

TIMELINE OF CONVERSION THERAPY* IN CANADA

an incomplete history

The history of conversion therapy in Canada is contentious—while there currently exists a legislative and popular resistance to conversion therapy in nearly all of its forms, this was not always the case. The difficulty in establishing a comprehensive legal and social opposition to conversion therapy lies in the relative obscurity that the practices have been able to operate under within the Canadian context. Conversion Therapy practices emerged early in the nation’s settlement as a mechanism of social control to support the establishment of “Canadian civil society”. Members of civil society are expected to behave and identify within the strictures of white, Christian, heterosexual, monogamous, and cisgender categories. Deviation from these norms and social mores were subject to control measures that are documented in this timeline as Conversion Therapy.

The pervasiveness of conversion therapy throughout Canadian history is also tied to the lack of social recognition around these practices as being harmful. The Indian Residential School system, for example, was conceived as a benevolent way to “civilize” Indigenous communities through their forceful conversion of Indigenous youth to Christianity and European social norms. In the Canadian Criminal Code, the establishment of “gross



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indecent” laws against suspected practices of homosexuality during the Victorian era of the 1800s were seen as a necessary measure of protection against threats to social norms such as marriage, piety, and celibacy. Disease models such as those in the widely-circulated Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) were classifying “Gender Identity Disorder” and later, “Gender Dysphoria” as mental illnesses as a seemingly value-neutral, scientific position. The belief that these conversion therapy efforts were relatively inconspicuous during the time that they were being used is what continues to trouble efforts to completely eliminate conversion practices today.

This timeline attempts to document the evolving history of conversion therapy in Canada, as well as highlighting popular resistance to these practices, as well as offering the perspective of a survivor of conversion therapy. This is an incomplete history and one that continues to be contested by the descendants of those harmed by conversion therapy and by survivors resisting the practice today.

***A note on language:** We have chosen to refer to these practices as “conversion therapy” because this is a term people are likely to recognize and because this is the term used in Canadian law. However, we want to emphasize that “therapy” is an inaccurate descriptor. These practices are harmful pseudoscience with no genuine therapeutic value. Because of this, some organizations and individuals choose to use alternate language such as “conversion practices” or “sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts” (SOGIECEs) to refer to conversion therapy. In your own life, we encourage you to use whatever language makes the most sense for yourself and your communities.

Timeline key:



Conversion Therapy **legislation and amendments** that institutionalize and legalize the practices



Normalizing Conversion Therapy socially and pathologically



Popular resistance to Conversion Therapy and legal/social **“progress”**



1800s:

The Establishment of Victorian sexuality mores

This period saw the formal and cultural establishment and enforcement of Victorian sexuality and gender mores. An offshoot of Christian and European gender and sexuality traditions, Victorian mores were upheld by [a combination of systemic factors](#). The height of the Industrial Revolution meant that the economic, medical, social, and cultural benefits of abstaining from sexual activity and gender binary deviance were [encouraged](#) to promote an industrious and puritanical way of life. The market-driven interests of this period dovetailed with the advent of pseudo-scientific methods to [“improve”](#) the human race. This unscientific revolution saw the creation of violent conversion methods such as:

- [Psychosurgery](#): corrective surgeries to “treat” mental illness and in many cases, suspected queerness. Early forms of the lobotomy can be traced back to the late-1800s;
- [Electromagnetic shock devices](#);
- [Hypnotherapy](#);
- [Testicular transplants](#) to enhance the production of testosterone, which was believed to curb homosexual urges;
- [Policing](#) suspected queer individuals through gross indecency laws;
- [Penal labour](#), which was the punishment for many gross indecency charges



1830s:

Early Residential Schools Established

This period marks the opening of some of the earliest forms of Church-administered [day schools and boarding schools](#) that enforced an assimilationist curriculum and conversion to Christianity for Indigenous children. Through their administration by various Christian church denominations, these schools enforced assimilation to a traditional Christian and European lifestyle through [starvation, physical and sexual abuse, and forbidding displays of Indigeneity](#). This included [abuse](#) for speaking Indigenous languages, the forced cutting of hair and change of clothing, school administrators intentionally providing poor living conditions, and lack of nutrition. Abusive experiences among Indigenous boys and girls were [deliberately gendered](#), and displays of emotion against the violence were forbidden and labelled effeminate by nuns, priests, and school administrators. Residential schools were early sites of conversion to Christian, Eurocentric, heterosexual, and cisgender traditions.



