


At least 4,000 aboriginal children died in residential schools, commission finds

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OTTAWA — Thousands of Canada's aboriginal children died in residential schools that failed to keep them safe from fires, protected from abusers, and healthy from deadly disease, a commission into the saga has found.

So far, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has determined that more than 4,000 of the school children died.

But that figure is based on partial federal government records, and commission officials expect the number to rise as its researchers get their hands in future months on much more complete files from Library and Archives Canada and elsewhere.

The disturbing discovery has cast a new light on the century-long school system that scarred the country's First Nations peoples.

Evidence has been compiled that shows residential school children faced a grave risk of death.

"Aboriginal kids' lives just didn't seem as worthy as non-aboriginal kids," Kimberly Murray, executive director of the commission, said in an interview.

"The death rate was much higher than non-indigenous kids."

The commission has spent the last several years studying a scandal considered by many to be Canada's greatest historical shame.

Dave Chan / Postmedia News

Over many decades — from the 1870s to 1996 — 150,000 aboriginal children were taken from their families and sent by the federal government to church-run schools, where many faced physical and sexual abuse.

A lawsuit against the federal government and churches resulted in a settlement that included payments to those affected and the creation in 2008 of the commission. Its job is to hold public hearings so people can tell their stories, collect records and establish a national research centre.

The commission has also established "The Missing Children Project" to assemble the names of children who died, how they died, and where they were buried.

The list of names will be contained in a registry available to the public. Murray said the exact number of deceased children will never be known, but she hopes more information will come from churches and provincial files.

"I think we're just scratching the surface."

William James Topley / Library and Archives Canada

Many perished in fires — despite repeated warnings in audits that called for fire escapes and sprinklers but were ignored.

“There was report after report talking about how these schools were firetraps,” said Murray.

She said it was well known that schools were “locking kids in their dormitories because they didn’t want them to escape. And if a fire were to break out they couldn’t get out.”

Many schools refused to spend money on fire escapes. Instead, they built poles outside of windows for children to slide down. But the windows were locked, and children were unable to reach the poles.

“It’s amazing that they didn’t make those corrections in those schools. There are just so many deaths that I think could have been prevented if they had done what they were supposed to do.”

Some children died as runaways and were found frozen to death in snowy fields; others who tried to escape their abusers drowned in nearby rivers.

Among the most famous incidents involved the deaths of four boys — Allen Willie, Andrew Paul, Maurice Justin, and Johnny Michael — who fled the Lejac residential school in British Columbia on New Year’s Day, 1937.

It was 30 degrees below zero. They were found frozen to death on a lake. An inquiry at the time found one boy, wearing summer clothes, had “no hat and one rubber missing and his foot bare.”

Handout / Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Murray said these types of deaths were far from rare.

“There were quite a few examples of children who ran away and died.”

Many died from tuberculosis because they were malnourished and were housed in poorly-ventilated buildings.

Some died of suicide, unable to bear the brutality of the schools.

The commission has even heard allegations — unproven by the commission — of manslaughter and murder.

“There are people who have been speaking out who say they’ve seen a child who was beat so brutally that they died. So there is that unanswered question: Whether the abuse was to the extreme that they were coming to their deaths at the hands of their abusers.”

“We have not found any records of confirmed manslaughter or murder but we have had people speak to that. Whether you are going to find that in a document is questionable.”

What happened to the thousands of children who died? Schools and the government would not pay to have bodies shipped back to their families.

And so they were placed in coffins and buried near the schools — some in marked graves, some in unmarked graves. Often, their parents in far-away reserves were never told what happened.

Murray said that although many of the deaths occurred up until the 1950s, children were continuing to lose their lives in more recent years.

“I think people can make it OK in their minds when they tell themselves it happened a really long time ago. I think it makes it easier for them to accept. But that’s not the reality.”

When the commission releases its report — likely by June 2015 — the massive document will chronicle the saga of deceased children.

Murray said the saga has left an “open wound” with First Nations communities.

“We hear from survivors and family members how important it is that they know what happened to their loved ones and to know where their remains are located.”