



Racial Inequity in the Canadian Labour Market

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1. Introduction

Indigenous, Black, and racialized people make up an increasingly significant proportion of Canada's labour market, reflecting the country's growing diversity. But even with this demographic shift, these populations continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their full participation and success in the workforce. Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers are often underutilized in the labour market relative to their work experience and education, with many being concentrated in precarious, low-wage jobs, and experiencing limited advancement opportunities. This not only perpetuates racial inequality but also results in a substantial loss of potential talent and productivity, costing the Canadian economy significantly. Addressing these disparities is both a matter of social justice and an economic imperative, as a more inclusive and equitable labour market could unlock the full potential of Canada's diverse population and drive greater economic growth.

This paper begins by exploring the larger demographic context of Canada, including the fast growing Indigenous, Black, and racialized populations. Because the vast majority of newcomers to Canada are racialized, the impact of immigration on the growth of the racialized population will also briefly be explored.

The paper then examines the labour market experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized people, outcomes which are quantified in the unemployment rate and average employment income for each group. The paper goes on to examine worker experiences both in the labour market generally and then within the federal public service.

This paper concludes by discussing the potential ways in which these issues can be addressed through social policy and organizational policies and practices.

2. Definitions

The definitions below are provided for Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadians, and racialized people to enable a more accurate and meaningful discussion of the three groups of focus in this paper.

Indigenous Peoples

Statistics Canada defines Indigenous Peoples of Canada as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. First Nations includes those defined as Status and Non-Status Indians by the Canadian government.

Black people

Throughout this paper the terms Black people, Black Canadians, and African Canadians are used interchangeably to refer to people of African descent residing in Canada. These terms refer to people of African descent whether they belong to a historical Black community, are an immigrant who has lived here for decades, were born in Canada to immigrants, or are a recent newcomer to the country.

Racialized people

The term racialized replaces the term “visible minority” previously used by the Government of Canada to refer to Canadians who are not Indigenous and who are non-White. This includes people of South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese backgrounds, or those who belong to more than one of these groups, regardless of their place of birth or length of time in Canada. While Statistics Canada has previously used the term visible minority and has only recently begun to use the term racialized, this paper uses the term racialized when summarizing all Statistics Canada data and research, regardless of whether the original term visible minorities was used.

3. Demographic Context

Indigenous Peoples, Black people, and racialized people represent a significant and growing proportion of the Canadian population and labour market. The population's ability to replace itself is decreasing as deaths increase due to the aging of the baby boom generation and the birth rate continues to decline. The result is an increased reliance on immigration for population and labour market growth. Since Canada removed its race-related restrictions on immigration in the 1960s, the proportion that is racialized has been steadily increasing to reflect the global population. Currently, the vast majority of newcomers is racialized, thus dramatically increasing Canada's racialized population.

Despite representing an increasingly important segment of the labour force, Indigenous, Black, and racialized people continue to be underutilized in the labour market, leading to significant losses to the Canadian economy. For example, one study found that Indigenous youth present an opportunity to add \$27.7 billion annually to the Canadian economy through their labour market participation (Future Skills Centre, 2020). In addition, RBC Economics estimates that if the skills of immigrants were better utilized, it could add \$50 billion annually to Canada's GDP (Agopsowicz, A., & Billy-Ochieng, R., n.d.).

Indigenous population

Indigenous Peoples are one of the fastest growing populations in Canada and make up an increasing proportion of the country's population.

According to the Census of Canada, the Indigenous population grew to 1.8 million in 2021. This includes 1,048,405 First Nations people, which was the first time the census counted more than one million First Nations people; 624,220 Métis people; and 70,545 Inuit people.

Table 1 examines the growth in the Indigenous population compared with the total Canadian population from 2006 to 2021.

Year	Indigenous Population			Total Population	
	#	% of Population	Rate of Growth Since 2006	#	Rate of Growth Since 2006
2006	1,172,785	3.7%	—	31,612, 897	—
2016	1,673,785	4.8%	43%	35,151,728	11%
2021	1,807,250	4.9%	54%	36,991,981	17%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006, 2016, 2021.

As the table shows, between 2006 and 2021 the Indigenous population grew at a much faster rate than that of the country as a whole—54% versus 17%, respectively. This resulted in the Indigenous population increasing from 3.7% of Canada’s population in 2006 to 4.9% in 2021.

Another key characteristic of the Indigenous population is that it is younger than the non-Indigenous population. The average age of Indigenous people in 2021 was 33.6 years, which is 8.2 years younger than the non-Indigenous population, which had an average age of 41.8 (Statistics Canada, 2022c). In addition, about 41% of all Indigenous people in 2021 were under the age of 25, compared with 27% of the non-Indigenous population (Government of Canada, 2023a). This means that Indigenous people will be entering the labour force in greater numbers in the coming years.

Statistics Canada projects that the Indigenous population could increase to between 1,965,000 and 2,633,000 by 2036 (Morency et al, 2015).

Black population

Similarly, Canada’s Black population is growing at a faster rate than the Canadian population as a whole. As Table 2 shows, the Black population grew by 97% between 2006 and 2021, with the population surpassing 1.5 million in 2021.

Year	Black Population			Total Population	
	#	% of Population	Rate of Growth Since 2006	#	Rate of Growth Since 2006
2006	783,795	2.5%	—	31,612,897	—
2016	1,198,540	3.4%	53%	35,151,728	11%
2021	1,547,870	4.2%	97%	36,991,981	17%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006, 2016, 2021.

Although Black people have lived in Canada since the 1600s, the growth of the Black population has been primarily driven by more recent immigration from the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa after Canada changed its race-based immigration policies in the 1960s. As the table shows, the Black population grew from 2.5% of the Canadian population in 2006 to 4.2% in 2021.

While immigration is a major contributor to growth in the Black population, Black Canadians are increasingly being born in Canada. As of 2021, 41% of Black people in Canada were born in the country (Statistics Canada, 2024b).

The Black population also has a younger age profile than the general population. In 2021, 42% of Black Canadians were children and youth (aged 0 to 25), compared to 28% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2024b).

Statistics Canada projects that by the year 2036, the Black population in Canada could increase to between 2–2.5 million people and represent between 5% and 5.6% of Canada’s population (Morency, et al 2017).

Racialized population

Canada’s racialized population is also growing at a faster rate than the general population. Largely fueled by immigration, racialized people are making up an increasingly large proportion of the population.

