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A group of 25 cyclists arrived Monday at the Thunder Bay Police Station where they were greeted by uniformed officers, Chief Bob Herman and members of the Thunder Bay Boys and Girls Club. The cyclists, most of them Montreal Police Service personnel, are pedalling across Canada in an effort to raise awareness about missing children.

Focus on magic of childhood

Cross-country cyclists promote keeping kids safe

BY KAREN MCKINLEY
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They ride because every year 55,000 children in Canada go missing and some never come home.

Twenty-five cyclists, most of them members of the Montreal Police Service, are riding across Canada in the Protecting the Magic of Childhood tour to raise awareness about missing children and the agencies that try to bring them home.

The cyclists stopped in Thunder Bay on Monday at the Balmoral Street police headquarters to meet city officers and Boys and Girls Club members. The team started out in Vancouver on Aug. 30 and the goal is to reach Montreal on Saturday.

Jean-Guy Gagnon, deputy director for the Montreal Police Service, said the ride into Thunder Bay was a dream compared to getting over the Rocky Mountains and through the rain on Sunday. It's a tough ride, but all the officers trained for the ride. No injuries or accidents have occurred.

"We ride because we know as officers a large portion of the calls we get are for a missing child,"

Gagnon said. "Most are recovered, but some do not return home, which is why we want to make communities aware of the services they can turn to."

Thunder Bay Police Chief Bob Herman said the benefits of the Montreal Police Service team's ride will extend beyond Quebec, adding it is the responsibility of all communities to protect children and return the missing to their homes.

"Police do more than enforce," said Herman. "We have an obligation to find missing children and prevent others from going missing."

Thunder Bay has a high number of missing in this city. Across Canada over 70 per cent of the missing are runaways, but they are still children, the most vulnerable members of society.

"We know as officers the impact of a lost child on a family. It's devastating. We can't solve the problem on our own, but we can help prevent more cases by supporting organizations like this."

Herman praised the local Masonic Lodge's Child Identification Program (Ch.I.P.) Launched

in 2008, the program gathers information on children, including physical descriptions that could be used if they are reported missing. More than 2,500 children have been registered so far. Such data is vital in identifying and returning children to their homes, Herman said.

Also on hand Monday were representatives of Enfant-Retour Québec, an organization started in 1985 after a five-year-old boy was abducted and murdered. The group only operates in Quebec, said Susan Armstrong of Enfant-Retour, but it works with others across the country to recover children.

The bike tour used to be in Quebec only, but it was decided to cross Canada to promote the importance of supporting all child-find organizations.

The cyclists' next stop is Wawa. The route also includes Espanola, Toronto and Ottawa before the final leg to Montreal.

For more information about the tour, visit www.tourcyclistespm.com.