



CANADA

Inside the impossible work of Canada's biggest Indigenous police force

For Nishnawbe-Aski police officers, the work can be extreme, dangerous and devastating. But historic change is coming.

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Kyle Edwards



Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service (NAPS) constable Charlie Chapman in Sachigo Lake First Nation, Ontario on Tuesday, May 22, 2018. NAPS is the largest Canadian First Nation Police force and is getting 79 new officers in the next five years and upgrading inadequate infrastructure and tools after the federal government announced \$291.2 million for policing in First Nation and Inuit communities. (Photograph by Amber Bracken)

Joseph Angees was off-duty the last time he saw his father, Moses. It was Nov. 20, 2005, and his father asked him to catch some walleye for a guest who was coming over later that evening.

Angees was more than happy to get out on the newly formed ice—the Wunnumin Lake First Nation in northern Ontario is known for its abundant lakes. That morning, he got on his snowmobile and rode past a row of houses. Angees remembers his father standing outside his own; they waved and exchanged smiles.

Later that day, Angees received a call from his sister, who told him their dad hadn't come home yet. As the only police officer in the community at the time, a constable for the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service, it was Angees's job to find him. Moses was heading to his trapper's shack across a frozen lake. Angees's mother, who was in hospital in Toronto at the time, told him over the phone that she feared the worst: "Brace yourself," she advised.

Angees searched everywhere he thought his dad might have been. There was no sign of him. The next morning, at 7 a.m., a search party scoured the lake for six hours in -20° C terrain. They found the broken ice where Moses and his snowmobile had fallen through. Remnants—a hat, a single glove and a shoe—could be seen above the fracture that was beginning to freeze over. "Don't ever go this way, he used to tell us," Angees says.

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A few hours later, divers from the Ontario Provincial Police recovered his dad's body. Moses was frozen in a way that suggested he was clinging to the ice—he was a fighter. Then Angees put his father on the sled of his snowmobile and took him home. The next day, without being able to mourn, Wunnumin Lake's only officer put on his uniform and went back to work.

Moments like these have been relentless. As a police officer in the small place where he was raised, Angees's personal life has often intersected with his job. He took the call when one of his sisters took her own life. He's responded to the "numerous" deaths or suicides of cousins and nephews. More recently, he was on the job when his brother died in a house fire. And the day after each tragedy, he went back to work. But eventually, he says, as the years went on, the weight of trauma became too much: "All that shit came crashing down on me."

Sitting in his navy-blue uniform inside the boardroom of the Wunnumin Lake band office, his voice is raspy from a cold he's been fighting. After the death of his brother three years ago, he took two years off—in that time he met with a therapist every week—and returned to life as a cop in his community, nearly 400 km northeast of Sioux Lookout, Ont., last year.



Dust from the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service (NAPS) plane hangs over the runway in Wunnumin Lake First



Nation,
Ontario on
Wednesday,
May 23,
2018.
(Photograph
by Amber

Bracken)

The Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service (NAPS) polices 35 First Nations with 160 officers across the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) in northern Ontario. Its catchment area is vast, stretching as far north as Hudson Bay; east to Beaverhouse Lake near the Quebec border; south to the Matachewan First Nation just north of Sudbury, Ont.; and all the way west to the Woodland Caribou Provincial Park near Manitoba. It encompasses nearly two-thirds of the province's geographical area (a region about the size of France), where the homicide and sexual assault rates were, respectively, five and 12 times the provincial average in 2016.

In 1991, the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) concluded that First Nations are “overpoliced” yet “underprotected,” a phrase that captures the destructive dynamic between Indigenous people and conventional police agencies, like the RCMP and provincial forces, which dates back more than a century. Their communities, First Nations leaders say, are viewed as perpetual crime scenes—areas that require constant monitoring, rather than a group of people worthy of protection. The endless churn of arrests, convictions and incarceration leaves generations stuck in cycles of crime and violence, with devastating human consequences.

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NAPS was formed to help change that, but in many ways, it embodies the concept of underprotection. Since its inception nearly 25 years ago in northeast Ontario, and its further expansion westward in 1998, it has been plagued by what independent auditors have described as severe underfunding and resource deficiencies, compounded by the unique challenges that come with policing northern communities. Many of the roughly 45,000 people they serve live on fly-in reserves, meaning a lone officer receives backup long after a crime takes place. Between 2011 and 2016, NAPS's budget averaged \$25.7 million, with a small increase in 2017. In 2016, the OPP said it would cost nearly \$80 million per year to take over NAPS's territory.