Table 3. Rate of Population Growth, Racialized and Total Population. Canada. (2006–2021).					
Year	Racialized Population			Total Population	
	#	% of Population	Rate of Growth Since 2006	#	Rate of Growth Since 2006
2006	5,068,095	16%	—	31,612,897	—
2016	7,674,580	22%	51%	35,151,728	11%
2021	9,639,205	26%	90%	36,991,981	17%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006, 2016, 2021.

As Table 3 shows, between 2006 and 2021 the racialized population in Canada grew by 90%, while the country’s population grew by only 17%. This resulted in the racialized population increasing from 16% of the country’s population in 2006 to 26% in 2021.

Statistics Canada projects that the racialized population will continue to grow at a faster rate than the general population. These projections show that Canada’s population will reach 43.8 million by 2036, with the racialized population increasing to between 35% and 49% of those aged 15 to 64 (Statistics Canada, 2017). While the growth of the racialized population will be fuelled largely by immigration, a growing proportion of racialized people were born in Canada. In 2011, about 31% of racialized people in Canada were born here (Statistics Canada, 2016).

4. Experiences of Indigenous, Black, and Racialized People in the Canadian Labour Market

4.1 Unemployment

The unemployment rate measures the proportion of the population actively seeking employment. Table 4 shows the unemployment rate in 2021 for Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadians, and racialized people compared with that of the total population.

8.6%	13.2%	11.7%	10.6%
Total population	Indigenous Peoples	Black Canadians	Racialized people
Source: Statistics Canada, 2022a, 2022d.			

Disparities in unemployment rates have been pervasive and persistent over time, showing stark differences between the ability of Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadian, and racialized people to secure employment compared with their White counterparts.

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous people consistently experience higher unemployment rates than the general Canadian population. As Table 4 shows, in 2021, Indigenous Peoples aged 25 to 64 experienced an unemployment rate of 13.2% compared to 8.6% for the entire population.

While a higher unemployment rate reflects the experiences of Indigenous Peoples once they are in the labour market, it also reflects their historical and ongoing colonization and systemic discrimination. These issues have led to social and economic inequities that persist to this day, impacting Indigenous Peoples' access to education, housing, health care, and, by extension, career opportunities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada outlined the devastating impact of residential schools and other colonial policies, which have contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous communities and resulted in intergenerational trauma and socio-economic disadvantages (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Because of structural and systemic anti-Indigenous racism, Indigenous Peoples are more likely to experience lower educational attainment, which limits their access to well-paying jobs and career advancement opportunities. In 2021, just under half of Indigenous people aged 25 to 64 (49%) had completed a postsecondary certificate, degree, or diploma, a rate lower than that of non-Indigenous people (68%) (Melvin, 2023). This gap in educational attainment translates into lower participation

in high-skill and high-paying professions, making it harder for Indigenous workers to gain employment and achieve upward mobility in the labour market.

Many Indigenous people also face barriers to accessing employment due to geographic isolation. A significant portion of the Indigenous population lives in rural or remote communities, where job opportunities are limited. In these regions, there may be fewer employers and jobs that are available may require specialized skills or qualifications that Indigenous workers may not have had the opportunity to develop. Additionally, workers in remote communities may struggle to relocate to urban centres where more career opportunities exist—especially when they lack the financial resources or social networks to do so.

A lack of transportation and access to high-speed internet also pose challenges for Indigenous people who live outside of urban areas. The Union of BC Indian Chiefs released a discussion paper that identified access to a driver's licence as being key to employment for Indigenous people (Dyok, 2021). They estimated that up to 75% of Indigenous people living in an Indigenous community do not hold a driver's licence. This is largely attributed to challenges getting to the nearest office to write the tests to get a learner's permit, accessing a vehicle with which to learn, and accessing the services of driving instructors. These issues exacerbate existing inequalities in employment opportunities and make it difficult for Indigenous workers to fully participate in the broader labour market.

Many Indigenous and rural communities across the country also continue to have limited or no access to the internet. As employers are increasingly using the internet as the only way to advertise job openings and receive job applications, limited access to high-speed internet is a significant barrier to knowing about and applying for jobs (Ghoshal, 2023).

When they do apply to job openings, Indigenous people face barriers in securing employment. One study found that First Nations people have a lower probability of employment than lower-skilled, non-Indigenous people. Even with higher skill levels in numeracy and literacy, the probability of employment for First Nations people was only 75% compared with 87% for Métis people and 90% for non-Indigenous people (Future Skills Centre, 2020). This study also found that workplace harassment and discrimination causes Indigenous people to leave their jobs prematurely, which further contributes to high rates of unemployment.

Black people

The data shows that Black Canadians experience persistently higher unemployment rates than all Canadians. As Table 4 shows, Black Canadians experienced an unemployment rate of 11.7% in 2021, compared to an unemployment rate of 8.6% for all Canadians. This higher rate of unemployment persists even after adjusting for age and educational attainment.

Black youth consistently experience higher rates of unemployment than their peers. The 2021 Census shows that Black youth aged 15 to 24 experienced an unemployment rate of 26.6% compared to 19.5% for all youth. The gap between the unemployment rate of the Black population and the rest of the population also occurs at all levels of education. In 2021, 9.1% of the Black population with a bachelor's degree or higher were unemployed, compared to just 6.7% of their peers. In addition, while both Black men and women have higher labour force participation rates than their White counterparts, they also experience higher unemployment rates and larger wage gaps on average compared with other racialized workers (Block et al, 2019).

