



Canadian public opinion about racism and discrimination

FINAL REPORT

Executive summary

The killing of George Floyd, an African-American, by white police officers in Minneapolis earlier this year sparked anti-racism protests across the United States and around the world, along with a wider public discussion of anti-Black racism and systemic racism. In Canada, this movement energized ongoing efforts to condemn and counter racism within society and recurring instances of police brutality against racial minorities. These events have had a clear impact on the Canadian public's awareness of the reality of racism in this country.

Over the past year, there has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of Canadians who say that discrimination against either Black people or Chinese people is no longer a problem in Canada. In each case, only half as many take this view in 2020 compared to 2019. Notably, the views of both those who identify as white and those who are racialized have shifted in the same direction. While the growing awareness of the reality of racism faced by Black Canadians can be linked to the focus on anti-black racism and instances of police brutality against racialized persons in Canada, the parallel shift in view of discrimination against Chinese Canadians likely stems from publicized incidents of abusive behaviour against people of Chinese background in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that first emerged in China.

Over the past decade, Canadians have also grown more supportive of racial minorities. A growing proportion agree that it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in Canadian society, while fewer feel that ethnic and racial groups need to take more responsibility for solving their own economic and social problems. Again, there is a notable similarity on these questions between the views of racialized Canadians and those who identify as white.

The past decade has also seen a significant decline in confidence in the police. A majority of Canadians continue to express confidence in their local police force and the RCMP, but the level of confidence has fallen since 2010 to the lowest level ever recorded since Focus Canada first asked the question in 1988. In this case, there is a difference between the views of white and racialized Canadians, with those who identify as white being significantly more likely to express confidence in the police.

Finally, while becoming more aware of the pervasiveness of racism, a majority of Canadians are optimistic that we will make real progress in addressing racism and discrimination in Canada over the next decade. Canadians tend to think that progress is more likely to be made through the actions of individual citizens than through government action.

About this research

This report examines the results from two public opinion surveys completed in late summer-early fall 2020:

- ***A better Canada: Values and Priorities after COVID-19***, was conducted online with 3,008 Canadians between August 17 and 24, 2020, in partnership with Vancity. (Margin of sampling error is not an applicable measure of accuracy with online surveys conducted with non-probability samples.)
- ***Focus Canada Fall 2020*** is the latest edition of the Environics Institute's Focus Canada public opinion research program (launched in 1976), in this case conducted in partnership with the Faculty of Social Sciences' IMPACT project at the University of Ottawa, and Century Initiative. This survey is based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cell phones) with 2,000 Canadians between September 8 and 23, 2020. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples.

Background

The news headlines in 2020 have been dominated by one topic: the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions, hardship and loss of life it has caused. But for much of the spring and summer, a second issue also captured the public attention: the reaction to the killing of George Floyd, an African-American, by white police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd's death set off a series of anti-racism protests in the United States and around the world. In Canada, it sparked not only public protests, but a wider public discussion of anti-Black racism, systemic racism, and the steps that public and private institutions still need to take to promote racial equality.

These events in Canada unfolded at a time when the reality of racism was already widely, if not universally, acknowledged. The [Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey](#), conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, found that many Canadians across different racial backgrounds report experiences of racism and discrimination due to race. At the same time, most Canadians acknowledge that racialized Canadians experience discrimination either often or at least occasionally. The survey also found that, the reality of racism in Canada notwithstanding, most Canadians believe that different racial groups generally get along with one another, and are more likely to be optimistic than pessimistic about achieving racial equality in their lifetimes.

How did the events of 2020 affect these attitudes? Did Canadians become even more aware of the impact of racism on racialized individuals and communities in this country, or did they seek to differentiate themselves from the United States by insisting that racism does not happen here? Was the public's optimism about the state of race relations in this country sapped or boosted? Did the events bring racialized and white Canadians closer together in their perspectives on racism, or push them further apart?