Only two years ago, existential questions loomed over the police force—officers voted to go on strike, citing dangerous working conditions and a pay gap that meant they earned nearly 20 per cent less than other forces in Canada. They threatened to disband if they were not brought up to the same standard. For too long, they said, officers were forced to cope with broken radios, patrolling without partners, substandard equipment and detachments that lack cells, heating, running water and, in some cases, even roofs—but finally, after years of lobbying, changes are coming.

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On March 8, the Safer Ontario Act, or Bill 175, received royal assent in the province's legislature, and the parts of it that pertain to NAPS are expected to be proclaimed law in early 2019. It will allow NAPS to be brought under the Police Services Act, effectively guaranteeing that Ontario maintains the largest First Nations police force in Canada to the same standard as its municipal counterparts—leaving behind a time when officers have no partners, and where infrastructural decay goes unchanged. The force will be better funded and will be overseen by the Ontario Civilian Police Commission.

Flawed and shaky though it may be, it's a project other First Nations will be watching closely—a decisive step, potentially, toward shedding the colonial policing model that to many remains a symbol of oppression.

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In a way, NAPS’s precarious existence has been “like driving an old, beat-up car that doesn’t have brakes,” says Alvin Fiddler, NAN’s grand chief. When Fiddler was elected in 2015, he made the force one of his priorities. He wanted it to be culturally different—he didn’t want to create another OPP. In his mind, policing in First Nations carries the weight of a fraught history that has left long-lasting wounds, along with a deep distrust toward the men and women in blue—wounds that forces like NAPS were created to heal.



The Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service (NAPS) Chief of Police Terry Armstrong on the way to Bearskin Lake from Thunder Bay in Ontario on Tuesday, May 22, 2018. (Photograph

by Amber Bracken)

In 1971, Helen Betty Osborne, a 19-year-old Cree girl from the Norway House First Nation, was abducted and murdered by four white men. It took 16 years to bring the case to trial in 1987; one of the men, Dwayne Archie Johnston, was convicted and given a life sentence, one was acquitted and the two others avoided charges.

It was Osborne's murder, along with the shooting death of First Nations leader J.J. Harper by a police officer on the streets of Winnipeg in 1988, that resulted in the AJI. The Mounties, the AJI determined, "did not feel that practice [of 'cruising for sex' in The Pas, Man., where Osborne went to school] necessitated any particular vigilance on its part." These events and others, the AJI concluded, have "coloured the perceptions" First Nations have of law enforcement.

Concerns surrounding RCMP and OPP effectiveness on reserves, especially in the North, run deep. Distrust of police is likely made worse by the fact that turnover rates in isolated police posts are high, and that those posts are more likely to be occupied by younger, less experienced officers.

At the outset, Angees thought that might also be his path—to spend the early years of his career in Wunnumin Lake before moving elsewhere. He got his start with the OPP in 1993, working in his community. For Angees, becoming a cop was a childhood dream. He was 12 when a former constable came to Wunnumin Lake, showing the kids his uniform. "That's when I said, 'Maybe I'll be a police officer one day,'" he says.

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When NAPS took over northwestern Ontario in 1998, he was given the option to stay with the provincial force or join the ranks of the latest First Nations police service; he chose not to relocate his family. He saw working in his community as an opportunity to deal with his own people.

Angees has been on the job for 25 years, the first 10 of which were the most difficult. “The first time I arrested my brother, I said to myself, ‘I don’t know if I want to do this anymore,’ ” Angees says. These days, he calls his boss before apprehending loved ones; about three years ago, he was ordered by the Crown to cease such arrests, citing a conflict of interest when those charges went before the courts.

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He works with two other officers who rotate from Thunder Bay and Dryden, Ont., on a schedule that sees them work 16 days straight and off for 12. On days off, he still finds himself taking calls—“If you’re the only officer in the community, you’re working 24/7”—because everyone knows him and his phone number. Even after family tragedies, he found there was little time to mourn: “You get 12 days to pull yourself together and do it all over again,” he says.

Wunnumin Lake is a community of about 600 people, a small reserve that can be driven through in two minutes. It has a hockey arena, a soccer field, a baseball diamond and a fitness gym. Like many others in northern Ontario, the community prohibits alcohol, though it makes its appearances, often in the form of local homebrew. In 2015, the median income in Wunnumin Lake was roughly \$15,000, compared to more than \$30,000 in the rest of the province; in 2016, the unemployment rate was 18 per cent versus seven per cent throughout Ontario.

