

U.S. government admits at least 53 burial sites at Indigenous boarding schools

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Los Angeles, May 13 (RHC)-- A U.S. government investigation has found at least 53 separate burial sites at federal Native American boarding schools, and officials expect to find more, according to a new report.

The initial findings of the investigation, which examined records under federal control, show that hundreds of children died in boarding school, but officials say the number is likely to climb into the thousands or tens of thousands as the investigation continues.

The 106-page report is the first volume of the continuing Federal Indian Boarding Schools Initiative, ordered by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in June 2021 after she heard the news that Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation had confirmed 215 children's graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.

The United States intentionally forced Indigenous families to send their children to school as part of an assimilation system that reached every corner of the country, according to the report. It found the boarding school system was "expansive" -- consisting of 408 "federal Indian boarding schools" across 37 states and territories, including 21 schools in Alaska and seven schools in Hawaii.

The creation of this system was part of a broader policy to take land from Indigenous people to allow for the expansion of the United States, the report found. In it, the government acknowledges its assimilation policy caused loss of life, physical and mental health, territories and wealth, tribal and family relations, and Indigenous languages, as well as the erosion of religious and cultural practices.

"When my maternal grandparents were only eight years old, they were stolen from their parents' culture and communities, and forced to live in boarding schools until the age of 13," Haaland told reporters Wednesday. "Many children like them never made it back to their homes."

She said Indigenous staff worked through their own trauma and pain to complete the report. "This is not new to us," she said, gesturing toward other Indigenous people who attended and spoke at the press conference.

The policy dates back to 1819, when Congress passed the Civilization Fund Act to financially support religious organisations that ran schools to assimilate Indigenous children.

After that, the federal government "induced or compelled" generations of American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian children to attend boarding schools. Beginning in 1871, Congress passed laws ordering parents to send their children to school, and authorised the Interior Secretary to withhold rations to those who refused.

Families hid their children, and officials sent police to seize them, the report said. More than 150 treaties, which were often signed under duress, included requirements that communities send their children to school.

From its earliest days, the US's official objective was to sever cultural and economic ties of Indigenous people to their land. "The assimilation of Indian children through the Federal Indian boarding school system was intentional and part of that broader goal of Indian territorial dispossession for the expansion of the United States," the report confirmed.

The U.S. used a twin policy of land dispossession and school systems to separate Indigenous people from their land and culture. This was the cheapest and safest way to take Indigenous land for the benefit of white people, the report states, citing the 1969 Kennedy Report.

The policy extended beyond boarding schools to include at least 1,000 other federal and non-federal institutions, including American Indian day schools, sanitariums, asylums, orphanages, and stand-alone dormitories that also aimed to educate Indigenous people.

Boarding schools were supported by both federal money and funds obtained from tribal trust accounts maintained by the U.S. for the benefit of Indigenous people, the report said.

The intentional removal of Indigenous children from their communities “was both traumatic and violent,” the investigation found. They were sent to institutions that were run in a “rigid military fashion with heavy emphasis on rustic vocational education.”

The schools deployed “systematic militarised and identity-alteration methodologies”, including renaming children from Indigenous to English names, cutting their hair short, requiring uniforms, discouraging or preventing religious and cultural practices, and organising children into units to perform military drills. The institutions also forced children to perform manual labour, including sewing garments and agricultural production, the report found.

If children spoke their language or practised their culture, they faced severe punishment, including solitary confinement, humiliation, flogging, withholding food, whipping, slapping and cuffing. Older children were forced to punish younger children. When they ran away and were caught, they faced physical punishment including whipping.

While the report doesn’t detail exactly how children died, it does describe conditions that could lead to death. “Rampant physical, sexual and emotional abuse; disease; malnourishment; overcrowding; and lack of health care in Indian boarding schools are well-documented.”

According to the report, young, malnourished children were forced to perform industrial labour. The report states that federal reporting of child deaths, including the number and cause of death, is inconsistent.

In Southern California, the federal government ran an off-reservation boarding school called the Sherman Institute. Its cemetery holds more than 60 graves, most of them students.

Jean Keller, a historian who wrote a book about the Sherman Institute, told Al Jazeera that most of the children died from diseases including typhoid fever, tuberculosis and influenza. Others died in accidents — one was killed when he was hit in the head with a hammer that children were throwing on the playing field, and another child was killed when a bakery oven exploded.

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