

# Indigenous leaders say discovery of children's remains at Kamloops residential school is beginning of national reckoning <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

As the discovery of the remains of 215 children at one of Canada's largest residential schools continues to reverberate around the country, Indigenous leaders and community members say it is only the beginning of an important – but painful – national reckoning.

"Kamloops is one school," said Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde, referencing the more than 130 residential schools that once operated across the country. "I've said before that the residential school system was a genocide against First Nations people, Indigenous peoples. Here is the evidence. Nobody can deny that."

The announcement by Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Kukpi7 (Chief) Rosanne Casimir last week that the remains of 215 children had been found at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in southern British Columbia made headlines around the world, and has sparked mourning and action generations in the making.

In the days since the announcement in B.C., neat lines of children's shoes have appeared outside legislative buildings and churches, while ceremonies and vigils are held to honour the dead, and a country grapples with what should come next.

Chief Bellegarde said the discovery has opened painful wounds for many residential school survivors, who have long told of unmarked graves and uncounted deaths, but "the sad part is nobody believed them."

"Now here's your concrete tragic, horrific evidence of 215 bodies that have been found," he said.

The gravesites were identified using ground-penetrating radar technology, as has been employed in other similar searches, including at the Muscowequan Indian Residential School near Lestock, Sask. Kukpi7 Casimir said the remains located in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemchas belonged to children as young as 3.

On Monday, Mr. Bellegarde called on Ottawa to work with chiefs and council and survivors in every province and territory to ensure proper research is done to identify gravesites at other former residential school sites.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Monday that the federal government has previously put money forward on residential school cemeteries but said, there is "obviously more to do."

"We have committed as a government to be there for reconciliation, but also to be there for truth," Mr. Trudeau said.

Stephanie Scott, the executive director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, said the loss of 215 children is unfathomable, and that she expects that number to increase as the investigation continues.

"I know that number is going to grow, the more research and the more we work with community and listen to those survivors and those elders and those knowledge keepers that hold that history," she said. "When you go into a community, everyone has stories about little lives that were lost and they can point you into the direction or the mounds or the grassy areas where children lay."

The Prime Minister has ordered flags on federal buildings to be lowered in memory of the 215 children, and several premiers and mayors across the country have done the same on other government buildings.

Mr. Trudeau said members of his cabinet are looking at how government can support Indigenous communities in their grief and their search for answers, and that there will be many more discussions in the coming days and weeks. He said Ottawa will work the provinces and territories to ensure that "we are all doing the right thing."

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh called for an emergency debate in the House of Commons on Monday and said there needs to be discussion about next steps, including working with Indigenous communities that want to investigate other potential gravesites. He also said those investigations should be federally funded.

"What we really want to emphasize here is that our nation is grieving," he said. "There are commemoration sites where people are placing children's shoes around the country, which is really important. We've got to grieve this moment. But for the federal government, it is not

good enough to just continue with symbolic gestures.”

The Ontario legislature on Monday unanimously agreed to grant Indigenous New Democrat MPP Sol Mamakwa 10 minutes to speak about the children who died.

“The death of our children is a crime against humanity. But Canada has never treated it as such,” Mr. Mamakwa said. “This country must own up to its past, as must all its governments and institutions for its role in the horror it created in residential schools.”

Meanwhile, calls for action are growing around the country, including by supporting searches at other school sites and creating a national day of mourning.

The Alberta Federation of Labour is also calling for an inquiry into the current child welfare system, and advocated for stripping the names of those who created or promoted the residential school system from public buildings and schools.

“The community of white settler Canadians has an obligation to look at the horror that their ancestors created and respond to it,” AFL president Gil McGowan said in a statement.

On Monday evening, Alberta Minister of Indigenous Relations Rick Wilson announced that the provincial government will fund research into the deaths and burials of hundreds of Indigenous children.

In Ontario, the NDP called on the Ontario government to investigate all lands and properties associated with residential schools, as well as institute an annual day of mourning and remembrance.

Progressive Conservative House Leader Paul Calandra said the government looks forward to working with First Nations to ensure that grounds get searched, and said he would work alongside the opposition on creating a day of mourning.

“I think that certainly is something that we should be working on together,” he told the legislature.

