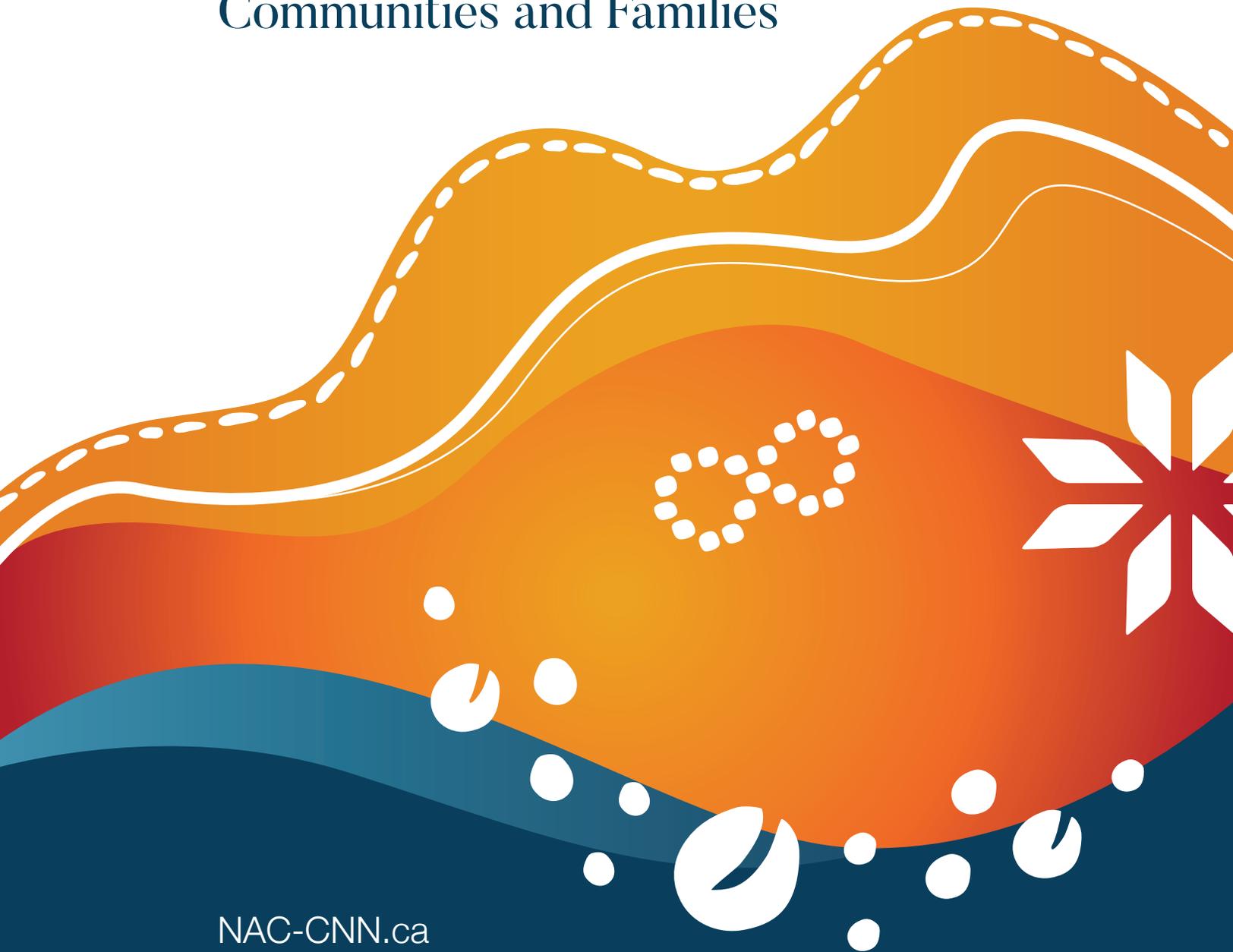




National Advisory Committee
on Residential Schools Missing
Children and Unmarked Burials

