



# Race relations in Canada **2019**

A survey of Canadian public  
opinion and experience

## Executive Summary

**Environics  
Institute**  
For Survey Research



Canadian  
Race Relations  
Foundation

Fondation  
canadienne des  
relations raciales

The study was conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

### **CANADIAN RACE RELATIONS FOUNDATION**

The Canadian Race Relations Foundation is Canada's leading organization dedicated to the elimination of racism and the promotion of harmonious race relations. Its underlying principle in addressing racism and racial discrimination emphasizes positive race relations and the promotion of shared Canadian values of human rights and democratic institutions. It strives to coordinate and cooperate with all sectors of society, and develop partnerships with relevant agencies and organizations at the local, provincial and national levels.

### **ENVIRONICS INSTITUTE FOR SURVEY RESEARCH**

The Environics Institute for Survey Research sponsors relevant and original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it's been changing, and where it may be heading.

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The study partners would like to acknowledge the generous support provided to the study launch by **RBC WEALTH MANAGEMENT**



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# Introduction

## Background

Canada is one of the most ethnically and racially diverse societies on the planet, and steadily becoming more so over time. More than four in ten Canadians are now first or second generation; and, in some parts of the country, those once labelled as “visible minority” are now the majority. Indigenous Peoples, at one point in time greatly reduced in numbers due to colonization and disease, are now among the fastest growing segments of the population.

Canada’s past included significant tensions between ethnic and racial groups, along with systemic discrimination and, in the case of Indigenous Peoples, cultural genocide. Today the country is seen by many as a model of multicultural harmony in relation to other parts of the world where ethnic and racial strife is on the rise. In comparison to most other western nations, immigrants and refugees have not become a flashpoint of ethnic and political conflict, and many Canadians see their country’s multicultural diversity as a defining symbol of national identity.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, racism and discrimination remain an underlying reality in Canada. People with racialized identities and backgrounds face ongoing challenges, both at a personal and an institutional level.<sup>2</sup> The state of race relations in Canada today is not a single story. Some see an uplifting story of dramatic changes from previous generations, the expanding inclusion of Canadians from different races in all walks of life, employment equity policies, and the establishment of anti-racism offices in governments. Others see an urgent need to address persistent systemic racism that continues to oppress the lives and opportunities of racialized individuals and communities.

Both realities exist, and perspectives are based on personal experience, anecdote, media reporting and political

agendas. What is also needed to better understand and address these realities is empirically-based evidence about the current situation and how relations between racial groups are evolving over time. This includes quantifiable measures of the perspectives and experiences of Canadians, both racialized and not.

## Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey

The Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, conducted a social research study to address this evidence gap; the first ever in Canada to do so in a comprehensive way. The Race Relations in Canada 2019 Survey establishes new benchmark indicators of race relations across Canada from the perspective of its citizens, and provides the foundation for monitoring progress over time. The primary focus of this research is on public attitudes, perceptions and experiences as they pertain to relevant dimensions of race relations.

The primary objective of this research is to generate credible, independent, empirically-derived evidence that will be widely referenced and used across Canadian sectors and communities. Such information can serve as point of common ground that brings different stakeholders together, and also provide a means for measuring progress (or the lack of progress) over time. This research is intended to provide information metrics to organizations in the public, private and non-profit sectors who are working to reduce racism both internally and in broader society.

The research is national in scope, and includes significant oversamples of the country’s largest racial groups (i.e., Chinese, Black, South Asian and Indigenous Peoples) in order to measure perspectives and experiences of both racialized and non-racialized Canadians.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Environics Institute Focus Canada Spring 2019. <https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-on-immigration-and-refugees---focus-canada-spring-2019>

<sup>2</sup> Evidence of the lived experience and challenges faced by Muslims, Indigenous Peoples and Black people in Canada has been documented in previous Environics Institute studies (see [www.environicsinstitute.org](http://www.environicsinstitute.org)).

<sup>3</sup> There is no consensus in Canada about whether Indigenous Peoples constitute a racial group as the term is generally applied. They are included in this research because Indigenous Peoples experience systemic discrimination commensurate with that of other racialized groups in Canadian society, with this treatment often labelled as “racism.”

