

National Gathering on Unmarked Burials:

Supporting the Search
and Recovery of Missing Children



Summary Report
September 2023



**Office of the Independent
Special Interlocutor**

for Missing Children and Unmarked
Graves and Burial Sites associated
with Indian Residential Schools



Representing strength, family and healing, bears are the primary element in the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor's logo. The larger bear represents the parent, family, and community, while the smaller bear symbolizes the children who were stolen and never returned.

The Northern Lights in the night sky are the Spirits of our ancestors dancing. The dancing guides the children to reunite with their ancestors.

The stars depict the connection between the children taken from their communities and the parents left behind, who would stare at the same stars longing to be reunited.

The flowers in the larger bear signify life and the resilience of Indigenous People.

The changing colours in the dotted path illustrate the on-going search for truth, justice and healing.

The three pairs of moccasins honour and acknowledge all First Nations, Inuit and Métis children.

At the first National Gathering on Unmarked Burials in Treaty 6 territory, Regional Chief Gerald Antoine observed that on the back of the larger bear, there is a clear outline of a child's face looking up at the sky. Although this was not intentionally part of the design, it has shown us yet another way that the children's Spirits are speaking to us all.



*“For the child taken,
For the parent left behind.”*

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Message from Kimberly Murray, the Independent Special Interlocutor



Kimberly Murray, Independent Special Interlocutor

It has been my ongoing honour to be the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools. As the Independent Special Interlocutor, I continue to prioritize hearing from Survivors, their families, and Indigenous communities searching for the children that were never returned home from Indian Residential Schools, Federal Hostels, and other associated institutions.

On September 6-8, 2023, Survivors, Indigenous community members, and leadership gathered in Montreal, Québec, my home territory, and a

place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many Indigenous Peoples including the Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg. We recognize the Kanien'kehà:ka as the traditional custodians of the lands and waters and acknowledge that Tiohtià:ke continues to be home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, which made it well-suited as the location to hold the fifth National Gathering on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials.

My Mandate, as Independent Special Interlocutor, is to identify existing legal and structural barriers and recommend a new federal legal framework to "*identify, protect, and preserve unmarked burial sites*". This description, however, does not adequately portray the significance of the Sacred work that Survivors and communities are leading to find the missing children and unmarked burials. As I continue to learn from Survivors, Indigenous families, and communities, it is apparent that our first duty is to the Spirits of the children who were never returned home. It is our Sacred responsibility.



This Sacred responsibility that each of us carry to find and recover the children was started by Survivors. Despite the harms that they experienced, Survivors have led us with courage, determination and strength. For far too long, their truths were not heard by Canada, but because of their persistence and bravery, Survivors have raised the country's awareness of the atrocities that were perpetrated against them, their families, and their communities. This has brought us to a place where Canada, as a country, can no longer ignore the truth.

This fifth National Gathering provided an important opportunity to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to engage in the Sacred work of searching for the missing children and unmarked burials in a way that listens to the experiences and truths of Survivors. Our time together in Montreal was an opportunity to hear strong messages about the need for accountability, transparency, resources, and healing. It was a chance to explore diverse approaches, discuss common challenges, and continue to amplify the voices that Canada has yet to fully hear and listen to. It is so important that I continue to connect to those voices, which will inform the recommendations contained in my Final Report. I am deeply grateful to all the presenters and participants at the National Gathering for the contributions that they have made, and are making, to this Sacred work.



Overview and Purpose of the National Gathering

Since the start of the [Mandate](#), several National Gatherings have been held across the country. While some Gatherings have had a specific thematic focus (such as [Indigenous data sovereignty](#), [trauma](#), or [upholding Indigenous laws](#)), other Gatherings have engaged in a more general way, meeting with Survivors and communities that are leading search and recovery efforts and connecting their knowledge, expertise, and truths with one another.

In early September 2023, Survivors, Elders, youth, elected leadership, technical experts, Knowledge Keepers, family, and community members gathered in downtown Montreal to share their experiences and deepen their support for one another as they search for the missing children and unmarked burials.

Over 450 participants attended the Montreal Gathering in person, with more than 1000 viewers on livestream. The Gathering was co-chaired by Victoria LaBillois and Luc Lainé.



Gathering Co-chairs, Victoria LaBillois, Listuguj, QC and Luc Lainé, Huron Wendat Nation, QC

Building on the work of previous Gatherings, the Montreal National Gathering was an opportunity to:

- Come together as Indigenous People to share common histories and experiences and to learn about distinct cultures, traditions, and practices;
- Create a safe and supportive space to exchange knowledge, learnings, protocols, techniques, and strategies to find all the missing children and unmarked burials;
- Mourn, heal, and grow together, supporting and connecting people and communities from across Turtle Island; and
- Provide and receive input to recommendations that will be included in the Final Report of the Independent Special Interlocutor, to be delivered in June 2024.





Gathering Participants

This Gathering focused on the voices of Survivors who have, for decades, carried the burden of knowing what happened at Indian Residential Schools, Federal Hostels, and other genocidal institutions. They have been speaking the truths of the unmarked burials for decades. We must heed their unwavering call to follow the truth, wherever it leads us, so that all the children can be found.



Introduction to the Summary Report

This Summary Report reflects the fifth National Gathering's key messages and learnings. Wherever possible, the Report uses the words of presenters and participants to capture the truths and insights that were shared. Consistent with the theme of the National Gathering, Survivor voices were the main focus and at the core of the Gathering.

Many of the important messages captured in this Report have been expressed at previous National Gatherings. Presenters and participants shared insights from their experiences of conducting searches, particularly highlighting the need for care in the ways that communities collect and preserve data and records. As has been discussed at prior Gatherings, this Report describes some of the legislative and policy tools that have been developed in some jurisdictions, and contains presenters' recommendations about how those tools might be expanded and improved upon. In addition, there was a clear outcry for justice and accountability by all those attending the Gathering.

This National Gathering also explored the truths of forced transfers of Indigenous children, with many presenters and participants sharing their families' experience of having children taken from them to institutions other than Indian Residential Schools, and who were never returned home. The accounts shared by these families highlight the need to follow and share the truths of all the missing Indigenous children, regardless of which institution they were taken to by the state and churches.

This Report also shares the reflections of presenters about the importance of engaging Canadians in the work that is being led by Indigenous communities. Several presenters spoke about the role of Settlers in confronting Indian Residential School denialism, acknowledging the truth of Canada's colonial genocide and ensuring that adequate resources are available for communities to do the Sacred work of locating the missing children.

Finally, this Report contains the voices of young Indigenous People that attended the Gathering, including a special message from the Youth, that was shared in the spirit of love and support for Survivors.

This National Gathering was enriched by a wide and diverse array of Survivor and intergenerational Survivor voices. The Gathering was also supported by Indigenous ceremonies, songs, and protocols. While there is no way to adequately capture all elements of the participants' time together, the healing nature of the Gathering must also be acknowledged in these pages.



Commitments and Protocols

The Sacred Fire

At every National Gathering, a Sacred Fire is lit on the first morning, and is tended to by Fire Keepers for the duration of the Gathering. The Sacred Fire at this Gathering was lit in Place du Canada park in the centre of downtown Montreal at the base of Mount Royal.



Elder John Anehwario Cree, Kanehsatà:ke, Mohawk Territory, QC and Elder Stephen Silverbear McComber, Kahnawà:ke, Mohawk Territory, QC

Elders John Anehwario Cree and Stephen Silverbear McComber lit the Sacred Fire at Sunrise on the first day of the Gathering. They reminded everyone that *“many years ago, our people lit the fire on Mount Royal to invite all of the people to come from far away and gather here.”* Tobacco Offerings were made, and the ashes collected from the four previous National Gatherings were added to the Sacred Fire.

The prominent location of the Sacred Fire in this downtown park signaled to all that an important and Sacred event was occurring nearby. For participants at the Gathering, the site of the Sacred Fire was a place of ceremony and reflection, where they could seek cultural and Spiritual support throughout the two days.