Navigating the Search for Missing Children and Unmarked Burials: An Overview for Indigenous Communities and Families



NAC-CNN.ca

Navigating the Search for Missing Children and Unmarked Burials: An Overview for Indigenous Communities and Families

CONTENT WARNING: The content on this page deals with Residential Schools, the death and disappearance of children, child abuse, genocide, and intergenerational trauma. The National Indian Residential School Crisis Line is available at all times, free of charge: 1-866-925-4419. Free support is also available through the Hope for Wellness chatline at 1-800-721-0066 or using the chat box at [hopeforwellness.ca](https://www.hopeforwellness.ca).

Over a period of more than 150 years, Canada's Indian Residential School system took First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation children from their families, communities, and cultures. More than 150,000 children were taken. Thousands never returned home.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that Indian Residential Schools were part of a wider system of institutions and policies intended to destroy First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures and societies. The search for missing children may require examining a range of institutions, including hospitals and orphanages, as well as schools that were excluded from the official Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement.

The work of the National Advisory Committee on Residential Schools Missing Children and Unmarked Burials is meant to be inclusive, recognizing the diversity of First Nations, Inuit and Métis experiences and the common underlying elements of colonialism, trauma, and the search for answers. The information in this overview document – and on the Advisory Committee's website – is intended to be relevant to a wide range of search activities and contexts, including schools that may have been known by different names such as boarding, industrial, and day schools.

The search for answers can involve many steps from examining school records to on-the-ground searches for potential burial sites. There is more than one potential pathway. First Nations, Inuit and Métis governments, communities and families will each decide for themselves the best way forward, based on their self-determination, laws and protocols and the direction provided by Survivors, Inter-generational Survivors, and Elders.

The purpose of this guide is to provide an initial introduction to the numerous options that can be considered. The goal is to make these processes easier to understand. We also hope that this overview can clear up some of the confusion and misinformation that often surrounds the technology involved.

The National Advisory Committee was created in July 2022 to help Indigenous communities access and share trustworthy information about all aspects of the search for missing children. The Committee is made up of independent experts from a wide range of backgrounds, such as archival research, archaeology, forensics, police investigations, health and well-being, and Indigenous law and protocol. The majority of Committee members are First Nations, Inuit or Métis.

The Advisory Committee is funded through the Government of Canada but is an independent body. The Committee is supported by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) and guided by a Circle of Survivors with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation members from across Canada.

We acknowledge that the search for missing children is an arduous undertaking that brings up painful memories and gives rise to inter-generational trauma. We also recognize that the ongoing trauma caused by the residential school system is part of a larger, ongoing pattern of colonial violence and racism impacting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis lives. We encourage Survivors, families, leaders, community members and frontline workers to make use of all available emotional and spiritual supports as they work through this difficult ordeal.

I.

Remembering the children

We know that thousands of Indigenous children never returned home from residential school. In many cases, their families were not ever told what happened to loved ones. For some of these children, there is clear documentation confirming that they died in residential school or in another institution such as a designated "Indian hospital". In many other cases, decades later, families and communities still don't have answers.

The children were often taken very far from home, sometimes thousands of kilometers. Some were moved through many institutions, including different schools, orphanages, hospitals, and sanitoriums. They were surrounded by people who didn't speak their language. Their names were often changed or mis-recorded. This was how the residential school system was designed: its stated purpose was to "civilize" Indigenous peoples "by removing the children from the surroundings of Indian home life."¹ As a result, it is now very difficult to trace the lives of the children who never returned home.

Work begun by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and continued by the NCTR has confirmed more than 4000 deaths in the Residential School system. Researchers continue to identify many more deaths.

Children in residential schools died of various causes including disease and poor health, malnutrition, neglect, fires and other accidents, suicide and violence. When children died in the schools, or after being transferred to a hospital, the missionaries, school administrators, Indian Agents, and other government officials asserted control of their remains. Their bodies were often not returned to their families or

“

We must never forget. We are talking about children. Children who were taken away and who never came home. Children who were loved and are still loved.