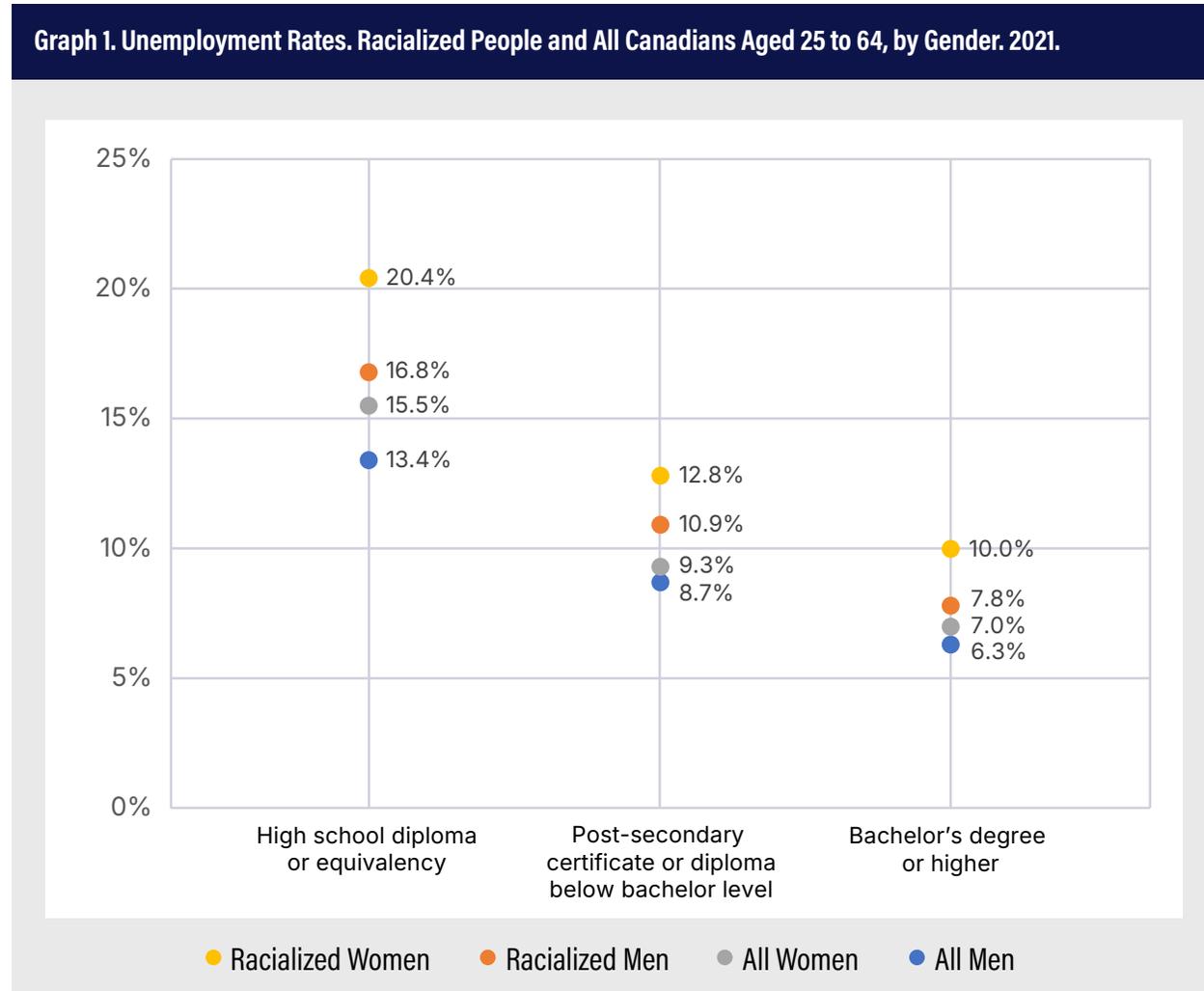
Explanations for the persistent gap in unemployment rates recognize that Black Canadians experience anti-Black racism both when seeking employment and when they do secure employment, contributing to them leaving their employment prematurely. Research consistently shows a preference for hiring White job seekers over their equally qualified Black counterparts. One study sent in fictitious resumes to job openings. The resumes used Black sounding names and White sounding names and included comparable levels of work experience and education. The result was that Black candidates were less likely to be called for interviews than their White peers (Kang et al, 2016). This phenomenon, often referred to as racialized resume discrimination, reflects the deep-seated anti-Black racism embedded within hiring practices in Canada's labour market, leading job seekers to "whiten" their resumes to avoid anticipated discrimination.

Various researchers and employment agencies have commented on the stigma associated with having a criminal record, which is particularly harmful for Black Canadians. One study conducted in 2017 shows that Black job seekers, even when they don't have a criminal record, have a harder time securing an entry level service or retail job than their White counterparts with a criminal record. In this study, the researcher submitted resumes for entry level service and retail positions in Toronto for four fictional people: a Black woman without a criminal record; a Black woman with a criminal record; a White woman without a criminal record; and a White woman with a criminal record. Each resume was submitted to 64 job openings. The study found that White applicants with no criminal record received a callback rate of 31%, whereas White applicants with a criminal record received a callback rate of 19%. However, the Black applicant with no criminal record had a callback rate of 11% and the Black applicant with a criminal record had a callback rate of 2% (Cruickshank, 2017). Again, this study highlights the preference for hiring White candidates over Black candidates to the extent that employers would prefer a White candidate with a criminal record over a Black candidate without a criminal record.

Racialized people

Table 4 shows that racialized people also experience higher rates of unemployment than the general population (10.6% compared to 8.6%). This higher unemployment rate exists at each level of education, for women and men.

Graph 1 shows the unemployment rate for racialized men and women compared with all men and women by level of education. As the graph shows, racialized women experienced the highest unemployment rates, followed by racialized men at all levels of education.



Source: Statistics Canada, 2022a.

Because a large proportion of Canada’s racialized population consists of immigrants, the experience of racialized people is impacted by multiple factors. This disparity has been attributed in part to the lack of recognition or the devaluing of education and work experience earned outside of Canada (Famulak & MacKenzie, 2024), concern about language and social skills (Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012), the arbitrary requirement for “Canadian experience” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013), being deemed to be “overqualified” (Careering, 2022), and outright discrimination.

Despite these intersecting factors, various studies have highlighted the significance of racism over immigration-related considerations. One study concluded that being a racialized person “is a greater obstacle to economic integration than being an immigrant” (Boudarbat & Adom, 2023). This study found that Canadian-born

racialized people have a higher unemployment rate (15%) than racialized immigrants (12%). Another study that examined labour market statistics for immigrant and non-immigrant racialized Ontarians found that the differences in outcomes for immigrants is not simply due to education levels and language skills, but also to racialization (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018).

In 2009, to examine the experiences of racialized job seekers, researchers sent out thousands of resumes to job openings in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. While the content of the resumes was relatively similar, the researchers changed the names to those that were Chinese, Indian, and English. The candidates with English names received the highest callback rate. The study found that employers significantly discriminated against candidates based on their names, which are often treated as a signal of language and social skills, even when qualifications on the resume are similar (Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012).

4.2 Employment income

Statistics Canada data also shows that Indigenous Peoples, Black people, and racialized people have a lower average employment income than Canadians as a group. This reflects the types of jobs they have access to, underemployment, and the glass ceiling they experience when trying to access management and leadership positions.

Table 5 compares the average employment income of these three groups to that of all Canadians. As the data shows, Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadians, and racialized people all experience lower employment incomes compared to the total population.

Table 5. Average Employment Income. Aged 25 to 64. Canada. 2021.			
\$58,850	\$49,960	\$45,880	\$50,400
Total population	Indigenous Peoples	Black Canadians	Racialized people
Source: Statistics Canada, 2022a, 2022d.			