Welcomes

At the Opening Ceremonies, Grand Chief Sky-Deer of Kahnawà:ke and Grand Chief Bonspille of Kanehsatà:ke provided words of welcome with kindness and generosity.

The sounds of the RedTail Spirit Singers' Drum and the Rattle Songs of the Kanehsatà:ke Traditional Women Singers brought participants' hearts, minds, and Spirits together as one.

Grand Chief Sky-Deer drew people together by recalling that despite the diverse traditions, protocols and practices among everyone gathered, much unites us: laughter, good words, good minds and good Spirits.



Kahsennenhawe Sky-Deer, Elected Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke

Victor Bonspille, Elected Grand Chief of the Mohawk Council of Kanehsatà:ke



The RedTail Spirit Singers



Kanehsatà:ke Traditional Women Singers

Lighting the Qulliq

Inuk Elder Emma Reelis lit the Qulliq for the National Gathering and shared a prayer for the children who were never returned home.

Traditionally used to bring light and warmth to families on long arctic nights, the warmth from the Qulliq could melt snow, boil tea, and strengthen the ice of igloos. The lighting of the Qulliq during the Opening Ceremonies of the Gathering connected everyone to this Inuit ceremonial practice and created a warm and welcoming atmosphere.



The Qulliq



The Empty Chair, Spirit Plates, and Sacred Items

The placing of the Empty Chair, Spirit Plates, and Sacred Items are Spiritual protocols that serve as powerful reminders of the true reason communities are doing the Sacred work of searching for the missing children and unmarked burials. Elder Silverbear reminded those gathered that *“although we do not see their faces, we put our hearts and minds together for them”* and for their families. We acknowledge that the missing children’s Spirits remain with us and guide those that carry out the work of searching for their unmarked burials.

The Empty Chair and water cup are small, to suit the children's hands and bodies, and the Spirit Plates are prepared with portions to feed a small child. Many participants at the Gathering made additional offerings of sweets and lunch box treats. These offerings remind all that caring for the Spirits of the children is a shared responsibility and that the children were, and are, loved and not forgotten.



Voices of Survivors

Listening to the voices of Survivors was the theme of the fifth National Gathering, and those voices are, and have always been, at the core of the work of the Independent Special Interlocutor.

One of the devastating legacies of Indian Residential Schools and other associated institutions is that they tried to silence Indigenous People's truths: the truth about who they were, the truth about what was really happening, and the truth about the devastating legacy of Canada's genocide. But Survivors have always known the truth. They have carried it in their hearts, in their Spirits, even when many would not listen and could not hear. And that is why it is so important to listen to the voices of Survivors, and to place their truths at the heart of the Sacred work of searching for the missing children and unmarked burials. Survivors are a bridge to the past – to the truth about Canada's colonial legacy. They are the living witnesses.



Voices of Survivors Panel (left to right):

Norman Kistabish, Abitibiwinni First Nation, QC | Emma Reelis, Goose Bay, NL | Angie Crerar, Grand Prairie, AB



You must admire and respect the resilience of these children who endured and survived as we are still here today. A proud people who could not be destroyed. But at what cost?... We learned to kiss away the tears and talk away the fears...

- Angie Crerar, Grand Prairie, AB

Healing Intergenerational Trauma through Intergenerational Connection

Participants recognized that the Indian Residential School System was designed to break the connections between Elders and youth. These connections are essential to learning, upholding, and passing on Indigenous traditions, culture and history, which is why they were a target of Canada's colonial genocide. While the need to re-establish and strengthen these connections takes time and effort, this Gathering provided opportunities for crucial intergenerational sharing – a vital starting point for healing.

The need for this intergenerational sharing was made clear by the words of Joni Karoo, who spoke honestly and vulnerably to the Gathering about the struggles of youth in her community with suicide and self-harm.

In my community there are a lot of things that are not spoken of. Youth are left with so much pain and no way to understand where it has come from. They wonder why they are going through this with their parents, their grandparents.

Youth need to be educated about why things are the way they are. It will help them go on in life.

- Joni Karoo, Taloyoak, NU



The Gathering included young people who attended and participated as community delegates, others attended as supportive family members of Survivors, and several attended the Gathering as presenters on the Voices of Youth Panel. The Gathering also included the OSI Youth Advisory that participated throughout and served as Facilitators and Notetakers for the various breakout sessions.

The presence of youth was intentional and important to all participants at the Gathering.

Thank you so much for having a table full of youth here, because these young people – I see their spirit, I see their energy, I see the drive and care they have for community, and I know that they are going to be the ones that are going to take care of our next generation. I can see how ready they are to take on that responsibility.

- Kyra De La Ronde, Red River Métis, MB



Throughout the Gathering, Survivors repeatedly shared that an important part of their motivation for reliving their trauma and sharing their experiences is to heal the wounds within their own families and communities. Survivors want to ensure that the generations that come after them understand what happened, and to plant the seeds of hope – hope for healing and a better way ahead – for the young people in their communities and across the country.

Back home is hard. Our children are hurting. They don't know they belong here. My hope is that our communities pray together everyday for our young ones because they need to see a good life. Our young ones need to have a sense of worth and pride. That is my hope. I pray for that every day.

- Elizabeth Anderson, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, YK



Rosalie LaBillois, Joni Karoo & Kyra De La Ronde

Voices of Youth Panel

Participants at the Gathering were challenged, moved, and inspired by the Voices of Youth Panel. Through their presentations, the panelists were able to capture both the anguish that Indigenous youth experience as intergenerational Survivors, and the incredible resilience and healing that they have found by being connected to their traditional teachings and their Elders.

Rosalie LaBillois, from Eel River Bar First Nation, spoke about the privilege and responsibility she feels as an Indigenous youth who was raised deeply immersed in her Mi'gmaq culture. Rosalie gifted the Gathering with a [traditional Whale Song](#).

Joni Karoo shared from her own life an important truth for intergenerational Survivors:

Intergenerational trauma was passed down to me. But so was the strength that comes from my grandfather. He went through so much. His strength really inspires me. It helps me continue to keep going.

Kyra De La Ronde relayed the challenges that she faces as a young Métis woman. She discussed her experiences of erasure, as her Indigenous culture and identity was covered up or hidden from her. She also reflected on the uncertainty that she carries as an Indigenous youth who moves through the world with some privilege as the result of her looks. She spoke about the choice she has made to embrace her Indigenous identity and to use that privilege to challenge racist narratives:

I have been taught that my voice is power. If I choose to silence my voice, I am silencing all the stories that I carry, that have come before.

One of the powerful messages that echoed throughout the Gathering was the mutual respect and love that exists between the generations in attendance.

How resilient Indigenous Peoples are! We push through no matter what [we] have been through. We have been through so much, and we are still here... You have been through so much and you keep going, keep fighting for us. You give me so much hope. I want to thank you all for that.

- Joni Karoo

The Governor General, the Right Honourable Mary Simon, spoke directly to the importance of bridging generations to ensure that the work of reconciliation continues:

We have seen the outpouring of support from Canadians as more and more children are located in unmarked graves. Families and whole communities are working together to find ways to honour the memories of these children and the sites where they were buried. [...] A lot has been done. But a lot of work remains. When I look at this audience, particularly at the young people, I'm reassured that our work of reconciliation will continue into the next generation.

All of you need to be included. Your opinions and ideas need to be heard and considered.

Hope is a great motivator. And there is hope. I have hope. And I believe in all of you. You are our hope.



(left to right) Rosalie LaBillois, Her Excellency the Right Honourable Mary Simon, Joni Karoo, and Kyra De La Ronde

The Youth Advisory to the Independent Special Interlocutor, were moved to share a message with the Survivors who had given so much of themselves throughout the Gathering. Tracey Leost read the message that the Advisory had prepared:

YOUTH MESSAGE

As the Youth Advisory, we wanted to express gratitude to each of you. It is so meaningful to be walking this journey with our Elders and our Survivors.

As youth from coast to coast to coast, we want you to know that we are here: grounded and proud and powerful in our ways. We are the dreams come true and the prayers answered from our Survivors and our Peoples, and we get to be that because you survived.