– KUKDOOKAA TERRI BROWN, TAHLTAN NATION, NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE CIRCLE OF SURVIVOR

”

communities. In fact, families were often not even notified of their child's death.

The TRC wrote about hundreds of graves on or near residential school sites that were never marked, or which were not properly protected, and have been lost. Survivors have also shared their knowledge of other forms of burial that were never recorded.

The search for missing children and unmarked burials is about honouring the lives of the children and guiding their spirits home. It is also about telling the truth about the residential school system and the terrible and lasting harm that it has caused. It is about healing, and it is about justice. The impact on families and communities is profound and life changing.

As this guide explains, the search for answers is never simple. Sadly, in some cases, the full story may never be known. However, as First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities have already shown, there are powerful and important ways to remember and honour lives of the children at all stages of the search process.

It is also important to note, that while search processes are often talked about in relation to the tools of Western science and research, such as archives and forensics, the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems must never be overlooked or forgotten. Indigenous peoples' own laws, protocols, and other teachings provide crucial pathways to healing and justice. Nothing in this guide is meant to take the place of the wisdom of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

¹ Reverend Alexander Sutherland, General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Canada's Missionary Department in the 1893 Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs.

II. Factors to consider when planning a search

A growing number of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities are now actively engaged in some form of search activity by listening to Survivors, gathering documents, and conducting ground searches. Their experiences highlight a number of factors that are helpful to consider from the outset when planning and designing a search process.

1. Has there been an opportunity for Survivors, the families of missing children, and all affected communities to talk about what they want to achieve and the process they want to follow?

Some of the possible goals might include:

- Finding answers about what happened to their children.
- Locating and protecting any burial sites.
- Honouring the children with ceremony.
- Returning any remains to their home communities.
- Gathering evidence for possible legal action or other accountability measures.

2. Who are the affected communities?

The children at residential schools came from many Nations and territories. There are searches now underway affecting 30 to 80 different communities.

- These Nations may have different goals.
- They may also have different protocols for carrying out a search.

The TRC recommended that the most affected community take the lead in any search. The TRC also recommended that the process be inclusive of all communities whose children attended the school, no matter how far from home they were taken. Involving all the affected communities in this way may require complex processes of consultation and collaboration. This takes a lot of resources.

Models of regional coordination and cooperation are also emerging. The National Advisory Committee hopes to share more information about such models in the near future.

3. How long will the process take?

A lot of attention is focused on the techniques like ground penetrating radar (GPR) that are used to search for evidence at likely burial sites. As explained in section 6 of this guide, these technologies do not produce quick or easy answers. And even before a ground search is carried out, other activities are needed to inform and guide the search.

These preparations may include:

- Setting out a workplan and leadership structure and putting a team in place to carry out this work.
- Establishing emotional supports for Survivors and others.
- Recording statements from Survivors.
- Searching school records and other related data.
- Compiling existing maps and photographs of possible sites.
- Ensuring that any information gathered can be safely stored.
- Consider how to engage with relevant police services who may have a future role in protecting the site, ensuring the safety of all involved, or conducting a criminal investigation.
- Obtaining the necessary funding and resources.

“

The search for missing children is a long and difficult process. I am grateful to all those Nations who have already set out on this path. They have important knowledge and experience from which we can all learn.

– JACK ANAWAK, CIRCLE OF SURVIVORS

”

4. How will these plans be communicated?

Clear lines of communication are essential to prevent rumours and the traumatizing impacts of misinformation.

- This includes communication with Survivors and the community, as well as other communities who will be impacted by any announcements.
- It is recommended that communities adopt a protocol for notifying affected family members around all new developments.
- It is also recommended that communities also adopt procedures for responding to inquiries from journalists and others, keeping in mind that the search for missing children has become the focus for those who want to deny the truth of residential school history.

