

Indigenous children are crying out for help in Canada. Will you hear them?

By **TANYA TALAGA** Staff Reporter
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In a country as great and strong as Canada, there are some things that just should not be.

Some things that have for far too long gone unspoken in the national social narrative that we have constructed about ourselves.

Canada, a country that takes in the war-torn and weary. A country always willing to lend a hand to its neighbours. A country that embraces and loves those whom other countries have ignored.

We weave this elaborate tale about ourselves, that we are a country of tolerance, of hockey sticks, of Tim Hortons doughnuts and great hope.

How is it then, that this great country has ignored the children living within its very own borders — the children who feel such a loss of belonging to anyone or anything that they can see no future. The children who choose suicide instead.

The youth suicide rates for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children are beyond comprehension, so wildly high it is almost impossible to process. The headlines of children dying by their own hands keep screaming at us from every corner — from Wapekeka to La Ronge, Saskatchewan to Rankin Inlet.

Our children are crying out for help.

In northern Ontario, in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Treaty 9 territory — much of the top half of the province — the number of suicides since 1986 is staggering: 566. Of those, 219 were young people between the ages of 15-20 and 88 were children between the ages of 10-14. How many hockey teams is that? Enough for an entire league.

How can two fundamentally different narratives on Canada exist at once?

For the past six months I have had the opportunity to travel across Canada, meeting many First Nations, Inuit and Métis people who live within Canada's borders on this North American continent the Anishinaabe call Turtle Island. According to oral tradition, stories passed down through time, it is believed we all walk and exist on the back of the turtle's shell.

Everyone I speak to, I ask them the same question: Why is it that our children keep dying and how can we pull together to stop it?

Today and culminating in September, I am going to bring you stories and voices from across many nations that will try to answer that question on the path toward healing.

From Chief Brennan Sainnawap in Wapekeka First Nation, who is bravely leading his community to open up about sexual abuse, to Seabird Island First Nation's Maggie Pettis, who talks about how our youth feel a loss of belonging, to the wise wisdom of Taku River Tlingit First Nation's Rose LeMay as she connects with global Indigenous leaders who also try to answer the same questions we do here.

Canada is in the first stages of truth-telling. These truths must be examined to understand how we got here — in a country of two narratives.

In truth lies hope.

For the first time, Canadians are not turning away from the true history of this country and the cultural genocide that was waged against Indigenous people from the mid-1880s to 1996, when 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their loved ones and their homes and sent to church-run, government-funded schools designed to assimilate them into Christian Canada.

Confronting the fallout of this reality is not easy. It goes against what many non-Indigenous Canadians were taught about the glory of kind Canada, a country full of polite, caring people.

The truth is, Canadians were taught to look away. To not pay attention to what was happening inside those 139 residential schools.

Most say they didn't know the horror, or that they didn't realize what was truly going on inside those schools.

If you are Indigenous, you knew. You grew up with siblings, grandparents and great-grandparents whose entire identities, whose languages and cultures were completely obliterated. You grew up with the legacy of their pain, of their inability to parent, and you grew up with their demons. You lost parts of your family to the child welfare system or to the justice system.

Because, you see, when all of those kids who were taken and thrown into residential schools, when they all went home, there was no health-care system to catch them. No doctors or mental-health professionals waiting to help survivors deal with the trauma imposed on them. No special clinics to handle the fallout of what Sen. Murray Sinclair so rightly called a cultural genocide.

All of these truths have led to a forced disconnection, ripping people from their culture and language with no health safety net in sight. As Sioux Lookout's Dr. Michael Kirlew tells me, Canadian health care is a colonial system, one that was never built with the needs of Indigenous people in mind.

"You have had an entire population of people who have been denied services from the very start," Kirlew says, pointing to the lack of everything from clean water to nurses and doctors in northern Ontario to having to fly children hundreds of kilometres away from their parents and families when they are in crisis.

"I don't want to fix this system. It needs to be dismantled and reconstructed," he says.

The effects of those inequities can be seen in the suicide crisis of today.

This Atkinson series is conceived out of the belief in the power of truth-telling, of giving voice to the voiceless.

It is not designed to berate Canadians, but rather to help us learn about ourselves as we walk together on the back of the turtle toward healing.

This Atkinson fellowship is about hope. I hope you join the conversation.

About the series The Atkinson Fellowship awards a seasoned Canadian journalist with the opportunity to pursue a yearlong investigation into a current policy issue. The award is a project funded by the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the Toronto Star. Tanya Talaga won the 2017-18 fellowship to explore the causes and fallout of youth suicide in Indigenous communities. Talaga is an investigative journalist for the Star who specializes in Indigenous affairs. A two-time National Newspaper Award winner, her 2017 book, *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City* (House of Anansi Press) won the RBC Taylor Prize. It examined the deaths of seven Indigenous high school students while they were away from their families attending school in Thunder Bay. Her Atkinson Fellowship stories will appear occasionally throughout the year.

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Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: Part 3: Toronto

Witness: Tanya Talaga

Submitted by: Christa Big Canoe/Commission

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