Each of you continue to show us the way in this journey. We leave this Gathering armed with your love and your Spirits continue to guide us as we journey home to our Home Fires to continue that work in our own communities.

So we wanted to say one big Miigwetch.

It was made really clear sitting alongside Elders these past few days that the unconditional love has never ever gone away. We hope that our Elders and our Survivors leave here knowing that your Youth love you immensely and we are so proud of each of you.



Members of the OSI Youth Advisory read a statement of support for Survivors

On the final day of the Gathering, former TRC Commissioner, Dr. Marie Wilson, spoke directly to the young Indigenous People who were present at the Gathering, and her words captured the love and hope of the room:

*"You are enough.
You are more than enough.
You are the answer to our prayers."*

Emerging Practice: Yúusneʷas Project

Yúusneʷas is a community-led, Survivor-guided intergenerational project to research and document experiences at St. Paul's Indian Residential School. The project's intent is to provide a safe space to listen to the truth-tellers and to take care of each other with cultural, emotional, and spiritual wellness supports. This process has ancestors, truth-tellers, and community at its heart and highlights pathways of healing for today and generations to come.

Sḵw̓xwú7mesh Úxwumixw is the lead community for this archival and land-based research into the former St. Paul's Indian Residential School, located on Sḵw̓xwú7mesh territory in North Vancouver. The project is working closely with səlilwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nation and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Indian Band, whose members were also taken to St. Paul's, from the time it opened in 1899 until it was shut down in 1959.



The word yúusneʷas was proposed by the Elders Advisory Committee for the project name as a recognition that Survivors must be cared for, as well as all who have been impacted by intergenerational harms. This seven-generation approach was the guiding principle for the Growth and Unity project logo, designed by Nation artist Calvin Charlie-Dawson.

Ashley Whitworth, the Project Director of Yúusneʷas explained that the initiative was designed to build community understanding of experiences at St. Paul's and to help heal and to care for each other. The goal is to bring together data that can capture what happened at St. Paul's to create an honest and as complete as possible understanding of the history.

While Survivor guidance and knowledge is at the core of the Yúusneʷas initiative, their truths are supported by the ongoing archival review process.

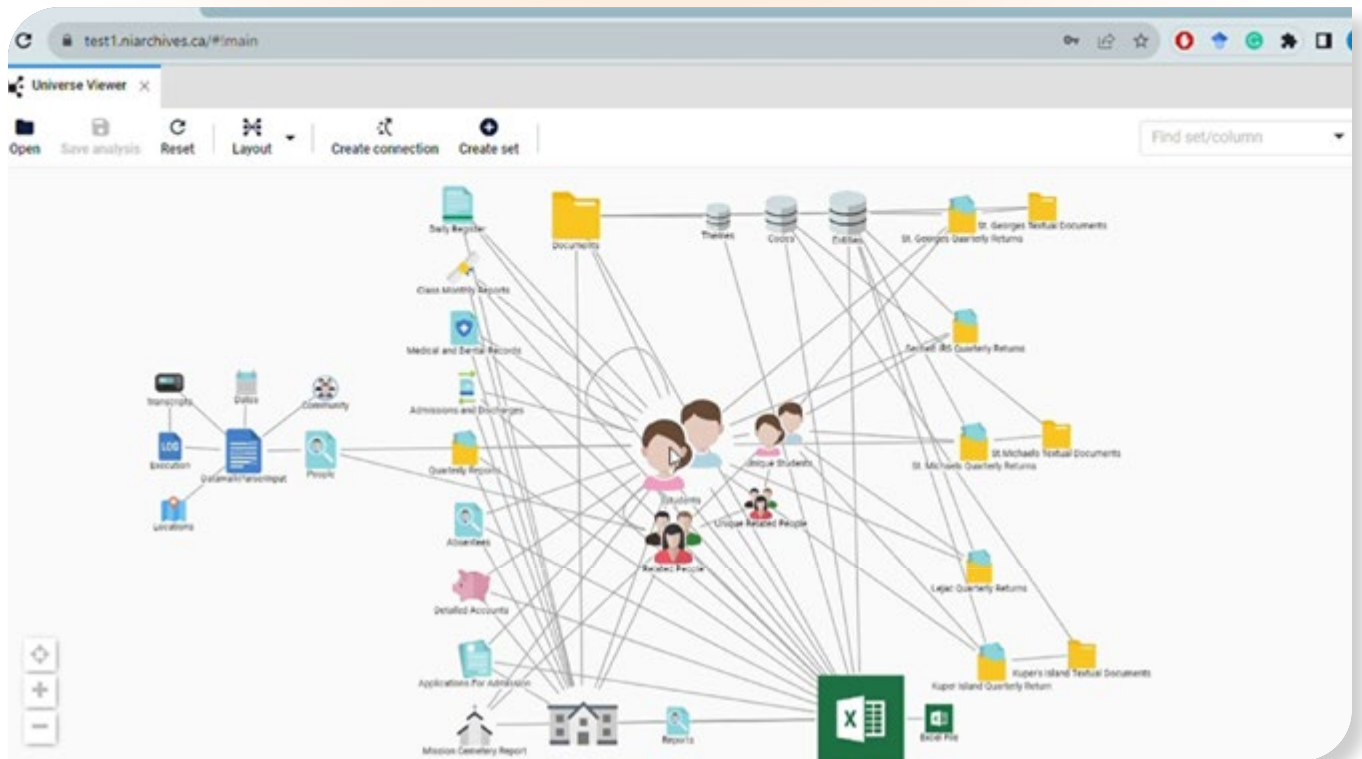
Now I just try to take it one day at a time. My friends give me lots of support. I attend Sharing Circles, and at first, I didn't say anything. I thought: no one could have an experience like mine... But later I realized that others have been through the kind of things I went through. And the sharing has helped me.

- Emma Reelis, Goose Bay, NL, Survivor



Preserving and Accessing Data and Records

Data is essential to the work of searching for the missing children and unmarked burials and to fully understanding the legacy of colonialism and the Indian Residential School System. Issues and challenges surrounding access to and control of Indigenous data has been an ongoing concern for many communities doing this Sacred work.



Slide from Ashley Whitworth's presentation: *Connecting Disparate Data to Understand the Student Experience*

Some of the data preservation and access challenges that were identified by participants at the Gathering include:

- Inadequate resources to support the research that communities need to do to find the missing children;
- Problems with translation of original records, such as those created in an old dialect of French;
- Access to information laws that lack recognition of Indigenous data sovereignty and the right of Indigenous People to hold and control their own records, information, and history;
- The existence of systemic barriers that block access to records held and collected by the federal government since 1755;
- Colonial gatekeepers, including state institutions, churches, museums, universities and private entities, who are not actively engaged in searching their records or making them accessible to Indigenous People and communities;

- Missing data that has been lost or destroyed, or are in danger of being lost or destroyed;
- Errors, erasure and incorrect record-keeping (such as changing the names of children or obscuring their identity) making it difficult to trace the experiences and transfers of individual children; and
- The tension between individual privacy rights and the collective rights of Indigenous People and communities to know and document the truth.

The Honourable Arif Virani, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, attended part of the Gathering and spoke about the need to preserve the truths that Survivors carry- something that he heard loudly and clearly from the Survivor Panel. He said that “[Survivors are] voicing the history because they don’t want history to repeat itself. That’s about data preservation, archiving, and collecting. It’s about making sure those stories are not lost.”

Survivors are doing the important work of capturing and recording Survivor truths – adding their truths to the history of Indian Residential Schools and other associated institutions. At the Gathering, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) was in attendance to receive and record the truths of Survivors and intergenerational Survivors if they opted to do so, adding to the public memory.



Survivors' Sharing Circle



Using Technology in Searches

As part of the National Advisory Committee on Residential Schools Missing Children and Unmarked Burials panel, Dr. Rebekah Jacques, a forensic pathologist, alerted participants to the fact that technology-assisted searches generate an enormous amount of data. Dr. Jacques and her fellow panelist archaeologist, Dr. Kisha Supernant, highlighted the importance of discussing and understanding what is going to happen with that data before any work is started, to ensure that Indigenous data sovereignty is acknowledged and protected.

