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A quantitative analysis of arson
against Canadian religious institutions
and its threat to reconciliation

April 2025





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List of abbreviations

AFN	Assembly of First Nations
ATF	US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
BATS	Bomb and Arson Tracking System
CAFC	Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs
CAPA	Church Arson Prevention Act
CCFMFC	Council of Canadian Fire Marshals and Commissioners
CCSP	Canada Community Security Program
CIRNAC	Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (Ministry of)
DOJ	US Department of Justice
FBI	US Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEMA	US Federal Emergency Management Agency
FNNP	First Nations Policing Program
FRS	UK Fire and Rescue Services
GPR	Ground Penetrating Radar
HOC	House of Commons
HUD	US Department of Housing and Urban Development
IRS	Incident Recording System
IRSSA	Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement
ISED	Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (Ministry of)
ISI	Independent Special Interlocutor
MP	Member of Parliament
NAICS	North American Industry Classification System
NCATF	National Church Arson Task Force
NCTR	National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation
NFID	National Fire Information Database
NIFSC	National Indigenous Fire Safety Council
NIRS	National Incident Reporting System
NRCan	Natural Resources Canada (Ministry of)
PSC	Public Safety Canada (Ministry of)
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
SIP	Security Infrastructure Program
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
UCR	Uniform Crime Reporting survey
USBDC	US Bomb Data Center
USFA	US Fire Administration

Executive summary | *sommaire*

The act of setting fire to houses of worship carries profound implications for our culture, our politics, and for the state of religious liberty in Canada; it also has the potential to seriously undermine Indigenous reconciliation.

This report undertakes the first empirical investigation of the spike in arson attacks on religious institutions in Canada since 2021. Few Canadians understood the full scope and scale of these attacks – until now.

Key findings include:

- Arson at religious institutions in Canada more than doubled compared to the baseline in 2021 and has not significantly declined since then.
- Statistical analysis indicates that the increase in arson is not religiously motivated. Instead, it is likely a response to the announcements, starting in 2021, of potential unmarked burials at former residential schools.
- Law enforcement's inability to effectively investigate and prosecute arsonists, coupled with society's general apathy towards condemning their actions, poses a significant threat to Indigenous reconciliation efforts in Canada.

Two broad motivating factors have been suggested to explain this increase in arsons. The first of these relates to a series of announcements regarding potential unmarked burials at some former residential schools (the network of boarding schools for Indigenous children instituted by the Canadian state and mostly administered for over a century by Christian institutions) starting in May 2021. The second possibility is that the arsons reflect anti-Christian or anti-religious sentiment growing in the country.

As of the time of writing, no groups or individuals have claimed responsibility with respect to any organized arson campaign, and less than 4 per cent of the arson incidents over the 2021–23 period have resulted in charges. So, the identities and motivations of the arsonists responsible for more than 96 per cent of arsons remain unknown.

Based on a careful analysis of the data, the report demonstrates that the increase in arson is likely a response to the announcements of potential unmarked burials at former residential schools.

Canada is not powerless to stop the arsonists. The apparent lack of a comprehensive policy response to date could impact support for reconciliation, possibly due to the perception that these crimes are not being addressed with the seriousness they deserve because of their association with the harms of the residential schools.

Canadian policy-makers should consider the coordinated policy responses that effectively addressed a series of church arsons in the United States in the 1990s. Some of the elements of those policies should be adapted and included in a uniquely Canadian policy response to arsons at religious institutions here, incorporating long-needed improvements to Indigenous police and fire protection services, among other elements. A uniquely Canadian approach should include the following:

- Create a national or regional integrated police/fire investigations unit focused specifically on arson at religious institutions.
- Improve Indigenous police and fire protection services, including to ensure full Indigenous participation in the integrated unit.
- Complete the long-running project of building and maintaining a comprehensive and timely national and on-reserve database of fire statistics.

Law enforcement officials need to thoroughly investigate and prosecute the offenders, and all Canadians must condemn the attacks – not least because they threaten the path to reconciliation and full Indigenous equality. **MLI**

L'acte d'incendie dans un lieu de culte a de profonds impacts sur la structure sociale, les affaires politiques et la liberté religieuse au Canada. Il risque également de nuire aux tentatives de réconciliation avec les Autochtones.

Ce rapport présente la première enquête empirique sur la recrudescence depuis 2021 des incendies criminels ciblant des organisations religieuses. Peu de Canadiens saisissent toute l'ampleur et la portée de ces crimes – jusqu'à présent.

Les principales constatations sont les suivantes :

- *Comparativement aux valeurs de référence, les incendies criminels ont plus que doublé en 2021. Depuis, ils n'ont pas diminué sensiblement.*
- *L'analyse statistique indique que l'augmentation des incendies criminels n'est pas généralement motivée par des considérations religieuses. Il s'agit plutôt d'une réaction dès 2021 aux communiqués sur les possibles sépultures anonymes d'anciens pensionnats.*
- *L'incapacité des forces de l'ordre à enquêter efficacement et à poursuivre les incendiaires en justice, couplée à l'indifférence généralisée de la société envers leurs actes, représente une menace grave pour la réconciliation avec les Autochtones au Canada.*

Deux éléments clés pour expliquer la hausse de ce type d'incendie sont proposés. Le premier est lié à une série de reportages à partir de mai 2021 sur la présence possible de sépultures anonymes autour de certains anciens pensionnats (système des pensionnats destinés aux enfants autochtones mis sur pied par le gouvernement fédéral et gérés pendant plus d'un siècle principalement par des institutions chrétiennes). Le deuxième émane de l'aggravation du sentiment antichrétien ou antireligieux au pays.

Au moment où nous avons rédigé ce texte, aucune organisation ou personne n'avait revendiqué la responsabilité d'une campagne organisée d'incendies criminels, et moins de 4 % des actes perpétrés au cours de la période 2021-2023 avaient abouti à des poursuites judiciaires. Les mobiles et les coupables de 96 % de ces crimes restent donc inconnus.

Ce rapport, issu d'une analyse minutieuse des données, démontre que la hausse des incendies criminels serait une réaction à l'annonce des possibles sépultures découvertes autour d'anciens pensionnats.

Le Canada n'est pas sans moyen pour arrêter les incendiaires. Or, l'apparente absence à ce jour d'un programme d'action complet pourrait influencer négativement sur l'appui à la réconciliation, dans la mesure où on pourrait penser que ces crimes ne sont pas traités avec tout le sérieux qu'ils méritent parce qu'ils sont associés aux préjudices subis dans les pensionnats.

Pour lutter contre les incendies d'églises, les décideurs canadiens devraient se reporter aux mesures coordonnées que les États-Unis ont mises en œuvre avec succès durant les années 1990. Certains éléments de ces mesures doivent être ajustés pour répondre à la situation spécifiquement canadienne, en y intégrant les améliorations attendues depuis longtemps pour les services de police et de protection contre les incendies dans les collectivités autochtones, entre autres. Une approche uniquement canadienne devrait comprendre ce qui suit :

- Intégrer les services de police et de protection contre les incendies. Le seul mandat de ce service intégré serait d'enquêter sur les incendies criminels dans les lieux de culte.*
- Améliorer les services de police et de protection contre les incendies que dirigent les collectivités autochtones dans leurs propres communautés. Notamment, ces services autochtones devront participer pleinement à ce nouveau service intégré.*
- Achever le projet de longue date de créer une base de données statistiques sur les incendies au Canada et dans les collectivités autochtones, et de maintenir cette base de façon compréhensive et efficace.*

*Les forces de l'ordre doivent mener des enquêtes approfondies et poursuivre en justice les auteurs de ces actes, tout en exhortant tous les Canadiens à condamner ces délits – notamment parce qu'ils menacent la voie de la réconciliation et l'égalité intégrale pour les peuples autochtones. **MLI***

Introduction

Many, if not all, countries have dark chapters in their past. For Canada, the Indian residential school system stands out as one of our most tragic, lasting over a century and only concluding with the final closure of the remaining schools in 1996.

In the last few decades, thanks to the bravery of many former students and the work of multiple scholars, the conditions of abuse and neglect at many schools, long known by survivors, finally became much more widely known. For many generations, Canadian history had often downplayed or not even mentioned these crimes. The 2008–15 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) estimated that 3,201 children died at these schools (TRC 2015).

Since the publication of the TRC's findings, many Canadians have come to confront with shame and anger not just these instances of child abuse, but the very notion of a residential school system that separated Indigenous children from their families and that the federal government constructed to explicitly extinguish Indigenous cultures. The participation of almost all of Canada's mainstream Christian churches in this endeavour ran counter to the faith's claim of a call to love and justice for all and has prompted a series of formal apologies by church leaders.

Amidst this emerging national reckoning with the residential school system, between May 2021 and December 2023, there were 17 announcements of potential unmarked burials¹ at former residential schools, starting by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation (TTSFN) in Kamloops, BC, and followed by other Indigenous groups. During the same period, arsonists attacked a total of 238 religious institutions – more than double the annual baseline of arsons from 2011 to 2017.

