



INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2010, the Black Experience Project (BEP) is a research study which examines the lived experiences of individuals who self-identify as Black and/or of African heritage living in the Greater Toronto Area, or GTA (the City of Toronto, and the Regions of York, Durham, Peel and Halton). This study was led by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the United Way of Toronto and York Region, the YMCA of the Greater Toronto Area, Ryerson's Diversity Institute, and the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora at York University. This research aims to provide a better understanding of the lives of Black individuals within the GTA, including the factors leading to their successes and challenges.

The results are intended to provide valuable insight and direction in identifying policies and other initiatives that will strengthen the health and vibrancy of the Black community, and by doing so, the health and vibrancy of the entire GTA and beyond. This report provides a high-level overview of findings, and provides a rich foundation for further research to examine specific issues in greater depth than is covered here.

Impetus – Why Now?

People of African descent (regardless of where they were born) have had a long-standing history in Canada and Toronto. Their stories and footprints can be traced back to Canada's early colonial period and the history of slavery, but in recent years has been shaped by successive waves of immigration. Canada's own history of anti-Black racism, segregation and exploitation is well documented if not widely known. At the same time, the long-standing contributions of the Black community to the development of the country in the face of structural and institutional racism are clear. In particular, the persistent activism and advocacy for civil liberties and human rights, while often missing from textbooks, is well documented.¹

Today, the GTA is home to more than 400,000 individuals who self-identify as "Black," comprising seven percent of the region's population and more than half of Canada's total Black population. Diversity within the Black population is not only related to country of origin, but also to language, religion, socioeconomic status, and time of migration – all of which become evident in cultural variation.

The Black community in the GTA has made substantial contributions to the growth and success of the country and the region – where they have also experienced economic, educational, social, and political disparities that continue to this day. There continues to be longstanding challenges facing the community, some of which are not similarly experienced by other racialized and ethnic communities in the GTA. It is well documented that Black individuals, compared with the non-Black population, earn less income, have higher rates of unemployment, experience higher rates of incarceration, suffer poorer health outcomes, and are more likely to be victims of violence². The history of colonialism and anti-Black racism has stood as a systemic barrier to collective and individual success.

A long list of reports has illuminated the root causes of these challenges. For example, The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence report published in 2008 by the Honourable Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling speaks to racism in the opening pages of the Executive Summary, noting that it is both “serious” and “deeply entrenched” across Ontario:

