

Inquest jury on aboriginal youths' deaths says 3 died accidentally, 4 undetermined

The inquest was examining the deaths of seven aboriginal youths between 2000 and 2011 in Thunder Bay, Ont. Five of them drowned in rivers.



Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School students Paul Panacheese, left, and Curran Strang, right, died while in Thunder Bay attending school. (TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO)

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Colin Perkel The Canadian Press

Inquest jurors examining the deaths of seven aboriginal youths in Thunder Bay, Ont., have decided that three of them died accidentally.

The other four deaths — including three found to have drowned — were ruled to be of undetermined cause.

That means jurors could not decide how they got into the rivers where their bodies were found.

The inquest then began hearing a slew of jury recommendations aimed at preventing a recurrence.

Among them, jurors called for more funding for aboriginal education.

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 2000 and 2011.

The youths had all been sent to Thunder Bay from their remote northern Ontario reserves to attend high school.

Six of the seven youths went to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, while the seventh attended the Matawa Learning Centre. Five drowned in rivers in and around Thunder Bay.

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,” he said.

“Consequently, tragically, there is no way to rule out that these kids were deliberately killed.”

The inquest, which began last October under presiding coroner Dr. David Eden, heard from close to 150 witnesses.

Panacheese and Harper were found dead in the homes they were staying in. The death of Panacheese, who collapsed at his boarding house, was found to be undetermined.

Harper was found dead of acute alcohol poisoning in the hallway of her boarding home, the morning after going out drinking with friends. She had been in the city just two days. Her death was ruled an accident.

In four of the five drowning deaths, alcohol is deemed to have played a role.

Jurors ruled the deaths of Anderson, Morrisseau and Wabasse undetermined, while Strang and Bushie were ruled accidental.

Ontario's chief coroner initially called an inquest into Bushie's death. Like some of the others, he was found drowned in the city's 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 juries that went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. The issue was also the subject of a report by former Supreme Court justice Frank Iacobucci.