

South Asian experiences with racism in Canada

Where do South Asians fit in the current dynamics of race relations in Canada today?

This is the fourth in a series of short insight pieces on race relations in Canada today and how it is changing, based on a national survey research program conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. Full details available on the [Environics Institute website](#).

Introduction. Canada – just a century ago a country composed primarily of people of European ancestry – is today among the most ethnically-diverse societies on the planet. This transformation has unfolded through immigration from many source countries. Close to half of all Canadians are either first generation (born elsewhere) or second generation (one or both parents born elsewhere).

People of South Asian descent now make up the largest group of Canadians, other than those from the historical European majority. People born in, or with roots in, India, as well as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Nepal now number 3.2 million people, comprising eight percent of the national population. It is among the fastest growing segments of the population through the arrival of newcomers as permanent residents, temporary workers and international students. The South Asian community is especially prominent in the urban centres of Toronto and Vancouver, and well represented in both the federal Parliament and several provincial legislatures.

The presence and contribution of South Asians to Canada notwithstanding, they have borne the brunt of racism along with other non-white immigrants. More than a century ago, Canada denied entry to hundreds of Sikh migrants arriving on the Komagata Maru, on the basis of newly-drafted regulations intended to bar migration from South Asia. In recent years, this community has been confronted with what has been described in a recent report as “a steep rise in hate toward South Asians on social media . . . with a large spike occurring during the recent federal election.”¹

What has been the experience of South Asian people in terms of encountering racism, and how does this compare with other racialized groups in Canada?

Valuable insight into these questions can be found in the results of a research program conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. The research consists of national surveys conducted in 2019, 2021 and 2024 with large samples of Canadians, structured to provide reportable results by country’s largest racial, ethnic and religious groups, including South Asian people (see [here](#) for further details on the research).²

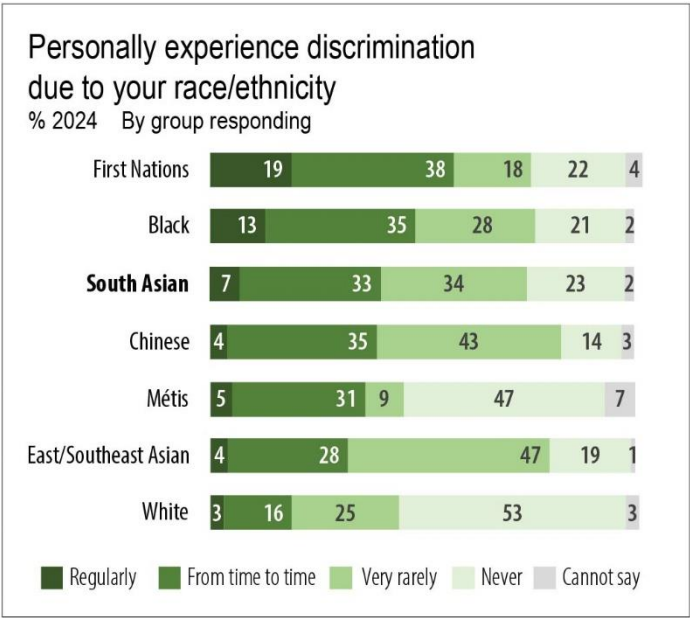
¹ Steep rise in hate toward South Asians in Canada documented through social media posts. *The Toronto Star*, June 25, 2025

² The sample size for each survey is as follows: 2019 (national total is 3,019, of which 304 self identified as South Asian); 2021 (3,698, 402); 2024 (5,086, 512).

The research examines Canadians’ perspectives and experiences with respect to race and discrimination from a variety of perspectives. This short piece focuses on a few specific questions asking about personal experiences with discrimination (including hate incidents or crimes), the treatment of others in their own racialized group, how racialized people see the future for the next generation, how Canadians as whole believe specific racialized groups are treated. The research looks at current perspectives (as recorded in 2024) and how they have changed (or not) over the previous five years.

Personal experience with racism. The survey asked Canadians about their personal experience with discrimination or unfair treatment because of their race or ethnicity. For the population as a whole in 2024, one in four said this has happened to them regularly (5%) or from time to time (21%), with most indicating it has happened very rarely (27%) or never (45%). These results have held notably consistent since 2019, although changes have occurred among some groups.

Such experiences, of course, happen mostly to racialized people, and especially those who are First Nations or Black. This is also a reality for many South Asian Canadians, with four in ten reporting discrimination regularly (7%) or from time to time (33%) due to their ethnicity or race. This proportion is a bit lower than what was recorded in 2021 (9% and 38%, respectively), during a time of heightened anti-Asian sentiment arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, but very close to results for 2019 (5% and 33%). A similar bump in 2021 is reflected in the reported experiences of discrimination among Chinese and Black Canadians, but not other groups.³