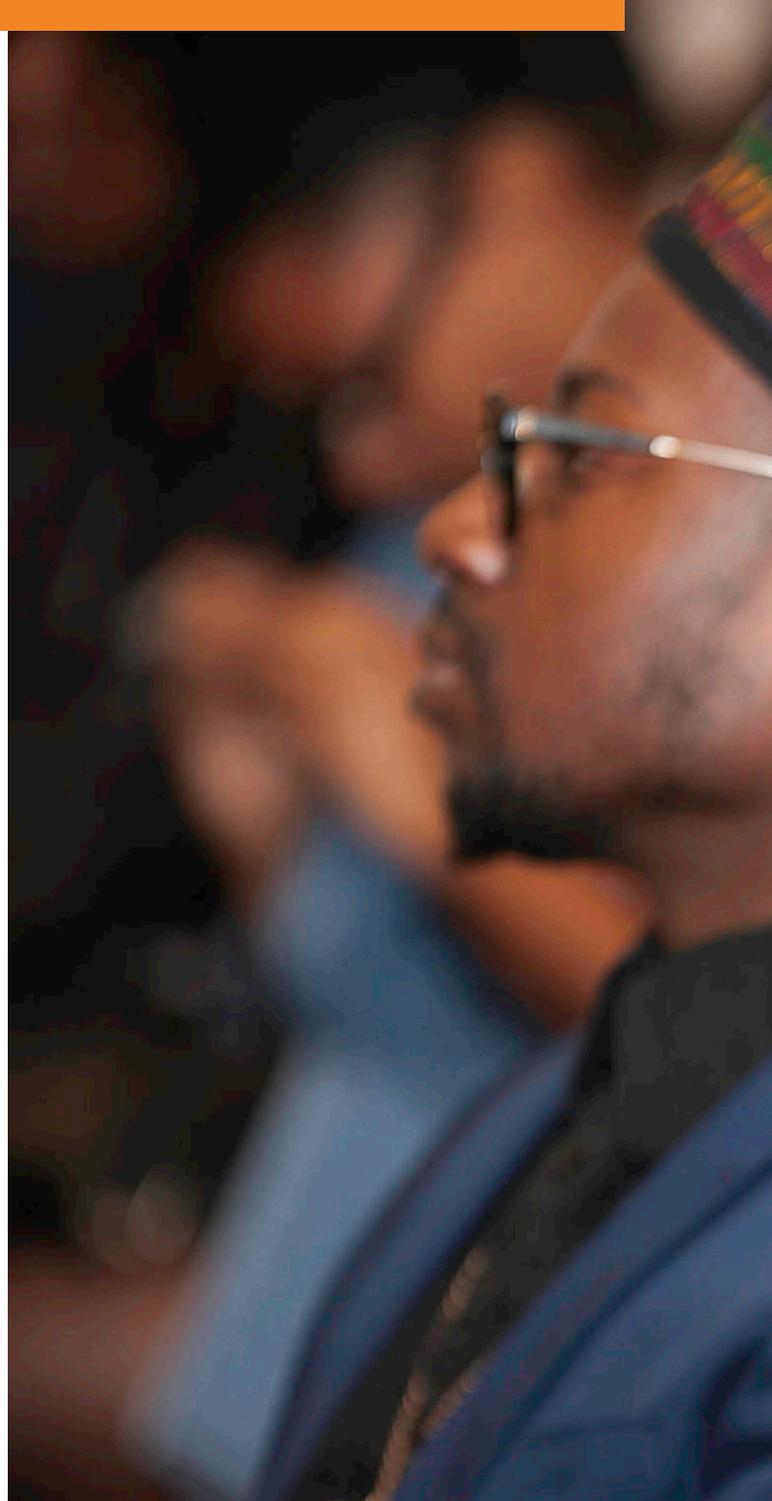
*The very serious problems being encountered in neighbourhoods characterized by severe, concentrated and growing disadvantage are not being addressed because Ontario has not placed an adequate focus on these concentrations of disadvantage despite the very serious threat they pose to the province’s social fabric. **Racism is becoming a more serious and entrenched problem than it was in the past because Ontario is not dealing with it.** The significant new investments in education are not reaching many of the children who need the most help because long-identified barriers to learning are not being addressed. Ontario’s youth justice system is harming some youth because it has no overall coordination, remains punitive in ways that are not strategic and permits increasingly problematic police-community relations.³*

Contributing to this challenge is the reality of media representations of the Black community presenting distorted and stereotypical images focused primarily on the disadvantages experienced by the community. Consequently, many have argued that today the Black community is largely defined by its challenges and deficits. Notwithstanding recent recognition of Viola Desmond on the new Canadian \$10 bill, little is known about the trailblazing achievements and contributions of the Black community in such areas as politics, law, business, research, social justice and public policy advocacy, and education, despite official acknowledgements of these contributions.⁴

The launch of the BEP in 2011 preceded the current climate of tragic police-involved deaths across North America, the most recent controversies over racial profiling, the emergence of Black Lives Matter, and the creation of the Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate. These recent developments underscore the significance of the Black Experience Project and the need for a greater understanding of the depths of persistent anti-Black racism and associated challenges.

BEP Goals and Objectives

The Black Experience Project began with a central question “What does it mean to be Black in the GTA?” The study embarked on a journey of answering this question in a respectful way using an “asset-based” research lens, which proposes that “difference” can be a source of strength as well as a challenge.⁵ The project also draws on critical race theory’s acknowledgment of deep historical and structural barriers that operate to disenfranchise or disadvantage groups in relation to their particular identities. For example, critical race theory would articulate the specificity of the Black experience in regard to racism and anti-Black racism.⁶ Together these provide a theoretical framework, which is both constructive and realistic. The purpose of the study is to better understand the nature of the strengths and contributions as



well as challenges and opportunities faced by the Black community. It explores the lived experiences of individuals within this community (or communities), and the factors leading to their success or challenges.