Any time you are using the technology, data is being generated... And it's really important to work in a way that respects and upholds Indigenous data sovereignty, so that that information sits with the Nation or sits with the Survivors and is not something that a company is taking or a university is taking... And that is really important.

- Dr. Kisha Supernant, Métis Nation of Alberta

Dr. Jacques noted that after ground penetrating radar (GPR) identifies possible or probable burials, communities may choose to proceed through a staged approach:

1. Superficial exhumation of the top surface of the land to confirm that indeed the GPR's reflections are a burial.

2. Complete removal of the land to discover if human remains are in fact present.

3. Examine the human remains, if present, to determine approximate age, and any evidence of disease or injury in the bones.

4. Obtain DNA sample to assist in identification.

[T]he worst thing was watching my sister get beat and I couldn't do a damn thing about it, all because she had a face cloth at the foot of the bed.

When we got home that weekend, [my sister] didn't want to get undressed because she didn't want mom to see her bruises. But finally, she did and mom was so shocked to see the bruises. And that was almost a week since she was beaten. She called our dad over and said: "look!"

Mom and dad brought us back to school, and we thought we were in trouble. You could hear dad swearing at them in the office because of what they had done to my sister. And he wanted to see the nun that did that. But no. She wasn't available.

I still see that picture in my mind about her bruises.

- Christine Szabo, Pine Creek First Nation, MB



While the use of technology (and especially ground penetrating radar) to assist searches has had a lot of attention in recent years, Dr. Supernant spoke about some of the considerations and limitations that must be considered:

GPR works really well in certain conditions, certain types of soil, certain types of environments work quite well. But I have now been involved in two separate places where GPR did not work at all – where we are in a cemetery where there are graves – we know there are graves there – the GPR just doesn't see them because the soil is not right. So if you are investing in a ground search, its really important to have a trusted source of information and someone who can give you good advice about what is possible.

The context of each site must be considered. Survivor knowledge is essential in considering the unique circumstances of each possible search site. Technology is not a perfect solution in every situation. Dr. Supernant noted that:



There are vast landscapes around every single residential school, and these landscapes are obviously places that Survivors, Elders, and communities are looking to search. It's really important to remember that every school is unique in its own way. It has its own unique history both in terms of how long it was in operation, which children were stolen to that place from which communities, but also what has happened since the residential school was in operation... [there] will be a different history of the land, what has happened to it... I have had the privilege of working with the Métis local in St. Albert on the Youville Institution, for example. The Youville Institution was in the heart of what is now the City of St. Albert so the lands that the school was on are almost entirely under the centre of the city. So this is a case where GPR may not be much help, since there isn't much left there to search.

Dr. Kisha Supernant, Métis Nation of Alberta

Forensics as a Tool for Truth Finding

(Adapted from the remarks of Dr. Rebekah Jacques)

Forensics is an essential tool for humanitarian action as it may provide answers and relief to the bereaved families and their communities. By helping fulfill obligations towards the deceased, we all can assert our own humanity.

Forensics can gather different types of evidence and data in the search for truth:

i. Scientific Exhumations: This is the removal of the earth on probable burials identified by GPR and other non-invasive search technologies, to help confirm the presence of human remains. This can be a destructive process because you are actually removing the land and unearthing a burial site. During this process, there are other forensic methods that are used to ensure the chain of custody of the evidence is protected, and that help enable identification.

ii. Identification: Identification relies on research of documentation and oral history testimony to determine who the person is that was recovered. Identification helps in returning the loved one to their family so that they can proceed with their death and funerary customs and protocols.

DNA samples may be required to maximize the chance of successful identification. To do this, the DNA of living biological relatives is compared to the DNA of the recovered human remains.

It is important to understand that many of the children may remain unidentified, so prior to exhumation, considerations about the willingness of family members to provide a DNA sample need to be made.

iii. Cause of Death: The postmortem examination or autopsy is an opportunity to try and determine what happened to the children and perhaps learn more about what caused their deaths.

Like identification, postmortem examinations present forensic pathologists with many challenges. Over time human remains naturally decompose and eventually fully return to the land. Today, given the passage of time, virtually all human remains that may be recovered from the time of the Indian Residential Schools will consist of skeletal remains only.

This means that any cause of death, can only be identified if there is evidence contained in the remaining bones.

Usually, evidence of the causes of a death are in the soft tissues of the body such as the brain, heart and lungs. The soft tissues on the children will have likely already be gone. So it is important for us to understand that the determination of a cause of death will not be possible in most cases. Forensic pathologists use the term “*undetermined*” to describe a situation where it is not possible to know how a person died.



Dr. Rebekah Jacques, Citizen of Métis Nation of Ontario, Forensic Pathologist, London, ON

iv. Expert Testimony: Forensic experts draw on detailed scientific and technological expertise. Because of the wide knowledge gap between laypersons and experts, forensic pathologists are often called to testify as expert witnesses in legal proceedings, such as criminal trials. Forensic experts testify in courts to support claims of truth. They use approaches that rely on forensic, medical and scientific standards that are scrutinized by legal systems and by their peers.

v. Next of Kin Clinics: As experts, the work does not end with the legal system. Many forensic experts working in death investigation systems have opportunities to meet with families to explain the processes and findings. These meetings are commonly called “*Next of Kin Clinics*” where families ask questions of the experts to better understand what happened to their loved ones.

But as noted, there are many limitations to forensic work in relation to the recovered children.

First, whole bodies are very unlikely to be recovered. There may be bones present within the unmarked burials but children’s bones do not survive as long as adults and may have disappeared already due to their natural breakdown over time.

Second, it may not be possible to identify all human remains. The uncertainty of not knowing the identity of loved ones can be extremely distressing. Decisions around honouring and commemorating the children, should be decided before the forensic work is underway.

Third, forensic work requires time, and will likely take years to recover and identify the children.

Fourth, forensics is part of the colonial death investigation system.

To do this work in an Indigenous and culturally responsive way, communities should insist that relationships are put at the forefront and that the work is transparent, accountable, culture- and trauma-informed. These relationships must be reciprocal, and draw on the expertise of Indigenous Knowledge Holders.

Dr. Jacques suggested the following for communities that are considering exhuming the burials of the children:

1. Create protocols with the forensic team, in order to formalize the partnership, and address cultural differences.
2. Consider whether affected biological family members are willing to provide DNA samples for the purposes of identification of the recovered children.
3. Determine how the children can be honoured and commemorated.
4. Identify if there is an intention to pursue accountability through colonial legal systems in the event that the forensic work results in evidence that could be used in a criminal prosecution.
5. Recognize and respond to the impact that forensic work will have on families and communities.

Challenges with Translation



Dr. Jérôme Melançon, Associate Professor, Chair of The French and Francophone Intercultural Studies Program, University of Regina

The issue of translating French documents received special attention at the Gathering, with a presentation from Dr. Jérôme Melançon of La Cité Universitaire Francophone at the University of Regina. It is well known that many institutions were administered by the Catholic Church, and Dr. Melançon explained that several were administered by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate – a religious order mostly present in France and Québec. Some of the Oblate-administered institutions were staffed by nuns who often only communicated with each other in French, through administrative and private records. These records include:

- formal letters regarding instructions, funding and the administration of the institutions;
- official documents, including the Codex Historicus (the master ledger of the institution), as well as lists of staff and children; and
- private journals of staff at the institutions, which, while less common, may offer frank and unfiltered insights into life at the institution.

Dr. Melançon and his team have been supporting translation efforts with and on behalf of Cowessess First Nation. Translators are provided with training on the history of the Indian Residential School System prior to working with community. Dr. Melançon's team is also working to create tools that will be shared with Indigenous communities and researchers to support their translation efforts.

Dr. Melançon suggested these steps that communities may choose to follow when working with translators:

1. Begin with larger files of many documents;
2. Summarize larger documents;
3. Flag mentions of missing children;
4. Highlight key words or names;
5. Determine whether full or partial translation is needed;
6. Translation of the document; and
7. Community and translator to review the translation together.