In order to explore these questions, this report examines the responses to questions in two surveys that took place at the end of the summer of 2020: *A Better Canada: Values and Priorities after COVID-19*, conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with Vancity, and *Focus Canada*, conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with the Faculty of Social Sciences' IMPACT project at the University of Ottawa and Century Initiative.

Discrimination against racialized people in Canada

The past year has seen a dramatic decline in the proportion of Canadians believing that discrimination against Black and Chinese people is no longer a problem in Canada. This shift has occurred among both those who identify as white and those who are racialized.

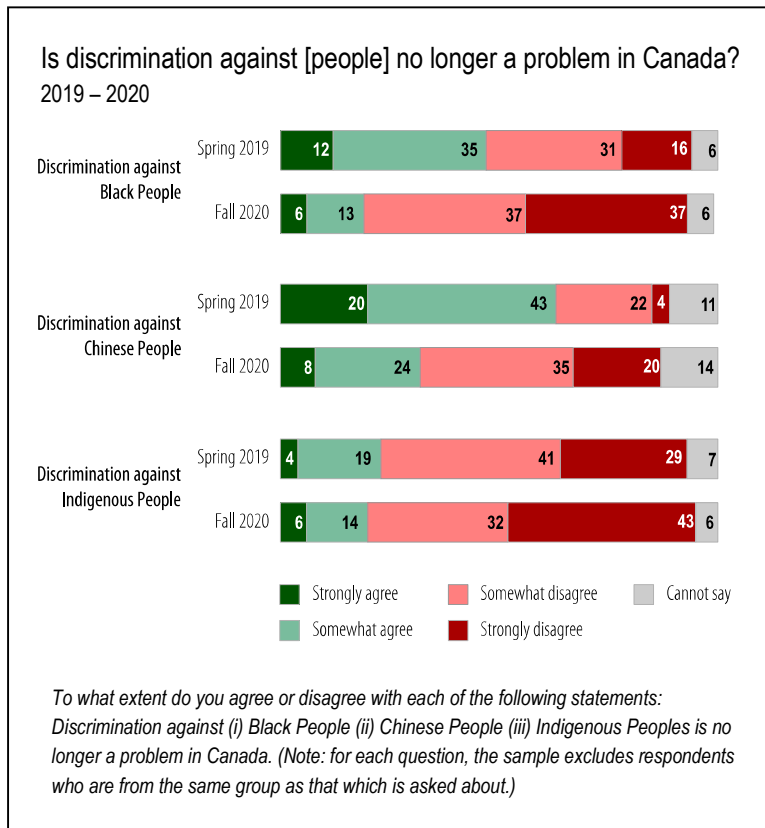
The [Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey](#), conducted by the Environics Institute and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, found that most Canadians acknowledge the existence of racism in their society, but also revealed some degree of wishful thinking about the extent to which discrimination against specific racial groups might now be in the past. At that time, a majority of Canadians agreed that discrimination against Chinese people is no longer a problem in Canada, while opinions were more evenly divided when it came to discrimination against Black people. In contrast, fewer than one in four agreed that discrimination against Indigenous Peoples is no longer a problem.¹

Just over a year later, public perspectives have changed dramatically. The proportion of Canadians who now say that discrimination against Chinese people is no longer a problem in Canada has fallen by more than half (from 63% in 2019 to 31% in 2020). Similarly, in the case of discrimination against Black people, fewer than half as many today compared to 2019 say that it is no longer a problem (falling from 47% to 20%).²

By comparison, there has been little change over the past year in the overall level of agreement that discrimination against Indigenous Peoples is longer a problem (20%, down 3 percentage points since 2019) – although the proportion saying that discrimination against this population is no longer a problem was already comparatively low.

But the strength of disagreement has increased, with the proportion strongly disagreeing that discrimination against Indigenous Peoples is no longer a problem increasing from 29 percent in 2019 to 43 percent today.