Project results are expected to provide a focal point for the Black community to better harness its assets and expand its successes throughout the entire community, as well as help the broader community (e.g., community leaders, decision-makers, policy makers, general public) understand and appreciate the lived experiences of the Black community.



The investigation began with the following principles:

- That the research design and topics of focus be guided by input and direction from the Black community, as well as from leading academic experts;
- That the collection of data be done in a respectful way that provides individuals with the opportunity to tell their own story, in their own words;
- The study sample be sufficiently representative and comprehensive to provide for meaningful analysis of important subgroups of the population (e.g., age, gender, income, ethnicity); and
- The study should draw upon the resources of the local community (especially emerging young leaders) and give priority to building capacity.

The project consists of three phases:

PHASE 1 – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (May 2011 – March 2014). A fundamental premise of the project is to ensure that the research focuses on issues and questions of greatest relevance to the Black community, in order to meaningfully contribute to strengthening its capacity. Phase 1 activities included extensive outreach, including group discussion sessions with community leaders (referred to as “Trailblazers” and “Champions”) and individuals across the GTA. The results of this process are documented in a separate published report (Phase 1 Community Engagement Final Report, January 2014).

PHASE 2 – RESEARCH DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND ANALYSIS (April 2014 – July 2017). The rich information captured through the community engagement process guided the design of the research in Phase 2, which consisted of in-depth interviews with a broad sample of 1504 Black individuals across the GTA (The results of the survey are presented in this report). Throughout this Phase, a Research Advisory Group comprised of local scholars from the Black community and others with relevant research backgrounds provided meaningful guidance to the project (see Appendix A).

PHASE 3 – POST-STUDY DISSEMINATION AND ENGAGEMENT (July 2017 and beyond). Once the research has been completed and publicly released, the findings will be broadly disseminated through the media and in active partnership with project partners, community organizations, governments and the Black community generally. The goal of Phase 3 is to: a) widely share the research findings with the community and with all sectors; b) prompt further analysis and discussion of the research and its implications; and c) initiate activities that lead to meaningful next steps in strengthening the community.

The BEP research will be made publicly available to community organizations, researchers, government agencies and others to conduct further, more in-depth analysis of the data in specific areas of relevance (e.g., health, education, criminal justice). The rich data set, which will be available through the Jean Augustine Chair (JAC) in Education, Community and Diaspora at York University, offers opportunities for further research to delve into specific issues not addressed in this report.

