

## ‘She was just fearing for her safety’: Family says Moore didn’t have mental health issues



Chantel Moore, 26, died following a confrontation with police during a wellness check on June 4.

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**David Gordon Koch | Times & Transcript**

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Advocates for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are warning against stereotypes following the police killing of Chantel Moore.

Moore, a 26-year-old woman from Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, was shot and killed by a member of the Edmundston Police Force on June 4.

It came amid a series of police killings stemming from calls for services related to mental health issues. Some media reports have portrayed Moore's death as an example of mental-health wellness checks gone wrong.

But Moore's family says she didn't have mental health issues, and police were sent to check on her well-being due to concerns about her safety.

She had recently moved to Edmundston to be closer to her daughter and mother and was celebrating at her new apartment downtown, according to previous reports.

"There were no mental illness issues," said Judith Sayers, a spokesperson for Martha Martin, the victim's mother, in an email.

"She had had a few drinks with a friend that night but we don't believe she was drunk," she said, adding the confrontation with police happened hours later.

Many questions remain about the events that night, she said, but the family's understanding remains that she was being harassed when her ex-boyfriend called police to complain.

"She was just fearing for her safety," Sayers said.

### **Negative assumptions**

The fact that Moore is being remembered as someone who was mentally ill is an example of victim blaming, said Michelle Perley, manager for the Looking Out For Each Other project.

Led by the New Brunswick Aboriginal Peoples Council, it aims to assist the families and friends of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

"It goes back to the context of the historical racism and marginalization of Indigenous women in the country," she said.

Those assumptions tend to normalize violence against Indigenous women collectively, said Elizabeth Blaney, director of the NBAPC.

It reflects "general negative assumptions about a whole group of people, in this case Indigenous women," she said.

Stereotypes and victim-blaming have often slowed down or impeded investigations, according to testimonies heard by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Police have often assumed victims were "drunks," "runaways out partying" or "prostitutes unworthy of follow-up," the final report of the inquiry noted.

Those kinds of stereotypes are also reflected in the media, Perley said, noting that it plays an important role because it shapes people's perceptions.

It's also connected to a lack of Indigenous representation in the media and other institutions, Blaney said. "When you go and turn on your TV... how many Indigenous people do you see there?" she asked. "That's a Canadian systemic issue."



Their comments come as New Brunswick faces complex problems of anti-Indigenous racism, policing and mental health and addictions services.

## **Stereotypes**

"There tends to be an assumption that non-white minority groups use drugs more often than the white majority," said Karen Urbanoski, the Canada Research Chair in Substance Use, Addictions and Health Services Research.

She said that assumption is largely untrue.

In fact, Indigenous people in Canada, including First Nation, Métis and Inuit people, are less likely to drink alcohol in a given year compared to non-Indigenous people, said Urbanoski, who is also a scientist with the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research.

She's calling on Canadians to reflect on deeply engrained stereotypes about Indigenous people and other racialized groups.

Hospital records in Alberta and B.C. show that Indigenous people are more frequently admitted for addictions than others in those provinces, according to the Canadian Centre for Addictions.

That might reflect higher rates of substance use or problems associated with substance use, but it could also mean that health professionals are more likely to diagnose Indigenous

people with substance use disorder, she said.

In June, the Minister of Health in B.C. launched an investigation into allegations of racism in the provincial health-care system.

"Factors such as stereotypes and racism do play into the types of diagnoses that are being made in hospitals," Urbanoski said.

### **Social determinants**

At the same time, groups including Indigenous people are more severely harmed by substances, she said.

Factors known as the social determinants of health tend to lead people down the road to substance use disorder, said Urbanoski, an assistant professor in Public Health and Social Policy of the University of Victoria.

"On the whole, factors such as poverty, racism, colonization, gender discrimination are determinants of substance use disorder," she said. "They do contribute to the development of harms related to substances."

Indigenous leaders have called for a public inquiry into systemic racism in policing and the justice system following the fatal police shootings of Moore and Rodney Levi, 48, of Metepenagiag Mi'kmaq Nation. The two shootings took place just eight days apart.

Levi's family has said he was experiencing severe paranoia caused by crystal meth, and tried without success to get addictions support on several occasions at the Miramichi Regional Hospital.

Chief Bill Ward of Metepenagiag Mi'kmaq Nation said people haven't recovered from a series of historical traumas, including being forced to attend institutions like the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in Nova Scotia.

Those systems destroyed generations of people by teaching them shame for their culture and language through violence, he said. "Unfortunately you see a lot of drug abuse, to dull the world around them," he said.

Indigenous women face both racism and sexism in Canadian society, said Blaney.

"We know that there's this discrimination against women," she said. "So when you talk about women who are Indigenous, you get the sexism compounded with the racism."