The views of Canadians who identify as white were no less affected than those who are racialized.³ Between 2019 and 2020, the proportion of white Canadians agreeing that discrimination against Chinese people is no longer a



¹ For these questions, survey participants were only asked about their perceptions of the experiences of racial groups other than their own (in other words, responses regarding the experiences of Chinese people do not include survey participants who identified as Chinese).

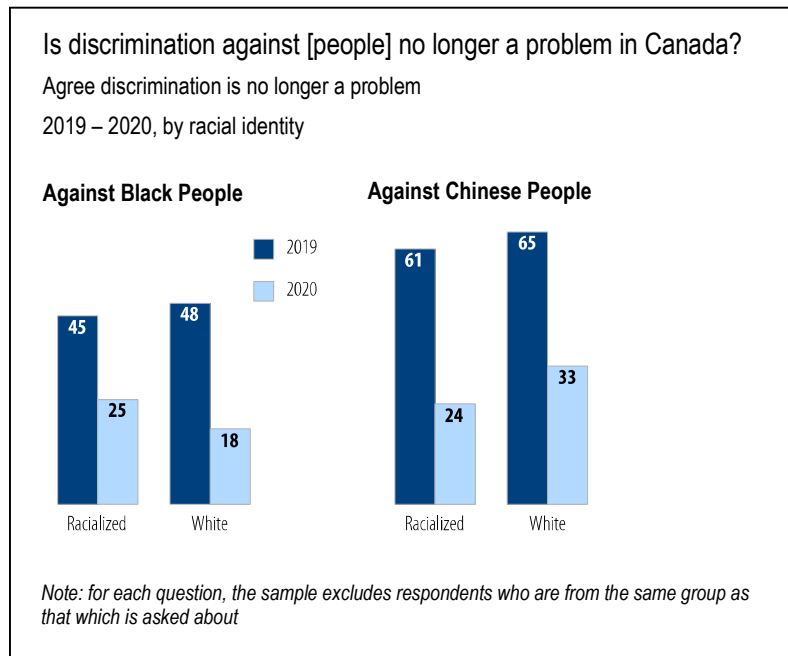
² In order to compare results to the 2019 survey, these results were calculated by excluding respondents from the same background as the group being asked about (i.e., responses regarding the experiences of Chinese people do not include survey participants who identified as Chinese).

³ Both surveys covered in this report asked participants to indicate which ancestral origins or cultural backgrounds best described them (multiple responses were permitted), based on a question similar to that used in the Canadian census (with the addition of a category for those identifying as Indigenous). The results for racialized Canadians presented in this report combine responses for those who did not select “white” as a category that describes their origins or background. The sample sizes for this group is not large enough to allow for the disaggregation of results for specific racialized populations.

problem in Canada fell from 65 to 33 percent, while the proportion disagreeing increased from 23 to 54 percent. In reference to discrimination against Black people no longer being a problem, the proportion of white Canadians agreeing fell from 48 percent to 18 percent, while the proportion disagreeing increased from 46 to 77 percent.

It is reasonable to attribute the growing awareness of the reality of racism faced by Black Canadians to the focus on anti-Black racism following the killing of George Floyd in the United States, and the efforts by the anti-racism movement in Canada to shine more light on instances of discrimination and police brutality against racialized peoples in this country.

These events may also explain the growing strength of the rejection of the premise that discrimination against Indigenous peoples is no longer a problem. The parallel shift in view in the case of Chinese Canadians likely has another source, however, namely, the coming to light of number of incidents of abusive behaviour against people of Chinese background in the wake of the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

