

The Difficult Truth About Residential Schools

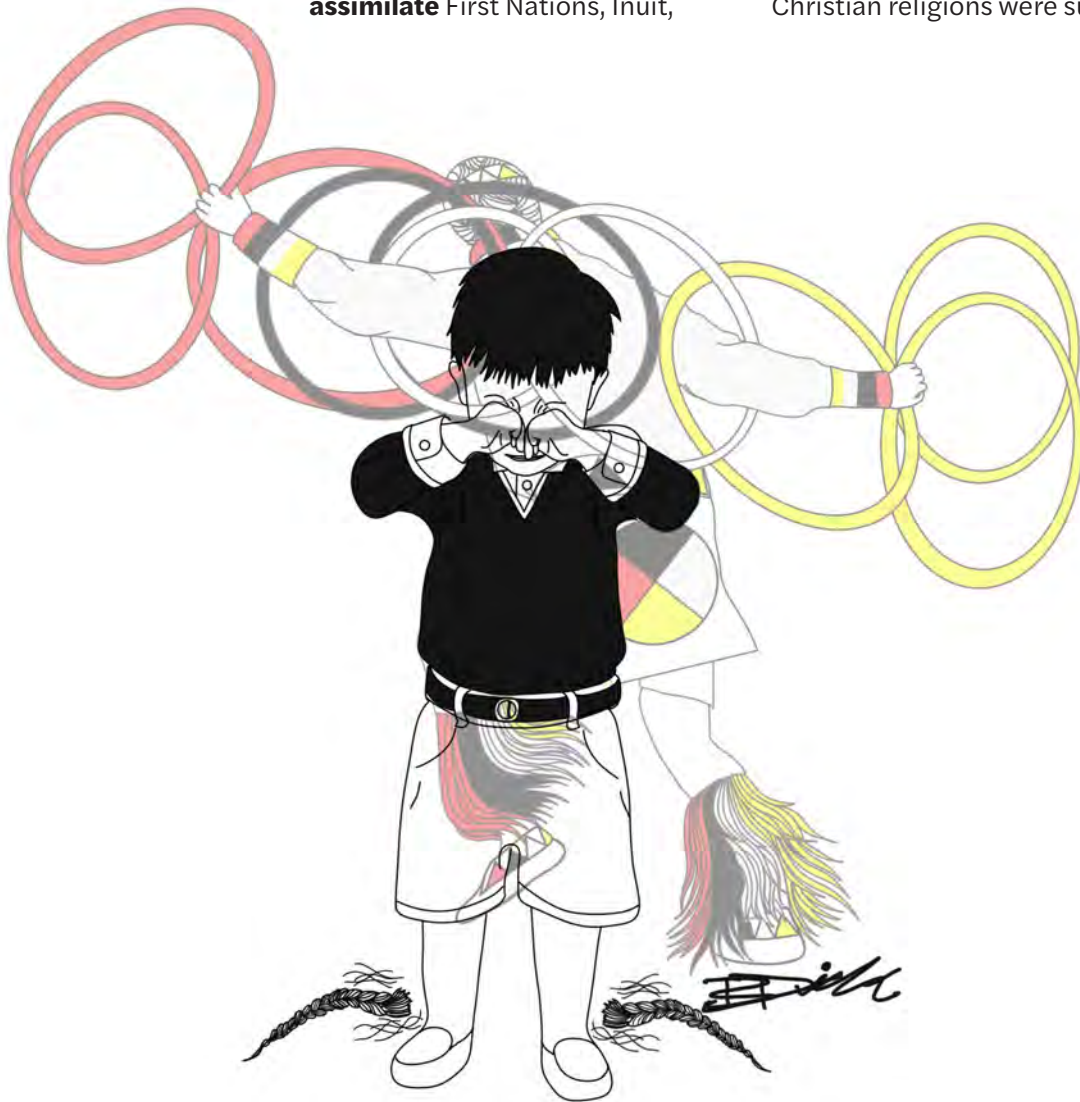
For over a century, beginning in the 1880s, more than 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their homes and sent to government-funded, church-run “Indian Residential Schools.” The last of these schools, outside Regina, closed its doors in 1996. In 1931, at the height of the

Residential School era, there were 80 schools operating in Canada.

