

Missing and murdered women in British Columbia

Thursday 27 September 2012, by [ANNIS Roger](#), [DOIG Reve](#), [Georgia Straight](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2012).

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Scores of women have gone missing and been murdered in British Columbia over past decades. Most are poor and Native Indian. Many worked in the sex trade, particularly in Vancouver.

In 2002, Robert Pickton was arrested under suspicion that he was a serial killer responsible for the deaths of dozens of disappeared women on his farm in a Vancouver suburb [1]. In 2007, he was convicted of the murder of six of those women. Additional murder charges were stayed following his conviction.

Faced with public outrage and revulsion over revelations during the Pickton proceedings of the role of police, courts and politicians during the years in which the disappearances and sometimes murders of women were being reported and ignored or downplayed, the British Columbia government was compelled to establish the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry in 2010.

That Commission wound up its public hearings several months ago and is preparing a report. Many groups advocating on behalf of the women victims as well as the poor and Native populations across the province of BC decided to boycott the Commission proceedings, saying they had no confidence in its terms of reference, its procedures (including the fact that while police received complete financial backing for legal representation, the families of victims and other people or groups wishing to testify did not), or in its appointed lead commissioner, Wally Oppal, a former judge, cabinet minister and attorney general of the province of British Columbia [2].

To this story can be added the sensational story of the dozens of female former RCMP officers who have launched lawsuits over the sexual abuse and assaults that they suffered during their time in the force at the hands of their male fellow officers. The complaints go back many decades and the complainants include formerly highly-placed officers.

Roger Annis

Two related news articles are enclosed.

Damning Report To B.C. Inquiry: “Wouldn’t Piss On Them If They Were On Fire”

By Reve Doig, published on *Huff Post* British Columbia, Aug 23, 2012

Independent counsel Jason Gratl has prepared a damning report to the B.C. Missing Women’s Inquiry that’s looking into the years before the arrest of convicted killer Robert William Pickton. The report is titled “Wouldn’t Piss On Them If They Were on Fire”: How Discrimination Against Sex Workers, Drug Users and Aboriginal Women Enabled a Serial Killer,” and it pulls few punches.

Indifference. Ineptitude. Discrimination. These words reverberate throughout the document. While Gratl levels those criticisms at both the Vancouver police and the RCMP, his harshest critiques at least on paper, appear to be directed at the city force. Gratl told me that the report should not be viewed as any vindication of the RCMP.

“I would say the VPD receives the bulk of the criticism, but the comments regarding the provincial RCMP service, the major crime squad, are equally damning but shorter because we heard very little about what they were doing. Because in fact they did next to nothing.”

Gratl also made the point that he was representing the Downtown Eastside at the inquiry, and the RCMP had much less interaction with the DTES than Vancouver police.

His issues with the VPD include asserting that those in management were not only strongly and actively opposed to a serial killer investigation, but at times went so far as to engage in deceptive practices throughout that investigation. They then engaged in a smear campaign against victims’ families and police critics following Pickton’s arrest. Chapter 3 of the report is titled “Suppression of Recognition of a Serial Killer.”

‘BREACH OF PUBLIC TRUST’

Among the events it describes is the VPD’s deliberate deception of the B.C. attorney general on the existence of a serial killer. Gratl’s report says it is “a breach of public trust of the highest order, is contrary to the Rule of Law, is a violation of the principles of civilian oversight, and deserves the highest level of censure available to a Commission of Inquiry under the Public Inquiry Act.”

Moreover, while Gratl points to many instances of discrimination and ineptitude on behalf of individuals, his report also repeatedly points to the low priority and worth that were placed on the investigation by Vancouver police brass. Investigations into the missing women were inadequately resourced, and frequently had their resources poached or reassigned.

In addition to institutional and individual prejudices that hindered investigations, particularly within the Missing Person’s Unit, funds and officers were also in short supply. The initial assignment of the investigation of missing women to the unit, described by Sgt. Mackay-Dunn as a “dumping ground for the walking wounded” in his appearance before the inquiry, is yet another suggestion of the lack of gravity with which the investigation was treated for years.

At the same time, vastly greater resources that amounted to millions of dollars were devoted to investigations such as a task force on home invasions, and the Downtown Eastside Extraordinary Police (DEEP) program which aimed to raise property values. Gratl’s report thus suggests a greater importance was placed on landowners’ concerns and property values than on the lives of missing sex trade workers, many of them aboriginal.

Also hindering the probe were repeated failures of communication, both between officers investigating the missing women themselves, and between the investigators and other units which might have helped them, such as the Vancouver Police Native Liaison Society. These marked failures ensured that information discovered was often lost or squandered.

Gratl pays less attention to failures to communicate between the VPD and the RCMP, but these failures were a key point raised by reports of the internal inquiries of both forces.

VPD spokesman Cst. Lindsey Houghton's response to the report was:

Thank you for your inquiry, however, since we have been strong advocates from the beginning for a full and thorough Inquiry we would now find it disrespectful of the process if we were to comment while the Inquiry continued. Out of respect for the inquiry we will reserve comments until after the inquiry has concluded with the release of Commissioner Wally Oppal's report.

AUTHOR'S CRITICS

As for Gratl, he is not without his critics. Reached for comment earlier this week regarding inquiry fees, Toronto lawyer Eddie Greenspan, who represented former VPD chief Terry Blythe at the inquiry, took the opportunity to say he was seriously offended by some lawyers in this case: "They went out to sully the reputation of this commission, and they may have succeeded."

More than once during the inquiry, Greenspan sparred with lawyer Cameron Ward, who represented the families of missing women. His reference to lawyers indicates to this blogger that his criticism is also meant for Gratl and his allegations of deception and smears by the VPD.

