



YWCA
CANADA

NATIONAL ADVOCACY.
COMMUNITY ACTION.

UNE VOIX NATIONALE.
DES ACTIONS LOCALES.

THE ROLE OF YWCA CANADA IN CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND THE 'INDIAN HOSPITAL' SYSTEM

SUMMARY REPORT

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

YWCA Canada's National Office is located in Tkaronto, or Toronto. Long before European colonizers arrived, the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Huron-Wendat formed sustained, and sustaining, relationships with these lands and waters and continue to assert their sovereignty through acts of resurgence. These acts of resurgence reflect the principles of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, an ongoing agreement between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee, as well as our obligations under Treaty 13.

As an organization and as individuals, we continue to learn from the wampum, from treaty relations, and from the diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people who now call Tkaronto home. YWCA Canada will continue to work towards reconciliation through solidarity with Indigenous peoples across these lands and beyond.

CONTENT WARNING AND SUPPORT

This summary report contains information that may be distressing or triggering for readers, especially Survivors, their families and Indigenous communities. We encourage readers to prioritize their well-being and seek support if needed.

Resources for Support

- 24-Hour National Indian Residential School Crisis Line: Call **1-866-925-4419**
- Hope for Wellness Help Line: Call **1-855-242-3310** or chat online at www.hopeforwellness.ca
- Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC): Visit www.nwac.ca
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call or text **9-8-8**
- Indigenous Friendship Centres: Providing culturally safe spaces and access to mental health services in urban areas
- Contact YWCA Canada: reconciliation@ywcacanada.ca

INTRODUCTION

Canada's legacy of colonization, systemic racism, and the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples has caused profound and lasting harm. Residential schools and “Indian Hospitals” are painful reminders of a history in which Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes, stripped of their culture and subjected to abuse and neglect. The impacts of these actions are still felt today, contributing to ongoing disparities in health, education and economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples.

As a legacy institution that benefited from and contributed to colonial policy, YWCA Canada recognizes that truth-telling is an essential step on the path to reconciliation. Our organization's history, including its involvement in residential schools and “Indian Hospitals”, is a difficult chapter that we must confront with openness and honesty. Reconciliation cannot begin without first acknowledging the harm done.

In 2019, YWCA Canada made a decision to commission research to understand YWCA's role in providing programming and services related to residential schools and “Indian Hospitals”. Dr. Kristin Burnett and Dr. Shannon Stettner conducted the research, and the draft report was completed in May 2022. While YWCA Canada did not own or operate these institutions, we acknowledge that YWCA Canada and its branches supported colonial practices and assimilation policies. This summary report shares key findings from that research. Since the completion of the report, YWCA Canada has taken the time to socialize the report internally by centering supports around Indigenous staff, volunteers and external partners, prioritizing communities named in the report. That work is ongoing and will continue in the future. The full report can be accessed upon request at reconciliation@ywcacanada.ca.

RESEARCH GAPS

This project required reviewing a large number of records covering more than a century of YWCA history across a wide geographic area. Institutional records were spread out across multiple locations, and inconsistent record-keeping practices made it challenging to gather a comprehensive view of YWCA's involvement. Additionally, access to archives was limited due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most importantly, YWCA acknowledges that the research was severely underfunded. While settler historians Dr. Burnett and Dr. Stettner consulted with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Survivors in the course of their work, because of the underfunding, the report could only ever focus institutional records rather than the lived experiences of Indigenous individuals, families and communities directly impacted by YWCA's involvement. This means that the personal stories, perspectives, and cultural contexts that are critical to understanding the full impact of YWCA's activities, were not captured. YWCA Canada takes responsibility for the report's limited focus and is working to ensure the voices and experiences of Indigenous Peoples are reflected in the next steps in truth-telling and reconciliation.

Despite these gaps, it is clear that YWCA played a role in supporting colonial ideologies and promoting policies of assimilation, and we must confront this difficult aspect of our history. Moving forward, any further research will need to center Indigenous voices and knowledge systems to provide a more comprehensive and respectful understanding of our past.

