

A Federal Probe Into Indian Boarding School Gravesites Seeks To Bring Healing

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Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland recently announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative in part, "to address the intergenerational impact of Indian boarding schools."

Department of the Interior

The United States is about to [undertake a national investigation](#) into hundreds of American Indian boarding schools that from the 1800s through the 20th century served to "kill the Indian to save the man," according to one school's founder.

On June 22, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative in an address to the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) during a virtual conference. It came weeks after the [discovery of 215 Indigenous children's remains](#) were found at a school site in British Columbia.

"To address the intergenerational impact of Indian boarding schools and to promote spiritual and emotional healing in our communities, we must shed light on the unspoken traumas of the past," Haaland said in her announcement. "No matter how hard it will be."

The Department of the Interior oversees the Bureau of Indian Affairs which, along with denominations of the Christian church, was responsible for boarding school practices starting with the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 until the late 1970s and after.

Now the DOI will now oversee an investigation into more than 365 boarding school sites in the U.S.

From 1869 when the Peace Policy was enacted through 1978, the [National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#) estimates that hundreds of thousands of Native children were removed from their families and sent to these schools, which spanned 30 states, the majority in Oklahoma (83), Arizona (51), Alaska (33), and New Mexico (26).

By 1926, nearly 83% of Indian school-age children were attending boarding schools, according to the organization.

What the investigation will entail

On its own, the federal initiative doesn't address the full spectrum of injustice inflicted by the government on Indigenous people, but Indigenous leaders say it's a start.

"We don't know where this is going to lead, but we do know that it is going to lead us down a path of truth, and a path of justice, and a path of righteousness," said Fawn Sharp, NCAI president.

The initiative will identify school sites where there may have been student burials, as well as the tribal affiliations of the children; search through DOI records of boarding school oversight dating back to 1819; consult with Tribal Nations, Alaska Native corporations, and Native Hawaiian organizations; and result in a final report to Haaland by April 1, 2022.

"The legacy of Indian boarding schools remains, manifesting itself in Indigenous communities through intergenerational trauma." Haaland wrote in a [secretarial memo dated June 22](#).

To date, more than [1,000 remains](#) of mostly Indigenous children have been found at four American Indian boarding school sites in Canada, since May, schools where Native students were forced to assimilate to "white" culture.



[Hundreds Of Unmarked Graves Found At Another Former School For Indigenous Children](#)

That's almost a third of an estimated 3,213 student death toll documented in [one of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final reports](#) in 2015. It is, however, also just 2.5% of the more than 150 school sites in Canada.

"The fallout of what we are witnessing is not only of the skyrocketing numbers as the body count climbs," Sharp said. "But the realization that there's a direct connection between that and every element of suffering and oppression that we've felt (for generations).

"Nobody escapes from the historical trauma of the boarding schools"

Many boarding school students never returned to their families; some were placed in foster care while others went missing. For generations, the descendants of students who survived have been living with [a legacy trauma](#).

"Nobody escapes from the historical trauma of the boarding schools," said Agnes Williams, an elder with the Seneca Nation of Indians who served as an International Indian Treaty Council delegate to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1983. "The substance abuse and addiction is, is, is what is part of that right now."

A former social worker, Williams was the executive director of a child welfare agency, the Urban Indian Child Resource Center, in the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid 1970s. There she recruited Native foster parents.

"When people were brought up in the boarding school, nobody taught them how to parent," she said. "So then the next generation of unparented Indians becomes foster care and adoption, which is the next travesty."

Then in 1978, compulsory attendance for Indigenous children at boarding schools, which was established in 1891, was abolished with the Indian Child Welfare Act, but Native family separations did not end there.

Very little work was done to help families rehabilitate

"As the boarding school era began to wane and change, it then turned really into a different kind of system, but one that still removed children, often for unnecessary reasons, and that was through state and private child welfare agencies," said David Simmons, director of government affairs and advocacy for the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA).

"There was very little work done to try and see if there was anything they could do to help the families rehabilitate, very little work done to really understand if there were any other family members who might be able to step in," he said.

"And usually the reasons that were given for removing children were pretty flimsy, compared to what we normally consider good practice in child safety."

In 2012, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission between the state of Maine and the Wabanaki Confederacy found that Native children in the state were five times more likely to be placed in foster care than non-Natives — decades after the boarding school era.

[In one documented case](#), a Wabanaki woman recalled one way her trauma was passed down to her children. She was fostered in a non-Native home in the early 1960s where she was punished by being placed up to her neck in a tub of cold water. That experience stayed with her.

"If anybody was to walk by me with water on their hands and go like that (hand flicking motion), just joking around, I get very angry, very quickly," she said in her report. "And, my kids found that out very young, you know, and I didn't mean to do that to them, it's just that it was a reaction to this fear."

Extensive fostering of Native children is a similar trend around the country. For example, [in 2019 the Pew Research Center](#) found that 70% of Cherokee children in the Midwest had been placed in non-Native foster homes, a practice that can lead to a loss of identity.

Of 1,700 foster cases, 40% were due to parental opioid abuse.

"When you look at the current state of Indian country, and the conditions of our citizens and our people with the highest metrics of suicide, the highest metrics of alcohol and drug abuse: that is an entire ethnic population self-medicating for centuries of pain," NCAI president Sharp said.



[More Graves Found At New Site, Canadian Indigenous Group Says](#)



[Pope Francis Expresses Sorrow But No Apology For Indigenous School Deaths In Canada](#)

However, [the brain can heal from emotional trauma](#). Just as the brain adapts to negative experiences, that same neuroplasticity can be tapped with certain therapies, [and art](#).

"If you have services, the brain is amazing, it can heal from an awful lot of things. You can develop coping skills and you can become a relatively well-functioning person even after trauma," Simmons said. "But if you don't have access to those services, it's just the same thing day in and day out and it can even get worse over time."

Federal initiative is a moment of reckoning for everyone

A 2018 [report](#) by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights titled, "Broken Promises," found that U.S. Federal programs meant to serve Native Americans' social and economic wellbeing are chronically underfunded. In 2016, Native Americans received 28% of healthcare funding per person compared with Federal healthcare spending nationwide.

"Not only are we living with the impacts of ethnic cleansing and genocide, but we are without resources to even begin to confront in do the healing," said NCAI president Sharp.

With the announcement of the Federal initiative, Sharp said it marks a moment of reckoning, one she hopes will last for several generations and not just within Native communities.

"Nobody inside and outside of Indian country that's a citizen of the United States is immune from this history. It's our shared history," Sharp said. "So for that reason, it is urgent that we not let another generation pass where this tragedy is ignored."

While Sharp hopes the DOI's initiative's final report may establish a foundation of historical evidence, without resources to address the profound impacts of forced relocations and boarding schools on Native people, paths toward long-term healing could be compromised.