

'Sharp contrast' between racism complaints in Ottawa and Thunder Bay police

Man who launched complaint of racism against Ottawa sergeant adopted Annie Pootoogook's daughter

By Chloé Fedio, [CBC News](#) Posted: Oct 06, 2016 4:45 PM ET Last Updated: Oct 06, 2016 4:45 PM ET



Annie Pootoogook, in a photo from July 2013, was found dead in Ottawa on Sept. 19, 2016. (Alexei Kintero)

The man who complained that an Ottawa police sergeant made "patently and objectively racist" comments online about the death of Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook is "disheartened" at what he calls the force's slow and indecisive reaction.

But at the same time, Veldon Coburn is applauding the Thunder Bay police force for "moving quite swiftly" to suspend an officer over racist comments about Indigenous people on Facebook.

Coburn said the "sharp contrast" between the two police forces is especially troubling at a time in Canada's history that is focused on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

'Hold the one person accountable so that the public doesn't look upon the whole force with the same suspicious eyes.'- Veldon Coburn

Though Ottawa police have begun an internal investigation into the alleged comments of Ottawa Sgt. Chris Hrnchiar, the officer remains on active duty, something Coburn doesn't understand.

"It's not clear what they're investigating to begin with," Coburn said. "Hold the one person accountable so that the public doesn't look upon the whole force with the same suspicious eyes."

Pootoogook was found dead in the Rideau River near Bordeleau Park on Sept. 19 in what her family members immediately found suspicious, given her fear of water. The Ottawa Police Service's major crime unit, which investigates homicides, is probing what they describe as "suspicious elements" about her death — but have not classified her death as a homicide.

Coburn noticed two troubling posts from the Facebook account of Hrnchiar, an apparent Ottawa sergeant, on an article about Pootoogook's death on Sept. 25. The posts said that "many Aboriginals have very short lifespans, talent or not" and that it was "not a murder case."

Pootoogook's family maintained she was murdered at the annual vigil for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls on Parliament Hill on Tuesday. At the vigil, her relative Sytukie Joamie accused the Ottawa police force of bungling the investigation into Pootoogook's death, pointing to "systemic racism" as the cause.

'The member will be held accountable'

Ottawa police chief Charles Bordeleau told CBC News in an interview last week that he spoke to the officer accused of writing the "inappropriate" comments and believes "he doesn't need to be removed from his duties right now as we continue this investigation."



Ottawa police Chief Charles Bordeleau called the comments allegedly made by one of his officers about Annie Pootoogook 'inappropriate' but the officer remains on active duty. (Adrian Wyld/Canadian Press)

Bordeleau was not available to discuss the case on Thursday but said in a written statement that the online comments under investigation "have racial undertones" that do not reflect the force's values.

"I am sorry for the hurt these comments have caused. The member will be held accountable," he wrote.

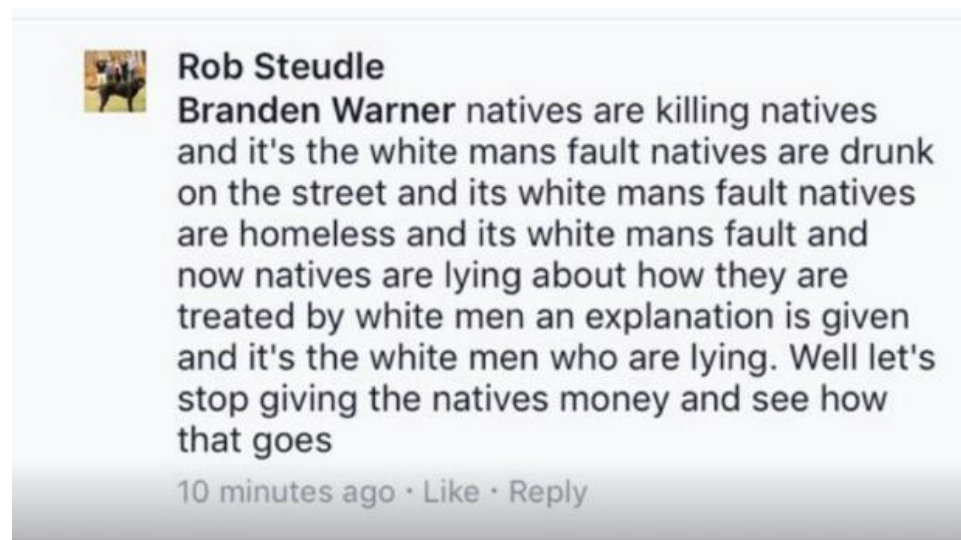
"As human beings, we all have biases — conscious and unconscious and that is a fact. This does not excuse the comments that were made. As police officers, it becomes even more important to ensure those biases do not impact the important work we do as we serve our citizens."

He added that police "are conducting a full investigation into the circumstances of [Pootoogook's] tragic death."

Thunder Bay suspends officer

Meanwhile, Thunder Bay Const. Rob Steudle was suspended after being accused of posting on Facebook that "Natives are killing Natives." Steudle, a director with the police association and a recipient of the Diamond Jubilee medal in 2012, was

initially the subject of an internal investigation over a Facebook post from Sept. 17 to 18.



Thunder Bay police say this is the Facebook post that prompted their internal investigation. (Facebook)

Thunder Bay police chief J.P. Levesque has since made a formal request to the Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD) to lead the investigation.

The OIPRD investigates complaints from across the province, either at the request of a civilian or directly from a police force, like in the case of Thunder Bay. Depending on the complaint and availability of resources, the OIPRD may recommend that forces launch their own internal investigations.

The OIPRD agreed to take on the Thunder Bay investigation "from a public interest perspective and to ensure objectivity in the investigative process," spokesperson Rosemary Parker told CBC News in an email.

Coburn adopted Pootoogook's daughter

Coburn has never met Pootoogook but he imagined that, one day, she would become part of his family. That's because he and his wife adopted Pootoogook's daughter, Napachie, in October 2014, after caring for the young girl as foster parents. She is now four years old.



Veldon Coburn sent a complaint to Ottawa's mayor and chief of police when he noticed what appeared to be racist online comments posted from the Facebook account of an Ottawa police officer. (CBC)

"We didn't have a relationship with Annie, but for my daughter's sake, we'd always intended to have one," he said. "The opportunity has been cut short."

He and his wife have three other children, including another adopted daughter.

Coburn didn't initially mention his family's private adoption of Napachie when he complained to police because the comments "were objectively racist," he said.

"I didn't really want to paint it as a personal issue. I really wanted to have my comments measured and level headed — not laded with visceral and emotional reaction," he said.

Joamie identified Coburn as Napachie's adoptive father during a speech at the vigil on Tuesday, also thanking him for flagging the Facebook comments about Pootoogook's death to police.