Indigenous Peoples

Table 5 shows that Indigenous Peoples aged 25 to 64 earned \$49,960 on average in 2021, compared with \$58,850 for the total Canadian population—a difference of \$8,890 or 15%.

Table 6 shows the wage gap for Indigenous men and women, compared with the average salary for all men. As Table 6 shows, for every \$1.00 the average Canadian man earned, Indigenous men earned 85 cents, all women earned 71 cents, and Indigenous women earned 62 cents.

Table 6. Wage Gap. Indigenous and All Workers aged 25 to 64. Canada. 2021.

Group	Average Employment Income	Wage Gap
All men	\$68,700	\$1.00
Indigenous men	\$58,150	\$0.85
All women	\$48,680	\$0.71
Indigenous women	\$42,320	\$0.62

Source: Statistics Canada, 2022d.

Black people

As Table 5 shows, Black workers aged 25 to 64 earned \$45,880 on average, compared to \$58,850 for all Canadians—a difference of \$12,970 or 22%.

This wage gap exists regardless of level of education. For example, among those with a bachelor's degree or higher, Black workers had an average income of \$58,000 compared to \$77,500 for all Canadians.

Table 7. Wage Gap. Black and All Workers Aged 25 to 64. Canada. 2021.

Group	Average Employment Income	Wage Gap
All men	\$68,700	\$1.00
Black men	\$49,320	\$0.72
All women	\$48,680	\$0.71
Black women	\$42,480	\$0.62

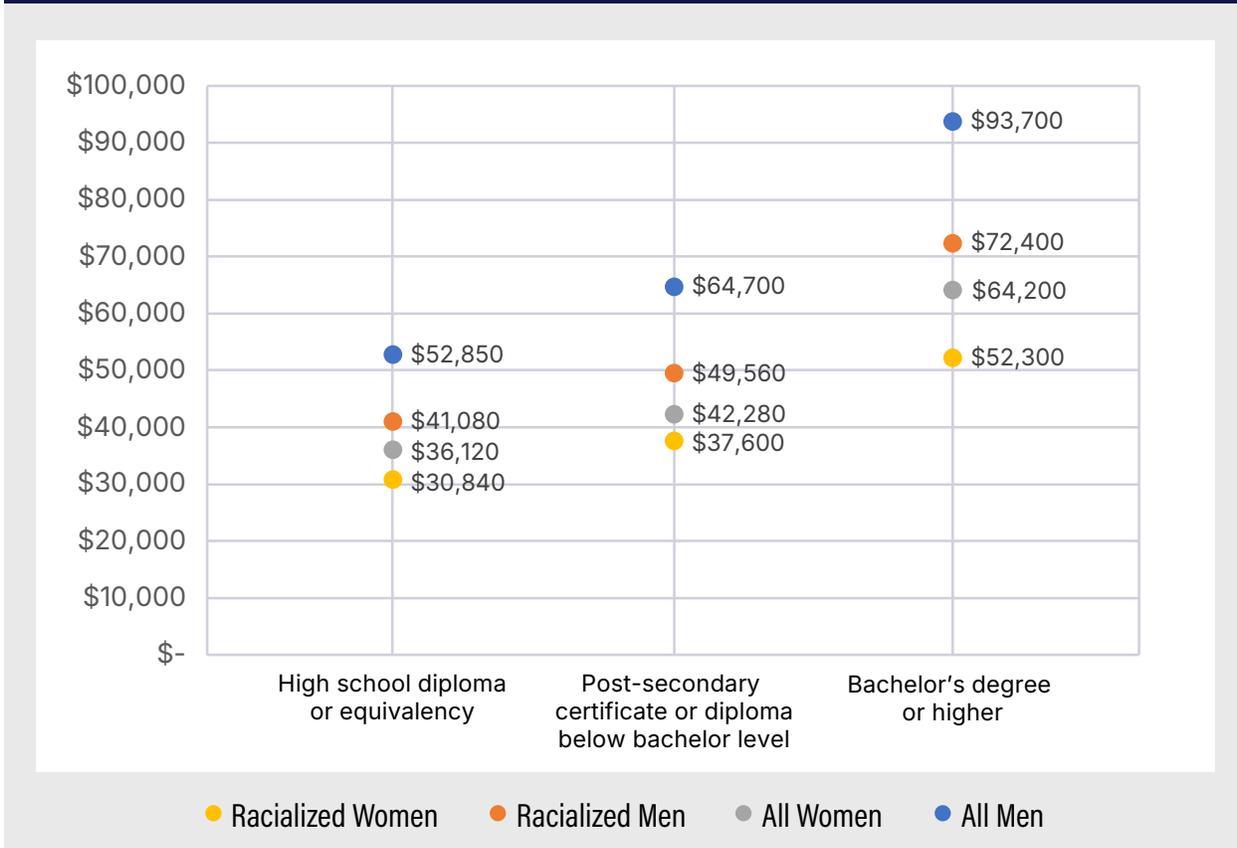
Source: Statistics Canada, 2022a.

The wage gap also exists for Black men and women. As Table 7 shows, for every \$1.00 all Canadian men earned on average, Black men earned 72 cents and Black women earned 62 cents.

Racialized people

Table 5 also shows that racialized workers aged 25 to 64 earn \$50,400 on average, compared to \$58,850 for all Canadians. This wage gap exists at all levels of education despite the racialized population being more highly educated on average.

Graph 2. Average Employment Income. Black and All Canadians Aged 25 to 64, by Gender. 2021.



Source: Statistics Canada, 2022a.

Graph 2 shows the average wages for racialized men and women compared with all men and women by level of education. As the graph shows, all men with a high school diploma earned just over \$52,000 on average. Racialized men need a post-secondary certificate or diploma to earn close to that, and racialized women need a bachelor’s degree or higher.

4.3 Retention, advancement, and inclusion in the workplace

After gaining employment, Indigenous, Black, and racialized employees often experience harassment, barriers to doing their best work, and barriers to their full inclusion in the workplace.

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous workers in Canada face persistent and significant barriers to retention, advancement, and inclusion within Canadian workplaces. These challenges are rooted in historical, ongoing social and economic marginalization and are exacerbated by structural, systemic, and interpersonal anti-Indigenous racism that disadvantage Indigenous workers.

