

Ontario police watchdog widens probe of Thunder Bay police

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The Ontario police watchdog is expanding its “systemic review” of the Thunder Bay Police Service’s practices to look at police conduct surrounding all indigenous missing person and death investigations.

The sweeping review, to be conducted by the Office of the Independent Police Review Director, was formally unveiled on Wednesday.

News of a potential review, first reported by the Star last month, came on the heels of a complaint concerning the investigation into the death of an indigenous man, Stacey DeBungee, in Oct., 2015 .

His family felt DeBungee’s death was not adequately investigated, because, within hours of finding his body, a press release was issued by police saying their initial investigation did not indicate a suspicious death.

This release was similar to releases issued in the wake of the death of indigenous students whose bodies were found in the waters surrounding Lake Superior from 2000 to 2011.

Gerry McNeilly, Ontario’s independent police review director, called the questions surrounding Thunder Bay Police “alarming.”

“Indigenous leaders and community members say that these investigations, and other interactions with police, devalue indigenous lives, reflect differential treatment and are based on racist attitudes and or stereotypical preconceptions about the indigenous community,” McNeilly said in a statement.

“It is critical that these issues be independently examined through a systemic review, which would enable me to effectively address the issues and make meaningful recommendations for improvement,” he added.

The terms of reference include the existing policies, practices and attitudes within the police service as they relate specifically to indigenous missing people and death investigations, and, more generally, “to issues around racism, free policing, such as ‘over-policing’ and ‘under-policing.’ ”

The review will also look at whether missing persons and death investigations involving indigenous victims are conducted in discriminatory ways.

The OIPRD receives and oversees public complaints about the province’s municipal, regional and provincial police. It operates at an arms length from the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Toronto Star



Sonny McGinnis, cousin of Stacey DeBungee, deceased, and Rainy River First Nation Chief James Leonard, right, talk to the Toronto Star about the review of police cases in Thunder Bay, Sept. 22. The Ontario police watchdog has now expanded its review to look at police conduct surrounding all indigenous missing person and death investigations.