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News / Canada

Seven native youth left for high school and never returned: Finally, an inquest

Teens who left remote reserves to attend high school in Thunder Bay died in circumstances never fully explored — until now.

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The family of Jordan Wabasse, dad Derek Jacob and mom Bernice Jacob in the background, listen to prayers during a memorial service for the teen in 2011 beside the Kaministiquia River, where his body was found.

By: **Marco Chown Oved** Staff Reporter, Published on Wed Sep 16 2015

After years of delay, a single inquest will finally investigate the deaths of seven aboriginal youths forced to leave their remote reserves in northern Ontario to attend high school in Thunder Bay, the province's chief coroner announced Wednesday.

The five-month inquest, called by Dr. Dirk Huyer, will start Oct. 5 after being stalled for three years over a fight to [improve aboriginal representation on juries](#).

Reggie Bushie, Jethro Anderson and Jordan Wabasse, all 15 years old, along with Kyle Morriseau, 17, and Curran Strang, 18, all apparently drowned in the waters leading to Lake Superior, while Paul Panacheese, 21, and Robyn Harper, 18, allegedly died of overdoses.

A [2011 Star report](#) on the lack of investigation into the students' deaths, all of which occurred since 2000, prompted the inquest, but the delay left many of the families wondering if they would ever learn the truth about their children's deaths.

"In 2000, we lost Jethro Anderson, who was only 15 years old. Since then, six more young people have been lost." said Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), a federation of 49 aboriginal communities spread across northern Ontario.

For years, [the NAN has pushed for a joint inquest](#) into the deaths of the seven young people, all of whom came from NAN communities at least 200 kilometres from Thunder Bay — and some as far as 700 kilometres.

"We are hopeful that this inquest will produce meaningful solutions that keep our children safe and allow them to access education without fear of tragic endings," Fiddler

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said.

The inquest has a double mandate, to investigate the circumstances of the individual deaths and [make recommendations](#) to address the systemic risks of sending youth to school in faraway cities.

Because many small, isolated reserves in the north do not have high schools, families are forced to send their children away to Thunder Bay, where specialized First Nations high schools do their best to integrate teens, many of whom have never before left their tight-knit communities.

This compelled migration reveals a fundamental inequality in our society, says Julian Falconer, a lawyer representing NAN.

“Why should families have to send their children hundreds of kilometres to attend high school? Why should communities end up so underfunded that they have to lose their children in order for their children to get basic education? And what kind of supports exist out there once they have to send their children hundreds of kilometres away? These are key questions,” Falconer said.

Police have never thoroughly investigated the deaths, Falconer said, heaping insult onto injury for grieving families.

“This case, sadly, is a poster child for the notion that First Nations are less than worthy victims. This is a very sad narrative about families who simply experience the worst the system has to offer in terms of investigating their children’s deaths.”

While they have waited for answers, parents’ fears have grown, but they have little choice but to continue sending their children south.

“People who live in the remote communities, their children have to access high schools by being sent out of the community. And with the reoccurring deaths, it’s literally become something parents are afraid to do,” said Toronto lawyer Christa Big Canoe, director at Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto, which is representing family members of six of the seven youths.

“The youths go to school to get a better education, to increase opportunity, to bring good skills back home — and the concern is: How safe are they when they’re there?”

Big Canoe and Falconer agree that the inquest is a positive sign that fundamental issues

of inequality facing aboriginal people are finally being taken seriously.

“Whether we’re talking about missing and murdered indigenous women, or youth who don’t have equal access to education and as a result find themselves exposed to harm, these are big issues that First Nations and indigenous people live with daily,” said Big Canoe.

Falconer added: “It’s important to respect the fact that the office of the chief coroner has ordered this multi-barreled inquest, that seven families are finally going to have their day in court, and that the system is working to attempt to remedy what have been terrible inequities in terms of close scrutinies of deaths.”

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