Interpersonal anti-Indigenous racism remains prevalent in Canadian workplaces. Indigenous workers face prejudice and negative stereotyping, which contributes to a work environment that may not be welcoming or inclusive. The prevalence of discrimination, microaggressions, and cultural insensitivity makes it difficult for Indigenous employees to feel fully included in many workplaces. One study conducted by the Environics Institute found that 20% of Indigenous people reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace because of their Indigenous identity. For First Nations employees, that number is 50% (Zhou, 2022). Such experiences contribute to an environment that is psychologically unsafe and emotionally taxing, significantly impacting mental health and job satisfaction. Another study found that 52% of Indigenous Peoples surveyed felt like they had to be “on guard” at work, while about 60% felt physiologically unsafe at their workplaces (Thorpe-Moscon, 2021).

Statistics Canada also found that Indigenous Peoples are more likely to experience discrimination at work than non-Indigenous people (15% versus 9%). In addition, Indigenous people were three times more likely to report having experienced sexual harassment at work in the past 12 months than non-Indigenous Peoples (6.8% versus 2.3%) (Bleakney et al, 2024).

Stereotyping and discrimination by employers and co-workers can also poison a workplace atmosphere and contribute to a negative work experience for Indigenous Peoples. Racism “is one of the fundamental barriers to Indigenous people getting a job and remaining in the job, and it is directly related to the attitudes passed down since European settlers arrived in North America” (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2019). Indigenous workers often report feeling alienated or excluded from their workplace cultures, which tend to be shaped by White, mainstream norms. Many workplaces lack adequate policies or practices that support the needs of Indigenous employees, such as flexible work schedules that accommodate cultural or spiritual practices (such as ceremonies or observances), access to traditional healing practices, or a space for cultural expression. As a result, Indigenous workers may feel forced to suppress their identity to fit into predominantly White work environments.

Indigenous workers also face significant barriers to career advancement. According to the 2016 Census, although Indigenous people made up around 4.9% of Canada’s population, they were underrepresented in high-status and leadership roles across most industries (Cukier et al, 2024b). The absence of Indigenous Peoples in managerial and decision-making positions means there is a lack of mentorship and role models for younger or less experienced Indigenous workers. This makes it more difficult for Indigenous employees to envision a path to career advancement and leadership roles within their organizations.

Black people

Despite a growing focus on the workplace experiences of Black Canadians since the 2020 murder of George Floyd, they continue to experience systemic discrimination, inequitable career opportunities, and negative stereotypes, which limit their ability to thrive professionally. These challenges are deeply rooted in Canada's history of anti-Black racism and continue to be exacerbated by structural, systemic, and interpersonal racism.

Black employees are more likely to experience negative stereotyping, which affects how they are perceived and their advancement opportunities. Stereotypes such as assumptions about Black workers' competence or qualifications, work ethic, and interpersonal skills can lead to unequal treatment and missed opportunities for promotions and professional development.

York University professor Lorne Foster concluded from a 2023 national survey that 75% of Black Canadians experience racism at work and that the work world is "really the epicentre of experiences of discrimination" for African Canadians (McLean, 2023). In addition, research in 2022 found that 50% of Black Canadian employees experienced race-based discrimination in the workplace and 96% of Black Canadians reported racism to be a problem at work (Zou et al, 2022). In the same research study, 78% of Black Canadians reported that workplace racism is a serious or very serious issue. By contrast, the majority (56%) of White participants felt that racism in the workplace was a small problem or not a problem at all.

Despite having qualifications and experience equivalent to their non-Black colleagues, Black workers are underrepresented in senior and leadership positions across various industries. According to a 2024 study by the Diversity Institute, Black people account for 4.2% of the Canadian population, yet they represent 3.8% of boards of directors and 2.6% of senior managers across sectors in the 10 cities studied (Cukier et al, 2024a).

Lack of mentorship and sponsorship is a significant issue for Black employees, especially in industries where they are underrepresented. Mentorship is essential for career growth, but Black employees often find that there are fewer opportunities to connect with senior leaders who can provide guidance and advocacy for advancement. Without mentors or sponsors to champion their growth, Black workers may find it more difficult to move into senior roles, thus reinforcing existing racial inequalities in the workplace.

Microaggressions and overt discrimination in the workplace contribute to an environment that is not welcoming to Black workers. Microaggressions, or subtle forms of discrimination, can include being ignored in meetings, receiving unwarranted negative feedback, or having one's work criticized more harshly than that of their peers. A 2024 study by KPMG found that 81% of Black Canadians had experienced

racism or microaggressions in the workplace in the previous 12 months, an increase from 72% in 2022 (KPMG, 2024).

Additionally, some Black workers face more overt forms of discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Various news reports and human rights complaints highlight the many ways in which Black workers experience anti-Black racism, including nooses being found on Toronto construction job sites (Lavoie, 2023) and at an Alberta hospital (Rusnell & Russell, 2021), and managers raising concerns about a Black worker's hair, with one manager stating that it might scare people (Francis, 2020).

It is important to note the impact of these negative experiences. Numerous studies show that racism and discrimination negatively impact the mental and physical health of Black and racialized groups, making them more susceptible to chronic illnesses like hypertension, anxiety, and depression. Workplace discrimination significantly increases as a person's number of intersecting identities (such as race, gender, sexuality, disability) increases. Black women in particular face prolonged unemployment and are overrepresented in precarious low-income jobs that lack benefits. Their precarious situation in the labour economy, coupled with the unique anti-Black racism they experience, negatively impacts their health, which was only exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Williams, 2022).

Racialized workers

Despite growing diversity in Canada's workforce, racialized individuals continue to encounter systemic discrimination, unequal opportunities, and structural inequities that impede their professional success. For racialized people who report experiencing discrimination, the workplace is the source of half of the complaints (Statistics Canada, 2024a). Between 2021 and 2024, just over half (51%) of racialized Canadians aged 15 and older reported experiencing discrimination, with the workplace (41%) being the most common location for these experiences.

Microaggressions are a daily reality for many racialized workers. They can take the form of offhand remarks, assumptions about a worker's competence or background, assumptions that they are newcomers, or being overlooked for opportunities. These interactions can contribute to a negative work environment and damage employees' mental health and overall job satisfaction.

Racialized workers often encounter significant barriers to career advancement in the broader Canadian labour market. Despite having the qualifications and experience necessary for leadership roles, racialized employees are disproportionately underrepresented in senior management and decision-making positions. In the three censuses (2006, 2011, and 2016), racialized Canadians aged 25 to 64 years were about half as likely as the rest of the population to hold senior management positions. In 2016, 15 workers per 1,000 who were part of the rest of the population were in a

senior management position compared with seven workers per 1,000 of racialized groups. Within the racialized population, there were differences between immigrants and non-immigrants in the same age group, where nine non-immigrants per 1,000 held senior management positions compared with seven immigrants per 1,000 in 2016. The representation in senior management positions also varied by gender. In the 25 to 64 age group, men were twice as likely to be in senior management positions compared to women in both the racialized population and the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

This lack of inclusivity in Canadian workplaces can result in cultural stereotyping or bias in how racialized workers are treated by colleagues and managers. Racialized employees may face assumptions about their language skills, work ethic, or even professional competencies based on their race or ethnicity. These stereotypes can perpetuate unequal treatment and limit opportunities for professional growth.