Drawing on Community Knowledge in Tseshaht First Nation

Elected Chief Councillor Ken Watts shared the following about the community-led and community-driven process in Tseshaht First Nation Territory. The full list of Lessons Learned and Best Practices were in his presentation slides, including the following:



Chief Councillor Ken Watts, Tseshaht, First Nation BC

- This isn't quick work. Timing is important, because we know that we are losing Survivors all the time. But this work is not a race.
 - Put Survivors at the centre! Be patient and nurturing, and integrate culture into everything.
 - While it may feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulders as a leader, remember that there are people standing behind you, holding you up, ones you can see & ones you cannot... But remember, who is supporting the support staff?!
 - Over 90 First Nations had children removed from their communities. Providing space for them to come here and do their work is important, but with so many languages and cultures, sharing information isn't easy.
- Drone LiDAR was one of our first steps, we recognize we should have coordinated more with archaeology & scanning companies because it is important to hire the right people to support the search where there are technical needs.
 - Never stop pressuring governments to fund your work 100% & budget for more than expected.



Recently I learned what it meant to heal my inner child. At 71 I figured out that I had an inner child! ... I was telling my inner child this morning: 'I am going to take care of you. You are safe here.'... Now I see past the pain. I see past the fear. I love my people for who they are.

- Gathering Participant

Policy and Legislative Tools

There are existing legislative and policy tools that can support the Sacred work that communities are doing to search for the missing children, and to protect their burial sites. Participants at the Gathering learned about some of these existing tools, and of the work being done by advocates to create new tools.

The United States: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak's (MKO)

Grand Chief Garrison Settee spoke to the Gathering about the work that MKO is doing to ensure the protection of burial sites, human remains, and cultural items. In particular, Grand Chief Settee described the *US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)* as a possible model in Canada.

The MKO has called on government to co-develop this kind of legislation with Indigenous Nations and suggested that Canada might consider the August 2006 *Agreement for a Protocol for the Protection of Heritage Resources and Aboriginal Human Remains Related to the Wuskwatim Generating Project* as a starting point for this work.

Québec's Bill 79: Improving Access to Records

In Québec, the public outcry about missing Indigenous People started well before the recovery of the unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. During the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), family members began to come forward and demand access to data and records about their missing loved ones. In its Final Report, the MMIWG Inquiry included Call for Justice #20, which directed the government to provide Indigenous families with full access to all the information about a missing family member.



Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) Grand Chief Garrison Settee, Pimicikamak Cree Nation, MB



In June 2021, guided by the persistence of Indigenous families and advocates, the Québec National Assembly passed **Bill 79: *An Act to authorize the communication of personal information to the families of Indigenous children who went missing or died after being admitted to an institution.*** This law was designed to make records more accessible to the families of Indigenous children who went missing or died after being admitted to an institution in the Province of Québec.

The Act created the role of a Special Advisor to Support Families of Missing and Deceased Indigenous Children with powers to provide information about children who went missing between the 1950s and 1990s. Pursuant to the Act, families are able to request access to hospital and sanatoria records, foster care records, child and youth records, cemetery and church records and other relevant information. The Act provides the necessary tools for families to obtain concrete answers about their children who were disappeared by the Government of Québec or a religious institution in the Province.



Anne Panasuk, Former Special Advisor, Québec Government



Forced Transfers

The Sacred work being done to locate the missing children and unmarked burials has led communities to other government and church-run institutions, such as Indian Hospitals, sanatoria, reformatories, mental health institutions, and those for disabled children.

Participants at the Gathering had the opportunity to hear from many different speakers about these forced transfers. Survivors and families have long known that the truth of the missing children is not limited to the sites of former Indian Residential Schools.

In her presentation as a member of the Circle of Survivors to the National Advisory Committee on Residential Schools Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, Jacquie Bouvier described her experience of three of her siblings being taken and placed in institutions other than an Indian Residential School. She spoke of her sister being removed from the family after her father died of tuberculosis and placed in an orphanage in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan despite the fact that her mother was still alive. After what the authorities described as a suicide attempt, she was transferred from the orphanage to a mental health institution in North Battleford, Saskatchewan.

Jacquie spoke of her experience of finding her brother, who was removed from the family as part of the 60's Scoop. It had been her mother's dying wish that he be located. The family was able to find him in the United States and they have been reunited.



Jacquie Bouvier, Métis, Beauval, SK

Jacquie also shared that one of her other brothers was also removed from the family and taken to a school for the deaf.

Each of these taken siblings were members of the family, a family that deeply loved and missed them.





Tanya Talaga, Fort William First Nation, ON | Elizabeth Anderson, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, YK | Christine Szabo and Sharon MacIntyre, Pine Creek First Nation, MB

At the Gathering a panel of family members focused on the need to find the children that were taken and transferred to other institutions. Three families discussed how they followed the truth, searching and eventually finding their missing family members who had been taken by the government. Each family had a loved one who died and was buried in an unmarked grave, far away from their home community and they were never notified of the death or location of their loved one's burial.



Hazel

Elizabeth Anderson shared how her family searched for their sister, Hazel, whom she never met.

Elizabeth and her family are members of Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, Yukon. Before Elizabeth was born and when Hazel was only three years old, she contracted tuberculosis and was taken from her family to the Charles Camsell Indian Hospital in Edmonton, Alberta. On July 10, 1951, almost 2000 kilometers from her home and without any of her loved ones around her, little Hazel died and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Elizabeth described the anguish that her parents felt over the loss of their daughter and the grief that never left them. Elizabeth recalled that her parents would mourn Hazel every July for as long as she could remember.

[Hazel's] story was kept alive with our family. We never met, but our memory of her was very strong.

She passed away at 3 years old in the hospital. My parents had no way of bringing her back to the Yukon. For many years they grieved and must have wondered where her resting place is?

- Elizabeth Anderson, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, YT

Elizabeth described her family's experience of searching for Hazel's grave. She explained that trying to access information about Hazel felt like running into a brick wall. Despite the fact that they knew that Hazel had been taken to Charles Camsell, they could not get access to the information they needed to find her burial place.

In March 2023, after seeking assistance from the Independent Special Interlocutor, documents and records were found that led them to the St. Albert Cemetery. Hazel was buried in an unmarked grave. In the summer of 2023, the Municipality of St. Albert and the Office of the Special Interlocutor, supported Elizabeth and her family to visit Hazel's resting place and conduct ceremonies, bringing healing to the family that had been searching for 72 years.



Elizabeth Anderson and Family at St. Albert Cemetery, Edmonton, AB

Marlene

The Nepinak family lost their beloved Marlene when she was 7 years old. Marlene's sisters, Mary Fernan Sharon MacIntyre and Christine Szabo, and her brother Reg Nepinak, described their ongoing search for Marlene.

At the first National Gathering on Missing Children and Unmarked Burials in Edmonton, Alberta in September 2022, the family met with the Independent Special Interlocutor, and asked for help locating Marlene. They believed that she may have been taken to Winnipeg and then to the Province of Québec. She was only 7 years old when she was taken, and the family never saw her again. She was placed in a home for disabled children by the Indian Agent.

I remember Marlene as being a happy little girl – just joyful! I remember Marlene was smart. She was not “mentally retarded” as stated in her medical file. She was not “an imbecile” as stated in this medical file. She had spina bifida and club feet. She was not able to walk, but it did not affect her mental ability. The [medical records] are all mixed up...

- Sharon MacIntyre (Nepinak), Pine Creek First Nation, MB



With the help of the Independent Special Interlocutor and Anne Panasuk, the former Special Advisor for Missing Children in Québec, the family was able to find Marlene. She was buried in an unmarked grave, in a cemetery in Magog, Québec. The exact location of her burial is not known by the cemetery. They only have confirmation that she is buried there. She may be in one of the several mass graves that are believed to be in the cemetery.

In September 2023, just days before speaking to the National Gathering in Montreal, the family travelled to Magog, Québec to attend at the cemetery and conduct ceremony so that they could bring some closure to a decades-long search.

