

Fact Sheet: Residential Schools

Between 1870 and 1996, Canada's federal government, along with the Catholic, United, Presbyterian and Anglican churches, operated about 130 residential schools. More than 150,000 Indian, Inuit and Métis children attended these boarding schools far from their parents. The system formally ended in 1969 but many schools remained open for two more decades. About 70-80,000 First Nations people who attended residential schools are still alive.

Residential schools were established within a colonial context with the express purpose of assimilating aboriginal children into mainstream culture rooted in European values. Although the objective of assimilating aboriginal people began before Confederation, the intent of the time was expressed by Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy minister of Indian Affairs in 1920:

*"The happiest future for the Indian race is absorption into the general population, and this is the object and policy of our government... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department. (John Coldwell Adams, "[Duncan Campbell Scott](#)," *Confederation Voices*, Canadian Poetry, UWO, Web, Mar. 30, 2011.)*

Children were forced to live at the schools for ten months a year. Attendance was compulsory for children aged 6-18 between 1884 and 1948; many children were taken from their families by force and parents who resisted could be put in jail. Siblings were often separated. Because of travel costs and the isolation of the schools, many children stayed at the schools year-round and parents were unable to visit.

The schools were set up as immersion programs where Indian languages were forbidden (often punished by needles in the tongue) so they would learn English or French and forget their mother tongue. They were not permitted to practice traditional religious and cultural beliefs so they would learn to become Christian and accept the superiority of European culture. Beatings, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse were common. Living conditions were harsh with inadequate nutrition, heating and clothing. In many schools, the mortality rate from infectious diseases like tuberculosis or small pox was more than 50%. Perhaps as many as 50,000 children died at residential schools; in many cases, their parents were never told. Aboriginal children were trained for jobs in service, farming and manual labour rather than jobs that would compete with the European population or that would support traditional occupations. (Source: John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (1999).)

Impact of Residential Schools

The shattering impact of residential schools remains with us today. Separated from their families, aboriginal children learned few parenting skills for their own children. Many have continued an intergenerational cycle of sexual and physical abuse. The trauma of intergenerational abuse is directly linked to high rates of addictions to drugs and alcohol, crime and suicide. Aboriginal people were given few life or useful job skills at the schools, making it difficult for them to cope and be self-sufficient in white Canadian society.

Developments

The last residential school closed in 1996.

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of 2006 created a negotiated legal settlement between the federal government, representatives of former residential school students and several churches. It established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on June 2, 2008 and provided aboriginal students with compensation of \$10,000 for the first year of school and \$3,000 for each subsequent year.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave a Statement of Apology to residential school students on June 11, 2008, acknowledging that the policy of assimilation existed with the intent “to kill the Indian in the child,” admitting that this was wrong and caused great harm. The statement also admitted that the policy of separating children from their families has also negatively affected the ability of First Nations parents to care for their children.

Since 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has held a series of national events in Winnipeg, Inuvik, Halifax, and Saskatoon. The next national event is scheduled for September 18-21, 2013 in Vancouver. A final session is to be held in Edmonton March 27-30, 2014

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The contents of this paper are intended as an information resource for general understanding on the subject. Reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy at the time of publication. Readers are advised to check the accuracy and currency of all information for themselves.

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