In addition, accent discrimination poses a significant challenge for racialized immigrant workers in the Canadian labour market. This bias can affect their chances of being hired, promoted, or even treated equitably in professional environments. Accent discrimination can lead to microaggressions and increased workplace stress, thus undermining workers' confidence and limiting their career advancement opportunities (Kang, 2020). The bias against certain accents can result in racialized employees being overlooked for promotions or receiving lower performance evaluations, exacerbating existing inequalities in the workforce (Jandt, 2020).

5. The Experiences of Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Workers in the Federal Public Service

For decades, unions, employee groups, and individual employees have identified the existence of racism in the federal public service and have been advocating for the federal government to acknowledge and address racism and its impact on the personal and professional well-being of Indigenous, Black, and racialized employees. These three groups have similar—yet distinct—experiences of racism in the federal public service. Of particular note are their experiences in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), which will be highlighted here, given their relationships with communities and the recognition of the systemic nature of racism through class action lawsuits.

Indigenous Peoples

The evidence shows that Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian federal public service continue to face challenges such as barriers to hiring, pay gaps, discrimination, and underrepresentation in leadership roles.

In 2021, the representation of Indigenous people in the public service has increased to 5.2%, exceeding their workforce availability of 3.8% (Government of Canada, 2023c). These gains, however, have not been consistent across all federal departments.

Research has confirmed that Indigenous Peoples continue to encounter various barriers that affect their ability to access jobs with the federal public service.

These include:

- Cultural bias of hiring managers
- Geographic location of jobs
- Language requirements
- Education requirements
- Recruitment and staffing tools, methods, approaches, and systems
- Online application process (Government of Canada, 2017)

In 2021, the Indigenous Centre of Expertise at the Public Service Commission (PSC) finished consultations to understand the barriers experienced by Indigenous Peoples in the recruitment processes of the federal government. They found that throughout a complex recruitment and interview process, Indigenous applicants had little support. “The respondents unanimously cited the complexity of the recruitment process as the main reason to explain why Indigenous Peoples weren’t applying to federal government jobs. Public service application and assessment processes are perceived

as long and challenging to understand.... The absence of communication and long periods between the various steps in the recruitment process were also a deterrent” (Government of Canada, 2023b).

In recent years, the federal government has committed to improving Indigenous representation and fostering a more inclusive work environment. Initiatives such as the Federal Indigenous Recruitment Strategy and the Indigenous Peoples Employment Strategy have focused on increasing Indigenous representation within federal departments and supporting career development for Indigenous employees (Government of Canada, 2020). These initiatives aim to create a more inclusive environment that values Indigenous perspectives and encourages their integration into the broader public service workforce.

Efforts have also been made to increase their representation in the public service through initiatives such as the Indigenous Internship Program and the Indigenous Leadership Development Initiative, which are aimed at enhancing career opportunities for Indigenous people and promoting their representation in leadership roles (Government of Canada, 2020).

Despite these efforts, many challenges remain. Indigenous employees continue to face systemic barriers to career advancement, and their underrepresentation in senior management positions persists. The issues are particularly acute in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Canadian Air Force (CAF).

Indigenous people working within the RCMP face unique challenges related to racism and discrimination, both from within the force and in their interactions with Indigenous communities. While the RCMP has historically played a controversial role in the treatment of Indigenous Peoples—particularly through its involvement in the enforcement of colonial policies and the suppression of Indigenous rights (RCMP, 2024)—Indigenous officers report experiencing significant barriers to advancement, systemic discrimination, and racial profiling within the organization (Taylor, 2023). These experiences create a workplace environment that can be isolating and alienating for Indigenous officers, affecting their mental health, job satisfaction, and career progression.

Indigenous officers also face challenges in their interactions with Indigenous communities. Given the RCMP’s historical role in enforcing policies that harmed Indigenous Peoples, many Indigenous officers experience difficulty in building trust with the communities they are meant to serve. This complex relationship is often marked by skepticism and resistance from Indigenous people, who view the RCMP as an extension of colonial oppression. Additionally, Indigenous officers are sometimes caught between their identity and duty, feeling torn between upholding the force’s policies and aligning with the needs and interests of their communities. As a result, Indigenous RCMP members may find themselves stigmatized by both their peers and

the people they are supposed to protect, leading to heightened feelings of stress and alienation.

In 2020, the Minister of National Defence acknowledged that systemic racism and prejudice still persist in the CAF when he established an advisory panel to examine the issues, with a focus on anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism, 2SLGBTQ+ prejudice, gender bias, and white supremacy (Department of National Defence, 2020). The advisory panel found that Indigenous people are underrepresented in the CAF and that while there are efforts to recruit Indigenous people, little effort is made to retain them. As the report notes, “The Programs for Indigenous Peoples almost appear to be an effort to ‘get them in the door’ so that they can then be assimilated to the traditional military mould with no further regard for their cultural diversity” (Department of National Defence, 2022). The report notes that while Indigenous people felt that the military was a place in which they could have a long-term and exciting career, they experienced racism, stereotyping, and microaggressions.

Black people

The representation and experiences of Black people in Canada’s federal public service are shaped by historical and systemic inequalities, as well as ongoing efforts to address these barriers and promote inclusion. While progress has been made, Black employees continue to face underrepresentation, challenges in career advancement, and issues related to racism and discrimination.

Black Canadians made up approximately 4.2% of the core public administration in the federal public service, yet they are concentrated in lower-level administrative categories and represent only 1.6% of those at the executive level (Government of Canada, 2023c).

Black employees in the federal public service often report encountering various forms of discrimination, both overt and subtle. A significant challenge is the prevalence of microaggressions, implicit bias, and racism, which can affect their professional experiences. Racialized employees, including Black workers, are also frequently overlooked for promotions and are often subject to stereotyping. These barriers make it difficult for Black employees to advance within the public service, contributing to a lack of career progression and job satisfaction.

