

**FINAL  
REPORT**

**2008 National Benchmark Survey**

*Prepared for:*  
Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada  
and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

A major objective of Indian Residential Schools Reconciliation Canada (IRSRC) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is to inform and educate Canadians about the impacts of Indian residential schools and, in particular, to increase awareness and understanding of the Indian residential schools legacy by all Canadians.

To demonstrate communications impact, IRSRC and the TRC require a baseline measure of public awareness of the IRS system and its intergenerational impact on Aboriginal communities. Thus, the major purpose of the study reported here is to provide a quantitative baseline of Canadians' general knowledge of IRS, with particular focus on the long-term impact of the IRS on former students, their families and their communities, in order to provide a benchmark against which to measure the impact of actions taken by IRSRC and the TRC related to enhancing public awareness and education.

### **Awareness of Aboriginal issues and the Indian residential schools issue**

- Canadians in general are somewhat, though not strongly, familiar with current Aboriginal issues in Canada. Overall, Canadians are most familiar with the issues of improving social and living conditions on reserves, and addressing issues stemming from past treatment of Aboriginal people.
- Canadians are more likely to believe that relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada are improving than the opposite (although most feel relations are staying the same). Aboriginal people are at least as likely as Canadians in general to feel that relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are improving.
- Half of Canadians have heard or read something regarding Indian residential schools. This figure rises to eight in ten among Aboriginal people. Among Canadians as a whole, abuse of Aboriginal students and the fact that students were separated from their families are the details of the issue most commonly recalled.
- Overall, just over one-third of Canadians report familiarity with the issue of native people and residential schools, with only one in twenty very familiar. This is a somewhat lower level of familiarity than with Aboriginal issues in general. In addition, about one-quarter of Canadians (and more than eight in ten Aboriginal people) personally know someone who was (or may have been) a student in an Indian residential school.

- There is fairly strong general awareness of the characteristics of the Indian residential schools system: about half of Canadians are aware that the system separated children from their families, did not allow students to speak their own language, and did not allow students to learn about their heritage or culture.
- Canadians are most likely to cite loss of cultural identity and language as long-term consequences of students' experience at Indian residential schools. However, some six in ten are unable to cite any consequence. Aboriginal people are more likely than Canadians in general to cite substance abuse and addiction problems, as well as domestic violence, as long-term consequences of the residential schools experience.
- Six in ten Canadians believe there is, to some degree, a causal link between the Indian residential schools experience and the current challenges faced by Aboriginal communities. Two in ten believe that the current challenges faced by Aboriginal communities are, to a great extent, a result of the Indian residential schools experience. This view is shared by more than four in ten Aboriginal people.
- Just over one-third of Canadians, and just under half of Aboriginal people, are aware of federal government involvement in attempting to address the legacy of Indian residential schools. Canadians most commonly cite the issue of financial compensation when asked what they have heard about federal government involvement with this issue.

### **Awareness and attitudes regarding the 2006 Residential Schools Settlement Agreement**

- Four in ten or fewer are aware of any of the five key elements of the 2006 Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Canadians are most likely to be aware of the “common experience payment” and the Independent Assessment Process. About one in five are aware of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Aboriginal people are more likely to be aware of most elements (in particular the “common experience payment” and the Independent Assessment Process) but are no more likely than Canadians generally to be aware of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- Canadians feel that the provision of counselling (or other forms of assistance) for former students will make the greatest contribution to reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada – more than raising awareness, a formal apology or financial

compensation/support. More than four in ten Canadians feel counselling for former students will contribute “a great deal” toward reconciliation.

- Two-thirds of Canadians believe (and four in ten **strongly** believe) that individual Canadians with no experience in Indian residential schools have a role to play in reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This view is shared by Aboriginal people and new Canadians alike.
- Generally, about one-third of Canadians believe that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will make a great deal of difference in raising public awareness about the Indian residential schools experience, supporting individual community initiatives, and improving relations between Aboriginal people and other Canadians. Aboriginal people are more likely to feel that the TRC will make a great deal of difference in these areas.
- In the context of Indian residential schools, Canadians generally understand the word “reconciliation” to mean closure/forgiveness or “moving on,” awareness/understanding of the issue, improving relations between Aboriginal people and other Canadians, or making amends/apologizing.

### **Key subgroup differences**

Throughout the survey, certain subgroups of the Canadian population had a higher general level of awareness of Aboriginal issues in general and issues related to Indian residential schools in particular. These are discussed below:

- Canadians living in the North (and, to a lesser extent, those living in the West) have the highest levels of awareness for Aboriginal issues in general and for all issues related to Indian residential schools. Awareness of these issues is substantially lower in Quebec than in any other region. Northern Canadians are also more likely to see a causal relationship between the Indian residential schools experience and the current challenges faced by Aboriginal communities, and to feel that a formal apology and financial compensation to former students will contribute a great deal to reconciliation. In addition, Northerners are more likely to strongly believe that individual Canadians have a role to play in reconciliation.
- Awareness of Aboriginal issues generally and of issues related to Indian residential schools also tends to increase with age and is generally higher among better educated Canadians (especially those who have completed university) and those with annual household incomes of \$100,000 or

more. Those with Protestant (or other non-Catholic) religious affiliations and those with no religious affiliation tend to have higher awareness of Aboriginal issues, including those related to Indian residential schools, than do Catholics. Similarly, those who attend services regularly have higher awareness of Aboriginal issues than do those who do not attend services regularly.

- Finally, those who have higher levels of familiarity with Aboriginal issues in general, and with issues related to Indian residential schools in particular, are more likely to recognize a strong causal link between the Indian residential schools experience and the current challenges faced by Aboriginal communities. Those with greater awareness are also more likely to feel that the elements of the 2006 Settlement Agreement will contribute a great deal to reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and to have higher expectations that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will make a great deal of difference.

## **Methodology**

The research consisted of telephone interviews conducted with a representative sample of 1,503 Canadians, 18 years of age and older, as well as with three oversample groups: Aboriginal people living on-reserve (155 telephone interviews), Aboriginal people living off-reserve (150 telephone interviews), and new Canadians (those not born in Canada – 209 interviews). All interviews were conducted between April 15 and May 5, 2008. A national sample of 1,503 will provide results accurate to within plus or minus 2.5 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples (larger margins of error will apply to the oversamples of on- and off-reserve Aboriginal people and new Canadians and to other regional and demographic subgroups). A more detailed description of the methodology used to conduct this survey is presented at the back of this report, along with a copy of the questionnaire.