This report presents an analysis of arson rates at religious institutions in Canada and compares these rates against those in the US and England. The analysis concludes that the increase in arsons at religious institutions in Canada cannot be explained by international phenomena. Utilizing the available regional data, the report reveals a statistically significant association between the surge in arson incidents at religious institutions and the geographical proximity to former residential schools that were the subject of announcements made during the 2021–23 period regarding of potential unmarked burials of former Indigenous students. The report suggests that any future announcements pertaining to verified human remains is likely to trigger a subsequent escalation in arson incidents at religious institutions. This report concludes that arsons at religious institutions must be investigated and prosecuted and opposed by society at large, not least because they threaten the path to reconciliation and full Indigenous equality.

Note that this report investigates arson against all religious institutions without distinction between Christian churches and other houses of worship, as Statistics Canada does not report denominations or faiths. Nevertheless, media reporting on the phenomenon suggests that the primary target of arson against religious institutions up to 2023 was Christian institutions, and in particular Catholic churches.

Furthermore, as 2023 was the last year for which data were available, any arson attacks in Canada against mosques and other Islamic institutions or synagogues and other Jewish institutions in the wake of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad's October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel and the Israeli government's subsequent response in Gaza and Lebanon can only be investigated once data for 2024 become available. Nevertheless, all communities of faith are likely to benefit from the suite of robust multi-jurisdictional policy responses to arson attacks at religious institutions.

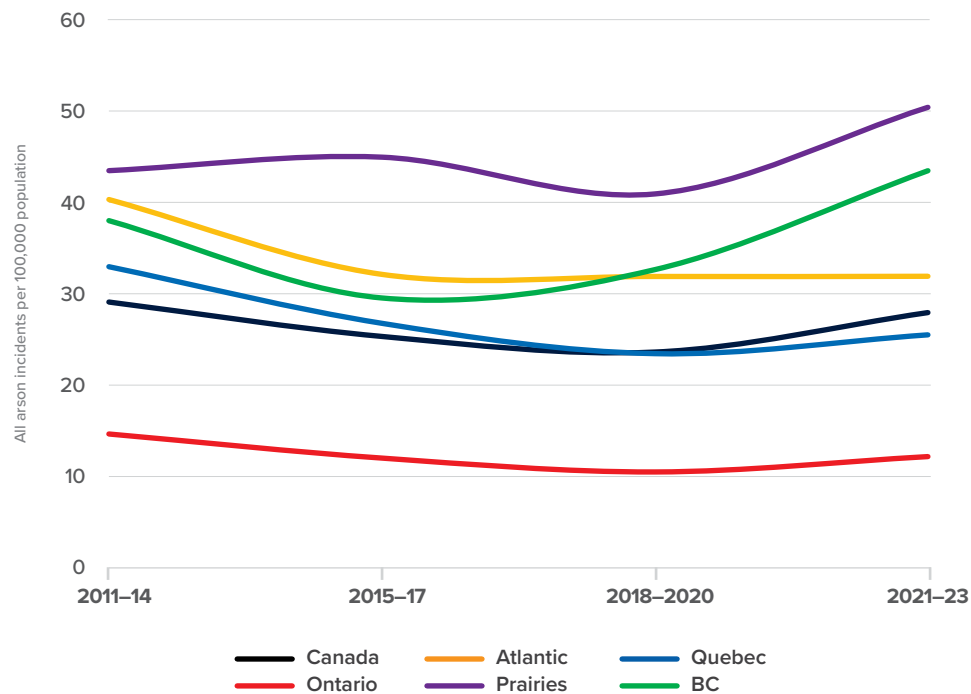
What the data tell us

This section presents an empirical analysis of arson rates at religious institutions in Canada and compares these to all types of arson in Canada and to arson at religious institutions in the US and England. It concludes that during the 2021–23 period there was doubling of arsons at religious institutions in Canada and that this increase cannot be explained by either an increase in all types of arson in Canada or to international trends.

Arson in Canada

To provide context on arson at religious institutions, we first analyze the evolution of all types of arson in Canada. Figure 1 shows population-adjusted arson incidents² in Canada and the regions for which the arson at religious institutions is available.³ It shows that arson incidents have been relatively stable, with a modest increase to 27.9 incidents per 100,000 population for the 2021–23 period.⁴

FIGURE 1: All arson incidents, per population



Sources: Statistics Canada (2024a, 2024d) and author's calculations

Arson at religious institutions

Arson data for specific types of buildings or institutions are not generally publicly available in Canada. So how was this report's investigation possible? In response to a question posed by the Marc Dalton, Member of Parliament for Pitt Meadows-Maple Ridge, on June 13, 2024 (House of Commons, 2024), the minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada (ISED), who has responsibility for Statistics Canada, tabled the annual provincial, regional, and national data for arson incidents at religious institution for 2010 to 2022 in the House of Commons on September 16, 2024 (ISED, 2024b). These data are replicated in Table 1 and presented at the same level of aggregation as the response from Statistics Canada.⁵ In addition, the author of this report asked Statistics Canada to carry out the same customized tabulation of data for 2023 (Statistics Canada 2024g), also included in Table 1.⁶

To address the highly variable nature of the annual data in Table 1, we aggregate across years for our regional analysis, with three-year periods for the most recent data (2021–23, 2018–2020, and 2015–17) and one four-year period for the oldest data (2011–14). In this regard, Figure 2⁷ shows that across Canada arson at religious institutions has almost doubled, from 0.112 per 100,000 population in the 2011–14 period to 0.203 in the 2021–23 period.

“Arsons at religious institutions must be investigated and prosecuted and opposed by society at large.”

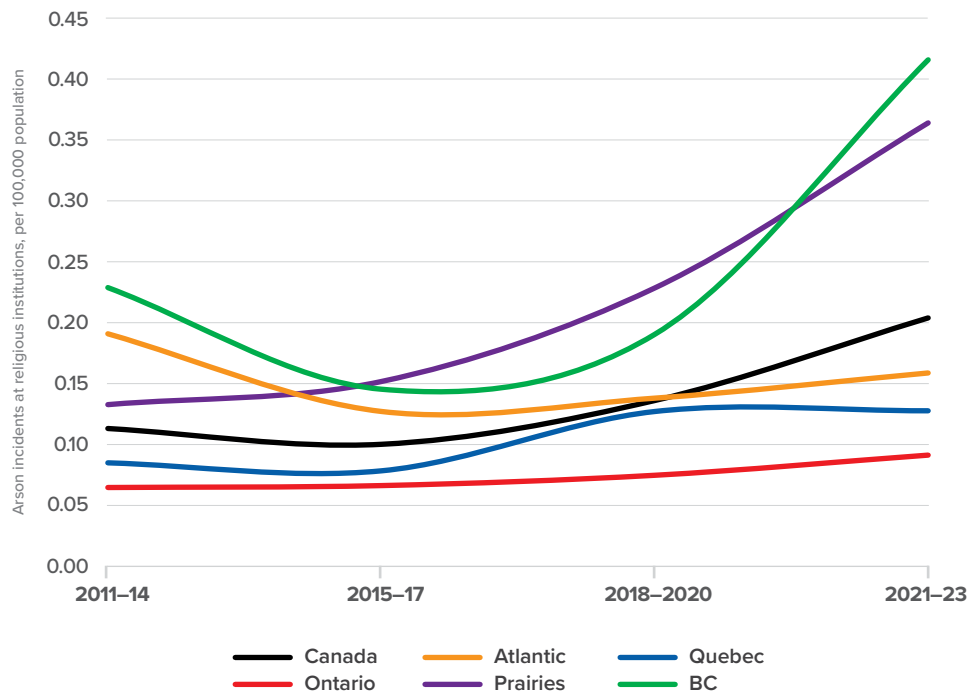
Regionally, Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic provinces have experienced either moderate increases or decreases over time, but all three regions end up below the national average by the 2021–23 period. In contrast, both BC and the Prairie Provinces experienced notable increases over the total period. With a rate of 0.416 such arsons per 100,000 people by 2021–23, BC had climbed to more than double the national average, while the Prairies also experienced a marked increase, hitting 0.366 per 100,000 people by the 2021–23 period.

