ensure that federal military weapons do not end up in the hands of local law enforcement.

Make no mistake about it – in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown, the criminal justice system in America is on trial. Despite the tremendous civil rights progress we have made over the past 50 years, we will never truly "overcome" until we honestly acknowledge and address the insidious vestiges of racial segregation and dehumanization that remain in this country, and unfortunately, in law enforcement.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Mascot Skews Reality about the First People

Decreasing negative stereotypes

BY JENNIFER VARENCHIK



Until recently, I never really paid much attention to the Native American mascot issue. "It's not my fight," I thought.

I live in Los Angeles County, home of the largest urban Native American and Alaska Native population in the United States. When I first moved to L.A. in the 1990s, I was constantly being asked if I was Latina. Sometimes people would get upset because I wasn't able to speak Spanish.

Occasionally, I would resort to sticking two fingers behind my head to act as a feather to illustrate being American Indian. Unfortunately, that's all I had to reach for to explain my heritage. Thinking back on those times is what has helped push me to get involved with the campaign to change the Washington football

team name.

I grew up in a small, picture-perfect northern California town. I was adopted by Caucasian parents and raised in a loving family,

but the one thing I didn't have was exposure to my Native American culture.

I remember glimpsing major sporting events on television and seeing fans dressed up in the stands. As a child, I wondered if that was how my people dressed. How was I to know? I didn't have any Native American references around me.

Sure, I learned tidbits about Native American history in school, but nothing about modern Native American life. My exposure to my culture as a child was fans on television pretending to be Indians and tragic history lessons in school.

And you know what? That is all most of America has been exposed to as well. Just add casinos, and that's what most non-Native people know about our culture.

In L.A., I began working for a Native American nonprofit organization that helps Native youth. I wanted them to be exposed to the real Native role models. We put posters of great past and modern-day Native leaders on walls. We purchased books and DVDs that positively portrayed

Native people, so the youth could see that Native Americans are more than history lessons and mascots.

A few years later, I had the privilege of being able to travel to Indian reservations around the country with another Native nonprofit group. I learned about different tribal traditions, met many wonderful people and grew a deeper appreciation for my culture. I was able to participate in various ceremonies and to hear speeches by some of the same people we had posters of at my first job. I was able to connect with many elders, tribal leaders and community organizers about what life was like on their reservation.

This brings me back to why I am involved with the mascot

issue today. Now, I know better. Most of America doesn't.

In 2005, the American Psychological Association called for an end to Native American mascots, citing research that the presence of these mascots results in lower self-esteem among Native youth and increased negative attitudes by non-Native youth.

A lot of the low self-esteem and high levels of suicide among Native youth go back to not being able to see positive portrayals of role models in the media. Many Native people know that most of America doesn't really know much about us because we're not seen, especially on mainstream media.

With our culture being so wide and diverse, we want you to know more than the limited knowledge that comes from rooting for a team with a Native mascot.

Each area of this country has a different climate, and the first people here learned to adapt and live off the land. The Native people of the Northwest lived a

very different lifestyle than the people of the Southwest. But with mascot imagery, everyone thinks all Natives are from the plains area. With more than 550 tribes in this country, these limiting images automatically leave out a large amount of Native Americans.

Shouldn't we get to choose how we are known? Me, I don't want to be known for feathers, tomahawks and war paint. I want to be able to say I'm Native American and the likely response is, "Oh, the first people."

Until I can tell people I am Native American and receive instant recognition, I will continue to do what I can to decrease negative stereotypes.

Please join me in this struggle. Let's create a new understanding of what it means to be Native American.

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