

Missing children, unmarked graves, and residential school cemeteries

Over the course of the Commission's work, many Aboriginal people spoke to us about the children who never came home from residential school. The question of what happened to their loved ones and where they were laid to rest has haunted families and communities. Throughout the history of Canada's residential school system, there was no effort to record across the entire system the number of students who died while attending the schools each year. The National Residential School Student Death Register, established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, represents the first national effort to record the names of the students who died at school. The register is far from complete: there are, for example, many relevant documents that have yet to be received, collected, and reviewed.

Some of these records have been located in provincial records. In June 2012, at their annual general meeting, the Chief Coroners and Medical Examiners of Canada approved a unanimous resolution to support the TRC's Missing Children Project by making available to the Commission their records on the deaths of Aboriginal children in the care of residential school authorities. The Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario had already done some groundbreaking work in terms of screening and reviewing its records, and identifying 120 possible cases of death of an Aboriginal residential school student. The TRC subsequently contacted chief coroners across the country to request their assistance in locating records related to deaths at residential school. As of 2014, chief coroners' offices in Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia had also responded to the Commission's request for records.

Other regional agencies also hold critical information in their records. The TRC contacted offices of provincial vital statistics across the country. At the Alberta National Event, Assistant Deputy Minister Peter Cunningham, from the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation in British Columbia, offered a flash drive in a small, carved, bentwood box, as an expression of reconciliation. He said,

I think it's incredibly important that all of the information comes out about what was a very deeply dark and disturbing event in Canadian history ... residential schools.... I'm here today to add to that body of knowledge on behalf of the government of British Columbia and the Vital Statistics Agency of BC.... The information on this flash drive is information about Aboriginal children between the ages of 4 and 19 years of age who died in British Columbia between the years 1870 and 1984.¹⁶³

As of 2014, in addition to the office in British Columbia, vital statistics offices in Alberta, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Yukon, and Nunavut had responded to the Commission's request for records. To complete the work begun by the Commission on the National Residential School Student Death Register, it will be critical for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation to obtain all records related to the deaths of residential school students.