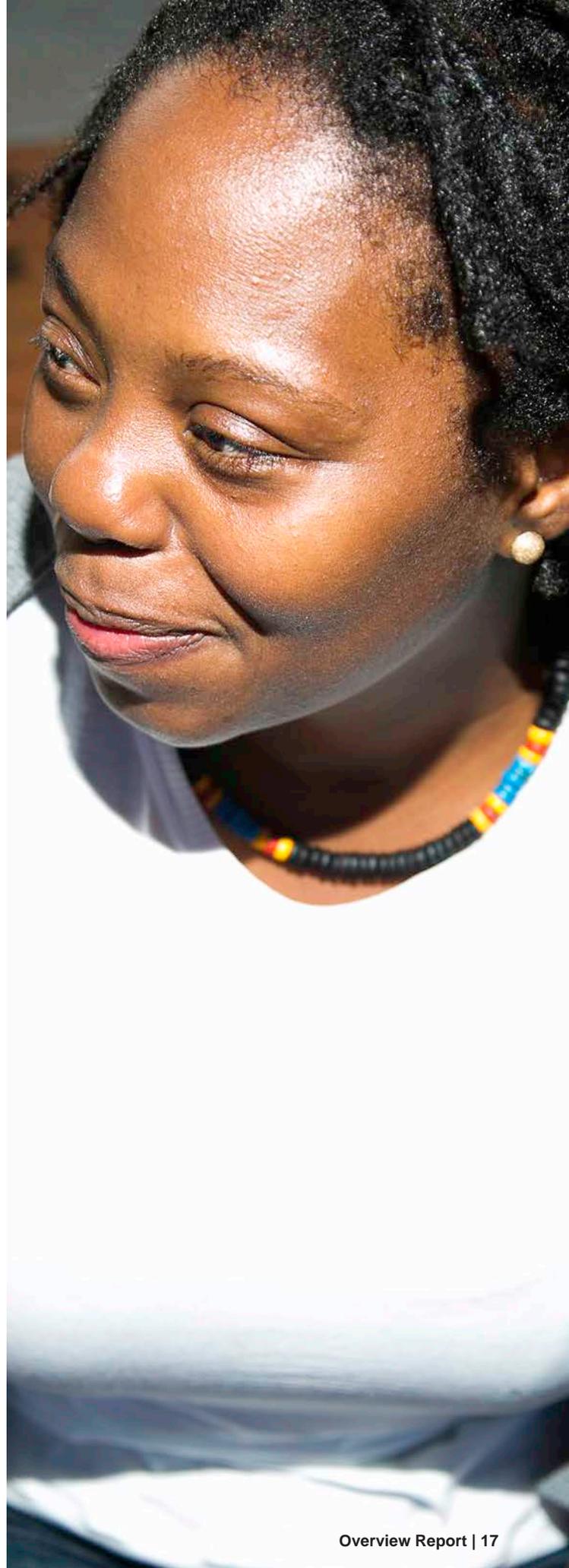


Research Focus

The BEP utilized an asset-based approach to the research, which places value on the strengths, contributions, resources and skills of the community, rather than reinforcing its challenges. This approach was intended to allow survey participants an entry point into the conversation about their personal lived experience and also the community's contribution and strengths.

The themes and topics to be addressed in this study were developed based on previous work (Phase 1 engagement with the Black community, literature review) and in consultation with the Research Advisory Group. Out of this process the following 10 themes related to the lived experience of Black individuals in the GTA were selected for inclusion in the study.

1. **Identity.** How do individuals define and experience their Black identity?
2. **Experience with the Black community.** How do individuals perceive and engage with the Black community?
3. **Personal aspirations and future goals.** What are the personal aspirations and apprehensions of Black individuals for themselves and their community?
4. **Education and learning.** What are Black individuals' experiences with the education system, and with other sources of learning? How do these experiences relate to outcomes in other areas of life?
5. **Experience with institutions.** How do Black individuals interact with, and experience, public institutions in their community? How is this experience influenced by one's Black identity?
6. **Treatment and representation by the broader community.** How are individuals in the Black community treated by the broader community? How do they see the Black community portrayed by the broader population?
7. **Employment and the workplace.** What are the employment and workplace experiences of individuals in the Black community?
8. **Health and well-being.** What is the relationship between being Black and individuals' health and well-being?
9. **Neighbourhood.** To what extent do Black individuals feel positive about, connected to and secure within, their neighbourhood of residence?
10. **Connectedness and belonging to the broader community.** To what extent and in what ways do Black individuals feel connected to the broader community?



How the Survey was Conducted

Research Approach. The study employed established survey research methods. In order to capture and document the lived experience of individuals recruited from the Black population across the GTA, through in-depth, in-person interviews. This type of in-depth interviewing made it possible to cover a broad range of topics and issues, well beyond what is normally covered in public opinion or social surveys. The approach is based on a previous Environics Institute study conducted in 2008-09 with the urban Aboriginal population in the country’s largest 11 cities⁸ (see Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study, 2010).

Survey Questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed through an extensive process, guided by the Phase 1 input, an extensive literature review, and direction provided by the Research Advisory Group. The survey included both structured questions (e.g., with response scales) and open-ended questions to capture a greater depth of experience through participants’ own words. Prior to being finalized, the survey was pilot-tested twice with small numbers of individuals from the Black community to evaluate the questions and the overall interview experience. The final version was vetted and approved through the research ethics process at Ryerson University, as well as by the Durham District School Board and Lakeridge Health (two of the locations at which survey participants were recruited).

Sample design and participant recruitment. The target population for this study was defined as individuals 16 years and older living in the Greater Toronto area who self-identify as Black or of African heritage. The study was designed to provide representation of this population to the extent possible across a number of relevant characteristics, including location of residence (region and local municipality), age, gender, household income and ethnic background.