Gratl, however, questioned whether Greenspan had meant that criticism for anyone other than Ward given that Gratl had challenged him on just that point in the inquiry room and he did not re-voice those criticisms at the time.

Gratl was appointed as Independent Counsel to the inquiry a year ago, after funding was denied to 13 groups representing stake holders on the DTES by then Attorney General Barry Penner. Gratl's report will be used by Oppal as he prepares his final report for the government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Gratl's report concludes with 37 recommendations for positive change. Among them are:

- Financial compensation for the children and grandchildren of the missing women. Money is no substitute for a mother's presence, love and support, but financial compensation may assist the children of the missing women to build their lives and advance the interests of their own families.
- The creation of a province-wide missing persons intake system and a civilian operated missing persons system with clear and formal rules to transfer investigations to the appropriate police service if foul play is suspected.
- Decriminalization and regulation of possession and trafficking of heroin and cocaine, allowing at a minimum for physician-prescribed heroin and cocaine.
- Implementing a sex worker liaison unit operating seven days a week throughout the day and night.
- Cease the harassment of sex workers with checks, searches, and involuntary information collection.

- That the Minister of Justice direct the Director of Police Services to conduct an audit of VPD and RCMP policies and practices to identify ways to reduce and eliminate racism and discrimination against groups and individuals at risk of serious violence, including sex workers and drug addicts.
- Funding to reopen the Vancouver Police Native Liaison Office under civilian direction and with an investigative mandate.
- Amendment of municipal bylaws to create zoning and licenses for sex work and brothels

“I never count myself an optimist. But even if one of those 37 recommendations gets picked up by the commissioner I will have done my job,” said Gratl.

Now it is time to hope that Oppal will pick up many of these recommendations. They form a reasoned, considered and ambitious conclusion to Gratl’s report. It’s a shame that such qualities are not the ones that characterized the investigation it details.

DISCLOSURE: Reive Doig has served on the PACE board as a volunteer for the past year and is currently vice chair.

RCMP commissioner Bob Paulson got a free pass from missing women’s inquiry, say lawyers

Georgia Straight (weekly), Aug 23, 2012

<http://www.straight.com/article-761521/vancouver/rcmp-boss-got-free-pass>

His name stands out among witnesses who weren’t called by the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. At the time when police forces were fumbling the hunt for the person preying on women working Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside strolls, he was the noncommissioned officer in charge of the RCMP’s southwest district major-crime section.

Then a sergeant, Bob Paulson is now the RCMP commissioner, and lawyers representing the families of these women wanted him on the witness stand. But the commission chaired by former B.C. attorney general Wally Oppal refused to summon Canada’s top Mountie.

In their final submission to the commission, lawyers Cameron Ward and Neil Chantler and researcher Robin Whitehead argue that the inquiry is incomplete because witnesses like Paulson weren’t summoned. According to their filing, Paulson was “extensively involved in the missing women’s investigations”.

“His name appears hundreds of times in the documents disclosed to the Commission,” the submission states.

It also notes that in March 2000, then-sergeant Paulson and a staff sergeant approached then-chief superintendent Gary Bass of the RCMP’s E Division in B.C. “with a proposal to create a coordinated effort to review” unsolved homicides and the cases of the missing women. This was mentioned in a report for the Oppal commission by Deputy Chief Jennifer Evans of the Peel Regional Police. Evans noted that the staff sergeant wrote a proposal that read in part that “at least 3 (three) serial killers

are believed to be operating in BC at this time”.

It took almost a year before a so-called “Joint Forces Operation” was launched in connection with investigating the disappearances of the missing women.

In a phone interview with the Georgia Straight on August 22, Chantler indicated that lawyers for the families hoped to ask Paulson about this March 2000 meeting. “We would have wanted to probe the circumstances and find out exactly what they exactly said and what discussions were had, and why efforts weren’t taken to form a JFO earlier in those circumstances,” Chantler said.

Robert Pickton, a pig farmer from Port Coquitlam, was eventually arrested in 2002. He was convicted in 2007 for the deaths of six women whose remains were found on the farm. The Crown eventually stayed charges against him for the deaths of 20 other women.

Paulson was sergeant in charge of the RCMP’s southwest district major-crime section from 1999 to 2001. B.C.’s southwest region includes the Lower Mainland. Paulson’s office didn’t respond to a request for comment before deadline.

The final submission by the families’ lawyers also identified 16 other witnesses who were not called by the commission.

One of these is David Pickton, who lived with his brother Robert and was “well known to police” for being associated with the Hells Angels. According to the submission, the Picktons’ properties in Port Coquitlam were “known by the police to be hives of illegal activity, including cockfighting, illicit alcohol and drug use, prostitution and petty theft”. The document states that “despite the RCMP’s frequent attendances there, possibly as many as 49 murders were perpetrated”.

Commission spokesperson Ruth Atherley told the Straight by phone that Oppal cannot comment because he’s preparing his report.

In their final submission, the lawyers for the families also note that there are “many theories” about why Pickton wasn’t stopped early on. One is in connection with the police investigation of the Hells Angels, whose members frequented the Picktons’ Piggy Palace booze can.

According to the lawyers, this could have “in some way played a role in the police departments’ failure to intervene in Robert Pickton’s activities”.

They also raise the possibility that “police knew more about the Picktons than they were willing to disclose publicly.” As well, the lawyers state, “many believe...that Robert Pickton did not act alone.”

P.S.

* <http://www.rogerannis.com/missing-and-murdered-women-in-british-columbia/>

Footnotes

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Pickton

[2] <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2012/06/05/brian-hutchinson-pickton-inquiry-under-fire-t-o-the-end/>