On Sept 6, we went to Magog to the Cemetery. We did a ceremony there. It was a hard time. But we prayed to all the Grandfathers and the Grandmothers. The Creator. And we asked Marlene to come home with us. We knew we needed to tell mom and dad to take her home. Because that is what they always did. “Mom, Dad. You’ve got to come and get your daughter now. Just like always.”

And so we are taking her home with us tomorrow.

- Reg Nepinak

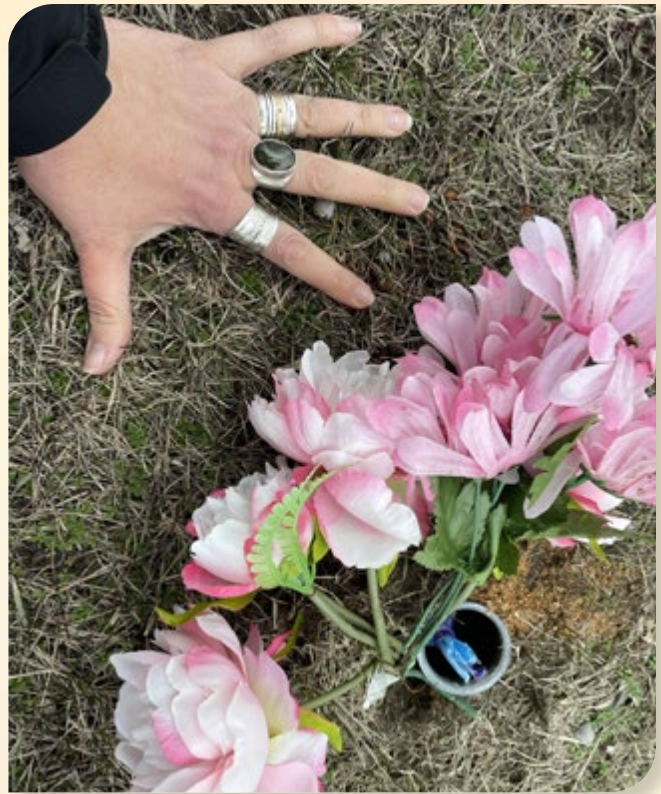
Annie

Tanya Talaga, Fort William First Nation, shared how she traced the truth about the forced transfer of her Great-Great Grandmother, Annie Carpenter, from the James Bay coast to an institution over 1000 kilometers away. The institution she was taken to was known by several names over the years, including the Mimico Insane Asylum, the Mimico Hospital for the Insane, the Ontario Hospital, and the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital. Annie died there in 1937 and was buried in an unmarked and untended cemetery off the side of a highway in West Toronto. While many of the details about Annie's life are not known, her family has been looking for her. Tanya noted that Annie has been one of the disappeared for over eighty years – a First Nations woman never to be seen again. When Tanya's family lost Annie, they also lost all her knowledge, her stories of who she was, where she was from, who she loved and why they lost her.

Our family has children all over the place. It's up to us to tell their story. To find our relations and to bring them home.

- Tanya Talaga, Fort William First Nation, ON

Tanya learned that Annie spent seven years, eight months, and 28 days in the hospital before she died on March 20, 1937. A provincial death certificate showed her burial place as the *"Institution Cemetery, New Toronto."* With this limited information, Tanya was able to trace Annie's burial to the Lakeshore Cemetery, a cemetery that had been abandoned by the Province of Ontario. With the help of Ed Janiszewski, a former employee of the institution, Tanya was able to locate Annie in an unmarked grave. Tanya and her family were finally able to visit Annie.



Tanya visits the burial of her Great-Great Grandmother, Annie Carpenter

"We smudged, we cried, we laid down flowers and we touched the earth, knowing we were reclaiming her – that we had come to take her Spirit home."



Tanya, a writer and a journalist, has also written about her family's experience finding Annie Carpenter in the Globe and Mail. In that article, she reflected on what finding Annie has meant for her and her family.

There are many similarities between what happened to Hazel, Marlene, and Annie, and to their families: the indifference of the State to their deaths, the tireless efforts of their families to find them and how quickly they were found once there was access to the right information and supports, and the powerful healing for the families that came from finding the truth and being able to conduct ceremonies. But the strongest similarity is the power of their families' love for them, reaching across geography and through centuries to bring their Spirits home.

Annie was not a child, but her loss left a wound in her family that impacted multiple generations.

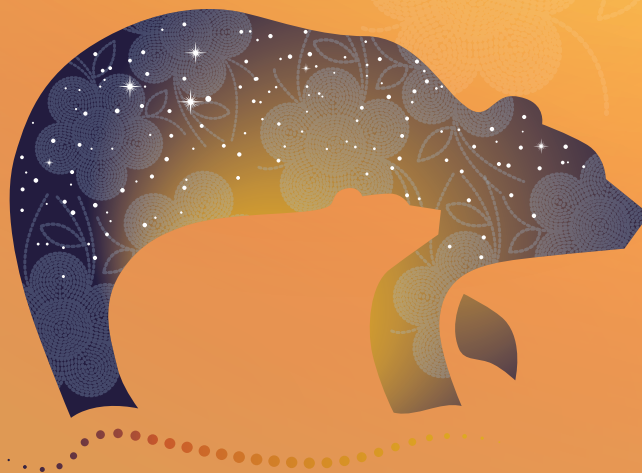
Hazel was never taken to Indian Residential School, but she died alone, far from home, without anyone who loved her there to hold her hand.

Marlene's family were given a file of information about Marlene, but it was full of errors that showed the indifference and ignorance with which Marlene was treated.

Truths about Indigenous People who were taken to institutions other than Indian Residential Schools or Federal Hostels were shared over and over at the Gathering. Whether they died at an Indian Residential School, an Indian Hospital, a mental health asylum or somewhere else, these people were loved and deeply missed. The indifference of the State to their deaths and the loss felt by their families is further evidence of the deep racism that cannot be ignored.

There is a feeling of guilt and responsibility of the parents who could not bring their children home. When in reality, the children were kidnapped from their families, taken to the hospital often never to be seen again. They suffered in silence and carry shame.

- Francoise Ruperthouse, Bill 79 Co-presenter



Justice and Accountability

Survivors and other participants expressed frustration about the lack of justice and accountability for the conduct that, under any legal framework, must be understood as wrongdoing.

Several people called upon the government to admit its responsibility for the genocide it has committed and to ensure that appropriate charges are brought against those responsible for harming and disappearing the children. While the passage of time may mean that many of those responsible cannot be brought to justice, participants spoke about the fact that this impunity is a barrier to their healing and to the reconciliation that Canada and Canadians say they want.



Norman Kistabish, Abitiniwinni First Nation, QC

Survivor, Norman Kistabish, from Abitiniwinni First Nation, reminded participants about the lack of accountability and the message that sends:

... We are close to 12,000 deaths now. There are no charges brought. I don't get it.
... The system is broken. It is dishonest. It is not there for everybody... We are treated as second class citizens, good-for-nothings, trash in society.



Chief Councillor Ken Watts of Tseshaht First Nation, said:

There is no reconciliation without truth and there can be no change without justice. Survivors have made it clear that you cannot have reconciliation without truth, and justice and accountability must occur.

Many participants spoke about the continuing harm that they experience knowing that the people who harmed their loved ones have never faced justice. Chief Councillor Watts told the Gathering that his community believes that Indigenous People must lead this process.

We must do our own investigations into the RCMP's role. They are the ones who took our children! Someone needs to be held accountable for what happened.

Interim National Chief Joanna Bernard also called for meaningful action to bring justice to First Nations for the colonial harms committed by Canada. She affirmed the Assembly of First Nations' support:

We are united in bringing justice for our stolen lost children and healing for Residential School and intergenerational Survivors.

Senator Michèle Audette spoke passionately about the role she sees for herself as an Indigenous woman, an intergenerational Survivor and a Senator, assuring participants that she will work to hold the federal government accountable. She shared her view that the government is a broken system that prevents Indigenous People from accessing what they need to be full participants in society. She sees her role as providing a bridge and a support for Indigenous People to that system, and a voice at the table where decisions are made.