The sampling plan was based on the development of a population profile that identified how the Black population is distributed across each of the characteristics described above. For instance, the plan looked at how many males aged 16 to 24 of African heritage live in the Peel Region with household incomes between \$60,000 and \$80,000. This information was used to create a sample matrix to determine how many individuals with each unique combination of characteristics should be interviewed for the study in order to attain a sample that adequately reflects the Black population.⁹

Table 1: Distribution of Study Sample across GTA regions		
Region	Black Population*	Sample Distribution
City of Toronto	218,160 (53%)	734 (49%)
Peel Region	116,265 (28%)	373 (25%)
Durham Region	41,890 (10%)	189 (13%)
York Region	25,870 (6%)	175 (12%)
Halton Region	10,970 (3%)	33 (2%)
Total	413,155 (100%)	1,504 (100%)

**Source: Statistics Canada: 2011 National Household Survey*



Individuals were recruited to participate in the survey through extensive outreach across the GTA to build awareness and interest in the study. This included advertising through conventional and social media, attendance at community events, tapping into existing social and community networks, and reaching out to Black community organizations and Collaborating Partners. Individuals expressing interest in participation were contacted by telephone to screen for eligibility based on the sample matrix for their Region. Those who qualified were then scheduled for an in-person interview at a time and place of their convenience. This important work was conducted by a dedicated team of individuals (mostly youth) from the Black community working on a full or part time basis from February to December 2015.

Study sample. A total of 1,504 interviews were completed with individuals across the GTA who self-identified as Black or of African heritage. The following table presents how this sample is distributed across regions of the GTA, in comparison with the GTA Black population.

The sampling approach was successful in completing interviews with individuals in every combination of demographic characteristics included in the sample profile for each GTA

region. In some cases, however, several groups are not represented in the same proportion as in the population; in particular the sample under-represents those who have no more than a high school education, those 55 years of age or older, and males despite considerable efforts to recruit more individuals matching these characteristics. The following table presents a profile of the study sample across a number of demographic and personal characteristics.

The final data set used for the analysis and reporting were weighted to match the composition of the Black population across the demographic characteristics outlined above, so that each group is represented in the total sample in proportion to its actual size (including those under-represented in the sample). Because the sampling approach was not based on probability sampling (i.e. each individual in the population having an equal chance of being selected) the final sample cannot be considered statistically representative of the GTA Black population, and caution should be used in generalizing the survey results to this population. However, the study included participation from across most socio-demographic segments of the GTA Black population, and is large to provide for valid insights for many of these groups within this population. Further details on the research methodology are available in a separate report.¹⁰

Table 2: Distribution of Study Sample across demographic groups			
		GTA Black Population* %	Study Sample (before weighting) %
Gender	Female	56%	64%
	Male	44%	36%
Age	16-24	11%	15%
	25-34	16%	16%
	35-44	24%	27%
	45-54	19%	20%
	55+	30%	23%
Ethnicity	Caribbean	55%	64%
	African	31%	19%
	Caribbean + African	4%	3%
	Other	9%	13%
Household income	< 20K	11%	15%
	20K - 40K	16%	16%
	40K - 70K	24%	27%
	70K - 100K	19%	20%
	100K plus	30%	22%
Education level	< HS	17%	4%
	HS Grad	29%	18%
	Trade / Community	33%	25%
	University Grad	17%	36%
	Post-Graduate	4%	15%
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	N/A	94%
	LGBTQ/Other	N/A	6%

*Source: Statistics Canada: 2011 National Household Survey

About This Report

This report presents an overview of the main findings from the Black Experience Project research, organized around a number of central themes that together provide a coherent narrative. The intention is to provide a broad picture of the experiences of being Black in the GTA, as recorded through the interviews with participants, rather than a comprehensive analysis of the full range of research findings.

The report presents selected results from the survey to illustrate the main findings. This includes both quantitative (numerical) results and comments provided by participants in response to open-ended questions (these comments, as recorded in note form by interviewers during the interviews, are shown in circles throughout the report). While in some cases the survey questions and participants' answers did not explicitly use terms such as "racism" or "anti-Black racism", the study interpreted descriptions, for example, of "unfair treatment because of race" as anti-Black racism. Unless otherwise noted, all results are presented as percentages.

More detailed information about the Black Experience Project and the complete research findings will be available through the BEP website and the Lead Partners. The Jean Augustine Chair at York University will house the study data. Community organizations, scholars and others interested in further analysis are invited to explore the data and to delve more deeply into questions of interest to the community.

