

‘He was just a child’: dead of Indigenous residential schools haunt Canada

Generations of First Nations children were abducted to institutions to solve the country’s ‘Indian problem’. Thousands never returned



Children at the Kamloops Indian residential school in British Columbia in 1931.

by Justin Ling in Montreal
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When they came to take Jonnish Saganash away, he was only five years old.

It was 1954, and the Canadian government had decided he was to be sent to a residential school in Ontario – hundreds of kilometers from his Indigenous community in Quebec.

“He was just a child, a gentle child born on the land of his ancestors,” his brother Romeo recalled this week.

Just a year after arriving at the school, Jonnish contracted rheumatic fever and died far from his family. He was buried in an unmarked grave near the school.

Last week, news broke at the other end of the country that would bring all those painful memories back. It was “devastating – again,” said Romeo.

Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc, an Indigenous nation in British Columbia, announced they had uncovered evidence of unmarked graves containing the remains of as many as 215

Indigenous children behind the site of a former residential school in the city of Kamloops.

“To our knowledge, these missing children are undocumented deaths,” said Kúkpi7 (chief) Rosanne Casimir in a statement. “Some were as young as three.”

The news came as a shock to many Canadians, but it shouldn’t have.



Autumn Peters places 215 ribbons on the fence behind the former Kamloops Indian residential school this week, in honor of the 215 children whose remains have been discovered buried near the facility, as well as her grandfather Clayton Peter, a survivor of the school, and all other survivors.

Indigenous people, especially those who survived the schools, have known for years that unmarked graves of their relatives dot the country. And Canada, they have said, is doing precious little about it.

The news from Kamloops has had Saganash thinking about those friends he lost in the 10 years he spent at La Tuque Indian residential school in Quebec.

“Those who disappeared or never made it home, those I knew were abused physically, sexually, spiritually,” Saganash wrote in an email. “Their eyes and look flashed in my memory, the things they said to me without uttering a word. The cries for help without tears. Those memories will stay with me all my life.”

Between 1867 and 1996, the Canadian state abducted more than 150,000 Indigenous children from their parents and forced them into these schools as part of a campaign of forced assimilation. Thousands were subject to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

According to the official register, 3,213 died. The real number is certainly much higher.

For decades, the mortality rate for Indigenous children in these schools ranged between twice as high and five times higher than non-Indigenous schoolchildren. Suicide, neglect and disease all contributed to the devastating loss of life.



A gathering at the Kamloops Indian residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia, in 1937.

Roughly 900 students died of tuberculosis in the schools. More than 150 would die of influenza and a similar number of pneumonia. In hundreds of other cases, a cause of death is unknown.

During the 1918 influenza pandemic, the principal of one Alberta school wrote in a letter to the department: “We have no isolation ward and no hospital equipment of any kind. The dead, the dying, and the sick and the convalescent were all together.” He called the conditions “criminal”.

Memories remain vivid for many survivors. Shirley Leon recalled seeing cattle trucks driving on to her reserve as a child – and then “seeing my cousins cry and then they were put on these trucks, and hauled off – we didn’t know where”, she told an inquiry decades later. Soon, the government would come for her, too: she attended the Kamloops school in the 1940s.

Some schools were government-run; others were administered by the church. All shared one central mission.

One official wrote in 1910 that those schools were “geared towards the final solution of our Indian Problem”. In practice, that meant stripping Indigenous students of their culture, language – and everything that made them Indigenous.

There is another name for that program: a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which spent five years hearing the stories of survivors from those schools, described it as “cultural genocide”.



Members of the community of the Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, Quebec, march through the town to commemorate the news about Kamloops.

Another witness, Ray Silver, told the commission about his time at the Alberni Indian residential school, in British Columbia. His brother, Dalton, fell ill, but Silver was not told. “He was a little guy, lying in the bed in the infirmary, dying, and I didn’t know ’til he died.”

The commission’s report was published in 2015 to great fanfare, and came accompanied by 94 calls to action – steps Canada must take in order to reckon with its ugly past and do right by the 1.7 million Indigenous people in the country, who consistently see lower health, education and economic outcomes.

The commission also identified 20 unmarked gravesites at former residential schools across the country. But, the commissioners wrote, “it is apparent that there are likely to be other unidentified residential gravesites across the country.” A national program, they wrote, “is required to complete the task of identifying the many unmarked residential school cemeteries and gravesites across Canada”.

The report was heralded as a watershed moment for the relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples. But optimism has given way to frustration over a lack of progress and an apparent lack of ambition from the federal government.

In late 2019 the Yellowhead Institute, a First Nations-led research centre at the University of Toronto, reported that just nine of the 94 calls to action had been fully addressed. In a 2020 report card, the Assembly of First Nations said there had been only “moderate progress” on identifying all of the children who died in those schools.



Flowers, shoes, and moccasins sit on the steps of the main entrance of the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, to honor the children who died.

“If we are serious about reconciliation, a term that has been so abused by the governments that no Indigenous person wants to hear that word any more, then our actions need to show that we are sincere and genuine,” Saganash said. “That is not happening.”

What’s more, the government of Justin Trudeau is currently fighting a class action lawsuit, seeking reparations for the broader effort to destroy Indigenous language, culture and identity.

Many Indigenous peoples are similarly vexed by Ottawa’s lack of progress in addressing Canada’s epidemic of violence against Indigenous women.

Saganash, who was elected to parliament in 2011 as a member of the centre-left New Democratic party, fought for years for the creation of an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women. But its calls to action have similarly been addressed in piecemeal fashion.



Justin Trudeau visits the makeshift memorial erected on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

If confirmed, the grim discovery in Kamloops would be one of the most significant discoveries in recent years. With support from the BC government, the Tk'emlúps to Secwépemc hired a ground-penetrating radar specialist. While a final study will be needed, Casimir said the preliminary results mean they can “begin the process of honouring the lost loved ones who are in our caretaking”.

“Not acting,” to uncover the rest of those sites, Saganash said, “will be just an invitation to relive the trauma every year or so, as we slowly discover other sites.”

Saganash’s family found Jonnish’s grave almost purely by chance, after his sister met a supervisor from the school who remembered him.

“When we asked my late mom, after finding her son 40 years later, if she would like the little body to be brought home,” Saganash recalled. “She responded: ‘It is not necessary, because I will be with him one day again.’”