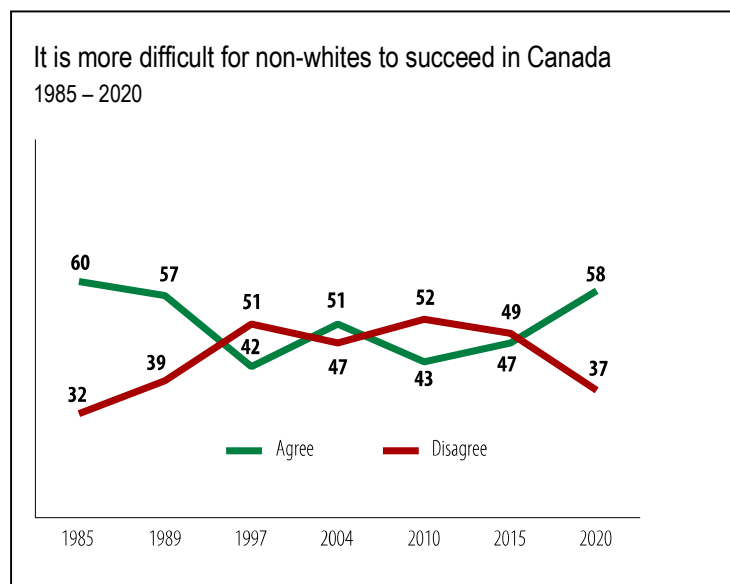


Addressing the challenges confronting racialized peoples

Compared to five years ago, Canadians today demonstrate a greater awareness of the barriers facing racialized people in this country, and are now less likely to place the onus for change on racialized peoples themselves. The views of racialized Canadians and those who identify as white are notably similar.

Challenges facing racial minorities in Canada. In the mid-1980s, most Canadians agreed that it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in this country than it is for those who are white. By the mid-1990s, however, opinions were more evenly divided. This pattern held for roughly two decades, with roughly equal proportions agreeing and disagreeing.

But over the past five years opinions have shifted back again: currently, 58 percent of Canadians now agree that it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in Canadian society than it is for those who are white (up 11 percentage points since 2015), compared with 37 percent who disagree (down 12 points).



Responsibility for progress. When it comes to addressing racial inequality, some people focus on the need for society as a whole to change, while others tend to place the onus for change on racial minorities themselves. In Canada, the proportion holding the latter view has been declining steadily since 1985. Thirty five years ago, eight in ten (80%) Canadians agreed that ethnic and racial groups should take more responsibility for solving their own economic and social problems; today fewer than one in two (47%) hold this view.

Disagreement has risen from 12 percent to 44 percent over that period. For the first time, Canadians are now more or less evenly divided on this question – whereas previously many more agreed than disagreed.

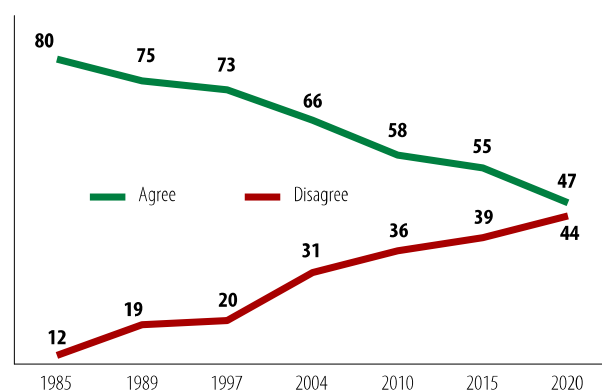
The similarity of views between racialized Canadians and those who identify as white on both questions is notable. The same proportion of those who are and are not racialized (58%) agree that it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in Canadian society than it is for those who are white. And similar proportions (45% for those who are white, and 43% for those who are racialized) disagree that ethnic and racial groups should take more responsibility for solving their own economic and social problems.⁴

There are, however, gender differences, with women being more sympathetic towards racialized groups. Sixty-three percent of women, compared to 51 percent of men, agree that it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful; 47 percent of women, compared to 41 percent of men, disagree that ethnic and racial groups should take more responsibility for solving their own economic and social problems.

On both questions, first generation Canadians (immigrants) are slightly less likely than average to express the view that is more supportive of racial minorities, but second generation Canadians are slightly more likely to do so, perhaps an indication of a difference in expectations between immigrants and their Canadian-born children (with the latter being less willing to accept an unfulfilled promise of equal treatment).

