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Indigenous Cases Treated By Police As 'Less Than Worthy Victims,' Lawyer Says

CBC | By CBC News

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An inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students in Thunder Bay, Ont., is providing a preview of concerns that could be raised at a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women, says a lawyer for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

The inquest, one of the largest in Ontario's history, started on Oct. 5 and is scheduled to run to March 2016.

It's looking at the deaths of students who died between 2000 and 2011 while attending high school in Thunder Bay. Few remote First Nations in northern Ontario have schools that go beyond Grade 10.

"Sadly there's a theme — less than worthy victims," lawyer Julian Falconer said after cross-examining an officer with the Thunder Bay police at the inquest.

"It's a theme that ties into not just this case but the entire picture around missing and murdered indigenous women and girls: less than worthy victims, I can sadly say this is part of that bigger picture," he said.

The retired police officer testified at the inquest that Thunder Bay police did not launch a criminal investigation into the death of Jethro Anderson until six days after he was reported missing in October 2000.

The body of the 15-year-old was pulled from the Kaministiquia River in Thunder Bay on Nov. 11, 2000, nearly two weeks after he disappeared.

Anderson, from Kasabonika Lake First Nation, was staying with his aunt, Dora Morris, while he attended the First Nations high school in Thunder Bay.

Morris told the inquest that she called Thunder Bay police about her nephew's disappearance within hours of him missing curfew, but her concerns were not taken seriously.

"I called every day just to ask if they had any leads," Morris told CBC News in an interview after she testified. "And every time I called, the answer was always, 'He's just out there partying like any native kid,' those kind of comments."

The comments, along with a police news release saying no foul play was suspected in Anderson's death sent out prior to a post-mortem, show police had "tunnel vision" when it came to the investigation, Falconer said at the inquest.

"The police have a tendency to default to a drowning and liquor scenario, literally, almost automatically," Falconer said of the investigations of five students whose bodies were pulled from local rivers, as well as other similar recent deaths of First Nations people.

Detective Sgt. Allan Shorrock, now retired, denied the allegation that investigators he supervised had tunnel vision.

Morris said she still does not believe the police conclusion that her nephew drowned, but she's uncertain whether the inquest will solve the mystery she believes still exists surrounding his death.

'Start searching right away'

She hopes, however, that by speaking out changes will be made to keep First Nations youth safe in the city.

"Like if things happen like this again, that they would start searching right away and do investigations," she said.


Falconer, who represents the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, said the revelations that have already come out at the First Nations student deaths inquest point to the need for a regional component in a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women.

"Thunder Bay is a perfect example," he said. "We need to have a local process for identifying the deaths and asking the kinds of tough questions that were asked today, [because] aboriginal communities continue to be concerned that when something happens to their people, it's not treated with the same gravity or importance."

In their election platform, the Liberals committed to "immediately" launch a national public inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in Canada.

The party said it would seek recommendations for governments, law enforcement and others to help "solve these crimes and prevent future ones." It also promised to spend \$40 million on the study over two years.

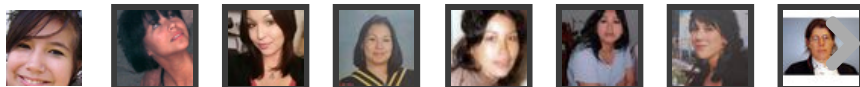
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