The high price of alleged police misconduct

By Krissy Clark

August 12, 2014

The FBI is investigating possible civil rights violations after a police officer in suburban St. Louis fatally shot an unarmed teenager on Saturday. The death of Michael Brown, 18, stirred a night of unrest in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, where the incident happened.

Many of the costs these kinds of cases of alleged police misconduct can have on a community are impossible to quantify — in terms of loss of life, and loss of confidence in civic institutions.

"The greatest cost is loss of faith in the police department, which then cause crime to spiral out of control," says Dick Simpson, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

But there are also some very specific costs to a community, with dollar amounts attached. For example, a string of notorious police brutality cases in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, connected to one police lieutenant, John Burge, cost the city of Chicago more than $100 million, says Simpson.

The money went to court fees, lawyer fees, and multi-million dollar payouts to some victims.

As Tim Lynch, director of the Cato institute's Project on Criminal Justice, points out, all that money has to come from some place. "The tax payers of these various cities pay the costs," he says.

The money usually comes through a city's general fund, says Professor Simpson. Meaning, if a city has to spend a lot on a big police misconduct case, "it diminishes the ability to provide services to citizens, and it raises their property taxes."

According to a review of public records by the Cato Institute, American cities spent at least $347 million between 2009 and 2010 on settlements and judgments related to police misconduct. Lynch says the amount could be even higher. Many municipalities do not make information on lawsuits involving police misconduct publicly available.