

## Globe and Mail – EXPLAINER

The Kamloops residential school's unmarked graves: What we know about the 215 children's remains, and Canada's reaction so far

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In B.C.'s Interior, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation has found the remains of children as young as 3 on the site of what used to be Canada's largest residential school. Here's what we know, and how it's rekindled Indigenous demands for justice and action

### Latest news

The discovery of [215 children's remains](#) in unmarked graves in Kamloops is just the beginning of a national reckoning Canada must have about residential schools, [Indigenous leaders say](#). "Kamloops is one school," said Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde, who called on Ottawa to make sure other gravesites are identified. [Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said](#) "I think there will be more that we will do," but did not elaborate.

Across Canada, the Kamloops find has renewed calls to dismantle monuments or rename institutions named after the architects of the residential-school system. In Charlottetown, city council voted to permanently remove a [statue of Sir John A. Macdonald](#) where protesters laid out 215 pairs of shoes in memory of the missing children. The legal framework for the schools was set up under Macdonald's prime ministership in the 1870s.

## The 215 children's remains in B.C.: What we know?

### WHERE IS THE KAMLOOPS INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL?

Built on the territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation in the southern B.C. Interior, the Kamloops Indian Residential School was at one point the largest of Canada's institutions designed to separate Indigenous youth from their parents and cultures. It operated from 1890 to 1969, mostly under a Catholic order called the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, but the federal government ran it as a day school for nine more years before it closed in 1978.

### HOW WERE THE 215 CHILDREN FOUND?

Previously, the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission's registry could confirm only 51 deaths at Kamloops from 1914 to 1963. But the Tk'emlups community long suspected that more children were buried on the grounds and tried for about 20 years to find them. Recently, a government grant allowed the nation to pay for ground-penetrating radar, which was used over the Victoria Day weekend to find the site. The survey team's preliminary findings were made public on May 27; a fuller report is expected in June.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THESE CHILDREN?

Some of the remains belonged to children as young as 3. They're believed to be previously undocumented deaths, Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir says. But it could be a while before the remains can be excavated, identified and returned to their home communities for proper burial; forensic

protocols for mass gravesites can be complex and rigorous. It could require help from the B.C. Coroners Service or the Royal B.C. Museum, depending how the Tk'emlups and other nations decide to proceed.

## **What is a residential school? Some context**

### WHO RAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS IN CANADA?

From the 1870s to the 1990s, residential schools were part of a systematic federal policy to assimilate Indigenous children into European culture, based on racist assumptions that their own cultures were inferior. Children were separated from their parents and lived in poorly funded schools where federal- or church-run staffs punished them for speaking their own languages. Physical and sexual abuse, malnutrition and disease were common. There were 138 residential schools reviewed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the last of which closed in Saskatchewan in 1996.

Survivors pressed the government and churches for compensation and apologies, a process that led to a \$2-billion settlement and the creation of the TRC. [Its final report in 2015](#), based on interviews with more than 6,000 witnesses, said the schools [amounted to cultural genocide](#) and are inseparable from the present-day problems Indigenous people face, from high rates of poverty, suicide and incarceration to the loss of Indigenous lands and traditions.

### HOW MANY PEOPLE DIED IN CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS?

The TRC's Missing Children Project has so far documented more than 4,100 deaths in the schools, but the full tally could be as high as 6,000.

[The 2015 report noted](#) huge gaps in the available records of deceased students' names, genders or even causes of death. Six of the TRC's ["calls to action"](#) (71 to 76) have to do with missing children and burials, and demand a clear plan to tell families where their lost loved ones are buried and make sure cemeteries are well maintained.

## **Mourning across Canada**

*Community gestures:* Friday's developments in Kamloops led to spontaneous gestures of solidarity across Canada, such as the leaving of empty shoes in front of legislatures, churches and public buildings.

*Official responses:* Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, federal cabinet ministers and provincial premiers have expressed sympathy about the news, which Mr. Trudeau called "a painful reminder of that dark and shameful chapter of our country's history." Mr. Trudeau had flags on federal buildings lowered to half-mast; the premiers of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario have done the same for flags at their legislatures, as have some of the mayors of Canada's large cities for municipal buildings. Many of the flag-lowerings will last 215 hours, or nine days, in memory of the 215 children.

## **New calls for action**

Since the Tk'emlups nation's grim discovery, Indigenous leaders and advocates have pressed Ottawa for more action to help residential-school survivors and follow through on the TRC's recommendations. These include:

*More investigations of graves:* “A thorough investigation into all former residential school sites could lead to more truths of the genocide against our people,” said Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. Some local Indigenous federations already have lists of sites they want searched and are asking for federal funding to do so.

*Monuments and naming:* Municipal governments and universities are under renewed pressure to take down monuments or rename institutions that honour people who helped build the residential-school system in the 19th century, such as prime minister Sir John A. Macdonald and educator Egerton Ryerson. In Charlottetown, city council voted to permanently remove a Macdonald statue that they had previously considered keeping with new signage and an added Indigenous figure.

*Statutory holiday:* Federal MPs were already nearing the final vote on C-5, a bill to make Sept. 30 a national day to commemorate residential-school victims and survivors, when the Kamloops discovery was made public. The bill has been approved in the House and must now pass the Senate.