



## **Thunder Bay police investigate officers' alleged racist Facebook comments**

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The Thunder Bay Police Service is investigating racist comments allegedly posted and promoted online by its officers, marking the second internal police probe launched in Ontario this week into derogatory remarks about indigenous people.

The comments, which appeared on the Chronicle Journal's Facebook page earlier this month, stemmed from a letter-to-the-editor by Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler regarding an allegation that TBPS officers had verbally assaulted a facilitator delivering cross-cultural training earlier this year.

“Give your head a shake Alvin Fiddler. I think it's too foggy to see the truth,” a Facebook user named Rob Steudle wrote on Sept. 17. On Sept. 18, the user followed up by adding: “Natives are killing natives and it's the white mans fault natives are drunk on the street and its white mans fault natives are homeless and its white mans fault and now natives are lying about how they are treated by white men an explanation is given and it's the white men who are lying. Well let's stop giving the natives money and see how that goes.” A Facebook user named Jeff Saunders “liked” the Sept. 18 comment.

In a statement Thursday, the TBPS said a number of comments posted online on Sept. 17 and Sept. 18 are the subject of a Police Services Act investigation by the force's professional standards unit. “It is alleged that these comments had the

involvement of members of the Thunder Bay Police Service,” the statement said, noting the remarks were brought to the force’s attention by a local APTN reporter. “These types of comments are not acceptable. They do not reflect the values of the Thunder Bay Police Service. We would like to apologize to our indigenous community for the hurt these comments may cause.”

No officers are named in the statement, and it is unclear how many members are potentially involved. Investigators have not confirmed that the Facebook accounts are linked to TBPS constables named Rob Steudle and Jeff Saunders, or that they were in control of their accounts when the comments were posted. The Facebook profiles suggest the two users are TBPS officers, and there are TBPS constables with those names on a recent public-sector salary list. Attempts to reach the users through Facebook were unsuccessful.

Earlier this week, the Ottawa Police Service said it was investigating remarks made by one of its officers in the comments section of a local news story about the death of acclaimed Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook, whose body was found in the Rideau River on Sept. 19. Sergeant Chris Hrnchiar asserted that her case was not a homicide, even as the major crimes unit was soliciting tips from the public. It “could be a suicide, she got drunk and fell in the river and drowned who knows ... typically many aboriginals have very short lifespans, talent or not,” he wrote.

The internal investigations come at a time when police forces across Canada are facing immense scrutiny amid concerns of systemic racism. The recently launched national inquiry into Canada’s missing and murdered indigenous women is expected to examine institutional bias, including among police. The RCMP’s civilian watchdog will release its findings this fall regarding allegations of excessive use of force, rape and mishandling of missing-person reports when dealing with indigenous people in northern B.C. Several *Sûreté du Québec* provincial police officers came under investigation after allegations of abuse against indigenous people in Val d’Or. And, in the coming months, Ontario’s civilian police watchdog intends to conduct a systemic review of the TBPS’s relationship with the indigenous community.

Grand Chief Fiddler called the comments allegedly involving Thunder Bay officers “disappointing,” especially given the recent coroner’s inquest into the death of seven First Nations youth, which aired racism in the city. “It’s obviously a setback for relations between the aboriginal community and the Thunder Bay police,” he said Thursday evening.

Ontario Native Women's Association president Dawn Lavell-Harvard said she will be watching closely to see what comes of the internal investigations.

“This is exactly the kind of attitude that has led to the problem of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls,” she said.