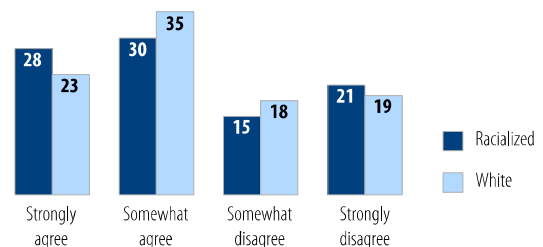
Canadians of different ages have similar opinions on the question of whether it is more difficult for non-white people to be successful, but older Canadians are much more likely than their younger counterparts to agree that racial groups should take more responsibility for solving their own problems (the figures are 60% for those age 55 and older, compared to 36% among those ages 18 to 29).

Ethnic/racial groups should take more responsibility for solving own problems
1985 – 2020

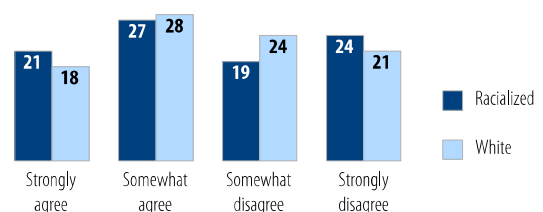


Challenges facing racial minorities in Canada
2020 By racial identity

It is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in Canadian society than it is for those who are white



Ethnic and racial groups should take more responsibility for solving their own economic and social problems



⁴ This Focus Canada survey is the first to include a question about respondents' racial identity, so results for racialized and non-racialized peoples cannot be compared to those from previous years.

In terms of changes of time, since 2015, acknowledgement that it is more difficult for non-white people to succeed in Canada has increased most noticeably among women (up 18 points, from 45% to 63%), in comparison with men (up 3 points, from 48% to 51%).

Confidence in the police

A majority of Canadians continue to express confidence in their local police and the RCMP, but the level of confidence has declined sharply over the past decade. Confidence in the police is significantly higher among Canadians who identify as white compared to those who are racialized.

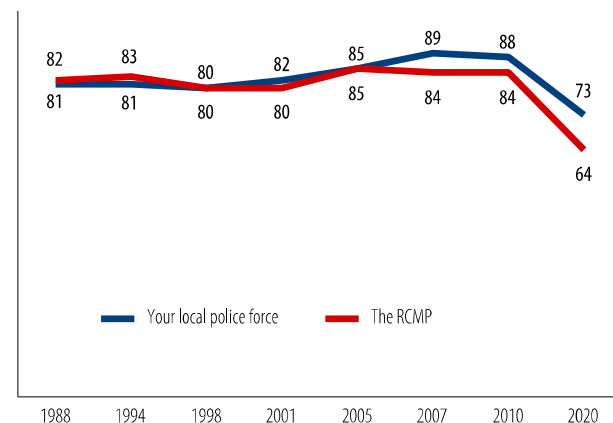
Canadians who identify as white and Canadians who are racialized have generally similar levels of confidence in most of Canada's institutions. But when it comes to confidence in their local police and the RCMP, marked differences emerge.

Canada's police forces have traditionally been among the most highly regarded public institutions in the country. For much of the last three decades, at least four in five Canadians have expressed either a lot or some confidence in the police. This is much higher than the level of confidence expressed in other institutions and leaders such as governments, business leaders, and journalists.

Over the past year, however, the police have been a focal point for the anti-racism protests in United States, Canada and other countries. This recent wave of protests was sparked by the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 by white police officers in the U.S., and drew attention to similar incidents in Canada, including incidents of police brutality perpetrated against citizens who are Black and Indigenous.