1876:

The Indian Act is Passed

The Indian Act established a series of legislated social norms and conventions that sought to punish and eliminate traditional Indigenous lifestyles, systems of governance, and cultural expression. The Act deliberately targeted expressions of gender and sexuality and legislated the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into “civilized” settler society. One of the most comprehensive and enduring forms of gender oppression was legislated through The Act’s regulation of Indian Status. Under the Indian Act, an Indian woman who married a non-Indian man (whether non-Indian or non-status) would [lose her status](#). To this day, entire generations of Indigenous peoples are culturally, legally, and interpersonally severed from their communities, languages, and kin, due to the Indian Act.



1892:

Criminal Code of Canada punishes “gross indecency”

The Criminal Code legislates punishments for “acts of gross indecency.” [The Code states](#), “every male person is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to five years’ imprisonment and to be whipped who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person.” This law establishes the punishment of expressions of homosexuality in public, labelling it as “[gross indecency](#).” The law aims to punish expressions of queerness and to warn people who engage in expressions of queerness that they risk imprisonment and violence if they do not adhere to the legislation.

1950s-1960s:

Cold War Fruit Machine

The federal government commissioned a machine to determine a person's sexual identity through involuntary biological responses. Canadian military officers and personnel were shown racy and neutral images of men and women that were paired with a survey they had to respond to. Their responses would then determine if they posed the [“threat” of homosexuality or queerness](#), which was seen as a form of disloyal, weak, and feeble behaviour that could possibly result in the targeting of those individuals by Soviet spies. In 2018, victims of the Cold War Fruit Machine, along with other victims named in the 2016 class action lawsuit against the Federal government for its “LGBT purge” efforts between 1950-1990, received between [\\$50 million and \\$110 million](#) in overall compensation by the Canadian government.



1968-1969:

“There is no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation”

Pierre Trudeau introduced Bill C-195, an omnibus bill that introduced major changes to the Criminal Code. On December 19th, 1968, a modified version of that bill, Bill C-150, was introduced that partially decriminalized homosexuality. The bill [decriminalized “consenting homosexual acts between two parties, in private, over the ages of 21”](#) with specific references to buggery and gross indecency. This amendment to the Criminal Code by then-Attorney General Trudeau was a provocative and publicized normalisation of private homosexual relations between adults, and a reckoning with centuries of repression toward both public and private displays of queerness.

1973:

Eliminating gender and sexuality “correction”

Homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostics and Statistics Manual (DSM); it is [no longer listed as an illness or a disease](#) by 1974. Gender Identity Disorder was replaced by Gender Dysphoria in the DSM in 2013, which was a [shift away from the clinical approach of “correcting” identities considered deviant](#).



1981:

“Operation Soap”

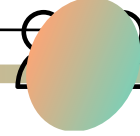
In 1981, the Metropolitan Toronto Police raided four gay bathhouses in a mass arrest event infamously known as “Operation Soap.” [Nearly 300 arrests](#) against gay men were made, and charges were laid on the grounds of Canada’s “bawdy-house” law, which regulated any place that was used for “non-normative sexual activities, prostitution, or other acts of indecency.” This mass criminalization and arrest incident resulted in numerous actions to protest police violence and the surveillance of queer public spaces. Operation Soap demonstrates the allocation of mass police force and funding toward efforts to eliminate safe public spaces for queer people, and the normalization of state repression of 2SLGBTQIA+ human rights.



2015:

Affirming Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Act Passed

On June 4, 2015, Bill 77, the [Affirming Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Act](#) passed in the Legislature. The bill is designed to ensure the protection and the rights of Ontario’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community by banning conversion therapy.



1990:

“Two-Spirit” introduced

The term Two-Spirit (niizh manidoowag) is [introduced by Anishinaabe elder, Dr. Myra Laramée](#), at the 3rd annual Native American/ First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Two-Spirit is a pan-Indigenous umbrella term that encompasses Indigenous peoples’ relationship to their culture, community, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This term is for Indigenous people to express their identities beyond the confines of Western understandings of gender and sexuality, and reclaim their practices of self-determination that have existed since time immemorial. Not all Indigenous people who are LGBTQIA+ will identify as Two-Spirit. The introduction of this modern term is a resurgence of Indigenous worldviews on gender and sexuality, and a defiant reclamation amidst centuries of gender-based violence enacted by the Canadian government.



2017:

Bill C-16 Passed

The bill amends the Canadian Human Rights Act and lists [gender identity and gender expression](#) as prohibited grounds for discrimination under federal jurisdiction.



2015

Closure of the CAMH Zucker Clinic

CAMH in Toronto [closes the GIC](#) after an external review concludes that the clinic had harmful effects on its youth patients. Criticisms of the GIC spanned over a decade, mostly from its former patients who recount experiencing sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts while receiving services there.