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The police detachment is a handful of trailers attached together, with three cells, a garage, a vault, an office and an apartment for Angees's partners.

Patrolling alone comes with a sense of ever-present risk. In southern parts of the province, driving with no one in the passenger seat is not uncommon for municipal or city cops. But most constables working for NAPS are quick to make a distinction, saying, "We don't just patrol alone, we work alone."

"I can't confidently say, as [NAPS] chief of police, with the numbers we've been working with, that our communities are safe," says Terry Armstrong, who has been head of the force for four years. "That's the job that I swore to do, so no—it doesn't feel good." When Armstrong visits communities, conversations with local leaders always shift to concerns about drug use; unlike their federal and provincial counterparts, his force can't afford designated drug units.

The role and working conditions, he says, have taken an enormous toll. Fully 21 per cent of NAPS officers are on stress or disability leave. Among the 33 officers currently away, 24 are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Says Armstrong: "When you don't have enough people, you're killing the ones you got left."

Nishnawbe-
Aski Police
Service
Constable
Ronnie
"Rufus"

Atlookan
patrols the
waters edge
to make
sure kids
are being
safe in
Eabametoong
First
Nation,
Ontario on

Wednesday, May 23, 2018. (Photograph by Amber Bracken)

It's a bright afternoon in late May, and Const. Ronnie Atlookan is patrolling the Eabametoong First Nation, 400 km northeast of Thunder Bay. Young children play along the edges of dusty roads, many of them riding scooters or bicycles. He smiles at them through his open driver's-side window. He is known as Rufus here.

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Officers are investigating a sexual assault case involving a group of young, female victims and are expecting to arrest a teenage boy. Atlookan pulls over in front of a house, gets out of his police truck and walks to the front door to tell the mother of one of the alleged victims that a detective from NAPS's Thunder Bay headquarters is at their detachment, waiting to speak to her daughter. Then he walks back to his truck and keeps driving. "The guy doesn't seem to understand," he says of the suspect. "I try to steer him right."

Like Angees, Atlookan once took two years off to seek help for the trauma he's experienced during his 18-year career. If there's another word that he says applies to him and his job, it's peacekeeper. He grew up in Eabametoong (Fort Hope), so he feels a responsibility to give second or third chances before laying charges. "It does help being Indigenous, and people seeing an Indigenous police officer," he says. Having one of the best detachments in the North also helps, he adds. The Fort Hope facility is new; it cost \$3.5 million. It has cameras, sprinklers and smoke detectors, drive-in garages that prevent runaways and cells with sliding doors rather than outdated bars, making it less possible for prisoners to hang themselves.

The infrastructural disparity between this and other NAPS-patrolled communities are unambiguous. On the Sachigo Lake First Nation, one of the northernmost communities in Ontario, the detachment is known for the blue tarp that covers the entire roof of a house converted into a police post. In 2001, a federal consultant's report estimated that the detachment could be used for only five to 10 more years.

Const. Charlie Chapman, the only officer there, remembers walking one newly arrested suspect through the narrow entrance of the building. "He grabbed a pencil and just about stabbed his own throat," he recalls.

Armstrong believes the people they're tasked to protect support police, despite past differences. "They're frustrated," he admits, adding that it's not uncommon for band councillors to accompany police to calls as backup. "Where else do they do that? Where else in this world does a mayor or a town councillor have to go out to help police arrest somebody and wrestle them down in the mud? It just doesn't happen, so why does it have to happen here?"

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The answer may be rooted in the creation of the First Nations Policing Program (FNPP) in 1991. It allows communities to either establish their own police services or reach deals that see the Mounties provide “dedicated” policing to a particular First Nations or Inuit community. (In 2017, there were 36 self-administered First Nations police services in the country, including NAPS.) Ottawa and the provinces and territories share funding responsibility but, critically, the FNPP has never come with money for infrastructure, and the budgets are fixed.

In June, NAPS announced a new FNPP agreement worth roughly \$30 million per year, with additional plans to add 79 new officers over the next five years. There’s optimism that the new legislation will cover shortfalls going forward, but the OPP will likely continue to oversee homicide investigations. Under the Police Services Act, Armstrong expects to have a partner for every officer and functional radios, detachments and employee housing, while having increased accountability. “We welcome oversight,” he says.