The current survey shows that a majority of Canadians continue to express confidence in the police: 73 percent say they have a lot (25%) or some (48%) confidence in their local police force, and 64 percent say the same of the RCMP (which also serves as the local police force in some communities) (19% have a lot of confidence in the RCMP, and 45% have some confidence). This level of confidence continues to be higher than that held by most (though not all) other organizations and leaders. For instance, currently the public's level of confidence in local police forces is lower than in doctors and nurses (91%) and scientists (81%), but higher than in journalists (53%), governments (49%) or business leaders (44%)⁵

A lot or some confidence in the local police / RCMP
1988 – 2020



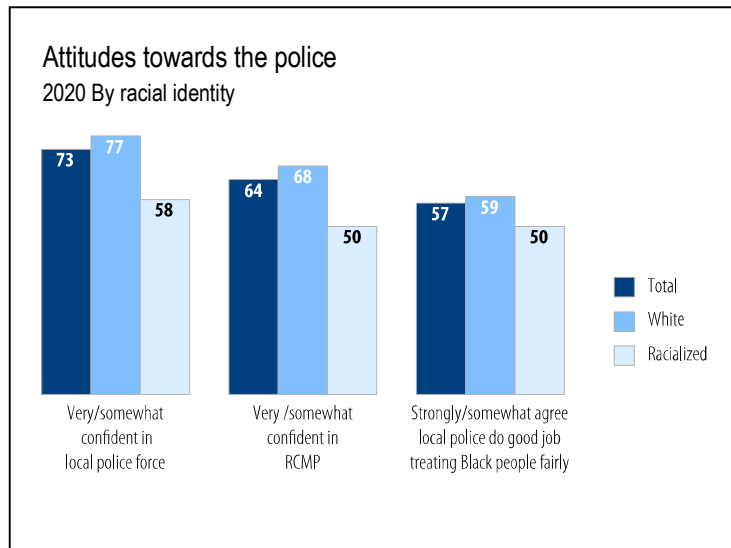
In general, in Canada today, would you say you have a lot of confidence, some confidence, little confidence or no confidence at all in each of the following?

At the same time, the public's level of confidence in the police has declined noticeably, for the first time in more than three decades. Confidence in one's local police force has fallen from 88 percent in 2010 to 73 percent today; in the case of the RCMP, confidence has fallen from 84 percent to 64 percent over the same period. The change has largely occurred more specifically in the proportion expressing a lot of confidence (and not just some confidence): from 43 percent to 25 percent in the case of the local police, and from 39 to 19 percent in the case of the RCMP.

⁵ The survey asked about 11 types of organizations and leaders. Complete data on confidence in other types of institutions and leaders will be published later this year in a subsequent report from the *A Better Canada* survey.

Across the country, confidence in the police has fallen most sharply in Ontario and the Prairie provinces (which means it fell in parts of the country where the RCMP is both more and less visibly present in local policing). In Ontario, confidence in local police forces has fallen by 19 percentage points, while confidence in the RCMP has fallen by 29 points. In the Prairie provinces, the drops are 17 and 27 points respectively. Confidence in the police has also fallen slightly more among women than among men, and more among Canadians under the age of 35 than among their older counterparts.

Currently, Canadians who identify as white are significantly more likely than those who are racialized to have a lot or some confidence in the police: 77 percent of white Canadians, compared to 58 percent of those who are racialized, say they have a lot or some confidence in their local police force; in the case of confidence in the RCMP, the figures are 68 percent and 50 percent respectively. White Canadians are twice as likely as racialized Canadians to say they have a lot of confidence in either their local police force (28% to 14%) or the RCMP (21% to 11%).



The differences between white and racialized Canadians in the extent confidence expressed in the police are greater than in the case of other types of institutions. For instance, compared to racialized Canadians, those who identify as white are only 8-points more likely to have confidence in business leaders, compared to 19-points more likely in the case of local police forces.

Confidence in both local police forces and the RCMP is also higher among older Canadians than among younger generations, and among those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents than among first- or second-generation immigrants. Confidence in local police forces does not vary significantly by region, but confidence in the RCMP is notably lower than average in Ontario (55%).