On January 23, 2019, the Federal Black Employee Caucus held its inaugural national symposium. The event brought together Black employees, human resources practitioners, and members of parliament, including the President of the Treasury Board at the time, to conceive of solutions to persistent issues faced by Black employees within the federal public service. Over 100 attendees discussed solutions to issues of harassment and discrimination, representation and advancement, self-care and well-being, disaggregated employment equity data, and the experiences of Black women (Federal Black Employee Caucus, 2019). The problems identified

regarding representation and advancement, as summarized in the symposium report, include:

- The concentration of Black employees is in the lower groups/levels (administrative positions) within the public service.
- There are very few Black people at the most senior levels.
- Discrimination may go unnoticed by new employees, but as time progresses, the discrimination they experience becomes evident.
- Discrimination exists in the staffing/competitive process.
- Black employees in middle management and more senior levels experience feelings of isolation.
- There is a retention problem.
- Black employees have to put in more effort than others.
- Black employees are stigmatized (i.e. “angry Black woman”).
- Non-Black employees in the same positions move up faster, and Black employees often end up training their bosses.
- Black employees are often told they are not being promoted because they are “not the right fit.” The criteria for being the right fit are not transparent.

In addition, the session on harassment and discrimination included the issue of performance measurement/management, which is “used to keep Black employees exactly where they are.” The participants recommended that statistics be kept on how many Black employees are on performance management action plans.

In 2020, frustrated by their ongoing experiences of anti-Black racism, Black employees of Canada’s federal public service filed a class-action lawsuit alleging systemic racism and discrimination in the workplace. The lawsuit claims that Black federal workers face significant barriers to hiring, promotions, and career advancement, despite their qualifications and experience. Plaintiffs assert that they are subjected to racial profiling, microaggressions, and discriminatory practices, which systematically hinders their professional development (Black Class Action, 2024). The lawsuit points to a lack of effective measures within the federal government to address racial discrimination, leading to a work environment where Black employees are underrepresented in leadership positions and often overlooked for opportunities. The plaintiffs are seeking acknowledgment of the systemic racism they face, financial compensation, and meaningful reforms to create a more equitable and inclusive workplace for Black public servants. The case has raised broader discussions about racism and inequity in public sector employment in Canada, calling attention to the need for comprehensive changes to address these entrenched issues.

In response to these challenges faced by Black employees, the Canadian federal government has launched several initiatives aimed at improving the representation and inclusion of Black people in the public service. For instance, programs such as the Federal Internship for Black Canadians and the Black Employee Network are designed to provide mentorship, career development, and networking opportunities for Black workers (Government of Canada, 2020). These initiatives focus on increasing the recruitment and retention of Black employees, particularly in senior positions.

The *Public Service Employment Act* has also been amended to promote diversity and equity in the federal public service, with an emphasis on addressing systemic racism and fostering inclusive workplaces (Government of Canada, 2020). Additionally, various departments and agencies have introduced diversity training and anti-racism workshops to improve awareness and create more supportive work environments for Black employees.

Racism within the RCMP has been a long-standing issue that Black officers, as well as those interacting with the police, have faced in various forms. Numerous reports and testimony from Black RCMP officers and members of the public have highlighted systemic racism, discriminatory practices, and barriers to advancement within the force. Black RCMP officers often report experiencing racial profiling, microaggressions, and discrimination from colleagues and supervisors. In 2019, a lawsuit was filed by Black RCMP officers alleging systemic racism and discrimination within the force. The lawsuit claimed that Black officers were subjected to racial slurs, were assigned less desirable duties, and were systematically denied opportunities for career advancement. The case also cited concerns over a culture of silence in which those who spoke out about discrimination faced retaliation, further deepening challenges to addressing the problem (Vancouver Sun, 2019).

A similar class action lawsuit was filed against the CAF. In January 2025, the Government of Canada announced the settlement of this lawsuit from current and former CAF members who experienced racial harassment and/or discrimination during their military service (Government of Canada, 2025).

The experiences of some Black CAF members highlight the persistent nature of anti-Black racism with the CAF. One member was discharged in 2004 after three years of service because of post-traumatic stress disorder, a diagnosis that came after he suffered ongoing racism at the hands of his colleagues (Mulligan, 2018). The alleged racism includes racist jokes, racist nicknames, and denial of warm clothing, food, and sleep. In addition, one victim claims that his sons, who lived on the base with him, were taunted on the school bus, spat on, and subjected to drive-by verbal assaults. He transferred from a base in British Columbia to Ontario, where the harassment continued. Another former member indicated that when he reported the abuse to a superior office, he was told to put up with it or leave the CAF (CBC News, 2014).

The effects of racism within the CAF are not limited to Black personnel but also impact the military's relationship with Black and racialized communities across Canada. The perception of systemic racism in the CAF can further erode trust between racialized communities and the military, which then makes it difficult to recruit from these communities.

Racialized people

In 2021, approximately 20% of the federal workforce was made up of racialized employees—higher than the workforce availability estimate of 17% (Government of Canada, 2023c). While racialized employees make up a considerable portion of the overall workforce, they are disproportionately represented in lower-level administrative roles and significantly underrepresented in senior management positions; 14% of executive positions were held by racialized people.

The 2022 Public Service Employee Survey found that racialized employees report more negative views of their workplace and more instances of harassment and discrimination than their White counterparts (Government of Canada, 2022). The federal government has recently acknowledged the existence and impact of racism on federal employees. The Final Report of the Joint Union/Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion states (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2017):

Racism, discrimination and harassment in all their forms have been identified as workplace challenges in Canada's public service. Results from the 2017 PSEAS and the Public Service Employee Survey for more than a decade provide evidence that the public service has challenges in welcoming and including members of emerging and long-standing equity-seeking groups.

Legal actions, including class-action lawsuits, have also sought justice for racialized officers who have faced systemic racism within the RCMP, urging the federal government to address the persistent issue of discriminatory practices in one of the country's most visible law enforcement bodies (Klein Lawyers, 2025). Similar to the experiences of Indigenous and Black people, racialized people have long reported experiencing racism within the RCMP, both as officers and as members of the public. Many have reported facing racial profiling, microaggressions, and outright racism from their colleagues and superiors. In interviews and lawsuits, racialized RCMP officers have described being passed over for promotions, assigned less desirable tasks, and subjected to racial slurs or derogatory remarks. These experiences of discrimination are often compounded by a lack of effective support systems within the RCMP and a culture of silence that discourages those who face racism from speaking out.

