

Threats to Indigenous Language

In 2019, the United Nations released a statement on endangered Indigenous languages which included a statistic estimating one Indigenous language dies every two weeks. While Indigenous people make up approximately 6% of the world population, they speak more than 4,000 of the world's languages. In British Columbia, only around 4% of the Indigenous population speak their language fluently, most of whom are 65 years of age or older.

Threats to Indigenous languages are widespread. A long history of colonialism and native genocide initiated the death of many languages, but more innocuous threats to Indigenous languages and cultures prevail today. In Turtle Island (a name often used by Indigenous people referring to land known otherwise as Canada and the United States), Indigenous populations have often been encouraged to speak English in schools and communities. Moreover, children sent to westernized schools were taught to assimilate to non-Indigenous culture, which led to each new generation knowing less about cultural practices, than the previous generations. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School is a historical example of one of these schools, but some contemporary schools continue to play a harmful role for Indigenous cultures.

Initiatives such as the Kingston Indigenous Languages Nest work to preserve the culture and language of Indigenous peoples, but as populations age and globalization encourages English as a primary form of communication, languages can be lost at a rapid pace. Approximately a quarter of public schools with a high Indigenous population receive instruction in a native language, according to a 2011 National Indian Education Study. Immersive schools contrast this extraordinarily, with students scoring on average higher on both English tests and their native language tests, as well as having a deeper cultural connection.

Lastly, the spread of COVID-19 was, and continues to be, devastating to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. A study by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) found that American Indians and Alaskan Natives had a mortality rate of COVID-19 that was 11.5 times higher than that of a white person in the United States. Many elders in their community passed away and with them went a generation of Indigenous people who spoke their language fluently. The need for Indigenous language preservation and revitalization has been highlighted by the pandemic.

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Information sourced from "The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues," UN Department of Public Information (www.un.org); Jessica Arrazola, Matthew M. Masiello, Sijata Joshi et al.'s "COVID-19 Mortality Among American Indian and Alaska Native Persons" in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 69, no. 49, Dec. 2020; Muiris O Laoire's "Indigenous Language Revitalization and Globalization" from *Te Kaharoa* vol. 1, 2008; Kelsey Klug's "Native American Language Act: Twenty Years Later, Has It Made a Difference," in *Cultural Survival*, July 18, 2012; Keren Rice's "Indigenous Language Revitalization in Canada" in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Historic Canada, 2020)