While most Canadians have at least some confidence in their local police force, fewer – though still a majority (57%) – agree that their local police force does a good job of treating Black people fairly. One in four (24%) disagrees that this is the case, and 19 percent offer no clear opinion. A majority of Canadians who identify as white (59%) agree that their local police force does a good job of treating Black people fairly, and only 23 percent disagree. Racialized Canadians are somewhat less likely to agree (50%) and more likely to disagree (30%) with the statement.⁶

Men (63%) are more likely than women (51%) to agree their local police force does a good job of treating Black people fairly. Opinions on this question also vary significant by political partisanship. Federal Conservative party supporters (72%) are much more likely than their Liberal (52%), NDP (46%) or Green (41%) party counterparts to agree that their local police force does a good job of treating Black people fairly. Conservative supporters also hold their view on this question much more strongly, with 43 percent agreeing strongly – twice as many as for supporters of any other party.

⁶ The data for racialized Canadians presented here combine those from a number of different racial groups. Given the sample sizes, it is not possible to report the opinions of Black respondents separately.

The Black Experience Project in the GTA

The data for racialized Canadians presented in this report combine those from a number of different racial groups, including those who identify as Black, Chinese, South Asian, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Latin American, Filipino, Arab, Korean and Japanese. Given the sample sizes, it is not possible to report the opinions of Black respondents separately.

Data from the Black Experience Project in the GTA, however, offers a useful point of comparison. The Black Experience Project was based on in-depth interviews with 1,504 individuals in the Greater Toronto Area who self-identify as Black or of African heritage, conducted in 2015 by the Environics Institute and partner organizations. At that time, the survey found that 61 percent of Black GTA residents had a great deal or some confidence in the police – a figure that is similar to the 58 percent of racialized Canadians who currently say they have a lot or some confidence in the police in the current national survey covered in this report. A higher proportion of Black residents of the GTA (85%) reported that they thought the local police force does a good or an average job of ensuring the safety of the citizens in their municipality.

A much lower proportion (42%), however, said that their local police force does a good or average job of treating Black people fairly. This is somewhat lower than the proportion of the more broadly-defined group of racialized Canadians (50%) who currently agree that their local police force does a good job of treating Black people fairly, according to the current national survey covered in this report.

For full results from this study, see the Project's website at <https://www.theblackexperienceproject.ca/.For>

Ending racism and discrimination

A majority of Canadians – both white and racialized - are optimistic about making progress in addressing racism and discrimination in Canada over the next decade. Most believe such progress is more likely to happen through the actions of individual citizens than governments.

In 2019, the [Race Relations in Canada Survey](#) found that Canadians were more than twice as likely to be optimistic than pessimistic about the future prospects for racial equality – that all racialized people in Canada will be treated with the same respect as others in their lifetime. This degree of optimism was evident across all racial groups, and strongest among younger Canadians.

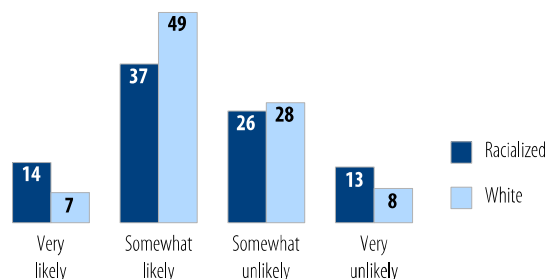
A *Better Canada* posed a slightly different question in 2020, and found that Canadians remain more optimistic than pessimistic, but by a somewhat smaller margin.

Currently, a narrow majority of Canadians (55%) think that it is very (9%) or somewhat (46%) likely that we will make real progress in addressing racism and discrimination in Canada over the next decade. Fewer than four in ten (37%) say it is somewhat (28%) or very (9%) unlikely that we will make real progress, and eight percent cannot say.

Addressing racism in Canada

2020 By racial identity

How likely or unlikely do you think it is that we will make real progress in addressing racism and discrimination in Canada over the next decade?