5. How will potential sites be protected?

Security is a concern throughout the search process, including protecting potential sites from vandalism and ensuring team

members aren't subjected to harassment and threats.

Ultimately, it is important to keep in mind that the search for missing children has many dimensions – it's not just a technical issue. The process can benefit from technologies like aerial photography, drones and GPR, but technology alone cannot provide the answers. These technologies work when used in conjunction with other forms of research which is necessary to determine where to search and to confirm the identities of any remains that may be found. Technology can never replace the knowledge of Survivors, Elders and Knowledge Keepers and the community.

Fortunately, there are Indigenous Nations, communities, governments, and organizations that already have extensive experience in the search process. They have learned valuable lessons and developed helpful resources that can assist others carry out searches. One of the goals of the National Advisory Committee is to support knowledge sharing among communities.

Taking care of each other

“The search for our missing sisters and brothers is an opportunity to heal ourselves, our families and our communities. But if we want to heal, we have to do the work in a good way, respecting and caring for everyone involved.”

– LARRY AHENAKEW, CIRCLE OF SURVIVORS

Every step in the search process can trigger past trauma related to residential school experiences. It is important to listen to the Survivors and to care for their needs. Inter-generational Survivors, extended families and the community as a whole will also be affected, as will the leaders and technicians carrying out the searches.

It is crucial to provide health and wellness supports for everyone involved. These supports should be available before, during and after all stages of the search process.

All supports should be trauma informed and culturally safe. Indigenous peoples' customs, protocols, and traditions are critical foundation for health and wellness. These supports might look different in every Nation, culture, and region and can take many forms, including time out on the land and other cultural activities in small and larger groups.

When communities start a search process, there is a lot of pressure to move quickly. This is understandable. However, the search process is likely to be long and complex. In order for it to be a healing process, attention and care must be given to ensure that it is carried out in a good way. Everyone involved, including outside contractors, should be informed of the community's expectations around respect for protocol and cultural safety.



III.

Knowledge Gathering

Preparatory research or knowledge gathering is key to an effective search. Statements from Survivors, and the careful analysis of historical records can help identify the children who never returned home and, in some cases, determine what happened to them. Along with existing maps, surveys and photographs, this research can also help narrow the search by identifying the most likely places for possible burial sites. Knowledge gathering is also a vital part of the ongoing work of recording the truth about the residential school system.

The recollections of Survivors are the single most important source of information to guide search efforts. All statements given by Survivors during the TRC are preserved by the NCTR, which also continues to gather statements. The NCTR has a help desk to assist Survivors, families and communities access statements and other records. A growing number of Indigenous communities now have agreements with the NCTR to directly access to these records.

It is also important to research whether statements have been collected through other processes, such as in police investigations and research carried out at universities.

Unfortunately, Survivor statements provided during the Independent Assessment Process (which was part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement) are currently sealed and scheduled to be destroyed. However, these records can still be preserved if the Survivor submits a request to release their own records. Information on how to submit such

a request can be found on the website the NCTR (nctr.ca) and in the FAQ published on the website of the National Advisory Committee (NAC-CNN.ca).

Many Survivors have never previously shared their experiences because the memories are so painful. If you choose to record new interviews with Survivors, the following best practices should be followed:

- Ensure that every Survivor has access to the health supports they need, before, during, and after the interview process, including any traditional and spiritual protocols the Survivor may wish to follow.
- Have a direct conversation with the Survivor so that they can decide whether they want their statement to be anonymous or not and carefully document the consent that they have given.
- Provide Survivors the choice of whether their statement will be recorded in audio or video form, in addition to being written down.
- Provide a translator if the Survivor is more comfortable speaking in an Indigenous language.
- Work at the pace that is best for the Survivor – including recording the statement over multiple sessions if needed.
- Be thorough and double check dates or sequences of events as well as names and locations.
- Record the entire interview and have it transcribed by someone experienced in this work.
- Preserve all recordings and transcripts for future research with the consent of the Survivor.

