

## Racial Profiling Forum in West Hartford Looks at the Consequences

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By Mark Zaretsky, Register Staff [mzaretsky@nhregister.com](mailto:mzaretsky@nhregister.com)

WEST HARTFORD — Racial and ethnic profiling has real costs, and laws that enable it often have unplanned consequences, four experts involved in studying and combatting profiling said Wednesday night in a forum prompted in part by the East Haven police profiling investigation.

While the event was billed, “Racial Profiling: Islamophobia, East Haven, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” much of the discussion wandered far afield from the East Haven federal investigation, touching on discrimination against Muslim Americans, the federal government’s controversial new Secure Communities program and the recent shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida.

Racial profiling — including Secure Communities, which essentially deputizes local police as immigration agents — erodes confidence in law enforcement, said Michael Lawlor, former East Haven state representative and now undersecretary for criminal justice policy and planning for the state Office of Policy and Management.

Beyond that, “profiling makes us stupid,” said fellow speaker Mongi Dhaouadi, executive director of the Connecticut Chapter of the Council of American-Islamic Relations, who said viewing someone as suspicious because of their ethnic or racial appearance might cause a law enforcement officer or agent to miss other clues that something is amiss.

Lawlor and Dhaouadi were among four speakers at the forum, which the Greater Hartford Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union sponsored along with the St. Joseph College School of Humanities & Social Science.

New Haven resident Khalilah Brown-Dean, associate professor of political science at Quinnipiac University, talked about how when she first arrived in Connecticut as a “newly-minted Ph.D.,” she and her husband were looking for a place to live.

One landlord opened the door and immediately told her that they didn’t accept Section 8 vouchers, said Brown-Dean, who is black.

Speaker Hannah Benton, staff attorney for the Center for Children’s Advocacy in Hartford, talked about the different expectations that law enforcement and those in schools sometimes have of students of different backgrounds.

One black child she’s worked with, “Tommy,” 9, is “an excellent speller,” she said. But he was charged with third-degree assault for having an altercation with another student that many people might simply write off as garden variety horsing around. “Through my interaction with Tommy, I have learned that the police officer in Tommy’s school has handcuffed him” at other times to try to modify his behavior, said Benton, who lives in Hartford.

The problem “is that this 9-year-old is not viewed as an excellent speller, not as a future college graduate,” she said. “He’s viewed as a potential criminal. ... Now, if we viewed Tommy as a future college graduate, would we think it’s OK that he’s being handcuffed in school? I don’t think so,” Benton said.

“We think the Secure Communities” program “is a public policy that is going to have many unintended consequences,” said Lawlor. “It basically turns the local police department into the immigration police” and “will erode the trust” in police of people who might otherwise call police as both victims and witnesses.

“That’s why Chief (Dean) Esserman” in New Haven has been clear that New Haven police are not the immigration police “and that’s why Governor (Dannel) Malloy directed our Department of Correction to not honor ICE detainees ... unless there is clear, objective evidence that they are dangerous,” Lawlor said.

Todd Fernow, professor of law and director of the Criminal Law Clinic at the University of Connecticut School of Law, was the moderator. About 50 people attended.

Dhaouadi, who lives in New London, said that prior to Sept. 11, 2001, “the Muslim community didn’t even understand what profiling means,” even though the largest share of its people are black. But after 9/11, hundreds of Muslims were rounded up, he said.

While profiling is understandable following a situation such as 9/11, “We have to resist the urge to do it,” Dhaouadi said. “Let’s agree that profiling people based on their religion is wrong. Let’s state that in the law. Let’s be honest.”

Brown-Dean said racial profiling “does not require that you be racist,” only that you discriminate between various people based on their race. That doesn’t mean that people shouldn’t notice someone’s race, but only that they shouldn’t be treated better or worse because of it, she said.

Raising the issue of Trayvon Martin’s shooting, Brown-Dean said that in situations involving minority youths, “we tell people what not to wear,” such as “hoodies” or low-slung pants, and tell them “that will keep you safe,” she said. “That’s not true.”

Benton said “data tells us that school-based arrests are very much disproportionately children of color.” Data also suggests that “it’s not just an urban issue,” and that “in suburban and rural communities, youth of color are even more disproportionately arrested.”

“Children I work with tell me they’re afraid to go to school, because they’re afraid that they’ll get arrested,” she said. But some communities are working to consciously avoid such profiling and one that did so, Manchester, “reduced school-based arrests by 85 percent.”