

Frequently Asked Questions: Residential Schools, Truth and Reconciliation, and Child Welfare

What were residential schools?

Beginning in the 1800s, government-sponsored religious schools were established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Christian-Canadian culture. Children were forcibly removed from their communities and families and placed in boarding schools, where they were punished for speaking their traditional language(s) and practicing their cultural traditions. Many children died in these schools and mental, emotional, sexual, and physical abuse was common. The residential school system is widely acknowledged as a form of genocide because of the purposeful attempt from the government and church to eradicate all aspects of Indigenous cultures.

During the 150 years that residential schools operated in Canada, an estimated 150,000 children were forced to attend these schools. The number of children who died is unknown, though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 2008, has the names or other information for more than 4,100 children (Source: [Missing Children Project](#)). Indigenous communities estimate the real number to be as high as 25,000 children.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit residential school students, as well as their families and communities, were, and still are deeply affected by the residential school system. The TRC heard from close to 7,000 witnesses, most of whom were residential school survivors. You can hear some of their stories from the [Legacy of Hope Foundation](#).

The last federally-run residential school, Kivalliq Hall in Nunavut, shut its doors in 1997. The [Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement](#), the class-action settlement between legal counsel for former students, legal counsel for the Churches, the Assembly of First Nations, other Indigenous organizations, and the Government of Canada was approved in 2006 and was implemented starting in 2007. The Agreement included compensation for former students, measures to support healing, commemorative activities, and the establishment of the TRC. On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, made a statement of apology on behalf of the Government of Canada to former residential school students. [According to a 2021 report](#), the Canadian government paid more than \$3 billion in compensation to residential school survivors.

What is the Sixties Scoop?

The Sixties Scoop refers to the large-scale removal of Indigenous children by child welfare authorities from their homes, communities, and birth families through the 1960s to 1980s, and their subsequent adoption into predominantly non-Indigenous families across Canada and the world. From 1965 to 1984,

Unmarked Grave Recoveries

In May 2021, the remains of 215 children were recovered in unmarked graves at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School located near the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation in British Columbia. This led to investigations at other school sites, with the number of unmarked graves totaling 6,509 as of September 15, 2021.

Day Scholars Settlement

In June 2021, the Government of Canada reached a settlement agreement with Day Scholars — students who attended Indian Residential Schools during the day but returned home at night. The settlement agreement includes compensation for former students and investments toward healing and commemoration. Learn more [here](#) or [here](#).

as many as 16,000 Indigenous children were placed in non-Indigenous homes, often without the consent or knowledge of their families and communities.

The widespread removal of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children and youth from their homes was connected to historical systemic and individual anti-Indigenous racism, the ignorance of child welfare workers of Indigenous customs and traditions, as well as socio-economic conditions on reserves, such as poverty, addictions, and unemployment, caused by the legacies of residential schools and colonization. Efforts to keep children and youth connected to their birth families, including their siblings, or communities and to support reunification were rarely, if ever, made.

The experience left many First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children and youth with a lost sense of cultural identity and belonging. The trauma stemming from the physical and emotional separation from their birth families continues to have a profound impact on those who were part of the Sixties Scoop and their communities.

In 1985, Justice Edwin Kimelman’s review of Indigenous child apprehension in Manitoba called [No Quiet Place: Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements](#) stated “that cultural genocide has been taking place in a systematic, routine manner.”

In October 2017, the [Sixties Scoop class action lawsuit](#) was finalized. The agreement requires the federal government to pay between \$500 and \$800 million in restitution to Indigenous peoples who lost their cultural identities when they were removed from their families and communities during the Sixties Scoop.

How is the child welfare system connected to colonization and residential schools?

It is commonly recognized that the history of child welfare in Canada began with J.J. Kelso — often referred to as the founding father of child protection work — in the 1880s in the city of Toronto. Child welfare emerged at a time when the Canadian settler colony was seeking to establish itself politically, economically, and culturally. Across the British Empire, including the Canadian settler colony, it became a truism of the time that *children are the future of the nation*. However, only certain children — namely low-income White settler children — were deemed worthy of saving from cruelty and neglect. The central concern of child rescue initiatives was preserving the dominance of the White race and ensuring lower-class White settlers did not sink to the level of the “savage Indians” (Source: Landertinger, 2017; Swain 2009). The child welfare system and the Indian residential school system emerged as two separate and distinct solutions for these respective child populations.

What is Systemic Racism?