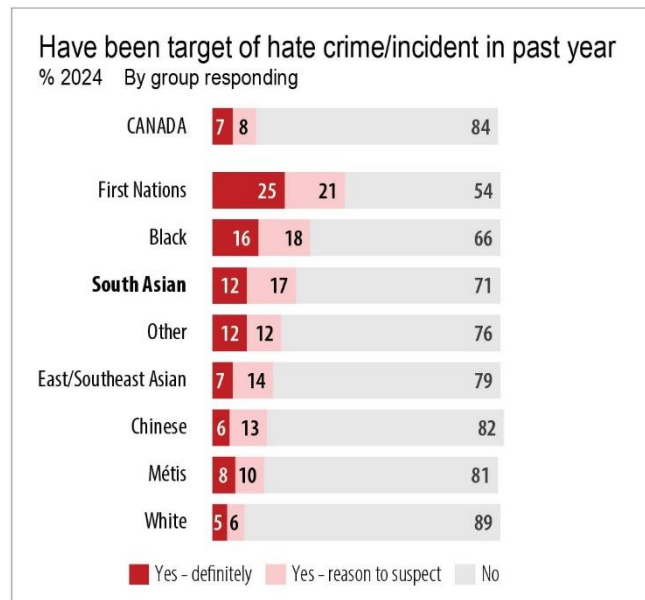
Canadians experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment within the past 12 months were most likely to say it was because of their ethnic or racial background, with some also mentioning their physical appearance, age, skin colour, gender, a disability, religion or sexual orientation. These reasons vary

³ The 2021 results coincide with both the COVID-19 pandemic and the public response to the George Floyd murder and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

somewhat across ethnic and racial groups, and South Asians stand out as being most likely to report being targeted because of their skin colour and religion.

Experience with hate. Hate motivated aggression is growing at an alarming rate in Canada. Official statistics record the number of police-reported hate crimes rising by more than 80 percent between 2019 and 2022, with racialized communities the primary target.

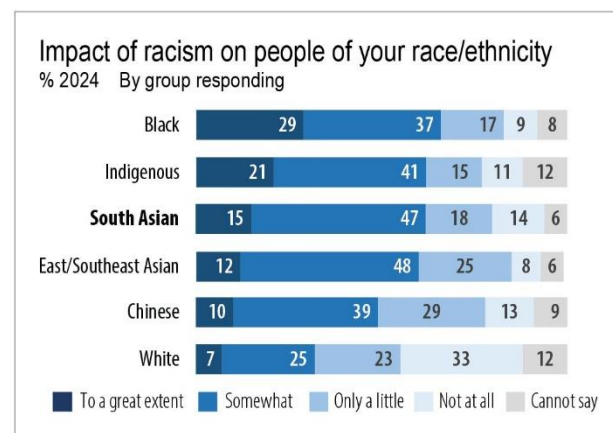
This research – the first such national survey on this topic – found that one in six Canadians have either “definitely” been (7%) or “had reason to suspect they were” (8%) the target of a hate incident or hate crime in the previous year.⁴



As with overall experiences with racial discrimination, experiences with hate are most widespread among Canadians who are First Nations or Black, but also among South Asians, with three in ten reporting this definitely happened to them in the past year (12%) or have reason to believe it had (17%).

Impact of racism on South Asian people in Canada. Discrimination and prejudice can take many forms and affect people in different ways. The survey probed the extent to which Canadians believe racism is affecting others they are close to who share their own racial or ethnic background. Consistent with the results on personal experience, it is Black (29%) and Indigenous (21%) people who most commonly say that racism impacts others they know to a great extent, with a sizeable plurality indicating this affects them “somewhat” (37% and 41%, respectively).

The response by South Asians is somewhat less widespread but generally comparable: one in six (15%) South Asians reported racism affects other people they know (with whom they



⁴ A How do Canadians know when they have been subjected to a hate incident or crime? The survey provided participants with a definition, along with examples of what this might include (e.g., *an elderly Asian man being shoved in a grocery store by a person who makes racist remarks*). Even so, the results show that many Canadians cannot be certain about whether what happened to them fits clearly into this definition of hate, which highlights the challenge in both documenting and addressing the problem.

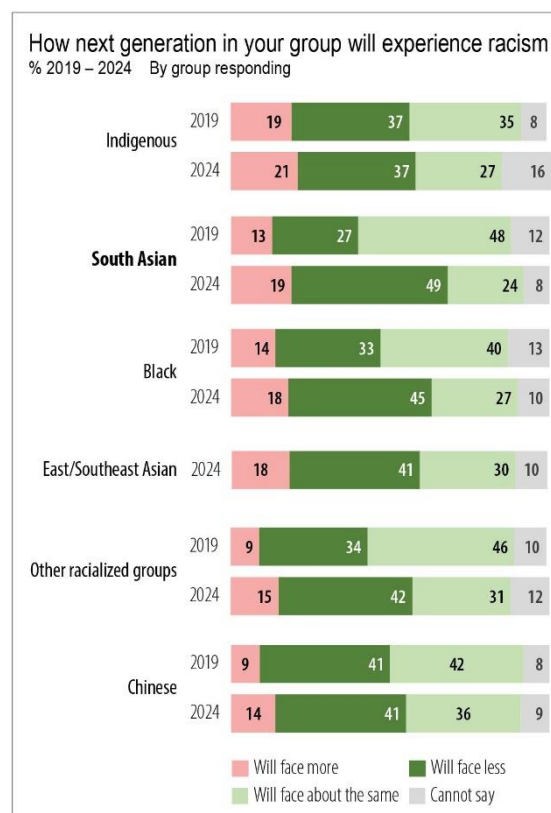
share a racial or ethnic background) to a great extent, with another 47 percent who said “somewhat.” South Asian perceptions of such impact in 2024 are similar to what was recorded in 2021, and somewhat higher than in 2019.