The aim of the schools was to educate, convert, and integrate Indigenous children into mainstream Canadian society. According to the thinking of the day, it would be easier to **assimilate** First Nations, Inuit,

and Métis children if they were removed from the influence of their parents and community and kept in schools for most of the year.

This government policy was based on a **colonial** world view that Euro-Canadian society and Christian religions were superior



Definitions

assimilate: to make similar

colonial: relating to a system or period in which one country rules another

to Indigenous cultures. Only now, many decades later, has Canada acknowledged that the treatment of Indigenous children in Residential Schools was a historical injustice that some call **cultural genocide**.

Life in a Residential School

Canada's history books have largely ignored the shameful story of Residential Schools.

"I absolutely think it's important for kids to learn it in school. It's been a hidden part of our history," says one Anishinaabe daughter of a Residential School Survivor.

The schools were more like violent prisons for inmates than schools for children. Students were bullied and abused. In addition to physical and emotional abuse, some children report being sexually molested by those who were supposed to care for them.

Students were also severely punished if they spoke their Indigenous languages. Letters home were written in English, which many parents couldn't read. When the students returned home, they often found they didn't belong anymore.

The schools were crowded, **unsanitary**, and cold. Thousands of children died at the schools, but nobody knows for sure how many. They succumbed to smallpox, measles, flu, and tuberculosis.

Chanie Wenjack's story

"The Secret Path" is the name of an award-winning album of songs, as well as a graphic novel and an animated video adaptation. They tell the story of Chanie Wenjack, a 12-year-old Anishinaabe boy who ran away from a Residential School near Kenora, Ontario in October, 1966, hoping to reunite with his family 600 kilometres away. He was found beside the railway tracks a week later, dead from starvation and exposure. The music and artwork were created by Canadian rock musician Gord Downie and artist Jeff LeMire.

The individual stories are heartbreaking.

Michael Cachagee says he was four years old when he was sent to a Residential School in northern Ontario. During the 12 years he was there, he never celebrated a birthday, and was never hugged or praised. Instead, he was beaten and sexually abused.

It took two failed marriages, years of alcohol and drug abuse, and therapy before he started to come to grips with what happened to him.

His younger brother never did. He was three when he arrived at the school. "He came out when he was 16 and the rest of his life was just a mess with alcoholism. He never had a chance – all because he was sent off to a Residential School," says Mr. Cachagee.

Ken Young, who was taken from his home at the age of eight in the 1950s, remembers public beatings at the Prince Albert Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan. Children had their heads shaved and their legs

shackled in pyjamas because they had tried to go home. The school was more like a prison.

"I thought it was normal because I was just a young guy," says the Winnipeg lawyer today. "Later, I realized how bad that was that adults would treat children like that."

It took a long time to get rid of his anger. "I was ashamed to be who I was because that's what we were taught."

Intergenerational fallout

"The closing of Residential Schools did not bring their story to an end. The **legacy** of the schools continues to this day," states the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report commissioned by the federal government in 2008.

Many of the problems faced by Indigenous Peoples today are rooted in traumatic Residential School experiences. Students were left with feelings of low self-worth, anger, and resentment.

Definitions

cultural genocide: the wiping out of one group's culture by another group

legacy: something such as a tradition or problem that exists as a result of something that happened in the past

unsanitary: dirty; unclean

“Traumatized by their school experiences, many **succumbed** to addictions and found themselves among the **disproportionate** number of Aboriginal people who come in contact with the law,” says the TRC report.

The ripple effect of this trauma has impacted not just the students themselves but also subsequent generations. Aboriginal youth who were not raised in their own homes never learned how to be caring and responsible parents to their children.

“The destructive beliefs and behaviours of many students have been passed on to their children as physical and mental health issues,” says the TRC report.

Canada’s Indigenous population now has high poverty rates and unemployment. It suffers higher levels of poor health, higher mortality rates, higher rates of accidental deaths, and dramatically higher rates of suicide.

All levels of government spend billions each year responding to the **intergenerational trauma** of Residential Schools. That includes money spent on crisis interventions related to child welfare, family violence, ill health, and crime.