6. Policy Implications

The Government of Canada has long recognized that discrimination has a significant impact on the labour market experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized people. In order to examine the issues and make recommendations to address them, the Canadian government established the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, also known as the Abella Commission, in 1983. The commission's mandate was to investigate and recommend ways to achieve equity in the workplace. The commission's 1984 report, known as the "Abella Report," highlighted the barriers to employment faced by four groups (Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized people,¹ and women). The commission coined the term "employment equity" and its recommendations led to the 1986 *Employment Equity Act*, which required federal departments, federally regulated private sector companies with 100 or more employees, and federal contractors to identify and remove systemic barriers to employment and close gaps in representation for these groups.

A review of the *Employment Equity Act* was initiated by the government, with the goal of modernizing the Act. One of the recommendations from the Task Force was the inclusion of Black people as a separate employment equity designated group in recognition of the distinct history of slavery and segregation in Canada as well as the statistical data showing the persistent differential treatment and underrepresentation of Black people in the labour market (Blackett, 2023).

The *Canadian Human Rights Act* (CHRA) aims to prevent discrimination and promote equity in various social areas, including employment. The CHRA protects individuals from discrimination based on factors like race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, and more. The CHRA imposes obligations on employers to ensure that hiring and promotion practices are non-discriminatory. Employers must also accommodate employees' needs based on prohibited grounds of discrimination and prevent harassment. Employers are also required to address and resolve complaints of discrimination in a timely and effective manner. Similar human rights legislation exists for each province and territory. In addition, the *Public Service Employment Act* requires that the public service be representative of the populations it serves.

More recently, in recognition of the systemic nature of racism within the public service and across Canada, the Government of Canada launched an anti-racism strategy. It was first released in 2019 and recently updated with the launch of *Changing Systems, Transforming Lives: Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2028*.

Recognizing this framework for addressing systemic racism in the labour market, more can be done to address racism within individual organizations and the federal public service.

¹ The term used at that time was "visible minorities."

Strengthening Anti-Racism Policies and Legislation

A critical step to addressing racial discrimination in the labour market is the enforcement of stronger anti-racism policies and regulations. For example, the *Employment Equity Act* mandates federal departments and regulated employers ensure the fair representation of marginalized groups, including Indigenous, Black, and racialized people, in their workforce. However, many argue that the implementation and enforcement of these policies need to be more robust. Regular audits, accountability measures, and clear consequences for non-compliance are necessary to ensure that employers follow through with their diversity and inclusion commitments.

Equitable and Inclusive Human Resources Policies and Practices

Employers should ensure that their human resources policies and practices are equitable and inclusive of a diverse workforce and in compliance with human rights and other equity-related legislation. In addition, employment policies, practices, and physical spaces could be modified to be more accommodating of cultural practices and identities. This can include ensuring the provision of religious accommodation to enable workers to take time off work to observe religious or cultural observances. In addition, organizations should ensure that prayer space is made available and that when hosting meetings that include food, kosher and halal options are available.

Additionally, workplaces should consider implementing wellness programs tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers to address mental health issues, stress, and burnout. Ensuring that their employee and family assistance programs provide culturally appropriate mental health support services and access to traditional healing practices for Indigenous employees can help workers feel more supported and included in the workplace.

Bias-Free Hiring Practices

One of the biggest challenges employers face is increasing racial representation in the workplace, particularly in senior leadership and decision-making roles, despite the benefits that diversity provides for an organization. Research shows that organizations with greater diversity at all levels perform better and have higher levels of employee satisfaction (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

To help diversify their workforce employers should implement bias-free hiring practices that remove biases in the hiring process and focuses more closely on hiring based on the skills and abilities needed for the job. This includes removing requirements that are not bona fide job requirements, e.g., the requirement for a driver's license or a criminal records check. Interview questions should also be reviewed to more closely align them with the skills and abilities needed for the job and to remove interview questions which are not relevant to assessing the candidate (e.g., asking "Why do you want this job?") and those which are gender or culturally biased

(e.g., asking “Why are you the best person for this job?”). Hiring practices should also include a process that anonymizes resumes so that the identity markers of candidates (e.g., names and addresses) are hidden to reduce implicit bias in the recruitment process.

Focus on Closing Gaps in Representation

Where underrepresentation exists, organizations should set targets for hiring and report on their progress regularly. This is a requirement of organizations to comply with the federal *Employment Equity Act*. It is also permitted by all provincial and territorial human rights codes.

The establishment of targets will help organizations focus on outreach recruitment to ensure that job seekers from diverse communities know about and are encouraged to apply to their job openings. Organizations should also identify and remove artificial barriers to the hiring of job seekers from marginalized communities and hire for diversity to meet these targets.

Training and Mentorship Programs

Organizations can also develop training and mentorship programs to help ensure people are skilled and prepared to take on new roles. For example, the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program provides training and employment opportunities for Indigenous Peoples to bridge the skills gap and promote their participation in various sectors.

Mentorship programs can also support career advancement for Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers. Senior leaders and managers should actively participate in mentoring employees from underrepresented groups and helping them navigate organizational structures, career opportunities, and professional development resources. This can help break down the barriers that often prevent Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers from rising to leadership positions.

Diversity and Inclusion Training

Diversity and inclusion training that goes beyond surface-level training that increases awareness is needed to change workplace behaviours. This training will help foster positive and inclusive work environments which is needed if organizations are to retain Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers. Comprehensive diversity and inclusion training should address implicit bias, microaggressions, and unconscious stereotyping, as these factors often contribute to discrimination in hiring, promotions, and everyday workplace interactions. Additionally, effective training must be ongoing—not just one-time events—and be integrated into the organizational culture.

Creating Safe Reporting Mechanisms

For Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers to feel safe and supported, organizations must implement safe, confidential reporting mechanisms with which employees can report incidents of racism, discrimination, or microaggressions without fear of retaliation. Employers should ensure that these mechanisms are easily accessible and that employees know how to use them. Furthermore, organizations must take swift, transparent action when allegations of discrimination arise and ensure that there is accountability for those found responsible for discriminatory behaviours.

The implementation of employee resource groups, especially those dedicated to supporting Black, Indigenous, and racialized employees, can also provide workers with a safe space to discuss issues related to discrimination, share experiences, and advocate for change. These groups can play a crucial role in driving workplace reforms by giving employees a collective voice to highlight issues that might otherwise be overlooked by leadership.

Promoting Public Awareness and Accountability

Creating broader public awareness about the importance of racial equity in the workplace is crucial for shifting societal attitudes toward Indigenous, Black, and racialized workers. Media campaigns, public service announcements, and education programs can help educate the general public about the value of diversity in the workforce and the negative effects of racial discrimination on individuals, organizations, and society. Governments, organizations, and advocacy groups should work together to challenge and change the broader societal norms that perpetuate racial discrimination in employment.

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