

How Thousands of Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada

The discovery of the remains of hundreds of children at the sites of defunct schools in British Columbia and southern Saskatchewan has rekindled discussion of a sinister time in Canada's history.



Children's shoes and toys were placed in front of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia after the remains of 215 children, some as young as 3, were found at the site this past week.

By Ian Austen

Published June 7, 2021

OTTAWA — The remains of 751 people, mainly Indigenous children, were discovered at the site of a former school in the province of Saskatchewan, a Canadian Indigenous group said on Thursday, shaking a nation grappling with generations of systematic abuse of Indigenous people.

The discovery, the largest one to date, came less than a month after the remains of 215 children were found in unmarked graves on the grounds of another former boarding school in British Columbia.

Both schools were part of a system that took Indigenous children from their families over a period of about 113 years and housed them in boarding schools, where they were prohibited from speaking their languages.

The dual discoveries give new impetus to the nation's debate on how to atone for its history of exploiting Indigenous people. Many are asking how so many children could have wound up in those burial spaces.

“A lot of survivors, my relatives, they've been saying this for years and years — that there was a lot of death, there's a lot of unmarked graves,” said Perry Bellegarde, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, the country's largest Indigenous organization, referring to children who were taken from their families and forced to attend Canada's notorious residential schools like Kamloops to assimilate into Western culture.

“But nobody ever believed the survivors,” he added. An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children passed through the schools between their opening, around 1883, and their closing in 1996. Since taking office in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has prioritized putting in place a list of 94 actions for commemorating the students and improving the lives of Indigenous people. But Indigenous leaders believe the government still has a long way to go.



Gathering outside the former residential school this past week after the remains were discovered.

What has been discovered?

About 20 years ago, an effort to find remains started at the Kamloops school, which operated from 1890 until the late 1970s, and was once Canada's largest, with 500 students at its peak. Members of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation made last month's grim discovery after bringing in ground-penetrating radar.

Among the 215 bodies found by the radar, there appears to be one of a child who died as young as 3, said Chief Rosanne Casimir of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc. All of the children were buried decades ago, she said.

Chief Casimir also said she anticipated that more remains would be discovered as the ground is scanned further this month. The community is now working with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the coroner's service in British Columbia.

Chief Casimir said the bodies found so far appeared to be buried in separate "unmarked burial sites that are, to our knowledge, also undocumented."

The discovery in Saskatchewan was made by the Cowessess First Nation at the Marieval Indian Residential School, about 87 miles from the provincial capital, Regina. Like Kamloops, the Marieval school, which opened in 1899, was operated for most of its history by the Roman Catholic Church for the government of Canada.



The Kamloops Indian Residential School in 1937.

What was the residential school system?

In the late 19th century, Canada set aside land for Indigenous people through often dubious treaties, while outright seizing Indigenous land in some places, particularly in British Columbia.

Around 1883 the government added a new dimension to its exploitation of Indigenous people. Indigenous children in many parts of Canada were forced to attend residential schools, often far from their communities. Most were operated by churches, and all of them banned the use of Indigenous languages and Indigenous cultural practices, often

through violence. Disease as well as sexual, physical and emotional abuse were widespread.

The Kamloops school was operated by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969, when the federal government took over the school system. Reports by an inspector and a doctor indicated that the students at Kamloops were severely malnourished at times.

A National Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up by the Canadian government spent six years hearing from 6,750 witnesses to document the history of the schools. In a report in 2015, it concluded that the system was a form of “cultural genocide.”

The commission also called for an apology from the pope for the Roman Catholic church’s role. On Sunday, Pope Francis stopped short of offering a formal apology, but said that “the sad discovery further raises awareness of the pains and sufferings of the past.”

Some former students testified before the commission that priests at the schools had fathered infants with Indigenous students, that the babies had been taken away from their young mothers and killed, and that in some cases their bodies were thrown into furnaces.

Many students also died from disease, accidents, fires and during attempts to escape, according to the commission.

Schools suffered mass deaths when infectious diseases swept through them, according to a report this year on the burial sites by Scott Hamilton, a professor of anthropology at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario.



Children at the Kamloops school in 1931.

How many children died at the residential schools?

When children died at residential schools, their families were often given vague explanations or told that they had simply run away and vanished, the commission found. When the schools acknowledged the deaths of children, they generally refused, until the 1960s, to return their bodies to their families. Remains were sent back only if it was cheaper than burying them at the schools.

In its report, the commission estimated that at least 4,100 students had died or gone missing from the residential schools, and demanded that the government account for all of those children. It did not, however, definitely say how many had disappeared.

Murray Sinclair, a former judge and senator who headed the commission, said in an email last week that he now believed the number was “well beyond 10,000.”

Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada

The remains of 215 children were discovered at the site of a defunct boarding school in British Columbia, refueling Canada’s debate on how to atone for its history of exploiting Indigenous people.

- **Background:** Around 1883, Indigenous children in many parts of Canada were forced to attend residential schools in a forced assimilation program. Most of these schools were operated by churches, and all of them banned the use of Indigenous languages and Indigenous cultural practices, often through violence. Disease, as well as sexual, physical and emotional abuse were widespread. An estimated 150,000 children passed through the schools between their opening and their closing in 1996.
- **The Missing Children:** A National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up as part of a government apology and settlement over the schools, concluded that at least 4,100 students died while attending them, many from mistreatment or neglect, others from disease or accident. In many cases, families never learned the fate of their offspring, who are now known as “the missing children.”
- **The Recent Discovery:** In May, members of the Tk’emlups te Secwepemc First Nation found 215 bodies at the Kamloops school — which was operated by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969 — after bringing in ground-penetrating radar.
- **‘Cultural Genocide’:** In a 2015 report, the commission concluded that the system was a form of “cultural genocide.” Murray Sinclair, a former judge and senator who headed the commission, recently said he now believed the number of disappeared children was “well beyond 10,000.”
- **Apologies and Next Steps:** The commission called for an apology from the pope for the Roman Catholic church’s role. Pope Francis stopped short of one, but the archbishop of Vancouver apologized on behalf of his archdiocese. Canada has formally apologized and offered financial and other search support, but Indigenous leaders believe the government still has a long way to go.

Since the commission ended, a federal project has been underway to document the fates of the children who never returned to their families after being sent to residential schools, and who are generally known as “the missing children.”

Remains in unmarked graves have appeared or been discovered through construction or natural events at the sites of other former schools, although nothing on the scale of Kamloops.

Dr. Kisha Supernant, an Indigenous woman who directs the Institute for Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology at the University of Alberta, has been leading teams that use ground-penetrating radar and other technologies to hunt for remains.

Professor Hamilton said that simply locating burial sites was often difficult because of poor record-keeping, lost records and the relocation of some schools. “These graveyards are often now unmarked,” he said. “What they were like 50 or 60 years ago is anyone’s guess. The challenge here is that they have not been maintained. Once the schools were closed, the properties were often abandoned.”



A commemoration of the children whose bodies were found took place before a Stanley Cup playoff game in Toronto on Monday.