

#215Children: Indigenous peoples grieve after mass grave found at residential school

written by M. Tiahui
June 11, 2021



Memorials to the 215 children buried at Kamloops Residential School have been put

up all over Canada.

On May 27, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation said that preliminary findings from a survey of the grounds at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia uncovered the remains of 215 children. This news has been met by a massive outpouring of grief in Indigenous communities.

Indigenous people have created memorials to the children, with 215 pairs of children's shoes, toys and flowers appearing on the steps of government buildings, churches and residential school buildings across Canada. Statues of prominent Canadian historical figures who bear responsibility for the residential school system, such as John A. Macdonald and Egerton Ryerson, are being covered with red paint and pulled down.

The confirmation of the remains of the 215 children at Kamloops is only a beginning; there are many more unmarked gravesites to be found and analyzed. While hundreds of graves had already been identified, residential school survivors have said for years that additional children are buried in many different areas, and asked Canada for years to fund searches at all residential school properties. Thousands of families seek to know who is buried there and what happened to their children.

Kamloops was one school from more than a century of government-sanctioned Indian residential schools in Canada. Abuse of every kind at these schools was the norm. At St. Anne's residential school in Ontario, survivors described whippings, beatings, widespread sexual abuse and punishment by shocks delivered in an on-site electric chair.

Medical experiments were permitted to be conducted on the children. Diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza swept through the schools, with the children's malnourished bodies often too weak to survive.

Some Indigenous (First Nations, Metis and Inuit) children died from tuberculosis or malnutrition. Some died of a broken heart. Some died trying to run away and return home. Some died from beatings and some from suicide.

No one knows how many children died nationally in Canada, but estimates range from 6,000 to as high as 25,000.

The children had their hair cut, were beaten for speaking their mother tongue, were told that their families and spiritual beliefs were evil, were subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

Imagine living in a community where outside authorities such as priests and Mounties swoop in to grab your children and carry them off to a residential school. Imagine that you are told you cannot even see your children unless you behave, or that you will not receive your meager rations if your child does not go to the school. Imagine how quiet your community is after the children have been snatched away.

Your child may return home broken, or may never return at all.



Indigenous children in a residential school classroom.

Not ancient history

Catholic missionary residential schools began in “New France” (French colonies in North America). Residential schools became part of Canadian government and church policy from the 1830s on with the creation of Anglican, Roman Catholic and Methodist schools in Ontario.

These colonial experiments set the pattern for post-[Confederation](#) policies from 1867 on. Approximately 150,000 Indigenous children in Canada experienced that era of residential schools.

The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996, so this is not ancient history.

Some children also were forced to attend government-run day schools, where abuse and cultural genocide were also common. There are still many school survivors and even more families descended from those who suffered at the schools.

Indigenous people certainly never forgot about the residential schools. What occurred in these schools has also caused intergenerational trauma, impacting families for generations.

Chief Clarence Louie of the Syilx Okanagan Nation in British Columbia said that Indigenous people still feel the impact of the schools today. “The level of inhumane and criminal treatment of First Nations children at the hands of colonial governments and organized religion is deeply disturbing,” he said in a statement.

“We are calling on the Province of British Columbia and Government of Canada to directly address these atrocities.”

Settlers in Canada are now paying more attention to the issue, yet some of them dare to deny that the residential schools were so horrific. This modern amnesia and denial by the oppressor nation ignores thousands of Indigenous people who participated in the painful six-year process of the national Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which [issued reports in 2015](#) detailing many of the abuses at the residential schools with 94 Calls to Action.

The government has failed to respond to many of the calls, including refusing to fund the requests to identify missing children and their marked and unmarked burial sites. Often the schools and authorities failed to tell families what happened to the children at the schools and refused to return the bodies home because they did not want to pay for transportation or have the families know how abused the child had been.

This information was widely available and publicized, and multiple calls to action

were included in the TRC report. Yet all too many settlers continued to profess ignorance or disbelief about residential schools even though information has long been available.

Canada's white ruling class has benefited immensely from the destruction of Native families and communities. As Indigenous people were violently forced onto reserves and often denied the ability to hunt, farm and fish to support themselves, vast tracts of land were renamed, divided, and handed out by the Canadian government to railroads, settlers, logging and other interests.

The stolen children were taught that their systems of governance and ways of life were bad and backwards, told they had no need for or right to the land in the face of allegedly superior Canadian "civilization."



Tiny handcuffs used to keep Indigenous children under control when they were taken from their communities.

