Indigenous · Opinion

Holding cells vs. carpools: what systemic racism looks like in investigation into Colten Boushie's death

We do not need another report or inquiry in 30 years that more 'cultural training' is needed: Robert Henry

Robert Henry · for CBC Opinion · Posted: Apr 08, 2021 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: April 8

Debbie Baptiste holds up a photo of her son Colten Boushie as the family speaks in the foyer of the House of Commons in 2018. (The Canadian Press)

This column is an opinion by Robert Henry, PhD, a Métis assistant professor at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Indigenous Studies and the executive director of the First Nations Métis Health Research Network. For more information about CBC’s Opinion section, please see the FAQ.
Earlier this year, the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP completed its report into the RCMP's handling of evidence in the death of Colten Boushie, and how they had treated his mother Debbie Baptiste.

Boushie, 22, was shot and killed after he and four others from the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan drove onto white farmer Gerald Stanley's property near Biggar, Sask., in August 2016. An altercation occurred between the people in the SUV and Stanley and his son, ending in the fatal shooting.

In February 2018, a jury found Stanley, 56, not guilty of second-degree murder or manslaughter.

The CRCC report presented 17 recommendations, of which, at the time of writing, the RCMP has said that they had completed 16 of them. Of particular interest is the continued recommendation for "cultural awareness training" for all RCMP officers, which has been repeated in most reports and inquiries focused on RCMP relations with Indigenous peoples in Canada.

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Reading through the CRCC report, I kept wondering when or if the report would focus on the systemic racism that has been repeatedly identified in the ways the RCMP engages with Indigenous peoples in Canada. The ways in which RCMP are used by corporate and governmental agencies to remove Indigenous land protectors from their territories to facilitate resource extraction. Or the ways in which Indigenous people have died after coming into contact with not just RCMP, but other police services across Canada.

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All of this to say, the RCMP, as with all policing agencies, focus attention on the surveillance of Indigenous people – and people of colour in general – while at the same time ignoring human dignity when handling the deaths of Indigenous people.

I am not saying all members of the RCMP think or act this way as this misses the whole point and helps systems point to specific actions to deflect allegations of systemic racism. It leads exactly to the trouble that RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki has with discussions of systemic racism – that systemic racism is too hard to understand because it is everywhere. In Canada, systemic racism is embedded in and across our systems; we cannot continue to deny this if we want to live in an "era of reconciliation."
Lucki says it's her goal to change the RCMP's culture in wake of Boushie report

Throughout the CRCC report and its recommendations, systemic racism is blatantly clear. The ways in which the system and its policies can be used to ignore human dignity while trying to protect itself, is what anti-racist scholars and activists have tried to shine light on. The problem is that when light is shone on the issues it is reflected, or rather deflected, to change the direction of attention to something else. Something less. Something cultural.

I don't want to focus on the entire report, or how Debbie Baptiste was treated by the RCMP the night of Colten's death, nor the subsequent traumatic violence of the RCMP showing up to his wake unannounced. Those are the easy points to show and tell ourselves that those actions are inherently wrong and need to change. If Colten was non-Indigenous, and let us be honest here, if he were white or white-coded, and came from a family who were seen as 'contributors' to Canada, the ways in which the RCMP interacted throughout would have been different. This is not a secret, and nor should it be. The only way that we can make change, is if we acknowledge and accept that we need to change. Rather, I want to focus on the way Gerald Stanley's family were treated in comparison to Colten's friends on that night and the day that followed.

Here is where we see what Commissioner Lucki and others have trouble with, that systemic racism is both background and foreground. While the teens were arrested, placed in separate cells, and held because they were viewed as "criminal," Gerald Stanley's son and wife were allowed to carpool together in a vehicle the RCMP allowed them to take from the crime scene, to go to the RCMP detachment, give their statements, go home.

Cells versus carpools. This is what systemic racism looks like. The ability to be seen as innocent, as truthful, to be treated with dignity. This is what is hard to talk about, and what is harder to bring out with reports and inquiries. But it is something we need to understand if we actually want to engage in reconciliation and not let it be another word in the Canadian "nice" vocabulary. That innocence, truth, and honesty are inscribed on who one is.

We need to challenge the actual impact of reports because they continue to skirt systemic issues and focus on recommendations that never have to truly be accepted. Rather, when we look at inquiries in relation to Indigenous peoples, there continues to be a focus on cultural awareness or cultural training, which focuses on of the need to learn about culture. The problem is that colonization has accepted culture, but it has never accepted the lives of those who live within the culture.

Colten was 22 when he died. The RCMP have stated that they have had and promoted cultural awareness training for the past 30 years. We do not need another report or inquiry
in 30 years continuing to state that more "cultural training" is needed to address Indigenous and RCMP or police relations, or Indigenous and health service relations, or Indigenous and child welfare relations. Change needs to come from within. That is the difference between anti-racism and cultural awareness training.

I have heard people say that they hope that this report, now being called the "Boushie Report," will make positive change and shine light on the ways Indigenous peoples are treated by the RCMP. The handling of Colten's death and how his mother was treated that night and his family since then has been without dignity, not just from the RCMP and policing more broadly, but Canadians in general.

Colten Boushie deserved better. Debbie Baptiste deserves better. We owe it to ourselves to be better.

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