This study is the first of its kind in Canada to focus on the respective perspectives and experiences of the country's major racial groups at a national level. The research is inspired by "reconciliation barometer" studies that have been conducted on a regular basis in South Africa and Australia (this research focuses on the relations between Indigenous and settler populations).<sup>4</sup> In the USA, much of the survey research on race relations has focused on comparing the attitudes of white and black Americans, with more recently inclusion of other ethnic groups such as Hispanics and Asians.<sup>5</sup>

This research consisted of a survey conducted online between April 17 and May 6, 2019, with a sample of 3,111 Canadians ages 18 and over. The sample was stratified to ensure representation by province, age and gender, according to the most current population statistics (2016 Census). In addition, over-samples were collected with individuals who self-identify as Chinese, Black, South Asian or Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) (the four largest racialized populations in Canada), in order to provide for sufficient representation of each group for analysis.<sup>6</sup> The survey was conducted in English and French (as per respondent's preference).

## About this summary

This summary presents the background and key conclusions from the research. A comprehensive final report is also available ([www.environicsinstitute.org](http://www.environicsinstitute.org)) which focuses on comparisons between racialized and non-racialized Canadians, as well as by selected population characteristics (e.g., region, gender, age cohort). The report also draws comparisons with the opinions and experiences of Americans, based on research conducted by the Pew Research Center.

Detailed data tables are available under separate cover, which present the results for all survey questions by population demographics and other relevant characteristics (see the study project page at [www.environicsinstitute.org](http://www.environicsinstitute.org)). All results are presented as percentages unless otherwise noted.

**Note about terminology.** The term "race" is problematic from a number of perspectives, in part because there is no consensus on exactly what it refers to. The term is widely used in the context of relations between people from different backgrounds and physical characteristics (e.g., culture, ethnicity, religion, history and skin colour), and as a way to define segments of society facing systematic challenges (racialized people).<sup>7</sup> In this report, the terms "race" and "race relations" are used for purposes of editorial clarity, with full acknowledgement of the limitations they entail.

## Acknowledgements

This research was made possible with the support from a number of individuals and organizations. The Environics Institute would like to acknowledge the financial and substantive contributions of its lead partner, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (Lilian Ma, Praan Misir, Suvaka Priyatharsan); Professor Jeffrey Reitz (University of Toronto), who served as a project advisor; the research team at Maru/Blue (Chris Andaya, Michael Theophile-Uruena), who managed the sample design and fieldwork; and, finally, the 3,111 individuals across Canada who took the time to share their perspectives and experiences, which collectively inform our understanding of the state of race relations in our country today.

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<sup>4</sup> See South African Reconciliation Barometer: <https://www.ijr.org.za/portfolio-items/south-african-reconciliation-barometer-survey-2017-report/>; Australian Reconciliation Barometer: [https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/final\\_full\\_arb-full-report-2018.pdf](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/final_full_arb-full-report-2018.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> An important survey on Discrimination in America was conducted in 2017 by National Public Radio, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H.Chan School of Public Health, which expands the focus to Native Americans: <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2017/10/discrimination-in-america--experiences-and-views.html>

<sup>6</sup> The survey also includes individuals from a range of other racial groups, but none of these groups are sufficiently represented in the sample to support group-specific analysis. These respondents as a group are identified as "other" racialized Canadians.

<sup>7</sup> A relevant definitional statement about race has been published by the American Anthropological Association <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>



## Key conclusions

How do Canadians view and experience relations between racial groups in their country today? At the broadest level, public opinion about the state of race relations is more positive than negative, both in terms of how groups are seen to get along and in the equality of opportunities for people with different racial backgrounds. Many (but not all) see evidence of improvement, and Canadians are generally optimistic about further progress over time. Perspectives on the broad picture vary somewhat by racial background, with racialized people (most notably Indigenous Peoples and Black people) less positive about the state of relations in comparison with those who are white; however, these differences are in many cases a matter of degree rather than a substantively different point of view.

At the same time, there is widespread recognition that racism is a reality in Canada, and something that is directly experienced by a significant proportion of the population. Among the groups studied, Indigenous Peoples and Black people are the most likely to report experiences of racial discrimination (in comparison with Chinese, South Asians and other racialized people), and they are also the groups most widely understood by others to experience such treatment (especially in the case of Indigenous Peoples as targets of racism).

