

Teen deaths, police probes, racism accusations: What's going on in Thunder Bay?

[CTV News Channel: Thunder Bay policing 'failure'](#)



Family lawyer Julian Falconer says there has been a failure of police services in Thunder Bay when they investigate First Nations deaths.

[CTV News Channel: Policing 'crisis' in Thunder Bay](#)

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Why have 10 indigenous people -- the majority of them teenagers -- been found dead in Thunder Bay, Ont. since 2000, seven of their bodies washing up in local rivers? And what have police done to investigate the deaths?

Those questions are at the heart of serious concerns voiced by First Nations chiefs in the region, who have accused Thunder Bay police of not thoroughly investigating the deaths because the victims were indigenous.

As Rainy River First Nation Chief Jim Leonard put it Wednesday: "I'll be blunt here. It's just a case of finding another dead, drunk Indian rolled in the water."



In this file photo, investigators are seen in Thunder Bay.

Leonard and two other chiefs spoke at Ontario's legislature in Toronto to demand that the RCMP step in to investigate the deaths of two teenagers found dead in McIntyre River in May.

The bodies of five other indigenous people have been found in rivers in the city since 2000.

The chiefs also called for more oversight of Thunder Bay Police Services Board, which they allege does not take their complaints seriously.

The Thunder Bay Police Services Board said it recognizes systemic racism, but it takes issue with “some of the factual assertions” put forward by the chiefs.

"A police service cannot cure systemic racism. We accept that our service has a role to play," the board said in [the statement online](#).

The chiefs' demands on Wednesday stem from a long and complicated relationship between First Nations communities and police in the northern region. Here is some background on the issue.

Lawyer: ‘No one knows what’s actually going on at the rivers’

Since 2000, nine indigenous youth and one adult have been found dead in Thunder Bay. Most recently, Tammy Keeash, 17, and Josiah Begg, 14, were both found dead in McIntyre River.

Keeash was being cared for at a Thunder Bay group home when she disappeared. Her body was pulled from the water seven hours after she was reported missing.

Begg, from Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation, was found in the same river a few days later. He disappeared the same night as Keeash, on May 6, and his body was found 12 days later.

The Thunder Bay Police Service responded to the deaths in a statement on May 18, saying that both investigations were “extensive.”

“This is not the time for pointing fingers. It is the time to join hands and work towards our common goals of finding answers,” [the statement read](#).

In October 2015, the body of Stacy DeBungee, 41, was pulled from the same river. A lawyer representing DeBungee’s family says the man’s death was deemed not suspicious three hours after his body was found.

A complaint was filed by DeBungee’s family to the Office of the Independent Police Review Director. It has since been expanded to include the deaths of Keeash and Begg.

Lawyer Julian Falconer accused Thunder Bay Police of ruling out foul play too quickly.

“No one knows what’s actually going on at the rivers. How do you lose this many people in a community the size of Thunder Bay?” Falconer told CTV News Channel on Wednesday.

Between 2000 and 2011, seven other aboriginal youth died in Thunder Bay after they moved from remote communities to attend high school in the city.

The victims included Jethro Anderson, 15, Curran Strang, 18, Robyn Harper, 19, Paul Panacheese, 21, Reggie Bushie, 15, Kyle Morrisseau, 17 and 15-year-old Jordan Wabasse.

Of those seven victims, five of their bodies were pulled from the McIntyre River and the Kaministiquia River.

An inquest looked into the seven deaths and included testimony from more than 200 witnesses. It also put intense scrutiny on the actions of Thunder Bay Police regarding the deaths.

According to Falconer, the inquest found that the causes of three of the river deaths, despite being deemed accidental by police, were found to be “undetermined.”

“Frankly there is a complete policing crisis in Thunder Bay, and what’s necessary is for the outside governing bodies to step in and get this thing under control,” he said.

Police chief under investigation

Meanwhile, the city’s police chief is [facing charges of breach of trust and obstructing justice](#) after a five-month investigation by Ontario Provincial Police.

The OPP says J.P. Levesque, 53, was charged last week. Particular details of the allegations have not been revealed.

The OPP says the RCMP contacted them in January to request an independent investigation.

A lawyer for the police chief said Levesque is "a person of outstanding good character" and that he looks forward "to fully responding to the allegations against him."

The charges against the police chief add to the sense of distrust surrounding Thunder Bay law enforcement, Falconer said.

Levesque is scheduled to appear in court June 13.

With files from the Canadian Press