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Nearly a thousand children died at Indian boarding schools funded by the U.S.

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED



Sequoia Carrillo



U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland testifies during a Senate Energy and Natural Resources hearing in May.
Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images/Getty Images North America

The federal government today expanded the number of children known to have died in the repressive boarding school system that, for more than a century, pulled Native American children from their homes and communities. The Interior Department also called for billions in federal funding to begin a “healing” process.

The report concludes a three-year investigation that saw, for the first time, the federal government accepting responsibility for its role in creating the system, which included more than 400 schools across 37 states.

“The federal government – facilitated by the Department I lead – took deliberate and strategic actions through federal Indian boarding school policies to isolate children from their families, deny them their identities, and steal from them the languages, cultures and connections that are foundational to Native people,” Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said in a statement.

The report calculates that the federal government spent the equivalent of \$23 billion in today’s dollars on the boarding school system from 1871 to 1969, and calls for spending an equivalent amount toward rebuilding families and communities.

Among the proposed initiatives are a national memorial to “acknowledge and commemorate” the experiences of tribes, and a plan to return the land on which the boarding schools were located to government or tribal ownership.

A bigger system than imagined

The new report expands upon the previously acknowledged size and scope of the system, adding more schools and burial grounds to the administration's final portrait of the gruesome system, and including oral histories that detailed decades of abuse and maltreatment.



Students gathered for an assembly at Hampton Institute in Hampton, Va., about 1900.

Library of Congress

For the past two years, Haaland and staff from the Interior Department have visited tribal communities around the country, hearing from survivors and their families.

“As we have learned over the past three years, these institutions are not just part of our past,” said Bryan Newland, assistant secretary of Indian affairs. “Their legacy reaches us today, and is reflected in the wounds people continue to experience in communities across the United States.”

At the same time, the department continued its investigation, headed by Newland, of government records to compile an accurate record of the toll from the schools' practices. The final report increased the number of boarding schools in the U.S. from 408 to 417, across 37 states or then-territories. The number includes 22 schools in Alaska and seven in Hawaii.

And the report confirms that at least 973 American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children died while attending schools in the system. The Department acknowledges that the actual number of children who died while attending Indian boarding schools is likely greater.





Students pray beside their beds at an Indian boarding school in Arizona, around 1900.

National Archives

“This report further proves what Indigenous peoples across the country have known for generations: That federal policies were set out to break us, obtain our territories, and destroy our cultures and our lifeways,” Newland, a member of the Bay Mills Indian Community, said in a statement,

The investigation also confirms that there are at least 74 marked or unmarked burial sites at 65 of the schools. One initiative proposed in the report is to identify and repatriate the remains of children who never returned home from the schools.

Moving communities forward

In the opening letter of the report, Newland says: “The most important thing is that our work to tell the truth about the Federal Indian boarding school system be paired with action.”

The final report seeks to put a price on that action, arguing that the government could begin to remedy the trauma inflicted in over a century of forced assimilation by investing “on a scale, that is, at a minimum, commensurate with the investments made in the Federal Indian boarding school system between 1871 and 1969.”

In other words, investing \$23.3 billion back to the tribes, spread out over a long period of time. The report advocates spending on programs such as family reunification, language revitalization, and Indian education – programs intended

to address the ways in which the boarding school system wreaked havoc on tribal communities.

A national memorial to acknowledge the harm to tribes and individuals is one part of the proposed plans. It would serve not only tribal members, the report says, but would also help educate the broader population about the dark time in the country's history.

Apart from these investments, the report calls on the U.S. government to issue a formal apology, and to continue the work of chronicling this period of history.

“The Road to Healing,” Haaland said, “does not end with this report – it is just beginning.”

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