

## **Thunder Bay police 'stopped seeing Indigenous people as humans,' says Anishinaabe podcast host**

Ryan McMahon's podcast 'Thunder Bay' exposed systemic racism in the city

This week, an [independent review of the Thunder Bay police force](#) found that institutional racism in the force contributed to shortcomings in how it investigates the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous people.

It also recommended that at least nine cases involving the deaths of Indigenous people should be re-investigated.

On Friday, Senator Murray Sinclair released another report, [criticizing the civilian board that oversees](#) the Thunder Bay Police Department. The Ontario Civilian Police Commission has stripped that board of its powers for at least one year.

Anishinaabe comedian, writer and documentary maker Ryan McMahon spent the past year investigating what's been happening in the city for the Canadaland [podcast Thunder Bay](#).

He tells [Day 6](#) host Brent Bambury how this week's news fits into the story he's been trying to tell. Here's part of that conversation:

**Let's start with your reaction to the police review that came out this week. What went through your mind when you read it?**

In one hand, you feel vindicated, and you feel relief that the report finds what you already knew. And if you talk to an Indigenous person across this country they know about systemic racism.

But then on the other hand, it's frustrating, and it's another report — another inquiry, another commission — to tell this country and frankly the world, what we've already been saying.

And it's infuriating that it takes this level of work and this type of resource to go into reaffirming what Indigenous people have already been saying, and I guess that's where we're at. I guess we have to accept that.

But it's frustrating to say the least.

**You knew about systemic racism and you knew how it was manifested in Thunder Bay, and yet you spent a lot of time there making this podcast. Why was it so important for you to go there and tell these stories now?**

The podcast came about as sort of an emergency that we felt to amplify the voices out of Thunder Bay, where we felt like the journalists that were doing good work in Thunder Bay that were already

there, are overworked and underpaid, and under-resourced, as are most journalists today in the world.

And we thought we can do something, we can help. There were so many stories left to tell in Thunder Bay that we couldn't ignore it any longer.

**The young people that you met and talked to are the ones that resonated for me as a listener. And a lot of the young people that you met in Thunder Bay weren't from Thunder Bay. Can you explain why they were there, and how that fits into this dynamic?**

I'm originally from northwestern Ontario and I can tell you, as a kid, Thunder Bay was the big city. That's where we would go for hockey tournaments and high school sports. That's where we would go to do our Christmas shopping for our family members. And that's where we would go to get away, to be in the big city.

The unique challenge of Thunder Bay, though, is that the hub then needs to contain all of those visitors. You have people that have called Thunder Bay home for decades, you have Fort William First Nation which is neighbouring, and then you have all of these outsiders.

If you read the report, you will find really, really ugly words and really ugly attitudes toward Indigenous people.-Ryan McMahon, host of 'Thunder Bay' podcast

And when you have a political situation like we do in Canada, where treaty — the law — says that kids need to go to school, but can't do it in their own home, they have to go away for these essential services.

The very sad story of Braiden Jacobs is that he had to leave his community of Webequie to receive trauma and grief counselling, and was found dead in Thunder Bay just last week. So that's why you find this population inside of Thunder Bay receiving essential services that Canadians take for granted and have in their own backyards.

**Some of the young people that you talked to in the podcast are aware of how precarious their situation is in Thunder Bay. What do you think they're doing, or what are they telling you that they're doing, in order to protect themselves?**

There are many different recommendations. There are curfews for young people that go to school at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. There are all kinds of different strategies with different applications put on their cell phones.

Traveling in pairs, checking in with billeted families and with teachers and friends.

These are strategies that I don't think everyday Canadian teenagers need to consider or think about, but these are the things that young Indigenous people have to do every day to ensure that they're safe.

**The conflict does appear to be on the surface when I listen to your work. Here's one reaction from the podcast that really stood out:**

**"I think a lot of our crime in this city right now is race-on-race. We bring in people a lot of people from northern communities who have grown up in very uncivilized areas. And we're throwing them into civilization and they don't know how to handle it. And so they're coming here, living here like they would up there. Like I said, it's race-on-race crime."**

**Ryan, what do you hear when you listen to those words?**

I hear the the type of racism and ignorance that was identified in the [independent police] report that was released this week.

I hear really damaging claims that Indigenous people from outside of the city are uncivilized for some reason.

These people are just the same as any other Canadian. They want the same things in their lives: they want to live healthy, full, happy lives. They want good things for their children.

And to other a group of people the way that this clip does is sadly a truth that we found while in Thunder Bay. And we talked to dozens and dozens of people, and asked everyone the same questions, and these were the types of answers that we found.

**You talked to a former police officer who worked in Thunder Bay, and talked about the missing persons cases involving Indigenous youth, which are part of this report. What did that police officer tell you?**

The police officer told us a lot. Most importantly, probably, he really articulated how the indifference inside of the Thunder Bay police really shattered his ability to believe in the police force and the policing system.

Whether it was because of racism, because it was discrimination, because it was the pressures of the job, officers in the force stopped seeing Indigenous people as humans. And when we're talking about not seeing a whole group of people as human, it's really easy to throw their cases away. It's really easy to not do those investigations properly.

It's really easy to not follow up with family members that are waiting to hear about loved ones, and I'm not quick to cast all police officers as bad, or all police departments as bad, but there is certainly a segment of the population ... and if you read the report, you will find really, really ugly words and really ugly attitudes toward Indigenous people.

There are many problems with the reopening of these these cases, least of which is the re-traumatization of these families.- Ryan McMahon

**The report recommends that nine cases be reinvestigated. Do you have faith that the outcome will be any different?**

I've talked to a few families already, and I plan on reaching out to more. These are families that I've talked with for our podcast, and through the year that we took to investigate and report for the podcast, that mistrust runs very deep.

And they don't know how to ensure that if these cases are reopened that they will find anything different. That so much time has passed, they're unsure what the police will find. Forensic evidence that was not collected will no longer be at the scenes of these crimes.

There are many problems with the reopening of these cases, least of which is the re-traumatization of these families.

I hope that, if nothing else, this report gives them a little bit of closure and that, should they choose to allow those investigations to be reopened, that they find the answers they need to find that closure.