TABLE 1: Number of arsons at religious institutions, by region, 2010–2023

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Atlantic	1	8	4	2	4	3	5	1	3	3	4	7	3	2
Quebec	4	9	7	4	7	2	8	9	6	17	9	10	11	12
Ontario	4	9	7	12	6	9	6	12	9	9	14	10	21	10
Prairies	0	7	12	7	7	11	9	10	16	14	17	31	20	27
BC	4	11	13	11	7	9	6	6	8	8	13	31	18	18
Territories	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	5
Canada	13	45	44	36	31	34	35	38	42	52	58	90	74	74

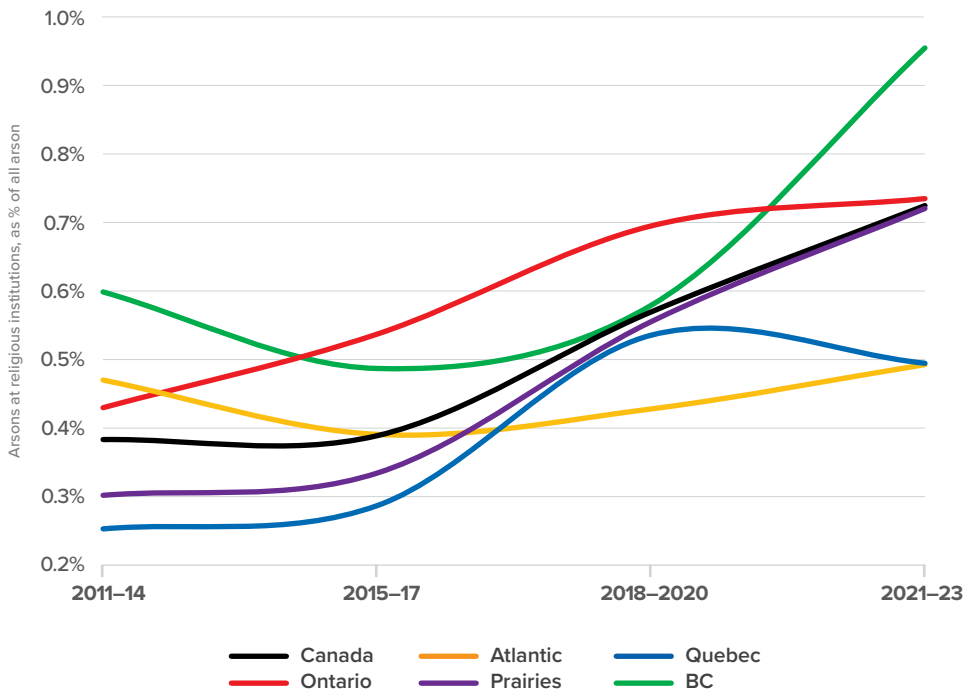
Source: ISED 2024b and Statistics Canada 2024g

FIGURE 2: Arson incidents at religious institutions, per population



Sources: ISED (2024b), Statistics Canada (2024g, 2024d) and author's calculations.

FIGURE 3: Arson at religious institutions relative to all arson



Sources: ISED 2024b, Statistics Canada 2024a and 2024g, and author's calculations.

It is also illuminating to analyze arson incidents at religious institutions in comparison to all arsons, as presented in Figure 3. On a national basis, arsons at religious institutions have almost doubled relative to all arsons, from 0.38 per cent in the 2011–14 period to 0.73 per cent in 2021–23 period. This key comparison demonstrates that the increase of arsons at religious institutions cannot be explained away by an overall increase in arson.

The comparative analyses in this section clearly demonstrate that over the 2011–23 study period the number of arsons at religious institutions in Canada has doubled. The 2011–17 period was a time of relative stability in the rate of arsons at religious institutions, after which there was a noticeable increase in the 2018–20 period (i.e., prior to any announcements of potential unmarked burials at residential schools) followed by a dramatic increase in the 2021–23 period (following such announcements). Most of these national increases were driven by increases in Western Canada (BC, the Prairies, and the Territories), with Eastern Canada (Atlantic, Quebec, and Ontario) having no, moderate or temporary increases. This regional analysis is further explored in the next section to consider Canada from an international perspective.

Canada in an international context

It would be natural to ask whether a trend of an increasing number of arsons at religious institutions internationally, or at least across some of the “Anglosphere,” had been observed over the study period. Such a finding would argue against there being anything anomalous in Canada related to the domestic context. However, the data indicates that the increase in arsons at religious institutions appears to be a uniquely Canadian matter.

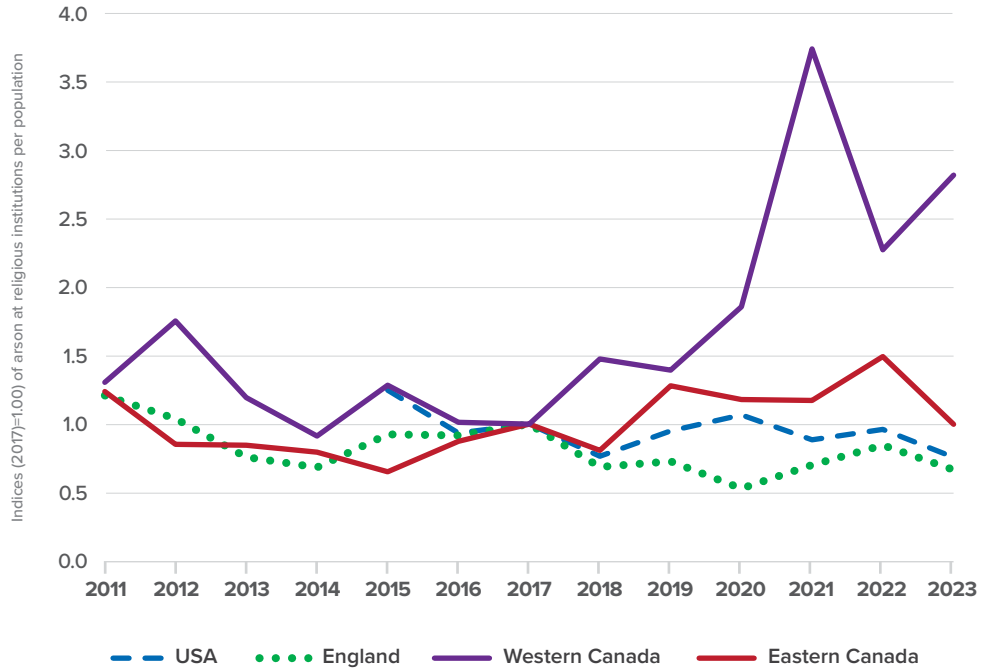
To account for national differences in the coverage and sources of the data between Canada, England, and the US⁸, our analysis does not compare levels across countries directly, but instead employs *index numbers* – a statistical device that simplifies comparisons by considering changes over time on a percentage basis. This is akin to being able to compare inflation rates across countries without reference to the underlying difference in price levels. National data on an annual basis is assessed in order to take advantage of higher-level aggregation. To highlight the regional differences in Canada as discussed above, data for “Western Canada” (BC, Prairies, the territories) and “Eastern Canada” (Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic Provinces) is also presented.

“The data indicates that the increase in arsons at religious institutions appears to be a uniquely Canadian matter.”

The US and England have both seen decreases in religious arson, as shown in Figure 4. Starting in 2018, Western Canada had experienced very significant increases compared to this international baseline, with the population-adjusted average for the 2021–23 period being three times higher than 2017. On the other hand, Eastern Canada has experienced a relatively more stable rate of such arsons.

This is all to say that Western Canada experienced increases in the number of arsons in religious institutions over the 2018-23 period, and in particular over the 2021–23 period, which were not present either in the US, England, or

FIGURE 4: Canada in comparison – arson at religious institutions, per population



Sources: ISED 2024b, Statistics Canada 2024d and 2024g, USBDC 2015–2024, FRS 2024, and author's calculations.

Eastern Canada. This offers evidence that the arsons at religious institutions in Canada are not part of any broader international pattern that could have been driven, for example, by the COVID pandemic and its corresponding public health measures, at least with respect to the US and England.

For Western Canada, the 2021–23 period average reveals a rate of arsons at religious institutions more than two times higher than the 2017 international baseline. On the other hand, Eastern Canada has been relatively more stable, with a modest temporary increase over the 2019–22 period, but returning to the 2017 level by 2023. Some of this temporary increase will have been due to a decline in arsons overall during that period.

Having demonstrated a clear and significant increase in arsons at religious institutions in Canada, unique in the international context, we move on to analyze possible societal drivers of this phenomenon.

What could be driving the increase?

This clear increase in arsons at religious institutions in Canada, recent and unique, must have an explanation. This section statistically investigates the two broad motivating factors that have been suggested to explain the increase in arsons at religious institutions. The first relates to a series of announcements regarding potential unmarked burials at some former residential schools starting in May 2021; the second was that the arsons reflected anti-Christian sentiment growing in the country.

Residential schools

We statistically examine our main hypothesis that the increase in arson at religious institutions in 2021–23 is related to residential schools by leveraging regional data covering a series of related announcements that roiled Canadian society starting May 2021.

It is important to first set the stage for the events of the summer of 2021. Canada, along with the rest of the world, was confronting a second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which by May of that year had resulted in the deaths of more than three million people globally (WHO 2021) and had strained the political and cultural fabric of many countries. This political and cultural strife would subsequently manifest itself in Canada in the form of a series of boisterous protests by truck drivers and their occupation of downtown Ottawa that culminated in the federal government invoking the *Emergencies Act* in February 2022 to disperse them (PSC 2022). Further, in the summer of 2020, the US had been rocked by a series of protests and demonstrations against police brutality and focusing in particular on its racial aspects in reaction to the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man, by city police during an arrest. Most of these protests were peaceful, but a significant number of them descended into violence and riots that involved arson (Sepic 2020).

Separately at this time, Canadian society had begun a national reckoning of the damage inflicted upon Indigenous peoples by residential schools. This harm was first formally recognized in 2006 via the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA).⁹ In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered a full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian residential

schools system (CIRNAC 2008). Given the Catholic Church's involvement in the residential schools, as outlined below, Pope Francis also issued a formal apology in 2022.¹⁰

The IRSSA included five elements to address the legacy of these schools (CIRNAC 2025), including payments for all eligible former students and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which documented the experiences of students at residential schools in its final reports of 2015. The work of the TRC subsequently continued on an ongoing basis by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR).