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In 1994, at a press conference at the Valhalla Inn in Thunder Bay, NAPS was declared operational. At the same time, in the same hotel, during a separate press conference, three First Nations announced they would be keeping the OPP as their protectors. Muskrat Dam was one of them; its then-deputy chief, Alvin Fiddler—the man now responsible for guiding the future

of the police force—said NAPS “would have difficulty fulfilling its mandate,” and was ultimately “set up to fail.”

Much has changed since then. Since taking over as grand chief, Fiddler has stood his ground in negotiations. He refused to sign agreements with Ottawa and the province unless they made NAPS a legitimate service rather than what he calls “just a program.”

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The possibility that a First Nations police service may shut down after their agreements expire is an unnerving reality across the country. The Blood Tribe Police Service, which serves roughly 13,000 people with just 29 officers about 200 km southeast of Calgary, always questions its future as the expiration date of its funding contract approaches. Its current funding agreement ends in early 2019.

The federal auditor general found that the FNPP has not been working as intended, and that there was “no clear requirement” for each program in Ontario “to fully comply with provincial policing legislation and standards.” The working conditions, its 2014 report said, posed “potentially serious health and safety risks to police officers, detainees and members of communities.”

These words came after decaying infrastructure had already taken lives. In 2006, 22-year-old Ricardo Wesley and 20-year-old Jamie Goodwin, both held for public intoxication, died inside a burning detachment on the Kashechewan First Nation. An inquest revealed that the building

was dilapidated, lacking smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and sprinklers. It also found that 19 of the 35 detachments in NAPS territory failed to meet building codes. More tragic incidents followed, casting a shadow of doubt not just on the force itself, but on the future of Indigenous policing.

On a cold day in February 2013, 23-year-old Lena Anderson hanged herself in the back seat of a police truck.

Bearskin Lake First Nation, Ontario on Tuesday, May 22, 2018. (Photograph by Amber Bracken)

Const. Jeremy Swanson had responded to a house party at Anderson's home on the Kasabonika Lake First Nation. There were fears that her three-year-old daughter was also there. When social workers removed her daughter from the home, Anderson became "hysterical," Swanson recalled during a coroner's inquest in 2016. She was detained but not charged. Swanson told the five-person jury that Anderson was going to be held until she sobered up, a moment that never came.

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Swanson's description at the inquest of the Kasabonika's NAPS detachment was acerbically blunt: "Open the door and there it is." The detachment had one light and two rooms that looked more like closets because they had no doors. There were no windows. There were no cells. He was told that if people needed to be held in custody, they would stay in the truck. One night, he held three people in three separate vehicles. It wasn't uncommon for him to bring people inside if they were well-behaved.

It was the first time Swanson had met Anderson; he was unaware of her troubled life and history of suicide attempts. On the way back to the detachment, he stopped at a Child and Family Services building. Anderson remained handcuffed while he spoke to a social worker inside. He said he was inside the building for about 16 minutes before stepping outside to check on Anderson.

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As he approached the truck, he noticed something was different. "It didn't look like she was sitting properly," Swanson said. She looked "attached to the door." He opened the door and found Anderson with the drawstring of her track pants tied around her neck and looped around the bars on the window and the ceiling light of the truck. Swanson cut her down with a knife he was told to carry specifically for this reason. "She had marks on her neck, so I tried to check for a pulse on her neck; there was nothing," he recalled.

Swanson rushed her to the nursing station in the community. He performed chest compressions on and off for about 40 minutes before she was pronounced dead. Family had already gathered around the station. Swanson said he didn't think he'd survive if he walked outside. He was flown out of the community that night and never returned.

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Two weeks later, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and its police force released a public safety notice saying that going forward, governments will be “responsible, legally and morally, for future deaths that are caused by inadequate resources.”

“Do I feel guilt? I don't think I feel that,” Armstrong says of the tragedies, both of which were before his time as NAPS chief. “As a police professional, I feel we should all do our best, and that's what the fight has been for.”

Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service Constable Joseph Angees, who is sick at work, recounts the stress of responding to the calls for his

father, who
drowned, his
sister, who
died by
suicide, his

brother who died in a house fire and to the calls for his nieces and nephews who all died by suicide in Wunnumin Lake First Nation, Ontario on Wednesday, May 23, 2018. (Photograph by Amber Bracken)

Merle Loon grew up, as did generations before him, on a trap line near the Mishkeegogamang First Nation, about 20 km south of Pickle Lake, Ont. His first language is Ojibway, and he considers himself fortunate. He went to one of the last remaining residential schools in Canada when he was eight years old—the Poplar Hill Development School—until 1985. It closed four years later. It’s where he learned to speak English.

