

Halifax police apologize to black community for pain caused by street checks



Halifax's police chief issued a formal apology to Nova Scotia's black community Friday over the practice of street checks, describing it as a first step to counter a series of historic wrongs.

Chief Daniel Kinsella acknowledged that officers' actions and words over the decades have caused mistreatment and victimization.

"On behalf of the Halifax Regional Police, I am sorry. I am sorry for our actions that caused you pain," he told an audience of several hundred gathered at an auditorium at the downtown public library.

Kinsella said while injustices can't be undone, police are committed to doing better in the future.

"This is going to be a journey, and for Halifax Regional Police, that journey starts now."

The apology comes in the wake of findings earlier this year that the police practice of randomly stopping people, collecting personal information and storing it was disproportionately targeting the black community — particularly young black men.

The study by criminologist Scot Wortley found black citizens were five times more likely to be street-checked than white citizens.

Last month, retired jurist Michael MacDonald issued an analysis that street checks as practised in Nova Scotia were illegal in constitutional and common law. On the same day, provincial Attorney General Mark Furey committed to banning the practice in policing regulations.

However, Kinsella acknowledged on Friday that reversing the policy and apologizing was just a first step in undoing generations of mistrust.

Former Nova Scotia lieutenant-governor Mayann Francis, the first black woman to hold the post, spoke before Kinsella, providing examples of past incidents that widened the divide between police and the black community over several generations.

She recalled the Nov. 8, 1946 arrest and jailing of Viola Desmond after the black businesswoman sat in the white section of a New Glasgow, N.S.,

movie theatre.

She also mentioned the April 12, 1998 "driving while black" arrest of professional boxer Kirk Johnson.

Johnson was pursued and his car was towed after the officer wasn't satisfied by the documents offered. A board of inquiry ruled in 2003 that Johnson's treatment was a violation of his human rights. The board called for a police study of such traffic stops and the role race plays, but the recommendation has yet to be carried out.

Francis also recalled participating in a review of the July 19, 1991 "Halifax race riot," when allegations were levelled against police that they had mistreated black citizens during arrests.

"From 1946 through to present day, the experiences of the African Nova Scotian community with the police department have been negative," she said. "These examples are only the tip of the iceberg."

To those who question the history of racism, Francis asked: "Have you ever been stopped by police because your skin was white?"

Kinsella said a plan to bring in wider changes to reduce racial bias in policing was underway. He promised to form an advisory committee early next year to help him oversee initiatives to improve education and training of officers.

"Training will be offered on a regular basis, and the community will be invited to be directly involved in ... delivering it."

He also said the force will focus on recruiting more black police officers and civilian staff and will set up programs to engage existing officers with black youth.

The chief said if there are cases of racial bias in policing, he will handle them personally. "I will be there for you. I, as chief of police, will take personal responsibility for followup in each and every case," he said.

People who have advocated for an end to street checks attended the event and said it will take time to create trust.

"I can't say outright that I trust the police, but what I can say is I'm open and I'm positive and I want to move forward," said DeRico Symonds, 30. He said the apology resonated with him: "You have to believe something different is going to happen than what has been happening."

Robert Wright, a member of the African Nova Scotian Decade for Persons of African Descent, said his group will remain vigilant to ensure Kinsella's promises are respected.

He said he was disappointed not to hear more about the traffic stops, recalling the Johnson case. "There are some of us in the community very concerned about traffic stops. We're worried the statistics may be even worse than street checks," Wright said. "We'll hold him to all of these things in the days coming forward."

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