The TRC identified 3,201 students who had died in the schools, with most of these deaths occurring prior to 1940 (TRC 2015). The TRC highlighted that the practice for most of the history of the schools was not to send the bodies of students who died at schools to their home communities, but concluded that instead, the majority had been buried in school or school-related cemeteries (Hamilton 2025). Furthermore, the TRC found that the cemeteries it had documented have since been abandoned, are disused, or are otherwise vulnerable to accidental disturbance, and that some may have become or had begun as unmarked burial sites.

Against this background, on May 27, 2021, the TTTSFN announced in a press release titled "Remains of Children of Kamloops Residential School Discovered" that "with the help of a ground penetrating radar specialist, the stark truth of the preliminary findings came to light – the confirmation of the remains of 215 children who were students of the Kamloops Indian Residential School" (TTTSFN 2021). This announcement resulted in very significant local, national and international news coverage that earned the announcement Canada's news story of the year (Meissner 2022).

Public opinion polling carried out in early June 2021 showed that the extensive news coverage had resulted in between 80 per cent and 93 per cent of Canadians "being aware" of the discovery of "graves" or "remains" in Kamloops (CRRF 2021; Ipsos 2021; Maru 2021). In retrospect, this was a precipitated announcement because no human remains had been verified at the time. In fact, none have been verified in the subsequent four years, either in Kamloops or at any of the other 16 residential schools in which similar announcements were made after Kamloops. This of course does not mean that remains may be verified in the future. In fact, given the number of former students who died at residential schools and the related burial practices at

many of these schools, the number of active and future searches to identify any additional potential unmarked burials, and the possibility that some Indigenous groups may undertake exhumations or other conclusive means to verify human remains, it is likely that one or more verified announcements will occur.

Given the impact on public opinion and subsequent socio-political developments,¹¹ there has been vigorous public debate about how the Kamloops and subsequent findings were announced by the TTFSN and other Indigenous groups, and reported by the media. (Glavin 2022; Gerbrandt and Carleton 2023; Champion and Flanagan 2023). This includes the specific terminology used to describe the findings (to which we return below), and whether the findings could relate to previously known cemeteries or burial places of former students, or controversially, the alleged site of clandestine burials (TTFSN 2021, Champion and Flanagan 2023). While a critical set of questions, these are peripheral to the primary theme of the report, which is to study arson at religious institutions. From a quantitative social science perspective, however, it is important to define terms and variables that we use in the statistical analysis. In this instance we test the hypothesis that arsons are a response to increasing public awareness of the harm of residential schools. We use timing and location of the “announcements” of “potential unmarked burials” as a proxy for that public awareness.

To identify which “announcements” should be included in the analysis, however, we would ideally use a definition and term that is already defined and generally accepted. However, neither of these conditions are met in relation to numerous announcements over the 2021–23 period that included different terms and definitions (e.g. “bodies,” “remains,” “graves,” “burials,” “anomalies” associated with ground penetrating radar (GPR), etc.) to describe the findings at former residential schools. One thing common to all these announcements, however, is that the locations are described as “unmarked” – there are no visible headstones or other marks to identify the location as a formal cemetery or an informal burial site. The two most generally accepted verbs to describe the physical spaces are “graves” and “burials.” The most contested aspect is whether an adjective is needed (for example, “suspected,” “potential,” etc.) to reflect that to date no remains have been verified at any of these sites (Higgins 2025).

In the absence of an existing definition and consensus, we refer to authority, legal precedent, and the evolution of TTFSN communications.

First, the Canadian-government appointed Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites (ISI) referred to “potential unmarked burial(s)” a total of 12 times in her Interim Report (ISI 2023), including with respect to the Kamloops announcement. Second, Chief Justice Leonard Marchand Jr., whose father attended the Kamloops Indian Residential School and later became Canada’s first Status Indian MP and the first Indigenous federal Cabinet minister, dismissed an appeal by a defendant against her criminal sentence arguing the sentencing judge was biased because the judge interjected with the word “potential” when the defence lawyer stated that 215 bodies had been identified at Kamloops. In dismissing the case of bias, Marchand noted that “that word [potential] is the very same word Indigenous communities and others have used to describe the results of tests using [GPR]” (Landry 2024). Third, on the third anniversary of its original announcement of the “remains of 215 children,” in May 2024 the TTSFN revised its terminology of the findings to “probable unmarked burial sites” (TTSFN 2024).

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cannot be explained away by
an overall increase in arson.* ”

Taking all this into account we therefore use the term “potential unmarked burials” throughout the report to define the announcements discussed above, as compiled in Table 2.

Having defined this important term, our focus is how the announcements of potential unmarked burials may have impacted the arsonists that set fire to religious institutions in unprecedented numbers beginning in May 2021.

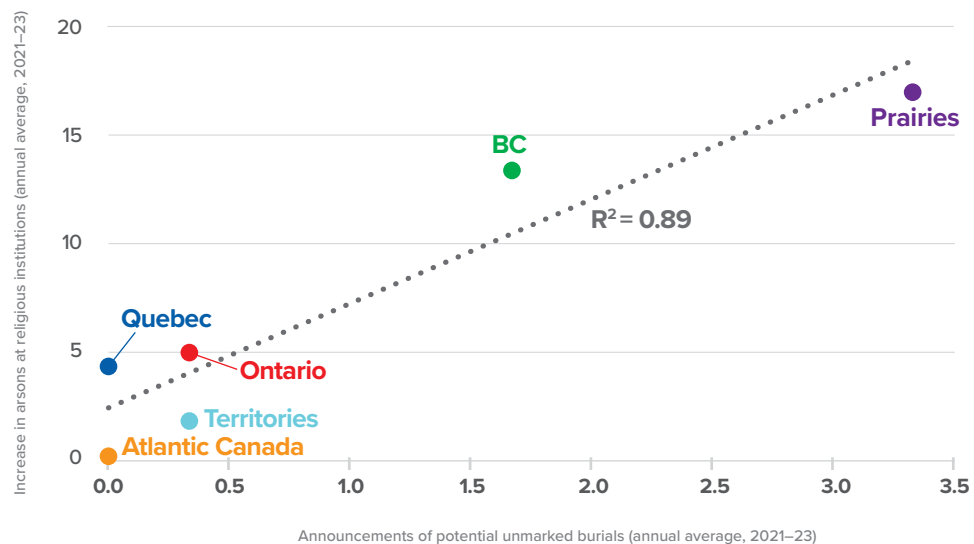
Based on this definition, Table 2 compiles these announcements from 2021 to 2023 and confirms that they have been highly concentrated at residential schools located in Western Canada (BC, Prairies, and Territories), accounting for 16 of the 17 announcements during this period.¹²

TABLE 2: Announcements of potential unmarked burials at former residential schools

	2021	2022	2023	Total		Total
Atlantic	0	0	0	0	Eastern Canada	1
Quebec	0	0	0	0		
Ontario	0	0	1	1		
Prairies	1	7	2	10	Western Canada	16
BC	3	1	1	5		
Territories	0	0	1	1		
Canada	4	8	5	17		
					Canada	17

Sources: ISI (2023) and author's research.

FIGURE 5: Statistical relation between announcements of potential unmarked burials and arsons at religious institutions



Sources: ISED 2024b, Statistics Canada 2024g, and author's calculations

To test the first hypothesis, Figure 5 shows the relationship between the average increase in arson at religious institutions (difference between the 2021–23 arson rate and the 2011–17 “baseline”) and the average number of announcements of potential unmarked burials. The analysis shows a significant statistical relationship¹³ indicating that these announcements explain most

of the variation in the increase in arsons at religious institutions over the 2021–23 period.

These statistical results provide evidence in favour of the hypothesis that the announcement of potential unmarked burials inspired more arsonists to attack religious institutions. While this is important confirmation of a possible motivating factor, it is, in the language of criminology, circumstantial evidence. The lack of direct evidence as to motivation is a matter to which we return to below.