“Racism is an imposed system of structures, values and processes that serve to advantage one group over another. Race is a socially constructed way of categorizing humans based on physical characteristics and placing these categories within a hierarchy that suggests an inherent inferiority or superiority between different racial groups. In this way, racism continues to reinforce the concept of race. This hierarchy has no scientific validity and finds its genesis at a time when dehumanization was a strategy to advance imperial, patriarchal, heterosexist and settler-colonial interests through dispossession, enslavement, genocide and oppression.” - CAMH

Systemic racism involves discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and practices, and unequal opportunities within organizations that result in inequitable outcomes for those who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized. An organization’s policies and practices can appear to be neutral but end up creating advantages for those who fall within a White, Eurocentric racial group and disadvantages for those who identify as Black, Indigenous, and racialized.

From the earliest stages of child welfare development, Kelso and others agreed that for White settler children “child saving efforts should never be directed to institutional life, but to that normal arrangement which keeps the child in the family relation,” as it was well understood that institutionalization was a harmful practice (Source: Landertinger, 2017). And yet, simultaneously, Indigenous children were being institutionalized in droves. At the very same time that cruelty and neglect towards White settler children became a punishable crime, Indigenous children were subjected to unfathomable violence and cruelty by the settler society.

When attendance at residential schools was no longer compulsory and child welfare services were downloaded to the provinces in the 1950s and 1960s, the rate of Indigenous child apprehensions across Canada increased exponentially. Indigenous children were now eligible to access the child protection services previously only available to White children. This “more equal care” resulted in the policies and practices of the Sixties Scoop, that led to the removal of thousands of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children from their homes, families, and communities. This is why child welfare is often considered the successor of the residential school system.

What is the Millennium Scoop and why is there a significant disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the Ontario child welfare system today?

We know that Indigenous children are significantly overrepresented in the child welfare system today. In Canada in 2016, Indigenous children accounted for just 7.7% of the child population but made up 52.2% of children in foster care (Source: [Census 2016](#)). In 2018, a report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Interrupted Childhoods*, showed that the proportion of Indigenous children admitted into care was 2.6 times higher than their proportion in the child population. The reasons for this reality are complex, but are connected to colonization, systemic and individual anti-Indigenous racism, and the intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools and the Sixties Scoop.

As a result of the ongoing racial discrimination and systemic oppression faced by Indigenous families and communities, they are more likely to experience poverty, addictions, and unemployment, as well as lack access to critical services and basic infrastructure, like safe housing and clean drinking water. These factors contribute to the higher rates of involvement of child welfare.

The current overrepresentation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children and youth in the child welfare system is sometimes referred to as the Millennium Scoop.

What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2008 as part of the [Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement](#). Its mandate was to document the truth of survivors, families, communities, and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience. The TRC spent six years travelling across Canada to hear from Indigenous people taken from their families as children and placed in residential schools. In December 2015, the Commission released its six-volume final report which contains [94 Calls to Action](#)—the first five of which are directed at child welfare.

The Commission’s offices are now closed, and its work has been transferred to the [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#).

What are the 9 Reconciliation Commitments made by the Ontario child welfare sector?

In 2017, OACAS apologized for the harmful role child welfare has played historically, and continues to play, in the lives of Ontario Indigenous children, families, and communities. As a sector, we unanimously agreed to [9 Reconciliation Commitments](#). They are:

1. Reduce the number of Indigenous children in care.
2. Reduce the number of legal files involving Indigenous children and families.
3. Increase the use of formal customary care agreements.
4. Ensure Indigenous representation and involvement at the local Board of Directors.
5. Implement mandatory Indigenous training for staff.
6. Change the inter-agency protocol to include Jordan's Principle as a fundamental principle
7. In consultation with Indigenous communities, develop a unique agency-based plan to better address the needs of the children and families from those communities.
8. Continue to develop relationships between their local agency and the local Indigenous communities.
9. Assist those individuals wanting to see their historical files by accessing and providing the information they request.

You can learn more about the apology and the event where it took place [here](#).

What progress has been made on the 9 Reconciliation Commitments?

Since 2017, the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto has been working closely with Native Child and Family Services (NCFS) to better understand our role in perpetuating systemic oppression and racism and how we can learn and grow as an agency that meets the needs of Indigenous children, youth and families.

Some tangible actions we have taken are:

- Training for staff
- Relationship building with NCFS
- Embedding Jordan's Principle in service practice
- Identifying the First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families who we have or are repatriating to Indigenous organizations
- Working to transfer approximately 40 children, youth and families to either NCFS or other Indigenous organizations
- Establishing a financial agreement to support NCFS as they assume responsibility for children, youth and families transferred from CCAS

Ongoing Litigation Against First Nations Child and Family Services

In 2007, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society (Caring Society) made two complaints to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, who later referred the case to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT). They alleged:

(1) The government was underfunding First Nations child and family services on reserve. The claimed this systematic underfunding was linked to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system.

(2) The government failed to implement [Jordan's Principle](#) – a rule that pledges to provide First Nations kids with the services they need, when they need them, rather than first taking the time to sort out which level of government is responsible for the cost.

