

A century of RCMP ignorance

Report says police were seldom aware of abuse at residential schools

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THE CANADIAN PRESS

HALIFAX—RCMP officers usually weren't aware of the need to investigate abuse in Canada's infamous native residential school system because aboriginal families were reluctant to tell them what was occurring behind closed doors, says a report by the police force.

Deputy Commissioner Steve Graham presented the research report Saturday to the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was holding its final day of Atlantic region hearings in Halifax.

The 457-page report, written by Marcel-Eugène LeBeuf, said the police acted on behalf of the federal government to track down children who had run away from the schools and to tell parents they had to send their children to the schools.

However, the researchers said police generally weren't aware of abuse, defined in the report as "improper physical or sexual behaviour and actions that contributed to the loss of cultural roots."

"Children would rarely denounce the abuse they suffered, and the school system prevented outsiders from knowing about the abuse that occurred. Discipline was kept strictly internal to the school system and was not associated to the police," the authors said in the report's summary.

"The report shows that Indian residential schools were essentially a closed system between the Department of Indian Affairs, the churches and school administrator. The problems within the schools did not attract police attention or intervention because they were mostly dealt with internally or were unknown to the police."

The report covers more than 100 years and represents the first complete assessment of the RCMP's in-



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Deputy Commissioner Steve Graham, left, hands the RCMP's report to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

volvement in the Indian Residential School system.

Government-funded, church-run residential schools operated from the 1870s until the final closure of a school outside Regina in 1996.

The researchers conducted 279 interviews and travelled to 66 communities between 2007 and 2009 to examine the police role in supporting the system.

After Graham completed his brief presentation to the commission, he gently placed the study into the bentwood box, where expressions of reconciliation are placed by those participating in the panels.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has a five-year mandate to document the history of residential schools, inspire reconciliation and produce a report by 2014.

The report said a lack of trust of



Pupils at St. Anne's school in Fort Albany, Ont., which closed in 1964.

the police by natives was the biggest barrier up until the 1990s. "Without public or police knowledge of wrongdoing, there would be no investigation and no charges laid against abusers."

Alan Knockwood, a former student at the Shubenacadie residential school in Nova Scotia, called the RCMP report "a bit of a whitewash"

that lets the force off too lightly.

"What we saw at the residential school was a posse of racists. . . Any child who was seen wandering around off the grounds was immediately snatched up to the RCMP and brought back," he said.

The report includes one anonymous account by an RCMP officer who said he told an Anglican priest he wouldn't bring children back to the school. The officer is quoted saying in 1962 that, "there were a lot of parents that were hesitant to send their children to school because of abuse."

In May 2004, then RCMP commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli publicly apologized to Canada's aboriginal peoples. "To those of you who suffered tragedies at residential schools, we are very sorry for your experience," he said then.