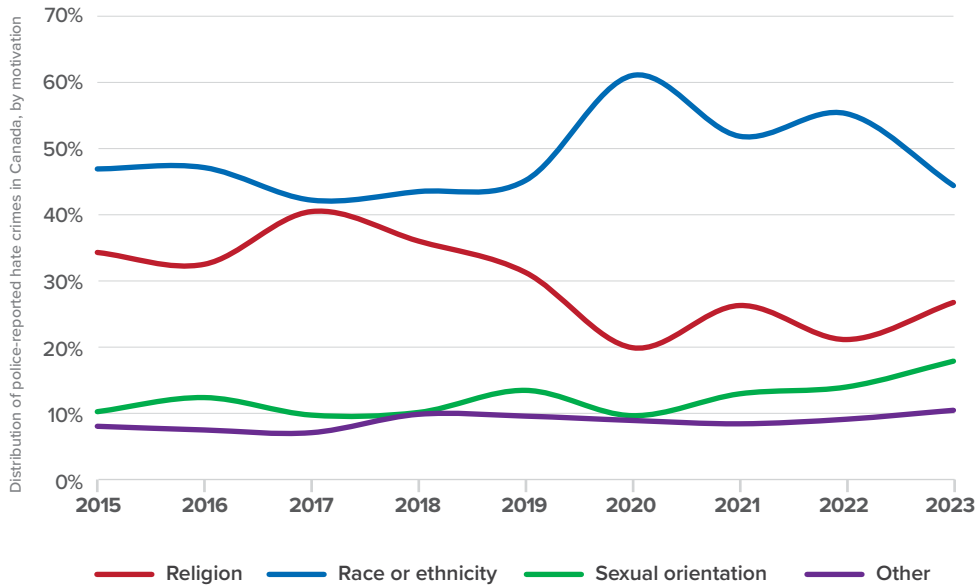
The first announcement of potential unmarked burials occurred in May 2021, which means that the increase in arsons at religious institutions over the 2018–20 period must have involved a different motivating factor. One hypothesis could be that an increasing awareness of the findings of the work and the reports of the TRC, and the ongoing work of the NTRC is associated with this increased arson. We applied the same statistical analysis to this hypothesis by examining the relationship between the increase in arson at religious institutions (calculated as the difference between the average annual arson during the 2018–20 period and the 2011–17 “baseline”) and the geographic location of former residential schools. The results (not presented here) show a more modest statistical relationship ($R^2 = 0.49$), indicating that about half of the variations remains unexplained.

Impact of religion

Another broad motivating factor that has been advanced to explain the increase in arsons at religious institutions is the impact of religion, either specifically due to the participation of almost all of Canada’s mainstream Christian churches in the residential schools or as an example of a general increase of religiously-motivated hate crime.

The Catholic Church in particular has figured prominently in the debate, having been the institution that administered the largest number of residential schools.¹⁴ Further, of the 17 announcements of potential unmarked burials, 15 were at Catholic-affiliated residential schools. While Statistics Canada does not report the denomination or faith of the religious institutions that have been the subject of arson, an analysis of the media-announced cases of arson charges¹⁵ suggests that the primary target of arson were Catholic churches.

FIGURE 6: Distribution of police-reported hate crimes in Canada, by motivation



Sources: Statistics Canada 2024e and author's calculations

It is noteworthy that none of the announced cases of arson charges discussed in the subsection “Arrests and motivation” on page 27 have included supplementary hate-related charges. But those 9 cases are just a fraction of the 238 arsons that have been reported during the 2021–23 period. It is possible, for instance, that some of the “unsolved” 229 arsons could be confirmed as hate-crimes, if charges were to be laid.

That is a different question from the other possible motivation, which is that arsons are just one aspect of a general increase of religiously motivated hate crime. For context on this question Figure 6 presents the relative distribution of motivation of hate crimes from 2015 to 2023.¹⁶ Figure 6 shows that race and ethnicity continued to be the largest motivating factors for hate crimes in Canada and that religion as a factor declined in relative terms over the 2015–23 period. To assess whether there is a statistical association, we analyzed the relationship between number of arsons at religious institutions against the relative percentage of religion-motivated hate crimes for the 2021–2023 period at the regional level (not shown here). The analysis showed a weak statistical relationship ($R^2= 0.24$), which indicates that the relative incidence of religion-motivated hate crimes at the regional level is not a good predictor of arsons at religious institutions. This shows that while some arsons at religious

institutions could eventually be classified as hate crimes (none so far), they do not appear to be a part of a broader relative increase in religiously-motivated hate crime.

Conceptual framework

This section presents the conceptual framework developed based on the statistical findings in this chapter.

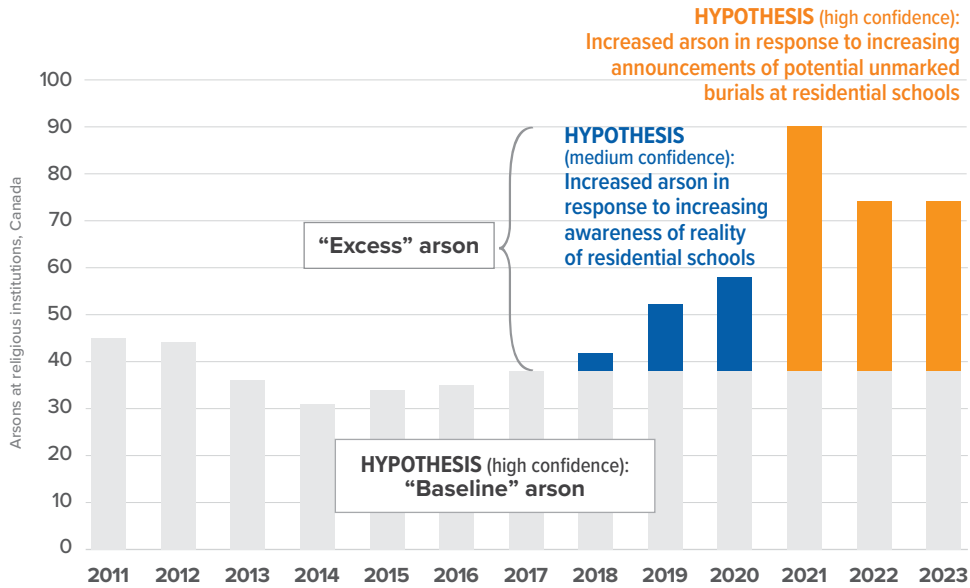
Figure 7 presents this framework graphically. The first hypothesis of the framework is that the incidence of arson at religious institutions is relatively stable over the long term. For the purposes of this report, this is referred to as the “baseline” rate of arson at religious institutions, calculated at 38 arsons per year, based on the 2011 to 2017 average. Most importantly, in the absence of any evidence that the underlying drivers of such baseline arson have changed, it is hypothesized that this baseline rate extends into the 2018–2023 period, as presented in Figure 7.

After 2017 or 2018, there was a break in the national data relative to the baseline, so that by 2018 and certainly by 2019, the number of arsons had increased dramatically, peaking in 2021 and then plateauing across 2022 and 2023. This report refers to this as “excess” arson, which is driven by factors not previously present. Based on our analysis above, it is possible to hypothesize with relatively high confidence that the excess arsons over the 2021–23 period were in response to announcements of potential unmarked burials.¹⁷

Figure 7 will facilitate the policy discussion in the following section, including, critically, whether any special initiative should be undertaken to reduce arsons at religious institutions. To date, the default for many policy-makers has been a “wait and see” approach. Policy-makers may not have had up-to-date official data at their disposal, so it was perhaps reasonable to conclude that the record 90 arsons in 2021 would be a one-year “blip,” but that would have been incorrect because the spike in 2021 was preceded by three years in which arson was already increasing.

High rates of arsons continued in 2022 and 2023. There is no publicly available data for 2024 yet, so we do not know whether that trend has continued. Given the reduced number of new announcements of potential unmarked burials in 2024, it is likely that the data will be below the 2022–23 plateau of 74 per year but above the baseline of 38. One could hope the

FIGURE 7: Arson incidents at religious institutions and conceptual framework



Sources: ISED 2024b, Statistics Canada 2024g, and author's calculations.

same for 2025 and 2026 and so forth, until the problem of arson at religious institutions “goes away.”

This is a high-risk gamble that policy-makers should not make, however; instead, they should recognize that the symbolism of arsons at religious institutions is many times greater than their physical or criminal dimensions. It has potentially important cultural, political, religious liberty and Indigenous reconciliation ramifications. All this in the context of the continuing vigorous public debate about how the announcements were made, how they were reported by the media, and how they were interpreted by Canadians.

Focusing on the latter, many Indigenous political and religious leaders have spoken out against the arsons, highlighting their possibly counter-productive impact on the long-term project of reconciliation. For example, the then-National Chief of Canada’s largest Indigenous organization, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Chief Perry Bellegarde, highlighted that burning churches is not the way to proceed: “But to burn things down is not our way. Our way is to build relationships and come together” (Malone 2021). Pentecostal assistant minister Jenn Allan-Riley highlighted that “burning down

churches is not in solidarity with us Indigenous people” and that such arsons could perpetuate a destructive cycle: “Whoever is doing this, you’re going to wake up a very ugly, evil spirit in this country” that further divides Indigenous people and the rest of Canadian society (Azpiri 2021).

Policy-makers should be seen by Canadians to be better prepared to prevent, investigate, and deter such arsons in the future. A continuing lack of a fulsome policy response could undermine support for reconciliation because of the perception that the arsons are not being treated with the seriousness they deserve because of their association with the harms of the residential schools.

“*Policy-makers should be seen by Canadians to be better prepared to prevent, investigate, and deter such arsons in the future.*”

This report provides a causal confirmation of what many Canadians already believe: that the arsons are in response to the announcements of potential unmarked burials. While that “quid pro quo” may be acceptable or desirable to a minority, many others view it as an unacceptable by-product of the country learning more about the reality of residential schools. This could further complicate an already challenging path to Indigenous reconciliation.

Given the additional funding for and number of active and future searches to identify any additional potential unmarked burials, and given the likelihood of future decisions by Indigenous peoples to undertake exhumations, it is likely that at some future point one or more announcement of verified human remains will occur.

