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## Attitudes of 'coldness, indifference' behind thousands of residential school deaths: TRC report

*More than 3,000 aboriginal children died at residential schools and the failures of those responsible for safeguarding them bordered on criminal, according to a special report*



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More than 3,000 aboriginal children died at residential schools, often of causes that could have been prevented, and the failures of those responsible for properly safeguarding the students bordered on criminal, according to a special report on the scandal.

In its final report to be released Tuesday, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provides a detailed account of the known deaths. The recorded figure is 3,201 but the actual number is probably much higher because of incomplete records, and the commission notes the death rate was much higher than among children in Canada's general population.

Its report documents how the children were buried in gravesites, many unmarked, that were not in their own communities. Today,

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that swept repeatedly through the institutions. Those children did not have to die.

“The spread of disease was fed and facilitated by crowded living conditions at the schools, along with a lethal combination of substandard sanitation, poor nutrition, and an appallingly low quality of medical care.”



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The commission says that the students were denied access to medical professionals who might have been available or willing to treat them. “In one of the darkest stains on the history of Canada, documents show that the care of Aboriginal children in residential schools was deemed less necessary than that given to white children,” says the report.

“Prevailing attitudes of those ultimately responsible for the schools reflects coldness, indifference, and neglect that borders on the criminal, if it does not actually cross the line.”

The federal government, which established the schools in the 1880s and let the churches run them for more than a century, knew as early as 1906 that there was an “exceedingly high death rate.” But it ignored the warnings that year of the chief medical officer of health in the Department of Indian Affairs.

“Government, church, and school officials were well aware of these failures and their impact on student health,” says the report. “If the question is, ‘Who knew what when?’ the clear answer is, ‘Everyone in



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The report concludes those failures contributed to unnecessarily high death rates.

"Many students who went to residential school never returned. They were lost to their families. They died at rates that were far higher than those experienced by the general school-aged population.

"Their parents were often uninformed of their sickness and death."

The children were buried away from their families in "long-neglected graves" and school administrators often didn't bother to record the cause of death or where they were buried. "Many, if not most, of the several thousand children who died in residential schools are likely to be buried in unmarked and untended graves. Subjected to institutionalized child neglect in life, they have been dishonoured in death," the TRC writes.

The TRC calls on the government to create an online registry of residential school cemeteries. In an interview Monday with the Citizen, TRC chair Justice Murray Sinclair said there is no doubt action needs to be taken, "just to show the basic human respect that we're all entitled to.



Handout

"It's not just the indignity it heaps on the children. It's the indignity it heaps upon their families and the communities and aboriginal people generally."

The report documents how students died from a variety of causes, such as fires, and how government and school principals didn't do enough to keep them safe. For example, principals locked fire escapes to keep students from running away. Where fire escapes did

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And the physical and sexual abuse also took its toll on children who saw only one way to end the horror.

“Some young children took their own lives rather than face another day in institutions where they lived in such despair.”

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Recorded death rates were particularly high in the early 1900s. In 1902, for instance, the national death rate recorded at the residential schools was 2.74 per cent. By comparison, the year before, the death rate for all Canadians between five and 14 years of age was much lower: 0.43 per cent. The actual death rate over the years at the residential schools was probably even higher, says the TRC, but further investigation will be required of records.

Over the decades, records on deaths were destroyed. The federal government has never done a review of how many residential school students died. The commission's project marks the first time such a review has been done.

The TRC was hampered by the previous Conservative government, which dragged its feet in providing archival documents that could cast a better light on the scandal.

As a result, because the commission could not review all records before submitting its report, the full story on deaths has not been told.

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