

Signs of Your Identity: Forced Assimilation Education for Indigenous Youth



In the 1837 House of Commons Report, the British government posited that assimilation was the only way forward for indigenous residents of the colonies. In Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, various iterations of the Indian Residential School system were created—usually church-run boarding schools meant to forcibly assimilate indigenous children into Western culture. Attendance was mandatory, and Indian Agents would regularly visit aboriginal communities to take children as young as two or three from their homes. Many of them wouldn't see their families again for the next decade, others would never reunite again. These students were punished for speaking their native languages or observing any indigenous traditions, routinely physically and sexually assaulted, and in some extreme instances subjected to medical experimentation and sterilization.

The removals continued in Australia until the 1970s. The last residential school in Canada didn't close until 1996. The U.S. government still operates 59 Indian Boarding Schools today.

The lasting impact on these indigenous populations is immeasurable. Thousands of children died while in the system—so many that it was common for residential schools to have their own cemeteries. And those who did survive, deprived of their families and their own cultural identities, became part of a series of lost generations. Languages died out, sacred ceremonies were criminalized and suppressed. The Canadian government has officially termed the residential school system a cultural genocide. These are the stories of those who made it through the system, and are coping with the legacy of their boarding school days.

This project examines not only the legacy of the residential school system, but also looks forward to the future—for the first time in decades, children are being brought up speaking Ojibwe and Cree and Blackfoot again. Potlatches and sun dances and sweat lodges have returned. There is a revitalization of First Nations culture that is undeniably linked to the collective healing process, and to reclaiming their voice in Canada.