It will likely matter little whether the remains relate to previously-known cemeteries or burial sites, or the site of alleged clandestine burials. If our conceptual framework has any predictive power, it is that such exhumations will result in increased arsons at religious institutions; thus, we should be better prepared to prevent, investigate, and deter such arson.

Elements of a policy response

What is to be done about the increased arson rate at religious institutions in Canada? It may be worth reviewing the policy response in the US during the mid-to-late 1990s to a similar series of high-profile church fires, in that case mostly at Black-majority congregations in the American South. Considering this episode in the context of Canada's own institutional framework would then allow a discussion of policy elements of a made-in-Canada response to prevent, investigate, and deter future arsons at religious institutions.

Arson at US Black-majority churches in the 1990s

In response to a series of high-profile church fires mostly at Black-majority congregations in the American South (Strain 2008), the US federal government instituted a series of legal and other changes. There was bipartisan support for the *Church Arson Prevention Act* (CAPA) that President Bill Clinton signed in 1996 (Congress 1996). CAPA made it a federal criminal code violation to damage or deface religious property and increased penalties for such violations. In addition, CAPA enjoyed two financing provisions. The first directed the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to make guaranteed loans to financial institutions in connection with loans made to assist religious or other organizations that have been damaged by arson or terrorism. Second, it appropriated funds for the Justice and Treasury Departments, to increase personnel to investigate, prevent, and respond to potential violations of CAPA.

The same year, Clinton established the National Church Arson Task Force (NCATF) to oversee the investigation and prosecution of arsons at religious institutions. The task force included personnel and resources from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), Justice Department prosecutors, and state and local law enforcement officers and prosecutors. The ATF and FBI deployed more than 200 investigators in such investigations over the life of the NCATF (White House 2000).

The NCATF operated for four years and reported a declining number of incidents (arsons, bombings, or attempted bombings) from 297 in 1996 when it was first established, to 209 in 1997, 165 incidents in 1998, and 140 in 1999 (NCATF 2000). The NCATF reported that it had opened 945 investigations

for arsons and bombings that had occurred between January 1995 and August 2000, resulting in arrests in connection with 342 of these investigations, for a 36 per cent cleared by arrest rate, which was more than double the 16 per cent arrest rate for arsons in general.

The US Fire Administration (USFA) reported that for the 1996–98 period, arson (intentional or suspicious) accounted for 25 per cent of all fires at religious institutions (USFA 2002). That percentage has declined to 15 per cent for the most recent 2020–22 period (USFA 2024).

Finally, the NCATF coordinated with other agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and HUD in the federal government’s efforts to promote arson prevention and to provide resources for church rebuilding.

Arrests and motivation

Prior to presenting any policy proposals to counter arsons at religious institutions, it is important to highlight two critical interrelated elements. One is that while we have important statistical evidence that the announcements of potential unmarked burials is a possible motivating factor, this is circumstantial evidence. In contrast, direct evidence could be in the form of confessions or “rationale” provided by arrested arsonists that indeed they were so motivated. Another form of direct evidence, if credible, would be a statement of responsibility from one or more persons or groups with respect to a campaign of arson. But that has not occurred. The other element is the associated problem of just how few charges have been announced by police or reported in the press in relation to these arsons.

There is no public database of arson incidents in which charges have been laid and the individuals charged have been identified. In the absence of such data, investigative journalism has identified 9 arson incidents over the 2021–23 period that had resulted in charges by January 2024 (Reith 2024), a number that was confirmed by the author of this report.¹⁸ That is just 3.8 per cent of the 238 incidents over that period. Police services and news organizations are not required to announce or report all instances, so the 9 “cleared by charge” should be considered a “floor” for estimation purposes. This compares to the benchmark 11 per cent “cleared by charge” rate of all arson incidents in Canada,¹⁹ which would translate into about 25 incidents (out of 238).

Persons charged are not required to provide a “rationale” or “motive” for their alleged crimes, even if the accused pleads guilty and agrees to the Crown’s summary of the facts. None of the reporting has included any such rationale or motive from the accused. There have been no confessions reported. In investigating three church arsons in Alberta, the local RCMP noted that “At this time there is no evidence to suggest that these crimes were politically or ideologically motivated” (Mertz, 2023). But while interesting for those particular cases, such an observation based on 2 to 3 cases cannot reasonably be applied to 238 arson incidents over the 2021–23 period.

“Were some of the arsonists acting under the belief that human remains had been found at the Kamloops Residential School?”

More generally, because the announced charge rate is so low (3.8 per cent) and the accused are not required to provide a rationale, no definitive conclusions can currently be drawn as to “who” is responsible for the increase in arsons at religious institutions in Canada nor “why.” The identity of more than 96 per cent of the arsonists and their motivations remain unknown – a mystery.

It is likely that there are multiple motivations associated with the “excess” arsons during the 2021–23 period, as there are for the underlying “baseline” arsons. There is probably some overlap between the two sets of motivations. To separate the two sets of motivation and focus on the excess will require further research based on combination of increased fire protection and police investigation to increase the “cleared by charge” rate, as well as more detailed, probably case-study-type research.

Having said that, our research has identified a number of motivation-related questions for further research. For example, were some of the arsonists in 2021 acting under the belief that human remains had been found at the Kamloops Residential School? How about some of the arsonists in 2022 and 2023? Were some of the 2022–23 arsonists “copycats” or just the same arsonists of 2021 who had now become serial arsonists? Are most arsonists

acting alone or are some acting in coordination with others? What is the proportion of arsonists that are Indigenous persons and are they acting as a form of retaliation to the announcements at residential schools or for other reasons? Most arsonists are likely to be non-Indigenous – are they people who suppose themselves to be allies of Indigenous people and burn down religious institutions as an act of solidarity, or are the arsons driven by anti-Indigenous racism? More generally, is there a political, ideological, or anti-religious dimension to the arsons? Is this explanation more or less likely given the lack of any form of statement of responsibility from one or more organized groups with respect to a campaign of arson against religious institutions?

Having reviewed the US experience and challenge of woefully low reported cleared by charge rates in Canada, the rest of this section focuses on possible elements of a made-in-Canada policy response.

Policy element: improved fire/arson statistics

Perhaps unsurprisingly coming from a quantitative economist, the primary element of a national policy that this report recommends is to improve the collection and dissemination of fire and arson data in Canada. This data element has three components.

The **first** component is to complete the long-running project of building and maintaining a comprehensive and timely national database of fire statistics. It is unacceptable that Canada does not have such a national database in 2025. This represents a structural failure with national security consequences. The National Fire Information Database (NFID) is maintained by the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC), but provincial coverage is partial, inconsistent, and not up to date (CAFC 2024; Statistics Canada 2024f). The lack of national fire statistics has been a known issue for many years²⁰ and it is time that it be solved.

The **second** component is to build and maintain a database of on-reserve fire statistics.²¹ A comprehensive and up-to-date database of on-reserve fire statistics is critically important because analysis suggests that fire-related deaths among Indigenous people in Canada are many times higher than non-Indigenous persons (Eduful 2024). Secondly, a proportion of the arsons of religious institutions were located on or near reserves, so accurate fire-related data is essential.

The **third** component relates to the frequency and dissemination of currently available arson at religious institutions data. As noted above, these data are only available by custom request and on an annual basis, which is unacceptable. These data must be released publicly by Statistics Canada on a routine basis, and the frequency of releases should be shortened to every quarter. There is simply too much lag between the end of the calendar year and when the UCR is updated (three to four quarters). Policy-makers, police authorities and fire services need timely data as it is developing. Statistics Canada must commit to releasing quarterly arson data for religious institutions within a few months of the quarter closing, and ideally within three months.

“Arson is a relatively difficult criminal offence to investigate and prosecute, with the charge rate for property arson in Canada being only 11 per cent.”

Policy element: investigation and prosecution

As noted above, arson is a relatively difficult criminal offence to investigate and prosecute, with the charge rate for property arson in Canada being only 11 per cent. There are no current data for the charge rate for arsons at religious institutions in Canada, but the default assumption is that on a national basis it would be comparably low, as low as 3.8 per cent.

A low arson charge rate presents a number of challenges. First, it reduces the deterrence effect. Simply put, a potential arsonist is less likely to be dissuaded when there is a **less than a one-in-twenty-five chance** of being caught and charged (based on the observed rate of 3.8 per cent). Second, a low charge rate decreases the chance of catching serial arsonists. The case of Jay Scott Ballinger in the US is indicative, with Ballinger and his co-conspirators responsible for 50 church arsons as part of a satanic cult ritual in 8 states from 1994 to 1999 before being caught in 2000. It is likely that Ballinger would have continued committing arson had he not been caught.

By comparison, the US government's NCATF efforts resulted in a relatively high charge rate, 36 per cent. This was the result of additional resources and specialized personnel, including from arson forensics and other scientific fields. The passage of CAPA made this form of federal intervention in what would normally be state and municipal police affairs possible. It also provided funding for the NCATF.