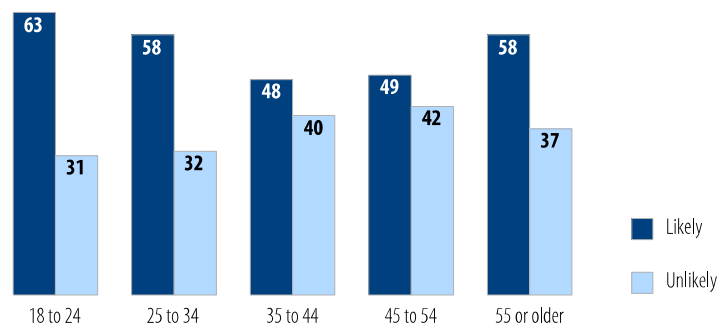
Racialized Canadians (52%) are slightly less optimistic than those who identify as white (56%). Racialized Canadians are also somewhat more likely to hold a firmer view either way: they are more likely than white Canadians to say it is both very likely and very unlikely. Both younger and older Canadians are more optimistic than their middle-aged counterparts.

In terms of how progress will happen in ending racism and discrimination, Canadians tend to think this is more likely to be made through the actions of individual citizens (70%) than through government action (21%). This view is shared across the population, although racialized Canadians (28%) are somewhat more likely than those who identify as white (19%) to believe progress is more likely to happen through governments. The same is true for Canadians under 35 years of age (27%), compared to those in older generations (19%).

Addressing racism in Canada

2020 By age group

How likely or unlikely do you think it is that we will make real progress in addressing racism and discrimination in Canada over the next decade?



The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established in 2006 as an independent non-profit organization to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading. www.EnvironicsInstitute.org.

Vancity is a values-based financial co-operative serving the needs of its more than 543,000 member-owners and their communities, with offices and 60 branches located in Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, Victoria, Squamish and Alert Bay, within the unceded territories of the Coast Salish and Kwakwaka'wakw people. With \$28.2 billion in assets plus assets under administration, Vancity is Canada's largest community credit union. Vancity uses its assets to help improve the financial well-being of its members while at the same time helping to develop healthy communities that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. www.vancity.com

The IMPACT Project in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa, Canada's largest bilingual university, is a knowledge mobilization infrastructure dedicated to promoting a new model of policy development, cultivating knowledge among Canadians, and contributing to the expertise of governments and community members across the country and onto the global stage. <https://sciencessociales.uottawa.ca/recherche/impact>

Century Initiative is a national, non-partisan charity with a mission to enhance Canada's long-term prosperity, resiliency and global influence by responsibly growing the population of Canada to 100 million by 2100. Century Initiative delivers its mission by leading, enabling and partnering on initiatives that support long-term thinking and planning in immigration, urban development, employment and entrepreneurship, early childhood supports, and education. The Century Initiative is concerned about our future and believes a bigger, bolder Canada benefits us all. www.centuryinitiative.ca

For more information about this research, contact Dr. Keith Neuman keith.neuman@environics.ca

Appendix

Survey questions from *Focus Canada 2020*

Please tell me whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with each of the following statements:

- It is more difficult for non-white people to be successful in Canadian society than it is for those who are white
- Ethnic and racial groups should take more responsibility for solving their own economic and social problems
- My local police force does a good job of treating Black people fairly

Survey questions from *A Better Canada: Values and Priorities after COVID-19*

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

- Discrimination against [random split sample 3 ways: (i) Black people (ii) Chinese People (iii) Indigenous Peoples] is no longer a problem in Canada.

In general, in Canada today, would you say you have a lot of confidence, some confidence, little confidence or no confidence at all in each of the following?

- Your local police force
- The RCMP

For each of the following, do you think that progress is more likely to be made through government action, or through the actions of individual citizens?

- In efforts to end racism and discrimination

Thinking about Canada over the next decade, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that we will make real progress in addressing each of the following issues?

- Racism and discrimination