When I was appointed to the Senate, I chose an office in the East Block building because Sir John A. Macdonald's office had been there. I was walking all those halls, thinking I would see a statue of bronze or copper. It was a black and white picture that I found. I put my hand on his picture, and I was crying. I said: 'You tried to erase us. You tried to make sure that we do not exist. But watch: you missed your shot! I am standing! We are standing! And thousands of us are still standing!'

-The Honourable Michèle Taina Audette, Senate of Canada



Dr. Rebekah Jacques spoke about the need to connect reconciliation with a truth that is supported with forensic evidence:

Reconciliation starts with the truth. Forensics is a tool for truth finding from a scientific perspective. In fact, forensic experts serve as credible sources of evidence that may be used in the legal system to support claims of truth.

Discussions about what role First Nations Police Services can and should have in investigating the missing children and unmarked burials occurred. Currently, there are several limits that exist for First Nations Police Services due to the way they are funded by governments. Accountability requires sufficient funding and resources to ensure that Indigenous Police Services have the foundation and supports they require to investigate and hold institutions to account for the harms perpetrated against Indigenous People.

Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak's (MKO) Grand Chief Garrison Settee explained the work that MKO has been doing to determine the Path Forward, which includes demanding accountability for the crimes against humanity that were perpetrated against the children, their families, and communities.



(left to right) Chief of Police Keith Blake, Tsuut'ina Nation, AB | Chief of Police Jerel (Jerry) Swamp, Rama Police, ON | Peacekeeper Chief Dwayne Zacharie, Kahnawà:ke, QC

One thing was made clear: the demand to make things right, and the need for justice, requires a response that goes far beyond mere access to financial resources to conduct ground and archival searches.

Some participants spoke of the insufficiency of apologies without meaningful actions. Grand Chief Gull-Masty of the Grand Council of the Crees told participants about her experience with the recent papal visit, and the expectations of delegates of meaningful change. She decried the lack of follow up, and cautioned that *“apology without follow up is not consistent with the spirit of reconciliation.”*

Many, including Grand Chief Gull-Masty, noted that Indigenous People must look to their own traditional ways for healing, saying that the *“healing processes should be based in land-based activities. This is where you will find your healing: in traditional cultural practices and activities.”*



Grand Chief Mandy Gull-Masty, Grand Council of the Crees, Eeyou Istchee, QC



We lived off the land and the water. We were fed from the land. We were a self-sustaining people. We only had one name: our Spirit Name. When the government came, they gave us different names... they took away our Spirit Name... We were such a strong, self sufficient people, but they came and ruined it. For what?! For their own gain, for their own control... But we have now gained back our traditions.

- Gathering Participant

Engaging with Canadians and Confronting Denialism

The focus of the work being done by Survivors and Indigenous communities is on recovering the missing children and unmarked burials. This Sacred work exists both with the support of and resistance among Canadians. Fortunately, as many participants at the Gathering noted, most Canadians are rightly horrified by what they are still learning about the genocide in Canada and are generally supportive of communities as they search for and recover the disappeared children.

Several speakers identified and celebrated this growing solidarity and support from non-Indigenous People as an important and encouraging sign of progress. Chief Councillor Ken Watts reminded participants of the waves of shock, grief, and ultimately support, from across Canada and around the world in response to the public announcement by Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc of Le Estcwéy, *"The Missing"*, the 215 unmarked burials at the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School. He highlighted some of the events that took place across the country to decry and commemorate the children, and to raise funds in support of the searches being conducted across the country by Indigenous communities.



The Honourable Arif Virani, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

The Honourable Virani, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, said that in the weeks and months following the announcement in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, *"[p]eople across the country were talking to their Members of Parliament when that discovery was made. They were opening their eyes and learning about it. That is important in terms of transparency and accountability, but it's critical in terms of Canadians' awareness of what is taking place. Canadians are pushing for this. And they are pushing Parliamentarians like myself for answers and responses that [the Special Interlocutor]'s work will help inform."*

Her Excellency, the Rt. Hon. Mary Simon, spoke to Gathering participants about the obligation Canadians now bear:

*"Canadians can no longer say 'I didn't know.'
We now acknowledge all aspects of our history. Both the good and the bad."*

Indigenous communities know that the process of learning the truth will not be easy. Participants shared and heard about the difficult work that flows from this knowledge, recognition, and support. Canadians can no longer look away from the violence and trauma that lies at the foundation of this country and must confront the true legacy of colonialism.

Although Minister Virani acknowledged that he could not possibly know the pain carried by Indigenous People as a result of colonialism, he shared his own lived experiences as a racialized Muslim man whose family came to this country as refugees from Uganda.

I don't think that you can work on the issues that I want to work on in terms of promoting equality in Canada unless you understand the foundational inequality in Canada that is steeped in centuries of colonialism and racism. What I mean by that is that you don't get to the point of religious equality, racial equality, things like acceptance of sexual orientation, unless you understand the foundational violations of equality that have been fomented on the people in this room, by European settlers who imposed their will in a colonial and racist manner.

Senator Michèle Audette encouraged participants to fight racism as part of the healing journey. "We've been here for 10,000 years and we are still here. And we are not giving up!"

In the [Interim Report](#), the Independent Special Interlocutor identified the need to engage Canadians in the necessary work of confronting and dismantling denialism of the genocidal actions of the state and the churches. This message was echoed throughout the Gathering.

Her Excellency, Mary Simon, described the problem of denialism and celebrated the resilient responses of Indigenous People in resisting that harmful and hateful way of thinking:



Still today, there are those who deny the stories of residential schools, of abuse and neglect and racism. Even though residential school denialism is in the minority, it is nonetheless present. Denialism takes the form of attacks – online, through the media and through the desecration of burial sites. These attacks are attempts to control the story of Indigenous Peoples.

Despite those that refuse to accept these realities, or maybe because of it, our voices got louder and louder.

-The Governor General, the Right Honourable Mary Simon

It was encouraging to some participants that Minister Virani also spoke about the challenge of denialism. In his remarks, he echoed the words of the Independent Special Interlocutor's Interim Report: Denialism is violence. Denialism is hate. He also said:

We must not and cannot deny what happened to hundreds of thousands of children at residential schools across this country. We must not and cannot deny the resulting pain, the intergenerational trauma, that still haunts Survivors, families, and communities to this very day.

Determining how best to respond to the minority of Canadians who deny the truth about the history of Indian Residential Schools, the harms of colonialism and the genocide in Canada, can be difficult. Some have argued that this racist violence is best ignored. Others believe that it is the responsibility of non-Indigenous People to confront and dismantle this denialism.

Participants heard about some of the strategies being utilized across the country:

- It is essential to tell our own stories, to capture the truth of the Survivors and find ways to share these truths with Indigenous and non-Indigenous People.
- The importance of collecting the testimonies of Survivors cannot be overstated, and the ongoing work of the NCTR and the Sharing Circles that were held throughout the Gathering is a critical initiative.
- Supporting artists to help translate the truth of what happened at Indian Residential Schools and other associated institutions for the public through their art.
- *Pour toi Flora – Dear Flora*: a story of two Indigenous young people who were taken to Indian Residential School that details the struggles they experienced later in life. While the work of creating art from the painful experience of these institutions can be extremely difficult, the creative process has a way of reaching people who might never read a report or visit a museum.



Sonia Bonspille Boileau, Director and Screenwriter of *Pour toi Flora*, Kanehsatà:ke, QC

Ultimately, the most powerful tool to combat the violence and ignorance of denialism is the truths and testimonies of Survivors. Ashley Henrickson, of Know History, shared the following:

Archival documents and official records are often considered the “Truth” in legal proceedings, while oral histories have been discarded. But these documents are skewed to the perspective of administrators and government officials. We know that the oral history testimony of Survivors and family knowledge is more accurate than the records. And records alone will leave us with an incomplete understanding of the truth.



Ashley Henrickson, Director of Outreach and Partnerships at Know History



It doesn't feel good to feel like an outsider in our own community. Those of us who went to residential schools need to be welcomed home.