If Canada, or a part of Canada, decided to establish a similar task force, sometimes also referred to as an "integrated unit," to investigate and help prosecute arsons at religious institutions, then several elements would need to be considered:

- **The approach could not be "copy-pasted" from the US.** First, because arson is already included in the Criminal Code, which in Canada is a federal statute, there is no need to "federalize" the crime of arson of religious institutions as was necessary in the US under CAPA. In this respect, while one of the RCMP's three key functions of federal policing is equivalent to the FBI, Canada does not have a federal institution dealing with fire services or arson.
- **Any approach would have to be done at the provincial level or higher to be able to address urban and rural areas and cross-provincial arson.** While many large municipal police services have dedicated arson units²² and a number have created integrated arson units including police and fire services²³ the general arson data indicates that arson incidence is three to four times higher in rural areas (Statistics Canada 2022). Given the geographic distribution of the arsons and the past patterns of other serial arsonists, it is likely that at least some arsons involved cross-province travel, suggesting that a regional perspective should be considered.
- **Any strategy would have to take into the particular division of responsibilities within and across provinces.** Fire services in Canada are provincially governed but locally established, with most provinces having dozens or hundreds of fire services. These are generally overseen by the province's fire marshals/commissioners. Fire investigators determine the cause of a fire and whether it was incendiary. This function may be carried out at the local or provincial level, depending on the jurisdiction and characteristics of the fire. Fires determined to be incendiary are referred to the corresponding police service. That police service may or may not have a specialized arson unit. The police arson unit leads the investigation,

including determining intent in order to categorize a fire as arson, and identifying any suspects. Finally, Crown prosecutors decide whether to pursue arson charges based on the evidence gathered by the police and fire investigators.

- **An arson-at-religious-institutions integrated unit should be tightly targeted and temporary.** The target could be the four provinces of Western Canada which is the region in the country that has experienced the highest number of arsons, and continues to do so. This pattern is likely to continue. The US disbanded the NCATF after five years because the incidence of arsons at religious institutions decreased. A similar time-limited “as required” approach should be taken in the establishment of the integrated unit. The unit would involve representation from provincial, municipal, and Indigenous police forces and fire investigation (see below). Optionally, there could also be federal participation via RCMP personnel seconded from federal policing. The objective of the integrated unit would be for the fire and arson investigators to share knowledge and resources based on timely data, with the objective of solving more arson incidents at religious institutions than if each had acted in isolation.

Policy element: improved Indigenous police and fire protection

It is vital to improve Indigenous police and fire protection services as a general policy and to ensure full Indigenous participation in the integrated unit investigating and prosecuting arsons at religious institutions.

Indigenous people are overrepresented in Canada’s criminal justice system as both victims and those accused of crime (DOJ 2024). The former includes arson, with arson rates being almost nine times higher for majority Indigenous populations (Allen 2020). Indigenous peoples are taking decisive action by pushing for change. They are challenging the legal and financial framework that governs Indigenous policing in Canada. In 2021, the AFN started working with Public Safety Canada (PSC) to develop new legislation to make Indigenous policing services an essential service (PSC 2024a). It will also put an end to the inequitable funding under the current First Nations Policing Program (FNPP²⁴) (AFN 2021) that has been criticized by the Auditor General of Canada (AG) (AG 2024).

A similar situation of chronic underfunding applies to on-reserve fire protection services, which, as noted above, is a federal responsibility.

In response to the need for improved fire protection, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the AFN prepared the *First Nations Fire Protection Strategy, 2023 to 2028*, which was the first strategy developed jointly by ISC and AFN, and also included input from technical organisations and the NIFSC (ISC 2024).

It is vital that both these processes are supported as part of the broader project of reconciliation, including self-determination. This will ensure that Indigenous peoples are able to fully participate as partners in an anti-arson strategy for religious institutions.

Secondary policy elements

There are several secondary policy elements that could be useful to complement the primary elements discussed above. We discuss two:

Prevention of arson is important. Given the news of increased arson, many religious institutions have individually taken additional steps to enhance security and other fire-prevention measures. Most recently, the PSC announced the Canada Community Security Program (CCSP), which provides up to 70 per cent “time-limited funding and support for communities at risk of hate-motivated incidents/crimes to enhance security measures at their gathering spaces,” including places of worship (PSC 2024b). The CCSP replaced the less generous and more restrictive Security Infrastructure Program (SIP) in late 2024.

Rebuilding after an arson attack is also important, and religious institutions often lack adequate insurance or face unaffordable deductibles that are not covered by donations and other contributions. The US federal response in the mid-to-late 1990s, including assistance by FEMA in rebuilding houses of worship attacked by hate-motivated arsonists, is a good example of this. Such a federally oriented rebuilding response may not be feasible given Canada’s jurisdictional divisions, but there is merit in finding a coordinated manner of assisting religious institutions to rebuild if they do not have the means to do so themselves.

Conclusion

This report is an effort to “answer the call” made by the TRC to quantitative social scientists to contribute to the project of reconciliation by undertaking empirical research in important, even highly charged, policy matters related to Indigenous people (Feir and Hancock 2016).

Arson directed against religious institutions and the lack of a fulsome policy response could undermine support for reconciliation, especially if there is a perception that these crimes are not being addressed with the seriousness they deserve because of their association with the harms of residential schools. Indigenous communities have expressed their opposition to such acts of arson, not only due to the significance of these churches to some of their member’s faith, but also because of the risk of perpetuating a destructive cycle that could hinder the progress of reconciliation.

It is crucial for Canadians to consider the arsons over the 2021–23 period as a “dry run” for the potential reaction to discovery of verified human remains in the future. It is imperative that both official authorities and Canadian society to be better prepared to prevent, investigate, and deter such arson. This is not only because of the inherent danger and financial cost if this criminal activity, which endangers the safety of first-responders, religious workers, congregants and neighbours, and damages or destroys houses of worship, but because the path to reconciliation itself may become scorched. [MLI](#)

About the author



Edgardo Sepulveda is an economist with more than thirty years of experience. He has advised governments, regulatory agencies, companies, unions, and consumer advocates in more than forty countries. He has written for the Progressive Economics Forum, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Alberta Federation of Labour, and has been lead author of three peer-reviewed academic articles in the last five years. This is his second policy report for the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. Born in Chile, Sepulveda is fluent in English and Spanish and has a good working knowledge of French. He received his BA (Hon) from the University of British Columbia and his MA from Queen's University, both in Economics. He established Sepulveda Consulting Inc. in 2006. [MLI](#)

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Endnotes

- 1 As noted in the section “What could be driving the increase?”, how the findings at Kamloops and other former residential schools were announced by TTTFN and other Indigenous groups, and reported by the media, has been the subject of vigorous public debate, including with respect to the terminology used to describe the findings. This is not the main focus of this report, but from a quantitative social science perspective, it is important to define terms and variables that we use in the statistical analysis. As further discussed in the subsection “Residential schools,” we refer to these as sites of “potential unmarked burials.”
- 2 There are generally two main sources of fire-related data in Canada and other countries: those that are collected by police authorities, which this report refers to as “crime statistics” and those that are collected by fire service authorities, which this report refers to as “fire statistics.” There are two categories of arson **crime statistics** in Canada: 1) arson (violations against property), which this report refers to as “property arson”; and 2) arson – disregard for human life (violations against the person), which this report refers to as “violent arson.” To be consistent with how Statistics Canada reports arson at religious institutions, both categories of arson are used in this report. These and other crime-related data are collected in (Statistics Canada, 2024a) in context of the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey (Statistics Canada 2024b). For **fire statistics** the question is whether the fire was determined by fire investigators to be deliberate, formally classified as “incendiary” in Canada and the US. Typically, fire services would refer incendiary fires to the police service for further investigation and to determine whether it should be classified as arson, based on its specific criminal definition.
- 3 For consistency this data is presented based on the same time period (2011–23) and same regions as available for arsons at religious institutions (see Table 1).

- 4 The total of 27.9 incidents per 100,000 population for the 2021–23 period is made up of 26.4 incidents for property arson and 1.5 incidents for violent arson, so that the former is more than 17 times more prevalent than the latter.
- 5 The six regions are Atlantic (Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick), Quebec, Ontario, Prairies (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta), British Columbia (BC) and the Territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut).
- 6 The data in Table 1 include police-reported incidents where the most serious violation was property arson or violent arson. Due to the nature of UCR reporting, Statistics Canada notes that the incidents include those that occurred “inside a religious institution or building” as well as those that occurred “on the surrounding property, such as an attached cemetery or adjacent parking lot.” Furthermore, Statistics Canada notes that “religious institutions include churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques, but exclude cemeteries not physically located on the religious property.” Statistics Canada confirmed to the author that it was not possible to identify whether the institution was a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque, etc.
- 7 Due to the relatively very small population size (0.3 per cent of national population), the data for the Territories is highly variable. We include the Territories in Tables 1 and 2; however, because of this variability it is not feasible to consistently present the Territories graphically within a reasonable scale that would allow visual assessment of the other regions. Hence, the Territories are not included as a separate regional variable in some Figures, such as Figure 2, but their data is included in the national variable under “Canada.”
- 8 The data for **England** (statistics for the United Kingdom’s three other countries are calculated separately, necessitating a comparison with the largest of the four nations) are “fire statistics” sourced from the Incident Recording System (IRS) produced by England’s Fire and Rescue Services (FRS 2024). The IRS records are useful for our purposes because the data include whether the fire occurred at a “Church / Chapel / Cathedral,” “Other Religious,” “Mosque” or “Temple” and whether the fire was considered by the FRS to be “deliberate,” which for simplicity of exposition is presented as arson in this section.

