

Jurors: Deaths of three aboriginal youths accidental; four undetermined

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Colin Perkel, The Canadian Press
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The deaths of four young aboriginals who moved from their remote northern Ontario reserves to attend high school in Thunder Bay, Ont., occurred in an undetermined manner, an inquest jury decided Tuesday.

Three other deaths examined at the months-long inquest were deemed accidental, the packed courtroom heard.

Jethro Anderson, 15, Curran Strang, 18, Robyn Harper, 19, Paul Panacheese, 21, Reggie Bushie, 15, Kyle Morrisseau, 17 and Jordan Wabasse, also 15, all died between November 2000 and May 2011.

"All seven were beloved children who died tragically and prematurely and lost the opportunity to lead their own lives, raise their own families and make their own valuable contribution," said presiding coroner, Dr. David Eden.

The death of Panacheese, who collapsed at his boarding house, was found to be undetermined. Harper was found dead of acute alcohol poisoning at her boarding home the morning after she went out drinking with friends. She had been in the city just two days. Her death was ruled an accident.

The drowned bodies of the other five were all found in or near rivers in the city. In four of the drowning cases, alcohol played a role.

The deaths of Anderson, Morrisseau and Wabasse were deemed undetermined -- meaning jurors could not decide how they got into the rivers -- while those of Strang and Bushie were ruled accidental.

Julian Falconer, lawyer for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation from whose communities the young people came, called the verdicts related to some of those who drowned significant.

"'Undetermined' in respect of three of five of the drowning deaths sends a clear message that the police investigations were deeply flawed," Falconer said. "Consequently, tragically, there is no way to rule out that these kids were deliberately killed."

Jurors called for development of policies on dealing with missing students, including the timely filing of missing-person reports, the use of social media in subsequent searches, and training for Thunder Bay police in investigating such cases.

Lawyer Brian Gover, who represented the police, said it's easy to be critical in hindsight but noted the service had already made many improvements in its processes.

"The cases took place over 11 years, and in the course of those 11 years, the Thunder Bay Police Service adapted its response to the problem of missing First Nation youths," Gover said.

In all, jurors made 145 recommendations in 18 broad areas aimed at preventing a recurrence -- most directed at the federal and Ontario governments. They include a call for more funding for aboriginal education with the aim of closing the gap between native and non-native students regarding educational outcomes within 10 years.

"To ensure sufficient and stable funding for First Nations education, Canada and First Nations should jointly develop a new and fully transparent funding framework for First Nations education that is based on actual student needs," jurors recommended.

Other recommendations were aimed at ensuring aboriginal students receive proper supports while at high school in Thunder Bay, including access to substance-abuse treatment and programs. Jurors also called for an end to "runners," people who buy alcohol for under-age drinkers.

The five jurors also recommended educating students on the UN Declaration of the Rights of a Child and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They essentially adopted several of the TRC's recommendations, among them enhancing aboriginal content in the school curriculum.

Reports on the recommendations should happen annually until all have been implemented or rejected, jurors said.

"The findings are crucial to understanding the underlying issues that our youth are faced with when attending school in urban centres," said Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day.

Six of the seven youths went to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, while the seventh attended the Matawa Learning Centre.

The [inquest](#), which began last October, heard from about 150 witnesses.

"There remains much work for all of us to do to ensure indigenous people are treated fairly and with respect for their culture and traditions," Eden said.

Ontario's chief coroner had initially called an inquest into Bushie's death. Like some of the others, he was found drowned in the McIntyre River in 2007. However, the process ground to a halt in 2008 due in part to a legal challenge related to the lack of aboriginal people on coroner's juries that went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.