“

As Survivors, we carry painful memories of our time at residential school. We also carry the traditional knowledge and teachings that the schools could never take away, no matter how hard they tried. Together, our memories and our traditions are the key to finding and honouring the young ones who never made it home.

– LILLIAN ELIAS, CIRCLE OF SURVIVORS

”

In addition to Survivor statements, there are wide range of documents – including residential school records, records from Indian hospitals and sanatoria, other church records such as parish records, and historical maps – that can help identify the missing children and the areas to be searched. In some cases, there may be records of previous surveys and searches of the grounds carried out for other purposes.

The NCTR was created to be the principal repository for the history and legacy of residential schools in Canada. Other organizations and institutions like the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia, and federal, provincial and territorial archives, also have a wealth of such documents and can help with locating and accessing information about missing children.

It is important to note, however, that the majority of these records were created by missionaries, Indian Agents, school administrators, and government staff who were non-Indigenous and who upheld and supported the Indian Residential Schooling system. The information they chose to record – or to ignore – often reflected their prejudices. Record keeping was frequently inaccurate or incomplete, and many records have now been lost. In addition, there is an ongoing problem of records in government, church, and private hands that have never been released.

A key step in the research stage is to compare Survivor knowledge, and accounts from other witnesses, with other sources of information about the physical site such as aerial, drone and satellite photos, and new information from site surveys. This mapping process can help identify where to look for possible burial sites,

and how different conditions in the landscape will affect any search and what can be found. Aerial photos from earlier decades can also help Survivors talk about areas to search, as they may show the location of previous school buildings.

If community plans include unearthing burial sites to try to identify the remains, it can be very helpful to gather DNA samples from close relatives. If communities choose to go this route, collecting samples may be very urgent: DNA samples from immediate family members are the most helpful, but as time passes, these opportunities will be lost. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that collecting, storing, and mapping DNA raises a lot of complex issues around community values and individual privacy that need to be addressed according to the laws, protocols and values of each Nation.

The concerns around DNA collection highlight a bigger issue in the knowledge gathering process. Information gathered today will be important for generations to come. It is vital that this knowledge is preserved, made accessible to future generations, and protected against potential misuse. Communities are encouraged to develop plans for the long term preservation of all information gathered during their research. There are unique First Nations, Inuit and Métis protocols for ownership, control, access and protection of data that can be applied such as the First Nations Principles of Ownership, Control, Access and Protection (OCAP); the Manitoba Métis Federation principles of Ownership, Control, Access and Stewardship (OCAS) and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami National Inuit Strategy on Research.

IV.

Ground searches

There are many techniques that can help find evidence of potential unmarked burials. Ground penetrating radar (GPR) is the technology that receives the most attention. Additional techniques include other forms of remote sensing technology like conductivity, magnetometry, and LiDAR, as well as drone photography and search dogs.

All of these techniques have the advantage of not disturbing the site. It is important to note, however, that none of these techniques are conclusive. You may have heard the term “anomalies”: this is how the results of GPR are described. The scan records unusual patterns in the ground – anomalies – which then must be interpreted.

In expert hands, GPR and other techniques can provide important supportive evidence that a potential burial site has been located. However, to confidently state that a burial site has been found, the information gathered through ground search techniques must be combined with other information such as Survivor statements and historic records.

In addition, it is much harder to gather evidence in certain landscapes, such as areas that are heavily forested or flooded. In these circumstances, the information that is gathered may be harder to interpret and involve an even greater degree of uncertainty.

“

Technology is just a tool. It's up to each of us, every Nation and every community, to determine how it should be used.

– ROMEO SAGANASH, CIRCLE OF SURVIVORS

”

Any ground search will take time. The search has to be thorough and it's a slow process to cover large areas of ground. Interpreting the data is also complicated and there are limited number of professionals who have the right set of skills and experience to do this work well. As more and more communities carry out ground searches, the high demand on a limited number of experts can create further delays. This is why training programs are important to increase the number of Indigenous experts who can do this work for communities.