In Saskatchewan, Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations Chief Bobby Cameron said finding the children’s remains and giving them proper burials is important to help First Nations communities and families find closure.

Anthropologist Dr. Scott Hamilton, who wrote a report entitled “Where are the Children Buried?” for the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission more than five years ago, said he hoped his report would be the beginning of important conversations about what to do with these gravesites of uncounted thousands of children, and how best to protect, honour and commemorate them. Instead, not much happened.

“I filed my report. And that was pretty much the last I heard about this except reading the reports of the TRC, like everyone else,” says Dr. Hamilton, who is also chair of the anthropology department at Lakehead University.

While work has been quietly underway to identify burial sites in places like Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc, Dr. Hamilton said he’d been waiting for a larger story to emerge and push the issue back into the forefront, as happened last week.

“The larger issue of the residential schools and of all of those missing kids kind of fell off the table in face of other burning urgencies in the news cycle....,” he said. “And the Kamloops story has sort of forced that back on to the public agenda, has forced it back into the public awareness. And it will be really important for us not to let it slide into the background again.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 2015 findings included a 266-page report titled “Missing Children and Unmarked Burials.”

“Many, if not most, of the several thousand children who died in residential schools are likely to be buried in unmarked and untended graves,” the report said. “Subjected to institutionalized child neglect in life, they have been dishonoured in death.”

The commission used satellite imagery and maps on a sample of school locations in an effort to locate unmarked gravesites, and found possible cemeteries “in a surprisingly large number” of locations.

“For the most part, the cemeteries that the Commission documented are abandoned, disused, and vulnerable to accidental disturbance,” the report said.

In one case, water erosion on the banks of an Alberta river in 2001 exposed the remains of former students of a residential school which had closed in 1922.

Tuberculosis was listed as the most common cause of death by illness. The report also includes accidental deaths, deaths from fire, and children who disappeared after running away.

The cause of death was not known in nearly half the identified cases.

Residential school survivors and communities have also long recounted stories of children who disappeared, died by suicide or were victims of homicide at residential schools.

Dr. Hamilton notes that a 1909 report by doctor Peter Bryce – whom he calls “the original whistleblower” – found exponentially higher mortality rates among children at residential school, compared with the non-Indigenous population.

“The level of trauma, the level of illness, the level of death, the level of morbidity, the level of chronic illness in these schools was far worse than what the regular mainstream Canadian society experienced,” Dr. Hamilton says, adding that the impacts of colonialism led to higher rates of morbidity for those living on reserve as well.

"This is part of a systemic pattern that we see in Canada's history," he said. "And it's particularly crystallized when we think about the residential schools with all of those kids, vulnerable in a very, very tough place."

Ms. Scott said the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation has continued the work of the commission, and confirmed the identities of 4,117 children who died after attending residential school.

Former senator Murray Sinclair, who chaired the TRC, has said the number could be as high as 15,000.

It is not clear whether any criminal investigations could result from the identification of the gravesites.

B.C. RCMP said in a statement that officers from the rural Tk'emlúps detachment will be working with the community, "while at the same time being supportive, respectful and culturally sensitive to the Indigenous communities that are impacted."

The statement said RCMP will defer to Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc community leaders on any future statements concerning work at the site.

Forensic work could involve extracting DNA from bone remains and creating genetic profiles to search for relatives through online genealogical repositories such as GEDmatch and 23andme, a technique police in the U.S. and Canada have used recently to unravel dozens of historical crimes and missing-persons cases.

With the issue of child residential school deaths back in the forefront, Dr. Hamilton says it is time to deal with the situation as a nation, working with survivors and their descendants and seeing how they want to proceed, whether that means identifying and protecting the burial areas and finding ways to honour the deceased, or disinterring the remains, identifying them if possible, then returning them to their home communities.

"I think that it's important for Canadian society at large, to realize that this issue isn't going to go away, and it's this enduring, painful canker on the Canadian psyche ...," he said. "This has an impact on all of us, because it forces us to come to terms with the nature of our society as Canadians. To recognize the legacy of our own history, and the consequences of decisions that were made 150 years ago. How do they reflect upon the decisions that we make right now? These are painful, hard legacies that Canada has to deal with."

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** indigenous children <sup>[4]</sup>

residential schools <sup>[5]</sup>

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