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Indigenous peoples

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There are more than 1.6 million Indigenous peoples in Canada, and more than 600 different Indigenous communities. Just over 200 of these communities are in British Columbia. About 80% of Indigenous peoples in B.C. live outside of Indigenous communities, in towns and cities across the province.

The people who are Indigenous to Canada belong to 3 groups – First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. First Nations people have lived in B.C. since time immemorial, which means before memory or record. Tens of thousands of First Nations people were here when Europeans arrived and colonized B.C. in the mid-18th century. The Métis people are of mixed European and First Nations ancestry. They are a distinct people and Nation. The Inuit are from the northern regions of Canada.

There are many stereotypes and prejudices toward the people who are Indigenous to Canada. This comes from the history of how European settlers treated the Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples and European history

Long before the first Europeans came to North America, the Indigenous peoples of the country now called Canada managed their lands with their own systems of government, laws, traditions, and economies. They had (and still have) their own languages, ceremonies, traditions, cultures, and spiritual beliefs.



When explorers arrived in North America, their countries were

fighting for power and control over land all around the world. Many of the settlers here did not recognize Indigenous peoples at all, or their laws, governments, cultures, beliefs, or relationships.

In 1867, the Government of Canada was formed. The government created the Indian Act, which was a law governing Indigenous peoples that controlled every aspect of their lives and tried to erase their cultures and ways of life. Indigenous peoples have always fought against the oppression of the Indian Act and colonization, and for the recognition of their rights. Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the Canadian Human Rights Commission have called the Indian Act a human rights abuse.

One of the darkest periods in the history of Canada was the creation of residential schools, which aimed to destroy the culture of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. The Government of Canada took thousands of Indigenous children away from their homes and families. They were put in schools far from their homes. They had to learn English and were stripped of their language, culture, and Indigenous identity. Most children suffered terrible abuses at the schools. The last official residential school closed in 1996.

The lasting damage and trauma caused by residential schools – and many other examples of injustice and racism in Canada’s history – still negatively affect Indigenous peoples, families, and communities today, as well as the country as a whole.

Recent history and reconciliation

In recent years, governments across Canada have recognized how their actions have hurt First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. In 2008, the Government of Canada created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to begin to look at and recognize the injustices against Indigenous peoples across the country.

<http://trc.ca/>

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted [the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UN Declaration, or UNDRIP\)](#). The UN Declaration has been adopted by 148 nations. It emphasizes Indigenous peoples’ rights to live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen Indigenous institutions,



cultures, and traditions, and to pursue self determined development in keeping with Indigenous needs and aspirations.

In November 2019, the B.C. government passed a law to implement the UN Declaration, which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission said governments in Canada should fully adopt and implement as the framework for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act means the B.C. government has to recognize and respect the human rights of Indigenous peoples.

With this law, the government has promised to work with Indigenous peoples to create an action plan that will help build a better future for Indigenous peoples and everyone in B.C.

<https://declaration.gov.bc.ca/>

Indigenous peoples today

Although the colonial governments of Canada tried to destroy Indigenous peoples' connections to culture, traditions, economies, laws, and rights to the land, those connections remain strong today. Indigenous peoples are restoring culture and languages that were almost lost because the government tried to erase them through the residential school system and colonial government policy. Indigenous peoples have fought to keep their cultures alive, and today they raise children to be proud of their cultures and identities. There are many celebrations and festivals in communities that welcome non-Indigenous people.

Traditionally, some First Nations leadership was passed down through a family (hereditary). Under the Indian Act, the Canadian government created "bands" – a different form of government that was imposed on First Nations. Who can be a member of the band is defined by the Government of Canada, not a First Nation. Many bands now have an elected council, called a "band council" and an elected chief.

Today, hereditary leadership still exists in many Nations, and some bands have both hereditary and elected chiefs, leaders and matriarchs. Many elected band councils manage education, band schools, housing, water and sewer systems, roads, and other



community businesses and services.

Some First Nations communities now have self-government agreements. Self-government means First Nations can take control of and responsibility for decisions affecting them. These can include making laws, deciding how to spend money, raising money through taxation, delivering programs, and building economic opportunities.

In many parts of Canada, First Nations signed treaties (contracts with the government) that gave new settlers rights to the land. Very few treaties were signed in B.C. In fact, 95% of B.C. is on First Nations land that never had a treaty agreement. Today, people recognize this issue. For example, you may hear someone begin an event in B.C. by saying, "We would like to acknowledge the territory of the Coast Salish people." This recognizes that First Nations people did not give up their land or legally sign it away to Britain or Canada.

Surprisingly, most non-Indigenous people living in Canada do not know much about Indigenous peoples, their histories, cultures, and ways of living. Although this is starting to change, there are many reasons for this lack of knowledge.

- For many years, the government policy was to assimilate (absorb) Indigenous peoples into Canadian society, so they would lose their unique identities as First Nations, Métis or Inuit.
- Many First Nations people have lived on reserves (communities) far from Canadian cities.
- The Canadian school system has not taught students about Indigenous peoples and their real history.
- Often Canadians only hear about Indigenous peoples through the media. Most of these stories are about Indigenous peoples protesting for their rights. These are often described as "negative" actions. Frequently the media do not try to reflect the truth as known by Indigenous people.

The language we use when talking about Indigenous topics in Canada is important. Some Indigenous peoples used to be called "Indians" or "Natives." Today, most Indigenous peoples identify these words with government oppression. This is not an acceptable way for non-Indigenous people to refer to Indigenous peoples. It is best to ask an Indigenous person what terms they prefer.



Cultural appropriation happens when someone takes something from another culture to use for their own benefit, with the original meaning or cultural importance lost or changed. Non-Indigenous people have taken important symbols and traditions sacred to Indigenous peoples and used them to sell products and make money. This is considered stealing and should not be done.

For more information:

- [Indigenous peoples of British Columbia](#)
- The City of Vancouver has written a [guide for newcomers](#)
- Indigenous Tourism BC has [travel information, events, and ideas](#). You can plan a culturally rich vacation that supports B.C.'s Indigenous travel industry
- The Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) is a [cable television network](#) in Canada that produces and broadcasts programs by and for Aboriginal people
- [The Government of Canada](#), Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada

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