

# Abuse of Indigenous children demands reparations, sovereignty

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Orange Shirt Day commemoration at the Federal Building in Boston, Sept. 30.  
Photo: Raquel Halsey-Arbona

*From a talk given at an Orange Shirt Day 2021 commemoration in Boston on Sept. 30.*

Orange Shirt Day has been commemorated in Canada since 2013, to honor the

survivors and remember the children who never made it home from the Indian residential schools.

The Sept. 30 date was chosen because it is the time of year when children were forced to go into the residential schools. The orange shirt symbolism came about when Phyllis Webstad told [her story](#) of her first day at residential school in the 1970s, when her shiny new orange shirt, bought by her grandmother, was taken from her as a 6-year-old girl as she was violently stripped of her clothing and belongings.

Today is also the first National Day of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada, although some provinces are refusing to honor it and there are too many Indigenous people saying they cannot even get the day off from work. Indigenous peoples have long been speaking the truth, and it is long overdue for settlers and newcomers to listen to that truth.

But honestly, there can be no reconciliation until reparations are made, Indigenous sovereignty is respected, Indigenous rights to consent and refuse are respected. Landback efforts and the right to decolonize need to be respected by Canada, a country that has still not changed its anti-Indigenous behavior or improved often deplorable conditions for Indigenous people, especially children. Apologies without actions do not mean anything.

More than 6,500 children have been found in unmarked graves on residential school grounds this year alone. They were not suddenly “discovered.” The survivors knew and testified about this. As children, some of the survivors were even forced to work on digging the graves.

One of the 2015 recommendations of the Canadian Truth & Reconciliation commission was that Canada fund and help Indigenous communities identify graves at the residential schools and reclaim their lost children. But Canada did nothing.

At least 150,000 Indigenous children were placed in the Canadian Indian residential school system. Some people now are referring to them as Institutions of Assimilation and Genocide, since that was the intent of the programs. And schools should not have graves full of children either, should they?

### **Genocide of Indigenous children**

The residential schools were created to alienate Indigenous children from their communities, spiritualities, cultures, languages and homelands. This genocide of children was an overt effort to destroy Indigenous family systems and remove Indigenous peoples from their lands. Mounties would raid some communities to snatch up all the children and take them away.

In some schools, the children were not allowed to go home at all for years, and families were prevented from visiting them. Even preschool aged children were in these schools and died there. Children died of malnutrition, tuberculosis, heartbreak, abuse, medical experimentation and more. Families were often not even told that their child had died, and their bodies were often not brought home. All of this resulted in profound intergenerational trauma.

The number of school-related deaths in Canada remains unknown due to incomplete records. Estimates now range from several thousand to over 30,000. Indigenous communities are urgently trying to raise funds to bring in specialists to examine the land and find graves at residential schools.

Many of the schools were run by the Catholic Church. One of the demands today is that the Catholic Church and its prelates not only apologize, but release all of its records, hand over the priests and nuns who did this to children, pay reparations out of its vast wealth, and take concrete actions to repair relationships with Indigenous peoples.

It's only now, after this year's revelation of thousands of unmarked graves of children, that more Canadians are finally listening to what has happened to Indigenous people in North America. Even now, there remain some genocide deniers who tell Indigenous people to get over it.

### **U.S. also stole children**

Today is also a National Day of Remembrance for U.S. Indian Boarding Schools.

Between 1869 and the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of Native American and Alaska Native children were removed from their homes and families and placed in boarding schools operated by the U.S. government and churches, including the Catholic Church and several protestant denominations.

Though we don't know how many children were taken in total, by 1900 there were 20,000 children in Indian boarding schools, and by 1925 more than 60,000. The Native children who were removed from their homes, families and communities during this time were taken to schools sometimes thousands of miles away, where they were punished for speaking their native languages, stripped of traditional clothing and had their hair chopped off. They suffered physical, sexual, cultural and spiritual abuse, neglect and torture.

Many children never returned home and their fates have yet to be accounted for by the U.S. government, although U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland has recently promised that there will be a thorough investigation.

Both countries also had a long history of removing Indigenous children from their homes and placing them with white families to be adopted and assimilated and lose their ties to their communities, a practice that went on for decades and resulted in children we call "lost birds" because they grew up not knowing where they belong.

As a result, Indigenous people worked very hard to get laws such as the Indian Child

Welfare Act passed so that this practice would end forever. Unfortunately, right-wing forces in recent years have been trying to overturn the Indian Child Welfare Act so that more of our children will be stolen and adopted by whites, and the future of ICWA will soon be determined by the Supreme Court.

In both Canada and the U.S., Indigenous children are disproportionately taken from their families and put into foster care, at least four times more often than white kids. This has led some people to say that foster care has in effect become the new residential school system.

*The writer is a leader of United American Indians of New England (UAINE), which hosts the annual National Day of Mourning commemoration in Plymouth, Mass., on the last Thursday of November. For more info, visit UAINE.org.*