Generations of genocide

The residential school system was part of an intentional, long-term Canadian government policy to devastate Indigenous families and steal Indigenous lands by forcing people onto reserves (known as “reservations” in the U.S.) and disconnecting children and communities from the land.

The schools were run with the backing of the Canadian government and churches. The educational views of the Methodist Minister Egerton Ryerson were influential; he wanted to “take the Indian out of the child,” force assimilation to white ways and have schools teach Indigenous children rudimentary skills in order to become farm laborers or take other jobs in service of white bosses.

While some Indigenous families may have hoped that their children would get a good education at the schools that would help their communities and children, that is not what happened.

The first Canadian prime minister, John A. Macdonald, pushed for the residential schools because, “When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write ... he is simply a savage who can read and write. ... [T]he Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence.”

Macdonald also had a policy of starving Indigenous people from the prairies in order to clear a path for the transcontinental railway by forcing them to move to reserves. Macdonald and the prime ministers who followed had millions of willing accomplices, supported by parliaments and legislatures, churches, political parties and white public opinion.

The United Church of Canada apologized for residential schools in 1986, the Anglican Church of Canada in 1993, the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1994.

Canada formally apologized in 2008, but has continued to implement policies that negatively impact Indigenous children and families.

The Pope has never apologized, and Catholic orders such as the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, which ran about 47% of Canada's residential schools, including the one in Kamloops, have refused to turn over their records.

Far from being hidden, information about the inhumane conditions at the schools appeared as early as 1907. Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, a highly respected expert in tuberculosis, [surveyed the health of First Nations children](#) in residential schools. He found that children in the schools were dying at the rate of 24% per year, and the death rate rose to a staggering 42% over three years. In one school that kept complete records, 76% of the children had died.

Bryce said "medical science knows just what to do," and he implored Ottawa to improve ventilation in the schools, stop putting sick children in with healthy children and ensure they had equitable access to tuberculosis treatment. As Bryce noted, the Indian Affairs budget for tuberculosis treatment for First Nations across Canada was far less than what was provided to the less populated city of Ottawa.

Nothing was done. Bryce would later lose his federal civil service position due to his constant whistle-blowing efforts.

Attacks not limited to Canada

In the U.S., an estimated 500 government-funded Indian boarding and day schools operated in the 19th and 20th centuries. NABS (National Native American Board School Healing Coalition) has identified 357 boarding schools alone.

The first federally-run Indian boarding school was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, in operation from 1879 to 1918, which used harsh military discipline to force Native children from all over the U.S. to assimilate.

At many of the schools, unmarked graves exist and remains of children are still undergoing a process of repatriation to the children's tribes. [Researchers say](#) that most of the more than 350 U.S. Indian boarding schools have cemeteries associated with them.

The US has never had an accurate accounting of the Indian boarding schools, the number of children who attended or those who died at the schools. By 1900, there were about 20,000 children in boarding schools; by 1925, that number [had more than tripled](#).

Brazil, Australia, Mexico and Venezuela were among the other countries that had mission and other residential schools for Indigenous children.

Even with the closure of residential schools, the mistreatment and removal of Indigenous children continued. In all too many countries, foster care became the "new residential school" - meaning that many Indigenous children are put into care rather than their families receiving the support needed to be able to keep their children. In Canada, Indigenous children comprise 7.7% of all children under age 14, but 55.2% of children in foster care.

Canada under Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party continues to conduct "belligerent and litigious" legal battles against survivors of Canada's residential schools and child welfare systems and refuses to properly fund services for Indigenous children. In the U.S., Indigenous children are disproportionately in foster care, and right-wing evangelicals continue to attack the Indian Child Welfare Act in hopes of being able to separate even more Native children from their tribal nations and families.

In the U.S., Australia and other countries, Indigenous kids continue to live at the bottom of the heap.

Land-back beats reconciliation

The Canadian Parliament has now acted to designate Sept. 30 as a national day of truth and reconciliation to learn about and honor Indigenous people who attended residential schools, those who survived and those who never came home.

It is always important for the survivors and their families to be able to speak the truth about the harm they experienced that continues to reverberate through Indigenous communities. They have worked so hard to improve conditions for these communities. It's important for settlers to commit to knowing the truth about residential schools.

But there can be no reconciliation without reparations, justice and the return of land to Indigenous nations. Apologies and holidays are useless if people from the oppressor nation are not taking immediate and decisive steps to undo the toxic settler-colonial systems and anti-Indigenous racism that continue to exist.

[Visit this website](#) for some ways to support the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation as they take responsibility for ensuring that the children's remains will be identified and repatriated.