2020:

Bill C-6

[An Act to amend the Criminal Code \(conversion therapy\)](#) was introduced as Bill C-6, and aimed to prohibit activities defined as conversion therapy. Survivors of conversion therapy went on parliamentary record to share their experiences and advocate for the Bill's passing. [Erika Muse](#) testified as a witness and offered her experiences of surviving conversion practices as a trans woman activist and survivor of conversion therapy endured at CAMH under Dr. Kenneth Zucker. Ultimately, the Bill [did not make it past its third reading](#) and did not move forward to receive royal assent.



2019:

Popular Resistance Across Municipalities

Community group, Intersex London ON, lobbied the City of London to [raise the Intersex flag at city hall](#) for the first time in 2019 to mark Intersex Awareness Day (October 26th).

The City of Barrie also raised the intersex flag at City Hall on the same morning.

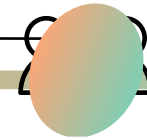
In the same year, the [Edmonton City Council moves to ban conversion therapy](#). This follows years of activists publicizing their experiences of faith-based conversion therapy.



2020:

Yukon Protects Youth Against Conversion Therapy

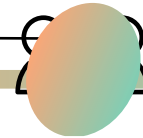
In November 2020, the Yukon Government unanimously passed the [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Protection Act](#). The Act prohibits conversion therapy from being provided to minors (under the age of 19) or to adults for whom there is a court-appointed guardian; identifies that a substitute decision-maker does not have authority to consent to conversion therapy for a person; and makes clear that conversion therapy is not an insured health service. The Act also allows for a fine of up to \$10,000 or imprisonment for up to six months, or both.



2020:

Quebec Bill 70 Adopted

In December 2020, the Quebec National Assembly unanimously adopted Bill 70: [An Act to Protect Individuals Against Conversion Therapies Available to Change Their Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Gender Expression](#). This Act prevents anyone by contract, whether for a consideration or free of charge, to provide conversion therapy to a third party regardless of age.



2021:

Bill C-4 Passed

The House of Commons and the Senate of Canada unanimously passed Bill C-4: [An Act to amend the Criminal Code \(conversion therapy\)](#). This new Bill [responded to previous community concerns and significantly strengthened the legislation](#) to include protections for both minors and adults. Bill C-4 amends the Criminal Code of Canada to create the following new offences: (a) causing another person to undergo conversion therapy; (b) doing anything for the purpose of removing a child from Canada with the intention that the child undergo conversion therapy outside Canada; (c) promoting or advertising conversion therapy; and (d) receiving a financial or other material benefit from the provision of conversion therapy.



2022:

Survivors continue to share their stories and challenge sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts

Lucas Wilson is a member of the Advisory Committee on the Justice Canadian Conversion Therapy Public Education Project, and a survivor of conversion therapy.

“I am a gay man who underwent conversion therapy at Liberty University, the world’s largest Christian fundamentalist university. For four years, a conversion therapist, Pastor Dane Emerick, attempted to convince me that I needed to become straight and tried various methods to reorient my sexuality (through prayer, through reading a conversion therapy manual/guide, pseudo-scientific talk-therapy, etc.). However, the violence was not just in these meetings with this so-called pastor; the violence continued and was amplified in the years to come, as I was promised that change was possible. Though I now have zero desire to change my orientation, at the time I believed (or, more accurately, was made to believe) that I should be straight, but when that change never occurred, I was convinced that something was wrong and defective with me. I turned on myself and was overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy, self-hatred, guilt, and eventually great shame. Conversion therapy creates a mindset within participants that shapes their self-perception that is emphatically violent and destructive, and this was a mindset I had to reckon with for many years after.

Many believe that conversion therapy does not still occur, that it is a thing of the past. However, conversion therapy still happens and will continue to happen even with the new law in place. Many also believe that anyone who underwent conversion therapy must have been weak, stupid, or unstable (for how could one allow oneself to undergo such “therapy”?). However, not only are many individuals raised within religious (and cultural) systems that create the conditions for individuals to seek out conversion therapy, but many undergo conversion therapy at a young age when they are much more impressionable.

[Bill C-4] means that the government (and the greater culture) is recognizing that conversion therapy is destructive. It means that the government (and the greater culture) has taken seriously the claims and abuse of conversion therapy survivors. And it means that future generations will not be subjected to the same abuse we survivors underwent.

To survivors of conversion therapy, you are normal, you are beautiful, and you perfect just the way you are. You do not need to keep striving to be anything other than who you are. Your sexuality is something to be celebrated, enjoyed, and explored--not something you need to hide, change, or fix.”