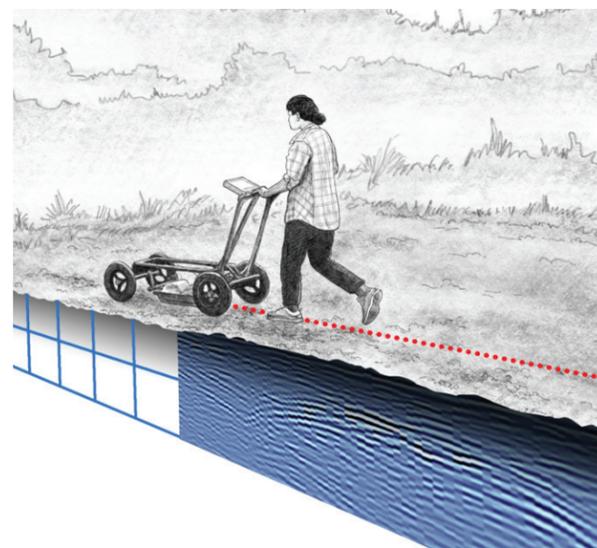


Illustration by Eric Simons



V.

When a probable burial site is identified

When a probable burial site is identified, families and the community (or communities) have the right to decide for themselves what happens next. This is a very sensitive conversation. Every Nation has its own laws, protocols and teaching about honouring burial sites. The approach that is best for one family or community is not necessarily the right approach for others.

Some families and communities may want to excavate the burial site so that the remains can be moved to a more suitable resting place. In some cases, excavations may also be necessary to conclusively identify individual remains, determine the most likely cause of death, or gather other evidence if criminal prosecutions are being considered.

For other communities, however, the knowledge of Survivors and other research may provide all the certainty they seek. They may want to leave the sites undisturbed and hold ceremony to memorialize, honour and lay the children to rest where they are.

In making this difficult decision, it may be helpful to consider that there are different ways to carry out an excavation, each with different potential impacts and outcomes:

- The top surface of land can be removed to more clearly determine whether a grave may have been dug, without actually disturbing the graves themselves.
- Some or all probable graves could be opened to confirm the number of burials without removing any remains.

“

I'm looking forward to the day when I finally find my baby sisters and know that they are at rest. I want there to be ceremony. And I want to make sure that their resting place is never forgotten.

– JACQUIE BOUVIER, CIRCLE OF SURVIVORS

”

- Remains can be moved to another burial site without subjecting them to any examination.
- Some remains can be examined, without relocating them or disturbing the other remains.

If a community is considering having remains examined, it is important to keep in mind that the amount of time that has passed, the conditions of the burial, and whether the site has been flooded or submerged, can have a significant impact on what can be learned. Forensic scientists may sometimes be able to determine cause of death – but not always. DNA analysis may be able to help identify the child, but only if there are DNA records for close relatives.

Whatever decision is made, it is important to protect the sites against natural erosion, development and vandalism. Unfortunately, Canada does not have strong laws for protecting potential burial sites. This is made more complicated by the fact that multiple jurisdictions – federal, provincial or territorial, municipal and Indigenous governments – may be involved.

The federal government has appointed an independent expert – the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites – to meet with communities and make recommendations on what Canada needs to do to honour the missing children. Part of the Special Interlocutor's responsibilities include recommending legal changes needed to protect potential grave sites.

Learning more

This document is intended to provide a basic introduction to the challenges involved in finding and honouring the missing children of residential schools. The National Advisory Committee has been gathering other, more in-depth resources and tools on all aspects of this process. You can find links on our website at NAC-CNN.ca.

Over time, we will be adding more resources, including new factsheets and briefing papers to fill the gaps in available information, as well as profiles of how different communities have addressed these issues. This overview document will also be updated and expanded based on the feedback we receive.