The data for the **US** come from a specialized data source: the annual “Arson Incident Reports” (AIR) prepared by the United States Bomb Data Center (USBDC), a unit of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco,

Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). It is a specialized subset of data collected by ATF due to its jurisdiction covering a certain type of arson, including at houses of worship (ATF 2024). The USBDC compiles the AIRs using data from the specialized Bomb and Arson Tracking System (BATS) that are reported by local, state and federal authorities. (USBDC 2015–2024). The data from the BATS were first made publicly available in 2015. The USBDC data are useful for our purposes because they include “houses of worship” as a category of structure and whether the fire was considered “incendiary,” which for simplicity of exposition is presented as arson in this section.

- 9 “The Settlement Agreement represents the consensus reached between legal counsel for former students, legal counsel for the Churches, the Assembly of First Nations, other Indigenous organizations and the Government of Canada. The implementation of this historic agreement brings a fair and lasting resolution to the legacy of Indian Residential Schools.” (CIRNAC 2025)
- 10 In July 2022 Pope Francis apologized for the manner in which many members of the Church participated and co-operated in “projects of cultural destruction,” which culminated in the system of residential schools (CIRNAC 2023).
- 11 This includes the June 2021 declaration by the Canadian government September 30 a national statutory holiday as National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (*Canadian Encyclopedia* 2024) and the appointment by the Canadian government in June 2022 of an Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites (ISI) that issued interim reports in 2023 (ISI 2023) and a final report in 2024 (ISI 2024).
- 12 The list includes year of announcement, name of residential school (as per IRSSA (CIRNAC 2024)), province/territory and religious affiliation. **2021:** Kamloops, BC (Catholic); Marieval, SK (Catholic); Cranbrook/Kootenay, BC (Catholic); Kuper Island, BC (Catholic). **2022:** Cariboo, BC (Catholic); Fort Pelly, SK (Catholic); Grouard, AB (Catholic); Gordon’s, SK (Anglican); Blue Quills, AB (Catholic); Sandy Bay, MB (Catholic); Fort Alexander, MB (Catholic); Pine Creek, MB (Catholic). **2023:** St. Mary’s, ON (Catholic), Sechelt, BC (Catholic); Carcross, YT (Anglican); Jousard, AB (Catholic); Beauval, SK (United).
- 13 The coefficient of determination (R^2) for this linear regression model of averages is relatively high ($R^2= 0.89$) and the p-value of the F-test is low (0.005), the regression model is a good fit for the data and that overall, it

is statistically significant. Given that this is a single independent variable linear regression, the p-value for the announcement variable is the same (0.005) indicating it is positive and statistically significant. The value of the announcement value indicates that an increase of one announcement during the three year period is statistically associated with an increase of 4.76 excess arsons.

Although these are statistically encouraging results, they should be considered in the context of the relatively small sample size (n=6) because this model is based on averages of the six regions over the three-year period (2021–23). To examine the relative robustness of these small sample results, we also use a pooled regression model that includes all annual observations over the three years (n=18). The result of this pooled regression is that announcement variable remains positively and statistically significant, albeit at a lower level of significance (p-value of 0.043). The value of the announcement coefficient is consistent with average model: an increase of one announcement during any year is statistically associated with an increase of 3.36 excess arsons.

Other sensitivities show the relative robustness of the linear regression model of averages presented in Figure 5. For example, running data for 2021 data only (n=6) shows a moderately lower level of significance, at $R^2 = 0.72$ and a p-value of the F-test at 0.033. Combining 2021 and 2022 data increases the level of significance to $R^2 = 0.80$ and a p-value of the F-test at 0.016. Finally combining 2021, 2022, and 2023 returns us to the results in Figure 5 of $R^2 = 0.89$ and the p-value of the F-test of 0.005.

- 14 The 2007 IRRSA originally included 130 institutions, to which 12 were subsequently added, for a total of 142 schools (CIRNAC 2024). Of these, a total of 121 schools (85 per cent) were religiously affiliated, mostly with the Catholic Church (63 schools (44 per cent)), and the Anglican Church (35 schools (25 per cent)), with the other 23 schools being affiliated with other Christian denominations.
- 15 See Subsection “Arrests and motivation”, which shows that Catholic churches accounted for 5 out of the 9 (55 per cent) of the reported cases in which arson charges have been laid.
- 16 During that period, most types of police-reported hate crime increased in absolute terms, possibly driven by an increased willingness to report these types of crimes and greater awareness on the part of police services to categorize such crimes as hate crimes. Self-reported victimization data on hate-motivated incidents indicates that in 2019, only 22 per cent of incidents perceived to be motivated by hate were reported to the police

(DOJ 2023). To normalize for this possibly confounding effect, Figure 6 reports relative values and shows that relative to other types of motivations, religious hate-crime has decreased.

- 17 There is a weaker statistical relationship associated with former residential schools to explain the excess arsons during the 2018–20 period, which is why this is presented with “medium” confidence
- 18 While some of the specific arson incidents and individuals charged were included in Reith (2024), the following is detailed list of the nine arson incidents, including name of institution, location and details of individuals charged, as compiled by the author of this report: 1) Our Lady of Mercy Roman Catholic Church, Kehewin Cree Nation (AB) – Unnamed youth (details withheld). 2) St. George Coptic Orthodox Church, Surrey (BC) – Kathleen Panek, 35 (Female). 3) St. Michaels Hungarian Church, Bashaw (AB) – Cameron Moses Wright, 18 (Male) and Unnamed youth (details withheld). 4) Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Catholic Church, Fort Chipewyan (AB) – Raymond Ahyasou-Cardinal, 19 (Male) and August Tanner Marcel, 26 (Male). 5) St. Bernard’s Catholic Church, Near Kapawe’no First Nation (AB) – Kenneth Ferguson, 56 (Male) and Gerald Capot, 50 (Male). 6) St. Theresa Point Roman Catholic Church, St. Theresa Point First Nation (MB) – Unnamed suspect. 7) Siksika First Nation Catholic Church, Siksika First Nation (AB) – Unnamed individual (details withheld). 8) Evangelical Free Church, Coronation (AB) – Unnamed individual (details withheld). 9) Beiseker Level-Land Seventh-day Adventist Church, Beiseker (AB) – Unnamed individual (details withheld).
- 19 Crimes in Canada are considered “solved” when the police have identified a suspect and have enough evidence to support charges. Such a case can then be classified as “cleared” in one of two ways: the laying of charges (“cleared by charge”), or when some other process is followed such as diversion – for example when a suspect is ordered to carry out community service or commit to a process of counselling – to have charges withdrawn (“cleared otherwise”) (Statistics Canada 2024c). The use and discretion of the “cleared otherwise” category has been shown to vary across time and police services (McCormack et al. 2012) and so the preferred indicator in this report is the cleared by charge category. In this respect the national average cleared by charge rate over the 2021–23 period for property arson was 11 per cent and for violent arson was 74 per cent (Statistics Canada 2024a). The former is consistent with other types of property crime and the latter with clearance rates for other types of violent crime.

- 20 The CAFC, the Council of Canadian Fire Marshals and Commissioners (CCFFMC 2013), the International Association of Fire Fighters (the trade union representing fire fighters in North America) (Garis and Mark 2011), and academics (Maxim et al. 2023; Garis 2014) have long called for the establishment of such a database.
- 21 It is worth highlighting that being on reserve, fire statistics/protection would be a federal jurisdiction, outside the responsibility of provincial/territorial fire marshals/commissioners (Clare 2023). The National Indigenous Fire Safety Council (NIFSC) has highlighted that on-reserve fire statistics have not been reported since 2010 (NIFSC 2024), in response to which it has recently created the National Incident Reporting System (NIRS). However, just like the NFID, it suffers from low participation (it is voluntary).
- 22 See, for example Ottawa Police (2025); Vancouver Police Department (2025).
- 23 See, for example, the “Winnipeg Arson Strike Force” established in 1999 to fight a rash of arsons, which included Winnipeg Police Services, Winnipeg Fire Services, and fire investigators from the Manitoba Office of the Fire Commissioner (MOFC 2025; City of Brandon 2025).
- 24 The FNPP was introduced in 1991 as an institutional and financial arrangement whereby the federal government contributes 52 per cent and the territorial/provincial government 48 per cent towards on-reserve policing. The FNPP covers three arrangements for the approximately 680 First Nations and Inuit communities in Canada. The first are Indigenous self-administered police service agreements, of which there are 36 covering 155 communities. The second are “tripartite agreements” in which the RCMP provide on-reserve policing services that are supplemental to those provide by provincial/territorial police forces. There are 140 of such agreements, which covered 230 communities. Communities not covered by either of these two types of agreement would be reliant on policing services through their municipal, provincial, or territorial governments

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