- Elizabeth Anderson, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation



Conclusions and Next Steps

At this fifth National Gathering, Survivors, Elders, Indigenous families, leadership, and community members came together to share their knowledge, hear the truths of Survivors, engage in ceremony and heal together, as they support the Sacred work of searching for the missing children and unmarked burials across Turtle Island.



Gathering Participants join together in a round dance

Each Gathering brings a unique set of perspectives and learnings, but some clear and overarching messages are emerging. Some of these messages include:

- The importance of intergenerational connections to support healing and instill hope for future generations;
- Access to records and data continues to be a challenge. The gatekeeping, paternalistic approach to Indigenous data has needlessly perpetuated harms on Indigenous People by preventing families from learning what happened to their loved ones and has impeded all people in Canada from knowing and acting upon the truth of what happened at Indian Residential Schools and other colonial institutions;
- Survivors, intergenerational Survivors, and Indigenous communities continue to demand an end to impunity for the harms that were done to their loved ones. Indigenous children, and future generations deserve to know that those who harmed the children will be held responsible; and



Kimberly Murray, greets a Gathering Participant

- Many non-Indigenous People support the important work being led by Indigenous communities to find the missing children and unmarked burials. All Canadians have an obligation to learn the truth of the colonial history of this country and take personal responsibility to denounce denialism when they encounter it.



The Governor General, the Right Honourable Mary Simon, Kimberly Murray, and Survivors

Indigenous People have their own ceremonies, processes, and systems. They must be supported to revitalize and implement them to heal the trauma of the past. Gathering participants were moved and inspired by the intergenerational dialogue and mutual love and respect shared between Survivors and the youth participants. All those gathered were motivated to return to their home communities, to apply the knowledge they gained, and to continue the challenging work of leading their communities and organizations through the Sacred work of recovering the children.

The Independent Special Interlocutor will continue to hold the voices of Survivors – the living witnesses – at the heart of this work. The important discussions that took place at the Gathering will inform the Final Report that will be released at the end of the Mandate.

Further opportunities to share knowledge between Survivors, Indigenous families, and communities, and upcoming Gatherings can be found at www.osi-bis.ca.



Inuk Drum Dancer, Jimmy Uqittuq, shares a cultural performance

*To all Survivors: Our journey has been paved by struggles, pain in our heart and soul, isolation and abandonment. We have lived, endured and survived the darkest legacy of residential school history. A legacy handed down for generations. I admire your courage, your determination to be heard, your fight to reclaim your rightful heritage and culture. Congratulations! You are indeed survivors!
I love you. God Bless you. We shall walk together.*

- Angie Crerar, Grand Prairie, AB



Acknowledgments

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Thank you to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation for their ongoing work and for their presence at this Gathering, facilitating Sharing Circles and collecting statements from Survivors.

Thank you to Indigenous Services Canada for providing the important health and wellness supports.

Thank you to Gathering Co-Chairs Victoria LaBillois and Luc Lainé for guiding everyone throughout the Gathering with kindness and respect.

Thank you to the Elders, Survivors, Fire Keepers, and community members who generously shared their knowledge and experiences, and provided support to ensuring that Indigenous protocols were followed throughout. A special acknowledgment of the support provided by Cultural Advisors Thelma Katsienhaion Nelson, John Anehwario Cree, Stephen Silverbear McComber, and Geraldine Standup.

Thank you to all the participants, speakers, facilitators, and volunteers who made this Gathering a success and to the staff of the Office of the Special Interlocutor, whose support makes these Gatherings possible.

Thank you to all those leading searches for the missing children so that their Spirits can be brought home.

Resources

Canadian Archaeological Association

<https://canadianarchaeology.com/caa/resources-indigenous-communities-considering-investigating-unmarked-graves>

The Canadian Archaeological Association provides valuable resources to support Indigenous communities in their search for missing children and unmarked graves.

Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC)

Residential schools missing children - community support funding
(rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca)

The Residential Schools Missing Children Community Support Fund addresses the ongoing legacy of residential schools is an urgent priority for the Government of Canada. This priority includes supporting Indigenous communities and families as they seek to research, locate, and document burial sites associated with former residential schools. As well as memorialize deaths of children and return children's remains home.

Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program

<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1581971225188/1581971250953>

The Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program was established as part of the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. It provides cultural and emotional support, and mental health.

Know History

<https://www.knowhistory.ca/>

Know History researches, documents, and shares stories that need to be told. They are experts at locating and accessing historical records in archives and institutions across the country, and work closely with Survivors and their communities to gather evidence that help identify missing children and shed light on the Indian Residential School experience. In addition to naming students, archival research can support communities' efforts to set the historical record straight.

Library and Archives Canada

<https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/collection/research-help/indigenous-heritage/Pages/residential-schools.aspx>

Library and Archives Canada's Indian Residential School records portal contains recommendations for how to conduct searches on Indian Residential Schools and missing children within LAC's archives. It recommends various sources where searches might be conducted and includes tips on how to navigate the archive and interact with records.

Mohawk Mothers

<https://www.mohawkmothers.ca/>

The Mohawk Mothers are an Indigenous-led initiative committed to gathering information about the medical experiments that occurred at the Allen Memorial Institute throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They have been engaged in a legal challenge with promoters of the New Vic project to stall future excavation of the former Royal Victoria Hospital site until a proper archaeological investigation is conducted. The Mohawk Mothers are committed to protecting potential undiscovered evidence or unmarked graves and ensuring that Kaianere'kó:wa (or the Great Law of Peace) protocols are respected on the site.

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

<https://nctr.ca/>

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) is a place of learning and dialogue where the truths of the Indian Residential School experience are honoured and safeguarded for future generations. The Centre provides Survivors, their families, educators, researchers, and the public the ability to access Indian Residential School history, experiences, and impacts, share it with others, dive deeper into the mysteries that still exist, and help foster healing and reconciliation to ensure this history is never forgotten or repeated.

Native Women's Shelter of Montreal (NWSM)

<http://www.nwsm.info/>

Provides a safe environment where women can begin to rebuild their lives. They offer support and frontline services to First Nations, Inuit and Métis (Indigenous) women and children to promote their empowerment and independence. The NWSM is the only women's shelter in Montreal that provides services exclusively to Indigenous women and their children.

Parks Canada

<https://parks.canada.ca/culture/designation/pensionnat-residential>

Survivors' Secretariat

<https://www.survivorssecretariat.ca/>

The Survivors' Secretariat was established in 2021 to organize and support efforts to uncover, document and share the truth about what happened at the Mohawk Institute during its 136 years of operation. The mandate of the Survivors' Secretariat includes supporting searching for and investigating unmarked burials and missing children; gathering Survivor statements about the truths of their experiences at the Mohawk Institute; research, collecting and archiving records and commemoration; and reporting back to Survivors, leaders, community members and liaising with other First Nations whose children were taken to the Mohawk Institute.

The Royal BC Museum and Archives

<https://learning.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/pathways/residential-schools-reconciliation/>

United Church Archives

<https://www.unitedchurcharchives.ca/>

The United Church Archives collects the records from their churches, church leaders, offices, denominations, Regional Councils, Communities of Faith, and other sources from across Canada. These records include those that detail the colonizing and genocidal practices carried out by the church, including information about the operation of United Church-run Indian Residential Schools and Day Schools.



Supports

The National Indian Residential School Crisis Line

The National Indian Residential School Crisis Line provides 24-hour crisis support to former Indian Residential School students and their families toll-free at 1-866-925-4419.

The Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program was established as part of the 2006 Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. It provides cultural and emotional support, and mental health counselling services to Survivors of Indian Residential Schools and the families of former students.

Hope for Wellness

First Nations, Inuit and Métis seeking immediate emotional support can contact the Hope for Wellness Help Line toll-free at 1-855-242-3310, or by online chat at [hopeforwellness.ca](https://www.hopeforwellness.ca).





**Office of the Independent
Special Interlocutor**

for Missing Children and Unmarked
Graves and Burial Sites associated
with Indian Residential Schools

osi-bis.ca