KEY FINDINGS

School Curriculums

The YWCA played a role in shaping the domestic science curriculum used in residential schools, which was designed to assimilate Indigenous girls into European-Canadian culture. The organization helped create courses that focused on “correct living,” teaching practical skills like cooking, sewing, home nursing and sanitation. The goal was to train Indigenous girls to become homemakers and follow European standards of domestic life.

The YWCA's influence went beyond schools and into “Indian hospitals”, where local branches provided etiquette classes to Indigenous patients. They also offered job training to Indigenous women, particularly in domestic service, to help them find work in non-Indigenous households, including the households of YWCA members. In addition to the assimilationist objectives, this work reinforced racial, social, and economic hierarchies that devalued Indigenous women, and their labour, in order to advance settler colonialism. This work contributed to the assimilation policies of the time and reinforced settler colonial values.

Rehabilitation Programs

The YWCA worked closely with “Indian hospitals” in the 1950s to support rehabilitation programs for Indigenous patients transitioning back into society after their treatment. These programs offered job counseling and extracurricular activities to help Indigenous individuals adapt to life outside the hospital. The YWCA also collaborated with other organizations to ensure that patients were introduced to life in non-Indigenous communities. These programs were designed to discourage Indigenous patients from returning their communities by promoting Euro-Canadian social norms.

Social Clubs and Extracurricular Activities

After the Second World War, the YWCA took on a role in providing recreational activities for Indigenous youth in urban areas, operating based on its belief that Indigenous youth were unable to use their free time productively.

As part of a broader post-war effort to address what was referred to as the “Indian Problem,” the YWCA created social clubs, intercultural committees and worked with provincial day schools to provide what were considered “appropriate” leisure activities. These efforts were rooted in the belief that Indigenous peoples needed guidance in navigating non-Indigenous society, reinforcing colonial ideas of assimilation.

Y-Teen Extension Programs

The YWCA operated Y-Teen and Extension Programs, offering social and recreational activities for youth, starting in the 1930s and expanding after World War II. Efforts were made to introduce these programs at residential and day schools. Further research is needed to better understand the full scope of Y-Teen Extension activities in residential schools and the role they played in the broader context of assimilation policies.

Residences and Hostels

After World War II, the YWCA provided housing for Indigenous girls and young women, with the underlying goal of exposing them to European-Canadian culture and values. This included running residences and offering emergency accommodations, while collaborating with other organizations to provide additional services. There is potential evidence linking YWCA housing efforts to the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families during the 1960s and 1970s, a period known as the Sixties Scoop, when many children were placed in non-Indigenous homes through Children's Aid Societies. Further research is needed to understand the extent of this connection and how YWCA Canada was involved, so that we can share the truth on this part of our history.

Indian Placement and Relocation Program

The Indian Placement and Relocation Program (IPRP) began in 1957 and was a national initiative run by Indian Affairs with the goal of controlling the movement of Indigenous populations and managing Indigenous labour. As part of this program, Indigenous individuals seeking financial and job placement assistance were required to agree to monitoring and supervision by Indian Affairs and other service providers, including YWCA. YWCA Canada branches supported the IPRP by offering services such as travellers' aid, room registries, job counselling, and social and recreational programs, reinforcing the program's broader aim of assimilation and control.

These findings are evidence that YWCA Canada played a significant role in programs that supported the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into European-Canadian society. From school curriculums and rehabilitation programs to social clubs and housing, many of its programs and activities contributed to these harmful efforts. Acknowledging this truth is foundational for YWCA Canada's path forward.

YWCA'S COMMITMENT TO RECONCILIATION

Looking ahead, YWCA Canada is deeply committed to integrating truth-telling into all aspects of our work. This means listening to the stories of Survivors and their families, learning from the past, and sharing the full history of YWCA's relationships with Indigenous communities.

Our journey towards reconciliation will be guided by the principles outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's Calls to Action, the Calls for Justice from the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' (MMIWG) report, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). These frameworks will shape how we work to rebuild relationships with Indigenous Peoples, ensuring that reconciliation remains at the heart of our organization.

Our commitment to truth-telling is a promise to actively participate in the reconciliation process, hold ourselves accountable for past actions, and work towards building a more inclusive and equitable future for the generations to come.