

U.S. to Search Former Native American Schools for Children’s Remains

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Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced a new initiative that would delve into the records of the federal schools to which Native American children were forcibly relocated for 150 years.



By [Christine Hauser](#) and [Isabella Grullón Paz](#)

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The United States will search federal boarding schools for possible burial sites of Native American children, hundreds of thousands of whom were forcibly taken from their communities to be culturally assimilated in the schools for more than a century, the interior secretary announced on Tuesday.

The initiative is likely to resemble a recent effort in Canada, where the discovery of the remains of 215 children at the site of a defunct boarding school rekindled discussion of the [traumatic history](#) and treatment of Native populations.

Addressing a virtual conference of the National Congress of American Indians, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland said the program would “shed light on the unspoken traumas of the past, no matter how hard it will be.”

“I know that this process will be long and difficult,” she said. “I know that this process will be painful. It won’t undo the heartbreak and loss that so many of us feel. But only by acknowledging the past can we work toward a future that we’re all proud to embrace.”

The forced removals were a result of the [Civilization Fund Act of 1819](#), which sought to introduce the “habits and arts of civilization” to Indian tribes adjoining frontier settlements through instruction.

In the years after the law was enacted, residential boarding schools were established across the nation and used to house relocated Indigenous children, suppressing American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian cultures.

The new program, called the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, will identify the facilities and sites where there may have been student burials, as well as the tribal affiliations of the children, the Department of the Interior said.

It will also mine records from 1819 to 1969 that were kept by the department, which had oversight of the facilities, working with tribal nations, Alaska Native corporations and Native Hawaiian organizations. A final report will be sent to Ms. Haaland by April 1.

Christine Diindiisi McCleave, chief executive of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, said that finding the graves of the missing children would be “very healing for a lot of our people.”

“The thing that is the open wound for our communities right now,” she said, “is the fact that our children were taken, and they’re lost, and we don’t know where they went and we don’t know what happened to them. We don’t know their final resting place.”

Chuck Hoskin Jr., principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, described the boarding schools as part of an effort by the federal government to civilize Native Americans. The Cherokee Nation identifies the boarding schools as the biggest factor in the loss of the Cherokee language.



An undated photo of the Carson Indian Training School in Nevada and students. Founded in 1890, the 240-acre boarding school operated for nine decades as part of a federal effort to erase Indigenous culture. Credit... Stewart Indian School Cultural Center and Museum, via Associated Press

“We saw an erosion of our culture and language, and in some cases, it was literally beaten out of the children who were forced to attend,” Chief Hoskin said in a statement. “It is a history that needs to be known and remembered.”

In a [statement on Tuesday](#), Jonathan Nez and Myron Lizer, president and vice president of the Navajo Nation, commended Ms. Haaland on the announcement.

“This troubling history deserves more attention to raise awareness and to educate others about the atrocities that our people experienced, so that they can better understand our society today and work together to heal and move forward,” Mr. Nez said.

In an interview on Wednesday, Mr. Nez said his biggest worry for the initiative was that it would become “a report that gets filed away.”

He said he hoped that the findings from the effort would make it into textbooks and lead to teaching “unedited” Native American history, especially in public schools on reservations.

“We are sovereign nations, that should also include sovereignty in education,” Mr. Nez said.

The discovery in Canada prompted the Department of the Interior to begin the initiative to shed light on what it called “these past traumas.”

Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada

The remains of what are presumed to be Indigenous children have been discovered at the sites of defunct boarding schools in Canada. Refueling the country’s debate on how to atone for its history of exploiting Indigenous people.

- **Background:** Around 1883, Indigenous children in many parts of Canada [were forced to attend residential schools](#) in a forced assimilation program. Most of these schools were operated by churches, and all of them banned the use of Indigenous languages and Indigenous cultural practices, often through violence. Disease, as well as sexual, physical and emotional abuse were widespread. An estimated 150,000 children passed through the schools between their opening and their closing in 1996.
- **The Missing Children:** A [National Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), set up as part of a government apology and settlement over the schools, concluded that [at least 4,100 students died while attending them](#), many from mistreatment or neglect, others from disease or accident. In many cases, families never learned the fate of their offspring, who are [now known as “the missing children.”](#)
- **The Discoveries:** In May, members of the Tk’emlups te Secwepemc First Nation [found 215 bodies](#) at the Kamloops school — which was operated by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969 — after bringing in ground-penetrating radar. In June, an Indigenous group said [the remains of as many as 751 people](#), mainly children, had been found in unmarked graves on the site of a former boarding school in Saskatchewan.
- **Cultural Genocide:** [In a 2015 report](#), the commission concluded that [the system was a form of “cultural genocide.”](#) [Murray Sinclair](#), a former judge and senator who headed the commission, recently said he now believed the number of disappeared children was “well beyond 10,000.”
- **Apologies and Next Steps:** The commission called for an [apology from the pope](#) for the Roman Catholic church’s role. [Pope Francis stopped short of one](#), but the archbishop of Vancouver apologized on behalf of his archdiocese. Canada has [formally apologized](#) and offered financial and other search support, but Indigenous leaders believe the government still has a long way to go.

In Canada, the Tk’emlups te Secwepemc First Nation [announced in May](#) that ground-penetrating radar had discovered the remains of 215 children at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School, which operated from 1890 until the late 1970s.



Flowers and tributes in memory of the 215 children whose remains were found at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia last month. Credit... Melinda Trochu/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



Shoes representing the 215 children. The Kamloops Indian Residential School operated until the late 1970s. Credit... Melinda Trochu/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

It gave new impetus to the debate on how to atone for a history of exploiting Indigenous people. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada has prioritized [94 actions](#) intended to commemorate the students and improve the lives of Indigenous people.

In the United States, a similar reckoning will take place, according to Bryan Newland, the principal deputy assistant secretary for Indian affairs. He said the Department of the Interior would consult with tribes on how to protect burial sites and use other information it had gathered.

“We must shed light on what happened at federal boarding schools,” [he said](#).

As a [member of the Laguna Pueblo](#), Ms. Haaland is the first Native American cabinet secretary in the United States and has made Native American issues a top priority at the department.

She [said in a memo](#) that in most instances, Indigenous parents were not able to visit their children at the schools, where students endured “routine injury and abuse” and where “some perished and were interred in unmarked graves.”

The initiative may lead to the possible [repatriation of human remains](#) as well as a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences of forced assimilation.

“Many who survived the ordeal returned home changed in unimaginable ways, and their experiences still resonate across the generations,” Ms. Haaland wrote.

Indigenous People in the Americas

[How Thousands of Indigenous Children Vanished in Canada](#) [New York Times](#) [June 7, 2021](#)

[‘Horrible History’: Mass Grave of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada](#) [New York Times](#) [May 28, 2021](#)

[Biden Picks Deb Haaland to Lead Interior Department](#) [New York Times](#) [Dec. 17, 2020](#)

[Fight Over Deb Haaland, First Native American Cabinet Pick, Reflects Partisan Divide](#) [New York Times](#) [Feb. 22, 2021](#)

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