Some Indigenous leaders say that when we speak of Residential School trauma we should also note the **resilience** of Indigenous Peoples. The people and cultures were badly damaged by years of historical injustice, but they continue to exist. Many Survivors are strong, courageous, and determined to heal and move forward.

“We also need to share stories of strength, resilience, and excellence,” says Rachel Mishenene, an Ojibway who works with the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the reestablishment of a broken relationship. It’s about resolving differences, accepting the past, and working together to build a mutually respectful relationship

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

For that to happen, according to the TRC report, “there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, **atonement** for the causes, and action to change behaviour.”

Many church organizations involved with the schools have apologized. “I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were a part of a system which took you and your children from home and family,” said the apology from the Anglican Church. The letter from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops read, “We face the past and sincerely ask for forgiveness.”

In 2007, the federal government announced a \$1.9 billion compensation package for

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

The three-person TRC, headed by Justice Murray Sinclair, spent seven years examining one of the darkest chapters in Canada’s history. Its mandate was to inform all Canadians about what happened at Indian Residential Schools. It visited hundreds of communities and heard testimony from 7000 survivors.

The TRC’s final report, released in 2015, contained 94 Calls to Action to address the legacy of the schools and move towards reconciliation.

Definitions

atonement: something that makes up for an offense or injury

disproportionate: something that is bigger or smaller than it should be in relation to something else

intergenerational trauma: trauma that is transferred from the first generation of trauma survivors to the second and further generations of offspring of the survivors

resilience: the ability to become well, happy, or strong again after an illness, disappointment, or other problem

succumb: to become very sick or to die from a disease

those who were forced to attend Residential Schools. Then in June 2008, then-prime minister Stephen Harper made a historic apology to Residential School Survivors.

For his part, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has promised to fulfill all of the Calls to Action outlined in the TRC report. In 2018, he announced the government's plan to overhaul its legal framework with Indigenous Peoples in Canada to give them stronger rights and greater control over their own destiny.

"Reforms are needed to ensure that – among other things - Indigenous Peoples might once again have confidence in a system that has failed them all too often in the past," he said.

All Canadians have a role to play

Today, Canadians have the opportunity to learn the difficult truth about what went on in Canada's Residential Schools and the harm that was inflicted. But once we know the truth, what do we do about it? The Truth and Reconciliation report recognizes that the path towards reconciliation won't be easy, or quick.

"It requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of Residential Schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours," says the final report.

"This is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian problem," stated

Justice Sinclair. "Because at the same time that Aboriginal people were being **demeaned** in the schools and their culture and language were being taken away from them and they were being told that they were inferior ... and that they were unworthy of being respected — that very same message was being given to the non-aboriginal children in the public schools as well."

Non-indigenous Canadians need to explore their own biases, and the stereotypes of Aboriginal people that they were brought up with. As the TRC warns, "the beliefs and attitudes that were used to justify the establishment of Residential Schools are not things of the past. Only a real commitment to reconciliation and change will reverse the trends and lay the foundation for a truly just and equitable nation."

The Witness Blanket

The Witness Blanket is a 12-metre-long art installation that recognizes the **atrocities** of the Indian Residential School System. Inspired by the idea of a blanket, which offers warmth and protection, the project resembles a giant "quilt" made out of hundreds of objects from Canada's Residential Schools, gathered from across the country. They include old doors and pieces of stained glass,

belts used to punish Indigenous children, a child's shoe, braids of hair, a hockey trophy, a doorknob, a photograph of a child, and a letter from parents asking that their children come home. Visitors can use a mobile app to learn more about each item.

The artwork toured the country for four years until the spring of 2018, when the tour was suspended due to wear and tear

on the exhibit. In May 2019, a new tour was launched using a true-to-scale reproduction.

The artist is master carver Carey Newman, who is of British, Kwagiulth, and Salish descent. He calls his piece "a testament to the human ability to find something worthwhile, even beautiful, amidst the tragedies, memories and ruins of the Residential School Era."

Definitions

atrocities: a cruel and violent act

demean: to make people have less respect for someone