“I didn’t hate cops,” says Loon, now 45, of his childhood. “I just didn’t trust them.” His uncle George, he recalls, was the one who hated police. His uncle fought them, much as he fought the English language in residential school, where he was repeatedly chained until he uttered the right words. George, Loon says, would return from jail with broken bones: “He didn’t leave like that.”

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When Loon was hired by NAPS in September 1998, he was almost instantly in the position he grew up witnessing. He arrested his uncle several times, and they usually fought when George was intoxicated.

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That his uncle loathed law enforcement because of childhood trauma didn't occur to Loon until about 10 years ago. "Would those officers [in the past] have known that? No, they didn't," he says. "They didn't understand residential schools and what kids went through. They didn't understand how First Nations communities work, and how people handle things there through culture and tradition."

He only lasted two years policing Mishkeegogamang before moving to other First Nations. In that time, inadequate housing forced him to sleep on floors and in the back of trucks. Long shifts made him lose track of time. NAPS officers, he insists, do more than their counterparts in the south. "They're the first responder, they're the police officer, they're the fireman, they're the counsellor," he says. "They're whatever you need them to be on that day."

But a heavy caseload places limitations on what they can do, especially for female victims. "You don't have time to give that victim the support they deserve," says Alana Morrison, a detective with the force who specializes in sex offences and has pioneered a program that provides assistance and support to survivors. For Morrison, who has been a victim of domestic violence and sexual assault, those shortcomings bring feelings of guilt.

Such depictions of life in NAPS explain why Fiddler acknowledges a feeling of relief when the Safer Ontario Act was passed in March—a day the Nishnawbe Aski Nation declared "historic." When NAPS is inevitably brought under the province's policing legislation, it will become a fully mandated and properly funded police force, after years of being considered a "non-essential service."

Premier Doug Ford has taken issue with aspects of the bill that demand increased oversight for all police services. (The PC's community safety critic, Laurie Scott, charged that the changes were "disrespecting police officers.") But board members at NAPS remain unworried about the future of the bill, believing that repealing the act would be a difficult and politically damaging move.

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For the largest First Nations police service in Canada, Fiddler understands the significance of this victory. He's open to "sharing the work" that led to provisions under the new bill that relate to First Nations police services "with other communities across the country," he says.

Loon, meanwhile, is now a staff sergeant working out of the Thunder Bay headquarters, where the lives of officers are in his hands. He often finds himself caught in an agonizing dilemma: giving an overworked constable time off to rest or ensuring that community members can pick up the phone and expect an officer to arrive at their front door. "I try real hard not to bother Joe Angeles," he says, adding, "Maybe somewhere in there, he's got the same feeling I have—that I'm here to protect my people."

Three years ago, after Angees lost his brother in a fire, his partner paid him a visit. He noticed something was off. He couldn't eat or drink. His partner called their commander, and the next day the boss flew to Wunnumin Lake. They hadn't been speaking long before Angees was ordered to take time off. "You're done," the boss told him.

He returned last June, despite his wife's protests. He weighed his options. He knew he couldn't live off WSIB benefits the rest of his life. He thought about what kind of work he'd do if he didn't go back. "I couldn't think of anything else to do," he says. "I've been doing this for 25 years. I felt I wouldn't be able to do anything else."

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These days, his wife looks forward to the moment he finally hangs up his badge. After a death or a suicide in the community, his four kids check on him to see if he's handling it okay. He says some part of him still does this because he wants to help his people but adds, on reflection: "Maybe it's just a job. You look forward to doing something. Maybe it's the pay. Most people don't have that."

One day, when his career is over, Loon will move back home. Wearing his blue uniform and sitting in his office on a quiet street in Thunder Bay, he says he wants moose meat; he yearns to live off the lake, in a cabin nestled somewhere in the bush he grew up in. He often tells co-workers this plan and receives strange looks. Then he tries to explain to them how proud he is of where he's from, and that he's only adapted to city life. "No matter where your home is,

that's the best place in the world, because that's your home," he says. "You always want to take care of that place because it's the best place, with the best people, you're ever going to live in."

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