Limitations of the research. This type of community-based research presents inherent challenges with respect to surveying a highly diverse population, and completing interviews with a sample that approximates this population across important characteristics such as gender, ethnic background, age, sexuality, income and education. Some groups within the population were especially difficult to recruit for the study. For example, special efforts were taken to identify and recruit people with lower levels of education and homeless segments of the population, with limited success. Because the sample is not statistically representative of the Black population in the GTA, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize these findings to the population as a whole.

The data for this research was collected from February to December 2015 and reflects participants' experiences at that time. Central to the study's success was the recruitment and training of a dedicated team of individuals from the community (mostly youth) to coordinate and handle all aspects of the process, and building this team from the ground up took time. For these reasons, completion of the survey fieldwork took considerably longer than anticipated, entailed higher costs, and resulted in the completion of fewer interviews than the original target of 2,000. The richness of the data from the more than 1,500 personal interviews also required considerably more time invested in the analysis and reporting of findings than had been anticipated at the outset.

The BEP data provide a rich basis for further exploration of specific segments of the population and issue areas that are not covered in-depth in this high level report. For example, gender identity and sexual orientation are of particular importance, as are issues such as health, education and policing. This initial report provides an overall understanding of the findings and leaves room for further analyses for upcoming studies using the data to better understand the perspectives and experiences of these populations.





Acknowledgements

To realize the BEP vision, the project has been guided by the concept of “being about the community, conducted by the community, and for the benefit of the community.” From the outset, a wide range of individuals and organizations that worked tirelessly to fulfil this vision has supported the project. This includes the BEP Lead Partners, the many Collaborating Partners across the GTA (listed below), community Trailblazers and Champions, the Research Advisory Group (listed in Appendix B), and the many volunteers (most of whom are youth) who contributed their energy and commitment to seeing this project through to completion. A thank you also goes to others who provided valuable advice on the draft report

Essential to the success of the Black Experience Project were its sponsors without whose support the project would have not happened, and in particular our principal sponsor TD Bank (a full list of project sponsors is presented on page 4 of this report). The lion’s share of the work was done by the BEP Project Team, including a core staff of more than a dozen, supported by a large team of more than 60 other individuals who played key roles as outreach workers, researchers, interviewers and administrative support (see the full list of Project team members in Appendix A).

Finally, and most important, the Black Experience Project owes its ultimate success to the 1,504 individuals who courageously shared their experiences. Collectively their stories tell the tale of what it means to be “Black” in the GTA in the second decade of the 21st century.

Collaborating Partners

A special thanks goes to the following organizations who helped to promote the study, by hosting community engagement, providing volunteers and venue space, and in other ways.

- African Canadian Development Council
- African Canadian Legal Clinic
- Atkinson Charitable Foundation
- Black Artists Network in Dialogue (BAND)
- Black Business Professional Association
- Black Leadership Health Network
- City of Toronto
- Heritage Toronto
- Jamaican Canadian Association (JCA)
- Midanyta Community Services
- Macauley Child Development Services “More than a Haircut” Project
- Region of Peel
- Redemption and Reintegration Services
- TAIBU Community Health Centre
- Toronto Police Service
- Tropicana Community Services
- United Way Peel
- United Black Students Conference
- York Centre for Education and Community
- York Regional Police
- Youth Challenge Fund

Note on Terminology

Anti-Black racism. The Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate, employing the African Canadian Legal Clinic’s language, provides the following definition: “The Anti-Black racism is prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotyping and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement. Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices, such that anti-Black racism is either functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the larger white society. Anti-Black racism is manifested in the legacy of the current social, economic, and political marginalization of African Canadians in society such as the lack of opportunities, lower socio-economic status, higher unemployment, significant poverty rates and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system”.¹¹

Asset-Based Approach. This is an alternative approach to what has been termed “deficit discourse” concerning specific segments of the population, which highlights disadvantage and barriers. An “asset-based approach” does not ignore the realities of discrimination and exclusion, and further examines the role of identity. For example, it looks at how identity is an advantage and source of strength; the contributions made by diverse identity communities; and how diverse identities should be valued.¹² Assets may include several forms of community capital: physical, human, social, financial, environmental, political, and cultural. [...]. Similarly, Tara Yosso lists six forms of cultural capital – social, familial, linguistic, aspirational, navigational, and resistance – that constitute “community cultural wealth” which represents the talents, strengths and experiences that students of colour bring to their schooling and education.¹³

