

# Did You Know?

National Indigenous History Month 2021

Did You Know? is a series run by the University of Waterloo Indigenous Initiatives Office for the duration of Indigenous History Month 2021. “Did You Know” posts were uploaded weekly on Mondays and Wednesdays, featuring information on various topics pertaining to Indigenous histories in Canada. Please share this resource widely.

## RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS IN CANADA: 1920s-1990s

Warning: This document contains details of violence and death, past and present, of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.



*A group of female students and a nun pose in a classroom at Cross Lake Indian Residential School in Cross Lake, Manitoba, February 1940.*

*Credit: [Reuters](#)*

Education was used as a tool of oppression for Indigenous Peoples through [“Indian Residential Schools”](#), an extensive school system set up by the Federal government. They were administered by churches from the early 1920s to the mid-1990s. The Roman Catholic Church operated three-fifths of the schools, the Anglican Church one-quarter, and the United and Presbyterian Churches the remainder.

The goal of residential schools was, according to the [Indian Act](#), “To kill the Indian in the child” and was based on the premise that Aboriginal cultures were inferior to White Christian ones.

Children were forcibly removed from their homes and parents at a young age.

At these schools, they were forbidden to speak their first language, their hair was cut, and they were stripped of their traditional clothes and given new uniforms. In many cases, the school staff gave children new names or used numbers to refer to them.

Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse were disturbingly common at the schools. A large percentage of students also did not receive enough food to eat. Poor living conditions and malnutrition meant that many became sick with preventable diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza.

While the government began to close the schools in the 1970s, **the last school remained in operation until 1996** - The [Gordon Residential School](#) in Punnichy, Saskatchewan.

Many Canadians were shocked to learn that [the remains of 215 children had been discovered at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia](#). However, this tragic discovery did not come as a surprise to Indigenous Peoples, as thousands of Indigenous children never returned home from residential schools and their whereabouts remain unknown.

Many individuals living in what is now known as Canada have little knowledge of residential schools, or issues such as persistent unclean drinking water in Indigenous communities. Many people are also unaware that the abuse that Indigenous children suffered at residential schools left them with deep scars that last for generations and still have not been healed.

Sadly, the residential school system was only one among many systems of violence and harm against Indigenous Peoples.

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) (TRC) concluded that more than 4,100 children died while attending a residential school, however this figure is a conservative estimate.

In 2015, the TRC [outlined 94 Calls to Action](#). As of December 2019, [a study by the Yellowhead Institute](#) reported only nine of the 94 calls to action are complete.

Find more resources by browsing the [Indigenous History Month resources webpage](#).