

Bay police need outside help to solve deaths of Indigenous youth: Editorial

It's time Thunder Bay police brought in the Mounties to help them investigate deaths of Indigenous young people.



Tammy Keeash went missing and was discovered in Thunder Bay's Neebing-McIntyre Floodway in May. (FACEBOOK)

By **STAR EDITORIAL BOARD**

Mon., June 5, 2017

What is happening with the Thunder Bay police force?

Since November the police service has been under investigation for allegations of “systemic racism” by the Office of the Independent Police Review Director over its handling of cases of dead Indigenous youths. This is a serious review. The office is an independent agency of the Ministry of the Attorney General.

Then last week the Ontario Civilian Police Commission, a provincial oversight body, announced it will appoint an investigator to look into the actions of the city's police board.

As the Star's Tanya Talaga [reported](#), the probes come after the death of 41-year-old Stacey DeBungee, from Rainy River First Nation, who was found in a Thunder Bay river in 2015, as well as the deaths of five Indigenous students who were also found in city waterways between 2000 and 2011.

In all those cases police concluded that the victims had accidentally drowned, something critics cannot bring themselves to believe. In fact, the critics suggest Thunder Bay police simply aren't treating the deaths of Indigenous youth as seriously as they would if the victims were white. "Sadly there's a theme – less than worthy victims," lawyer Julian Falconer has said of the investigations.

Unfortunately, those deaths were not the end of it. In May two more Indigenous teens – Tammy Keeash and Josiah Begg – went missing in Thunder Bay. They, too, were later found dead in nearby waterways.

Now, chiefs representing almost all of Northern Ontario are demanding the RCMP be brought in to investigate the two most recent teen deaths and to re-open the DeBungee case. They are also asking the commission to appoint a new police board administrator.

Their requests are more than justified and should be met. The situation is even worse since there is currently no leadership at the top of the force. As if the probes into the service and the board were not enough, Thunder Bay police Chief J.P. Levesque is facing charges of obstruction of justice and breach of trust for allegedly disclosing information about the city's mayor, Keith Hobbs. Levesque is currently on medical leave.

The result is a crisis of confidence in the city's police service, especially among Indigenous people. "With all that has transpired to date, it is painfully obvious that the Thunder Bay Police cannot credibly investigate the river deaths," says Francis Kavanaugh of Grand Council Treaty #3.

Even aside from that, there are concerns that Indigenous youth must travel far from home to Thunder Bay to receive a high school education, counselling or medical treatment because there aren't adequate facilities on or near their reserves.

That was highlighted at an inquest that wrapped up last June into the deaths of the five Indigenous youth found in waters surrounding Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011, and two others who died at their residences. It recommended that governments make sure services are available closer to reserves.

A year later, though, it appears nothing has changed. Keeash was in Thunder Bay for counselling that she couldn't get on her home reserve. Begg was in town for medical appointments.

It's time three steps were taken. First, Thunder Bay police should ask the Mounties to assist them in investigating the most recent deaths of Indigenous teens. Second, the civilian police commission should appoint an outside administrator to run the police board. Third, the federal and provincial governments should finally ensure that the educational, mental health and medical needs of First Nations kids are met in their communities.

Only then will there be hope for an end to these tragic deaths.