

Indigenous leaders call for RCMP to investigate deaths of young people in Thunder Bay

All 77 northern Indigenous leaders are now asking for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to step in and investigate the staggering amount of river deaths of Indigenous people.

Grand Chief Ogichidaa Francis Kavanaugh was one of three chiefs from northern Ontario calling on the RCMP to take over the investigation of teen deaths. The chiefs say they lack confidence in the OPP and the Thunder Bay Police Force. (TORONTO STAR)

By [**TANYA TALAGA**](#) Staff Reporter
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Nearly all of northern Ontario's First Nations chiefs are demanding the RCMP be brought in to investigate three recent Indigenous deaths.

The demand came as news broke the Thunder Bay Police Services Board is now under investigation for how it supervises the Thunder Bay Police.

The Ontario Civilian Police Commission (OCPC), a provincial oversight body, sent a letter to northern Ontario chiefs on May 30 saying they will be appointing an investigator to look into the actions of the police board. The commission's letter was in response to a request made on May 29 by the chiefs, who represent nearly all of northern Ontario, to investigate the board and to appoint an outside administrator.

Before any action can be taken against the Thunder Bay police board, an investigation must be carried out first to gather evidence, said Linda Lamoureux, executive chair of Safety, Licensing Appeals and Standards Tribunals Ontario. The board says they "welcome this investigation without reservation and will co-operate fully," according

to a statement by Brian McKinnon, vice-chair of the Thunder Bay board, released on Wednesday.

Tensions are already heightened in Thunder Bay between the Indigenous community and police. The Thunder Bay Police Service is being investigated for allegations of “systemic racism” for its treatment of all Indigenous disappearance and death cases by the Office of the Independent Police Directorate (OIPRD), a body operating at arms length of the ministry of the attorney general.

And, the police Chief J.P. Levesque is facing obstruction of justice and breach of trust charges for an alleged incident involving the Mayor Keith Hobbs. He is currently on medical leave and is scheduled to be in court on June 13.



The body of 17-year-old Tammy Keeash was discovered in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway. First Nations leaders are now calling for the RCMP to take over the investigation after expressing a lack of confidence in both the Ontario Provincial Police and the Thunder Bay Police Force. (FACEBOOK)

The OCPC probe comes after the death of Stacey DeBungee, from Rainy River First Nation, who was found in a Thunder Bay river in 2015 and the deaths of five Indigenous students from 2000 to 2011 who were also found in city waterways. In all cases, Indigenous leaders felt the deaths were never properly investigated as police quickly assumed all drowned.

There have been other reported cases of Indigenous people being beaten up and thrown in the rivers. [Darryl Kakekayash](#) said when he was a high school student in Thunder Bay he was assaulted and thrown into the river. An investigation by former Toronto Homicide Detective Dave Perry concluded the now 25-year-old was telling the truth and his case could be classified as a hate crime.



Thunder Bay Police chief J.P. Levesque has been charged by the OPP with breach of trust and obstructing justice following a five-month investigation. (THUNDER BAY POLICE)

“It is our view the Thunder Bay police can not fix this. They have shown they are not able to come to any conclusion other than the deaths are non-suspicious and non-criminal, which doesn’t hold any water with us,” said Rainy River First Nation Chief Jim Leonard from a Queen’s Park news conference.

“Today we are here to demand some action immediately,” Leonard said.

Last week, the [Thunder Bay police board vice chair McKinnon](#) said he supported the Thunder Bay police and there is no basis for accusations against them, reported tbnewswatch.

Leonard said their support shows the board has already taken a position before the known results of the investigation into the force.

In McKinnon’s Wednesday statement, he added, “systemic racism is a much broader term than just the relationships between police and Indigenous communities. A police service cannot cure systemic racism. We accept that our service has a role to play.”

Recently, another two children have been found dead in the rivers. Tammy Keeash, 17, of North Caribou Lake First Nation, was found in the Neebing-McIntyre Floodway on May 7 and Josiah Begg, 14, was found in the McIntyre River two weeks later. Begg went missing the same day as Keeash, on May 6. He was in town with his father from their home community of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation.

All 77 northern Indigenous leaders — occupying nearly all of northern Ontario — are now asking for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to step in and investigate the river deaths. The 77 chiefs are part of Grand Council Treaty No. 3 surrounding the Kenora and Sioux Lookout area, and Nishnawbe Aski Nation, covering almost all of the rest of northern Ontario stretching from the northwestern Manitoba border to James Bay.

“The recent losses of Tammy Keeash and Josiah Begg have once again confirmed the inability of the Thunder Bay Police Service to conduct competent and credible investigations into the epidemic of deaths of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) and Treat No. 3 community members in Thunder Bay rivers,” said NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler.

“There has been no leadership at all, in our view, from this police services board, over these many years during these tragic events. They have been silent,” he said.

Fiddler said he does not believe the board ever came to witness the inquest into the seven NAN students who died from 2000 to 2011 while they were living in Thunder Bay to go to high school because there is no school for them to go to in their home First Nations communities.

“It’s ironic because whenever there is an issue in an Indigenous community, a third party manager is immediately brought in right away to take over,” said Fiddler. “The request we are making today is along the same lines.”

However, bringing in the RCMP to Thunder Bay to investigate the river deaths is the solely the decision of Thunder Bay police, says a government source.

The astronomical disproportion of deaths of Indigenous people at the rivers in Thunder Bay is staggering, said lawyer Julian Falconer, who acts for both NAN and Rainy River.

“There is no other community in this country that is losing this many people at the rivers,” said Falconer.

The OPP has been quite clear they will not help the Indigenous people get answers because of the current OIPRD investigation, said Falconer.

“As a matter of law, I am simply communicating to you that you should be very troubled by that response. That the communities would be deprived of the benefits of an investigation into a death because they accessed the OIPRD is offensive,” Falconer said.

Each time there is someone who is pulled out of a river in Thunder Bay it is an Indigenous person and Thunder Bay police says “there is no foul play,” said Grand Council Treaty #3 Ogichidaa Francis Kavanaugh.

Last fall, the OPP refused to support the communities with an independent investigation into DeBungee's death, added Kavanaugh. Recently, two young Indigenous teens – Delaine Copenace and Azraya Kokopenace -- have died in his northwestern Ontario territory and the families are not happy with what they say are a lack of investigations into their deaths, he said.

In Sioux Lookout the OPP is known to “have issues of over-policing and racial profiling,” he said.

“The RCMP is the best placed agency to complete these investigations and provide a credible report. There is both precedent and legal authority to bring the RCMP where local police service is unable or unwilling to provide unbiased services,” he said, pointing to then Toronto Police Services chief Julian Fantino to investigate corruption charges against his officers in 2001.

Read more: [Thunder Bay police chief charged with breach of trust](#)

[Thunder Bay police chief's charges tied to issue with the city's mayor](#)

[First Nation's family rejects Thunder Bay Police explanation for teen's death](#)