In 2016, the CHRT ruled in favour of the AFN and Caring Society, stating that the Canadian government is racially discriminating against First Nations children. Since then, the Government of Canada has failed to comply with several orders by the CHRT and continues to fight the ruling in court. Learn more about the case [here](#).

- Seconding 3 staff to NCFS to assist with the transition of children, youth and families.

Together, we continue to monitor and evaluate our progress on these commitments to ensure improved outcomes and supports for Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities.

As an organization serving the Catholic population of Toronto, are you affiliated with the Catholic Church? Wasn't the Catholic Church responsible for residential schools?

CCAS provides supports and services to the Catholic population of Toronto. While we are not an extension of the Church, Catholic values are entrenched in the fabric of our organization which guides how we support children, youth and families.

Residential schools were government-funded, but most often run by Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches.

The child welfare sector, including our agency, has taken responsibility for the role we have played and continue to play in the over-representation of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children and youth in care, and we are actively working towards Reconciliation.

What are Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies and how are they working to support Indigenous communities today?

In Ontario, child welfare services are provided at the community level by independent non-profit organizations, funded by the Government of Ontario, called children's aid societies or Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies. Ontario's *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* (CYFSA) states that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities have the right to provide their own child and family services where possible. Additionally, in 2020, Bill C-92, *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, was passed by the Government of Canada. This Act affirms the inherent rights of Indigenous communities to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services.

As of August 2021, there are 51 children's aid societies in Ontario, 13 of which are mandated Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies. In addition, there are two pre-mandated agencies — these are organizations that are working toward their designation by the provincial government to provide child protection services in their communities. Each Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agency provides culturally relevant services to the First Nations they serve, including using their own service models, customary care agreements, and self-governance models. They are focused on honouring the traditions, history, and customs of their communities and providing services that are rooted in their values, principles, and strengths. The [Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario](#) (ANCFSAO) supports Indigenous Child and Family Well-Being Agencies across the province to provide high-quality, community-based child welfare and family well-being services. ANCFSAO also provides education, training, policy development and analyses, research and advocacy.

What is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation? What is Orange Shirt Day? Why were they created?

This year, the Government of Canada passed legislation to make September 30 a federal holiday, [National Day for Truth and Reconciliation](#). "The day honours the lost children and survivors of residential schools, their families and communities" and calls for public commemoration of the tragic and painful history and ongoing impacts of residential schools.

Orange Shirt Day is also September 30 and has been celebrated since 2013. It is an Indigenous-led day dedicated to commemorating the residential school experience. It is a day to learn about and discuss the legacy of the system, as well as remember and honour the students who attended residential schools.

Orange Shirt Day was created as part of the St. Joseph Mission Residential School Commemoration Project and Reunion events in Williams Lake, BC. There, Phyllis Webstad told her story of her first day of residential school. She had been gifted a new orange shirt by her grandmother, which she was excited to wear. However, it was immediately taken from her when she got to the school and she never saw it again. This was common practice at residential schools, where children's personal items were removed, they were often forced to cut their hair, and they were prohibited from speaking their traditional language(s) or practicing their cultural traditions. This was part of the systematic attempt to assimilate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children into settler society and destroy their connections to their families and communities.

The orange shirt now serves as a symbol of all that Indigenous children and youth lost, but also of hope and healing for the next generation of children and youth. You can learn more about Orange Shirt Day [here](#).

Why is Truth and Reconciliation important?

Residential schools and the Sixties Scoop are a part of Canadians' shared history. We continue to see the impacts of these systems in the lives of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children, youth, families, and communities. The current child welfare system also continues to harm Indigenous families and communities. Healing and repairing our relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities requires the deliberate and sustained action of dismantling our colonial systems and structures—in child welfare, but also across sectors. Without sustained, proactive, and positive action from settlers, there can be no Reconciliation.

Resources:

- [The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#)
- [The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement](#)
- [The Indian Residential School Survivors Society](#)
- [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#)
- [The Sixties Scoop Class Action Lawsuit](#)
- Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Interrupted Childhoods*
- [Legacy of Hope Foundation](#)
- [Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario](#)
- [No Quiet Place: Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements](#)
- Landertinger, L. (2017). Child Welfare and the Imperial Management of Childhood in Settler Colonial Canada, 1880s-2000s. University of Toronto (Canada).
- Swain, Shurlee. 2009. "Sweet Childhood Lost: Idealized Images of Childhood in the British Child Rescue Literature." *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*. 2(2).

Former Residential School students can call [1-866-925-4419](tel:1-866-925-4419) for emotional crisis referral services and information on other health supports from the Government of Canada.

Indigenous peoples across Canada can also go to The Hope for Wellness Help Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for counselling and crisis intervention.

Call the toll-free Help Line at [1-855-242-3310](tel:1-855-242-3310) or connect to the [online chat](#).