Black. The term Black refers to individuals of African heritage who may also self-identify as Black, African or Caribbean. In addition, the

Ontario Human Rights Commission defines Black as: “A social construct referring to people who have dark skin colour and/or other related racialized characteristics. The term has become less of an indicator of skin colour and more of racialized characteristics. Diverse societies apply different criteria to determine who is Black.”¹⁴

Community. Throughout this report the term “community” is used to describe the groupings of individuals constructed as Black. This comes with the understanding that there is substantial diversity within the Black population, and use of this term is not intended to imply that Black individuals are all alike or can be represented by a single group.

To underline this point, in the lead-in to the survey questions about the Black community, BEP participants were read the following statement: “We recognize that there is a great deal of diversity within the Black community, and that some people see it as many communities rather than a single Black community. When we use the term “Black community” we are referring to the broader Black population.” The term “Black community” is used throughout the report because it most accurately reflects the wording of the questions that BEP participants responded to.

Critical race theory. Critical race theorists assert that “the majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality and it is only the more crude and obvious forms of racism that are seen as problematic by most people.” CRT gives attention to intersectionality – a concept that recognizes the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because individuals are simultaneously members of many groups, their complex identities operate to shape the specific ways individuals experience that bias.¹⁵

Identity. To understand the extent to which race is a factor in the lived experiences of Black individuals, it is important to examine and embrace the complexity of identity and its intersection with life outcomes. For the purpose of displaying how race and identity intersect in the lived experience, the study considered three components of identity:

- “Cultural identity” – a shared culture, a collective with a shared history and ancestry.
- Personal identity – the features of an individual that forms their value proposition, their dignity and self-image, as well as their self-respect and/or distinct personality.
- Socially constructed identity – an identity that is ‘imposed’ based on having shared characteristic features to which particular values are also ascribed. This identity reflects how society views and treats particular individuals based on such factors as race, gender and sexual orientation.

Intersectionality. The Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate provides the following definition: “Acknowledges the ways in which people’s lives are shaped by their multiple and overlapping identities and social locations, which, together, can produce a unique and distinct experience for that individual or group, for example, creating additional barriers or opportunities. In the context of race, this means recognizing the ways in which people’s experiences of racism or privilege, including within any one racialized group, may differ and vary depending on the individual’s or group’s additional overlapping (or “intersecting”) social identities, such as ethnicity, Indigenous identification, experiences with colonialism, religion, gender, citizenship, socio-economic status or sexual orientation.”¹⁶

Race. A socially constructed classification of human beings based on identified or perceived characteristics such as colour of skin and informed by historical and geographic context. It is not a biological classification. It is often the basis upon which groups are formed, agency is attained, social roles are assigned, and status conferred.¹⁷

Racialization. The process by which personality traits, behaviours, and social characteristics are ascribed to minoritized people because of their race, and are seen as permanent and inalterable.¹⁸

Racism. This term is defined as follows:

- **Individual racism** is “an ideology or set of ideas and beliefs that frames individuals’ negative attitudes towards others and are usually reflected in the willful, conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect, and reflexive actions, words, and opinions of individuals.”
- **Institutional racism** “exists when a set of established rules, policies, and regulations of institutions, businesses and agencies, etc. systemically reflect and produce differential treatment of various groups and individuals based on race.”²⁰

Structural racism. This term refers to as systemic or societal racism, refers to the laws, legislations, rules, and ideology upon which the state operates and which tends to privilege the dominant group members of society and prevent minoritized group members from fully participating in society. This racism is difficult to overcome as it can be hard to identify and is often seen as the norm. Systemic discrimination as a product of the racism is often hidden within the seemingly objective, democratic and meritocratic systems.²⁰

White supremacy. White supremacy is a system of privilege, oppression and exploitation perpetrated by white peoples (i.e., of European background) to maintain their wealth and power over Black, Indigenous and other racialized people. White privilege does not always require its beneficiaries to be obviously or openly racist. Instead, dominant social institutions function to perpetuate white supremacy.²⁰