

Day 6

with Brent Bambury

Friday March 31, 2017

Thunder Bay's Indigenous community says hate crimes are common and racism in the police force isn't helping

Around 1 a.m. on January 29, [Barbara Kentner](#) was walking with her sister Melissa on a residential street in Thunder Bay, Ontario, when a dark grey car with tinted windows drove past them.

An object was lobbed out the window and the sisters say they heard one of the passengers shout, "I got one."

Then Barbara was down. She'd been hit in the stomach by a trailer hitch weighing more than 20 pounds.

At first, Barbara was told she would recover from her injuries. Just this week, however, [Melissa says](#) that doctors have told her sister that she just has a few weeks to live.

The alleged assailant has been charged with aggravated assault, but Melissa feels that doesn't go far enough. She believes she and Barbara were targeted because they're Indigenous. She and others say attacks like this [are common](#) in Thunder Bay.

Not an isolated event

Many Indigenous residents report having bottles and eggs thrown at them. More troublingly, many say they can't go to the police with their concerns, because the police won't take them seriously — or might, in some cases, be part of the problem.

Last November, Ontario's civilian police watchdog — the Office of the Independent Police Review Director ([OIPRD](#)) — launched a [major investigation](#) into allegations of systemic racism in the Thunder Bay Police Service.

Celina Reitberger, the executive director of [Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services](#) in Thunder Bay, has been encouraging people to come forward with their stories.

Reitberger told Day 6 that [complaints](#) range from Indigenous kids being stopped and questioned by officers on the street to physical abuse at the hands of police. The organization has created wallet-sized "Know Your Rights" cards that people can refer to if stopped by police.

"Thunder Bay is not isolated in terms of complaints like this," she tells Day 6. "We get complaints from Kenora, from Sioux Lookout, any place where people from the north are coming to an urban centre."

Thunder Bay, sitting on the shore of Lake Superior, is the gateway between northern and southern Ontario.

The [city](#) has a large mobile community of Indigenous people who travel between it and their home reserves for work. Kids from remote communities too small for a high school move to Thunder Bay as teenagers and board with locals in order to get an education.

By 2040, it's estimated that half the city's population will be Indigenous.

No Foul Play : Death in Thunder Bay - The Case of Stacy DeBungee - the fifth estate



A long history

Racism and racial tensions between white residents and Indigenous ones have been a longstanding issue, but Reitberger says people have become more overt and emboldened on social media.

Several Thunder Bay police officers are currently under investigation for allegedly posting [defamatory comments](#) about Indigenous people on Facebook.

Reitberger says another concern is that many of the young people coming to Thunder Bay for school have never lived away from home, much less a city, and can struggle to find support.

Last year, there was an [inquest](#) into the suspicious circumstances surrounding the deaths of seven Indigenous students who died between 2000 and 2011, after having come to the city for high school.

Those deaths, as well as the death of [Stacy DeBungee](#) in 2015, instigated the OIPRD investigation. DeBungee's body was found in the McIntyre River, and after an investigation of less than three hours, Thunder Bay Police deemed the death "non-criminal" and moved on.

Julian Falconer, the family's lawyer, told the [Toronto Star](#), "There is a systemic treatment of Indigenous deaths that is not lost on any of my clients. They are less than worthy victims."

Reitberger hopes the investigation will be the beginning of a real transformation in Thunder Bay — "starting right at the top" of the police force, right down to changing attitudes in elementary school.

To hear Rachel Giese's conversation with Celina Reitberger, download our [podcast](#) or click the 'Listen' button at the top of this page.

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