Future outlook. How do South Asian people in Canada feel about the future for themselves and their children in terms of racial equality? The survey asked Canadians who do not identify as white how they think the next generation of people with their own racial or ethnic background will be treated in society in terms of discrimination and stereotyping.

In all of the groups featured in the research, a clear plurality expresses optimism in terms of anticipating the next generation will face less rather than more racism. By comparison, relatively few believe their children will encounter a more negative future, and this outlook is outweighed by the proportion who don’t anticipate much change from the present.

On this question, South Asians stand out in 2024 as being the most likely of all groups to express optimism for their next generation, and in showing the most dramatic improvement in this perspective since 2019.

Half (49%) of South Asians surveyed say the next generation will face less discrimination than they themselves encounter, a jump from 27 percent who articulated this view five years earlier. This positive trend is also evident among Black and “other” racialized groups, but not among those who are Indigenous or Chinese.⁵



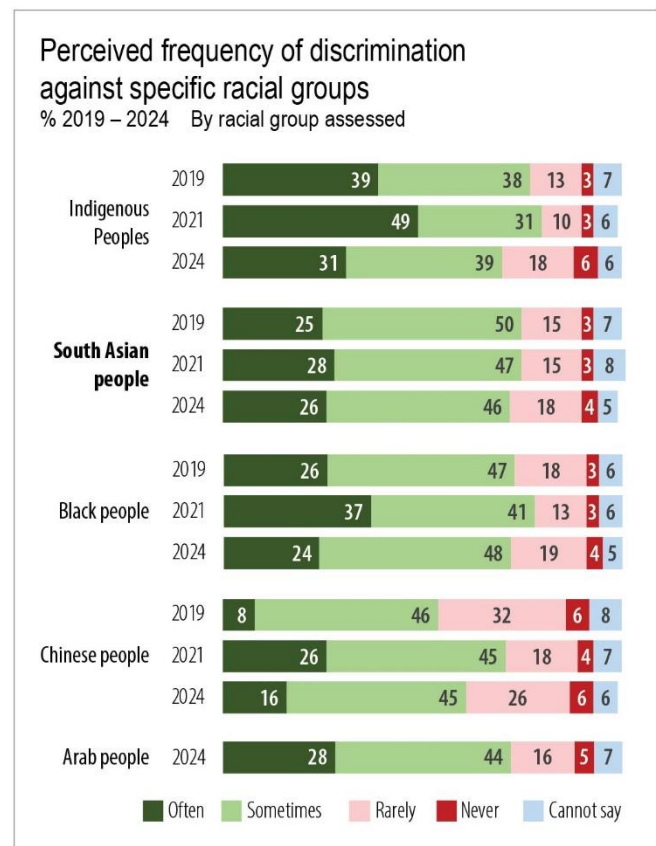
Public perceptions of racial discrimination. Apart from the experiences reported by South Asians and other racialized people, to what extent do Canadians as a whole believe that some groups in this country encounter discrimination and mistreatment? And how have such perceptions changed over the past five years?

A clear majority of Canadians believe that each of the five groups presented experience discrimination due to race or ethnicity at least sometimes if not often. In the cases of Indigenous, Black and Chinese people, perceptions of frequent discrimination spiked up in 2021, with 2024 results more similar to what was recorded in 2019.

⁵ “Other” refers to people who identify with a racialized group other than those reported separately (i.e. are too small in number in the survey sample to be included in the analysis as a distinct group).

Public perceptions of discrimination directed at South Asian people in Canada in 2024 are roughly comparable to other groups. South Asians are seen to be a bit less likely to experience racism on a frequent basis in comparison with Indigenous people, but more so than Chinese. Notably, opinions about the treatment of South Asians have held steady over time, without the spike in 2021 recorded for some other groups.

Conclusion. In comparison with most other racialized populations in Canada, South Asians as a community are populous, economically successful and well represented in government. Their collective history in Canada does not share the tragedy of cultural genocide experienced by Indigenous Peoples or the legacy of colonial slavery inflicted on people of African descent.



But in their own way, South Asians have borne the brunt of racism from the beginning, and today continue to experience discrimination due to ethnicity or religion at levels roughly comparable to those who are Indigenous or Black. This reality is also widely recognized by most other Canadians, even if many may not fully appreciate the scope and harm it inflicts on those affected.

The persistence of experienced racism notwithstanding, South Asians stand out as among the most optimistic of all Canadians about a better future for the next generation; a view that has strengthened significantly since 2021.