

Probe of Indigenous deaths should extend beyond Thunder Bay, leaders say

At the moment, OIPRD Director Gerry McNeilly said he must concentrate efforts on Thunder Bay



OIPRD Director Gerry McNeilly is leading a systemic review of Thunder Bay's police department. The Ontario Independent Police **Review Director's office** is re-examining nine death investigations handled by the department. (LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By **TANYA TALAGA** Staff Reporter

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All of the northern Ontario cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls should be considered for re-examination by the outside provincial police watchdog body, Indigenous leaders say.

On Monday, the Ontario Independent Police Review Director's (OIPRD) office confirmed they were [re-examining nine death investigations](#) of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls that were handled by the Thunder Bay Police Service, dating to the 1990s.

The OIPRD, which operates at an arm's length from the Ministry of the Attorney General's office, began investigating the Thunder Bay police last November after complaints by First Nations leaders who say cases involving Indigenous people are often closed and dismissed without proper examination.

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The Attorney General's Indigenous Justice Division has identified about 25 Ontario cases concerning murdered and missing Indigenous women for the probe, said OIPRD director Gerry McNeilly. However, the "OIPRD will look at them in a general way for our systemic review, but they will not all form part of the review. We are working with the Indigenous justice division to review nine of the MMIWG cases."

As well, the OIPRD is also re-examining another 30 death investigations as part of the probe of the Thunder Bay police for allegations of systemic racism and deficient investigations. Of the 30 cases, most are Indigenous; however, some are non-Indigenous homicides. Both are being looked at in order to see if there are any discrepancies in how the cases are handled.

But Anna Betty Achneepineskum, the deputy grand chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) — a political organization of 49 First Nations in northern Ontario, says the provincial probe should not just stop in Thunder Bay.

Achneepineskum said all of the [MMIWG cases](#) in the NAN territory, which is outside of Thunder Bay and stretches to James Bay, north to Hudson Bay and up to the Manitoba border in the northwest, should be opened up and re-examined. The Ontario Provincial Police are in charge of the MMIWG cases outside of Thunder Bay.

“I’m grateful the review in Thunder Bay is taking place. And those are just the cases we are aware of that have come to the surface,” Achneepineskum said.

“We need to find a process to extend this to the OPP. We have concerns as well on some of the deaths of our people,” she said.

“The OPP investigates all the homicides in NAN territory. There are cases that I am well aware of, even from well before the 1990s, where police haven’t addressed concerns of the families and where there has been on outreach or communication with the families.”

Chief Denise Stonefish, the Assembly of First Nations women’s council chair, agrees.

“Should the OPP reinvestigate those cases? Yes, I believe it should. Their contribution by doing that would fall in line with what the national MMIWG inquiry has been pegged to do,” Stonefish said. The national inquiry is currently holding meetings across the country. It can request cases be re-investigated by police but that is not its sole focus.

“We have to do something in terms of those investigations. I know right now the concentration (of cases) is in the north. I can appreciate that the deputy grand chief has her hands full in trying to bring it to light but it is something occurring throughout Ontario, maybe just not in the same numbers happening in the north,” she said.

McNeilly acknowledges there are problems in northern Ontario but at this point, he does not feel in a position to open up his systemic review to other areas.

“My main thrust is to complete the Thunder Bay review so members of that community can move forward in a positive way. The recommendations I will make in my review report will be applicable to all police services in Ontario, including those in the north,” he said.

The OIPRD will be holding its first-ever public session in Thunder Bay on Sept. 25, as part of the consultations for its review of the policies, practices and attitudes of the Thunder Bay Police.