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## Canada

# Aboriginal children at residential schools often buried in unmarked graves, report reveals

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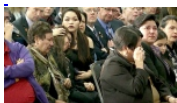
Published Tuesday, December 15, 2015 2:09PM EST

Last Updated Tuesday, December 15, 2015 5:10PM EST



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Students learn how to sew at Fort Resolution Indian Residential School (St. Joseph's Convent), in Resolution, N.W.T., in this undated image. (Library and Archives Canada)



Aboriginal children attending residential schools died at a higher rate than school-aged children in the general population, and were often buried in unmarked graves, according to [the final report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

The commission released its final report Tuesday afternoon, marking the culmination of six years of research and interviews with more than 6,000 residential school survivors and their families.

It is estimated that more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children were separated from their families and forced into residential schools over much of the last century.

The final report contains [an entire volume dedicated to the children who died or went missing](#) while attending residential schools. It also sheds light on the poor practices used at the schools to record the deaths, bury the dead, and inform the students' families.

It found that the government never established health and safety standards at its residential schools, and failed to enforce what minimal standards it had in place.

This failure was due to the government's "determination" to keep residential school costs low, the report said. It also resulted in "unnecessarily high death rates" at residential schools.

The commission found the following:

- 3,200 students died while attending residential schools from 1867 to 2000.
- For 32 per cent of these deaths, the government and the schools did not record the name of the students who died.
- For 49 per cent of these deaths, the government and the residential schools did not record the cause of death.
- For 23 per cent of these deaths, the gender of the student was not recorded.
- The majority of deaths took place before 1940. Prior to 1940, there were 1,150 deaths for which no name was provided. After 1940, there are 44 death reports that do not provide the student's name.
- Many residential schools did not send the students' bodies back to their home communities after they died. Instead, many were buried in cemeteries that have since been abandoned and are "vulnerable to accidental disturbance."

The report noted that many aboriginal families have "unanswered questions" about what happened to their children or relatives who were forced to attend residential schools.

"The tragedy of the loss of children was compounded by the fact that burial places were distant or even unknown," the report said.

### Conditions at schools

The report also contained descriptions from survivors of the living conditions at the residential schools.

According to survivors' accounts, diseases such as tuberculosis rampaged student populations, and poor medical care was provided.

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Accidental deaths were common, and the report includes accounts of children dying in boating and plane accidents.

The report also noted that the poorly maintained school buildings often became fire traps. According to the report, 19 boys died in a single fire in Beauval, Sask., in 1927.

"The high death toll was partially attributable to inadequate fire escapes," the report said.

Many students also died or disappeared after attempting to run away from the residential schools, the report said.

In one account, four boys ran away from a school in Fort Albany, Ont. in 1941. The boys were presumed drowned and their bodies were never recovered, the report said.

### Abandoned cemeteries

Many of the cemeteries where the students were buried have since been abandoned, the report said.

In one case, a school cemetery in Battleford, Sask., became neglected after the school closed in 1914. At the time, the school's principal warned the government that 70 to 80 individuals were buried at the cemetery, most of them students.

"He worried that unless the government took steps to care for the cemetery, it would be overrun by stray cattle," the report said.

The report highlighted a case in 2001, when water erosion of the banks of Alberta's Bow Highwood River exposed the remains of at least 34 bodies of former residential school students. The bodies were eventually exhumed and reburied in aboriginal and Christian ceremonies, the report said.

These tragic examples point to the fact that many students who went to residential schools never returned to their homes, the report said.

"Their parents were often uninformed of their sickness and death. They were buried away from their families in long-neglected graves," the report said. "No one took care to count how many died or to record where they were buried."

The report said many basic questions about missing residential school students have never been addressed by the Canadian government.

Earlier this year, Justice Murray Sinclair, who headed the commission, said that the number of students who died is likely higher; [estimating that up to 6,000 children may have died while under the care of residential schools](#).

## Photos



Students learn how to sew at Fort Resolution Indian Residential School (St. Joseph's Convent), in Resolution, N.W.T., in this undated image. (Library and Archives Canada)



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