

Thunder Bay

**Missing, murdered Indigenous women cases face systemic review in Thunder Bay, Ont.**

**Racial stereotypes lead to police complacency, Rainy River First Nations Jim Leonard says**

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'Alarming questions' have been raised about how police in Thunder Bay, Ont. investigate the disappearances and deaths of Indigenous people, says Gerry McNeilly, the province's police watchdog. (CBC)

Ontario's police watchdog says he'll share the results of his systemic review into how Thunder Bay police investigate the disappearances and deaths of Indigenous peoples with the national public inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women.

The Ontario Independent Police Review Director, Gerry McNeilly, set the terms for his review this week after "alarming questions" were raised about how officers interact with Indigenous peoples.

Rainy River First Nations Chief Jim Leonard is one of the people asking those questions. He filed the complaint that prompted the review after Thunder Bay police said the death of one of his community members was accidental.

Leonard said police jumped to conclusions based on racial stereotypes that the case was "just another drunk, dead Indian who rolled in the river."

A private investigator later found **reason for suspicion in the case**, including the use of the man's bank card after his death.



Rainy River First Nations Chief Jim Leonard says the injustice faced by First Nations people at the hands of police 'has to stop.' (Nick Sherman/CBC)

The review is also investigating **inflammatory Facebook posts from September**, alleged to come from police officers in the northern Ontario city.

"Indigenous leaders and community members say that these [death] investigations and other interactions with police devalue Indigenous lives," McNeilly said in a statement announcing the terms of reference for his review.

It will examine police policies, training, education, oversight and accountability mechanisms, communication with Indigenous families and "the extent to which complaints about the service's interactions with Indigenous peoples are inhibited by reprisals or fear of reprisals."

Several young Indigenous people have filed complaints against police and then withdrawn them, McNeilly said.

"They have chosen to withdraw the complaints primarily because they have indicated, without going on the record and without giving me anything in writing, that there have been reprisals against them," he said.

A thorough review of Thunder Bay police cases involving missing and murdered Indigenous women and men in the city will be also be undertaken.

That work will be "informed" by, and its results shared with, the national public inquiry, McNeilly said.

At the end of the review, McNeilly will make recommendations for improvements.

"My goal here is not to necessarily cast blame or to point fingers specifically," he said. "I will address the issues and I will point out where problems occur or where problems need to be addressed, but at the same time [I will] make recommendations in a positive way so those issues can be addressed."



Thunder Bay police Chief J.P. Levesque said on Thursday the force will 'continue to strive to work towards building a stronger relationship with the Indigenous community.' (Cathy Alex/CBC)

The recommendations are expected next spring.

Leonard said he's looking forward to them.

"I hope there's a recognition by the Thunder Bay police that they have to do things differently and that it spreads to the [Ontario Provincial Police] and other police forces across the country," Leonard said.

Thunder Bay's police Chief issued a news release on Thursday saying he will fully co-operate with the review.

"It is our hope that any recommendations arising from the process will assist us, and other police services in Ontario, to move forward towards meeting the needs of our diverse communities," J.P. Levesque said.