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60 Native children from Northwest died in U.S. boarding schools, among nearly 1,000 deaths nationwide 7/31/2024



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More than 60 children from
tribes with homelands in
Washington, Oregon and Idaho

are among the nearly 1,000 Native American children who died in the U.S. government's abusive boarding school system that tore families apart and devastated Indigenous communities, according to the results of a federal investigation released Tuesday. Between 1819 and 1969, thousands of children were taken from their homes as part of a targeted effort by federal officials and religious leaders to eradicate Indigenous culture and identity. The report estimates the federal government Local News spent \$23.3 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars over the 150 years supporting the boarding school system and similar assimilation policies. There were at least 17 boarding schools in Washington, up and down the Interstate 5 corridor, on the coast, and dotted through the arid grasslands of the eastern parts of the state, according to the Interior Department. Many of them were on present-day tribal land. Tribal nations did not gain the right to run their own schools until 1975, and parents could not prevent their children's placement in off-reservation schools until the

Indian Child Welfare Act passed in 1978. The report, commissioned by Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, found marked and unmarked graves at 65 of the more than 400 U.S. boarding schools that were established to forcibly assimilate Native American children into white society. The actual number of burial sites associated with Indian boarding schools — and the number of Indigenous children who died there — is likely far greater, the Interior Department acknowledged. The report also doesn't include details on how each child died, but officials noted the causes of death included sickness, accidents and abuse. The findings come after Haaland embarked on a two-year "Road to Healing" tour conducting listening sessions at tribes across the United States. The tour included a stop at the Tulalip Tribes' gathering hall last year, about 35 miles north of Seattle, where the secretary heard survivors share stories of their brutal experience at Native American boarding schools. Deborah Parker, a citizen of the Tulalip Tribes and chief executive of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, welcomed the release of the report, but said the federal government and her organization ultimately Federal Native American boarding school sites in the Pacific Northwest Source: U.S. Department of the Interior Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative (Mark Nowlin / The Seattle Times) need more time and access to records to understand the full picture. "The department was able to identify, by name, 18,624 Indian children – that's only a beginning," Parker said. "That's a beginning." There were an estimated 523 of these boarding schools in the U.S., according to research by the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. The Interior Department report accounts for 417. The report does not include burial sites affiliated with other institutions like day schools, orphanages or stand-alone dormitories, or boarding schools operated by churches and groups that didn't receive federal funding. More than 1,000 institutions involved in the education of Indigenous children did not meet the criteria used in the department's investigation. A number of children from Washington who died in the schools were

identified, including one child from the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, one from the Muckleshoot Tribe, one from the Puyallup Tribe, two from the Quinault Indian Nation, one from the Suquamish Tribe, one from Skagit, one from Snohomish and two from Yakama. The report also accounts for the deaths of 15 Nez Perce children, and others across the West. The tribal affiliations of more than 200 children who died at boarding schools were not identified in the report. Suquamish Tribe Chairman Leonard Forsman said his tribe is still reviewing the report and working to uncover more information about the Suquamish student identified to offer a “proper resolution.” “We hope this will contribute to the healing of our people from the trauma resulting from the assimilation policies imposed on us by the U.S.,” he said in a statement. At these boarding schools, children were forced to follow militaristic schedules, performed agricultural and manual labor, and in some cases, experienced physical and sexual abuse. Survivors have recounted stories of having their mouths washed out with soap and their hair cut, or of school leaders whipping them with ropes and belts. They were punished for speaking their language and practicing their traditions. By 1969 — when the federal support for Native American boarding schools ended — 25% to 35% of all Native American children had been separated from their families, according to studies conducted by the Association on American Indian Affairs. Growing up, Parker said she witnessed how the schools disrupted healthy family relationships, traditions and how people viewed the educational system. Children ripped away from their parents were left struggling to create stable homes for their own children years later, said Tulalip Tribes Chair Teri Gobin. Studies have found that the childhood experiences at boarding schools left adults with serious physical and mental health issues, ones that could also be seen among their children. “This historical trauma has moved from one generation to the next,” said Gobin, whose father attended Cushman Indian Hospital, a boarding school that performed medical experiments on students. “They destroyed their lives, their

children's lives." The healing coalition has been central to the Interior Department's research and is advocating for the creation of a federal commission through Congress to find and analyze the records from the government and church-run boarding schools and uncover the horrific truth publicly. Parker said the coalition hopes the bill's passage would coincide with an apology from the sitting U.S. president, and a commitment to meaningful action. The healing coalition and tribal nations are still looking for records of children who never returned home and of unmarked, or poorly marked, burial sites. These are stories and records that have largely been withheld from Indigenous people, Parker said. [View 54 Comments / 54 New](#) "We deserve truth, we deserve justice and ultimately, we want to heal from this long legacy of abuse," said Parker, whose relatives attended boarding schools. In addition to a formal apology, the report calls for the U.S. government to invest in programs that could help tribes heal from the intergenerational trauma caused by boarding schools, such as violence prevention and language

revitalization. That funding should be “commensurate with the investments made in the Federal Indian boarding school system between 1871 and 1969,” according to the report’s recommendations. “We’re bringing back our culture, we’re bringing back our canoes, we’re bringing back our longhouse way of life, and I’m incredibly proud of that,” Parker said. “I hope that we continue to do that, and then others learn from Native American people, because we have a lot to give.” If you are a boarding school survivor or a descendant, resources are available from the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition at boardingschoolhealing.org.