The following are key conclusions from the research.

### State of race relations in Canada

As a whole, Canadians believe that race relations in their country are generally good, both in terms of how well people from different races get along with one another and the extent to which people from all races have equal opportunities to succeed in life. In terms of how race relations have changed over the past decade, the public is more likely to see progress than setbacks; although a plurality believes conditions have changed little over this period. Views are noticeably more positive when the focus is placed on race relations in one's own local community compared with the country as a whole.

Two-thirds of Canadians believe that race relations in their country are generally better than that in the USA, and indeed Americans themselves are mostly negative in their assessment; just four in ten Americans describe current race relations in their country as generally good, and a majority says they have gotten worse over the past 10 years.

At the same time, perspectives on race relations are not equally positive across racial groups. Indigenous Peoples (especially First Nations) are noticeably less likely than others to see race relations as good or having improved over time, and to believe Canada compares favourably to the USA, while Black Canadians are also less positive about people from all races having an equal chance to succeed in life. By comparison, Chinese and South Asian Canadians tend to be the most positive about current race relations. Apart from racial background, opinions about race relations are also linked to one's socio-economic status, with positive views rising along with education level and household income.

Looking to the future, Canadians as a whole are generally optimistic that progress toward racial equality will happen in their lifetime. On this question, South Asians are the most optimistic and Black people the least so, but these differences across racial groups are relatively small. More notably, strong optimism about future progress toward racial equality is most evident among Canadians 18 to 29 years of age, Indigenous Peoples, and those born in another country. Racialized Canadians expect the future will mean less rather than more racism for the next generation of people with their own background, although many do not believe there will be much change from the status quo.

### Attitudes toward people of other racial groups

Canada is a multicultural and multi-racial country, with more than one in five people categorized by Statistics Canada as "visible minority" (or racialized). A large proportion of the population has frequent contact with people from different racial backgrounds, and this is especially so for individuals

from who are racialized (i.e., having contact with those who are non-racialized). Beyond contact, however, Canadians generally describe such interactions as somewhat if not very friendly. As well, most Canadians have friendships that cross racial and cultural lines, with eight in ten reporting to have at least one friend from a different racial or cultural background.

The survey examined Canadians' attitudes toward each of the country's four largest racialized populations, and results reveal a mix of favourable and unfavourable opinions along a continuum of "modern racism"; this term refers to people's general attitude or sentiment about the treatment of specific racial groups in Canadian society, focusing on the perceived validity of their experiences of discrimination due to race and whether they are receiving more than they deserve (e.g., special consideration, government benefits).<sup>8</sup> Among the four groups, Indigenous Peoples are most likely to be seen as experiencing discrimination and obstacles (that is, least apt to attract modern racist sentiment), followed by Black people, with South Asian and Chinese Canadians less apt to be considered to experience racism.

Across racial groups, Black Canadians stand out as being the most attuned to the experience of other racialized groups in the country (i.e., thereby expressing low levels of modern racism), especially when considering Indigenous Peoples. This perspective may be the result of ongoing experience with anti-Black racism. In comparison, the attitudes of other racial groups toward one another are more variable. None of the other groups (including racialized and white Canadians) stand out as being higher than average when it comes to expressing views that manifest as modern racism.

## Racial discrimination in Canada

The reality of racial discrimination in Canada is widely acknowledged, although not by everyone. Just six in ten can identify at least one group whom they believe are targeted for discrimination due to race, with no group mentioned by as many as one in four, while the remaining four in ten respondents cannot name any. The racial groups most commonly identified as affected include Indigenous or Aboriginal Peoples, Black or African people, and Muslims or people from the Middle East. Perceptions on this question do

not vary noticeably by respondents' own racial background, although Indigenous and Black people are much more likely than others to name their own group.

Among Canadians as a whole, Indigenous Peoples are most widely seen as experiencing frequent discrimination in society today, followed by Black people and South Asians, with few placing Chinese Canadians in this category. Black people and Canadians ages 18 to 29 are the most sensitized to racism against other groups in society, while ongoing discrimination directed at Black people is most apt to be recognized by other racialized groups, and especially First Nations people.

Canadians are more likely to see racial discrimination to be a function of the prejudiced attitudes and actions of individuals rather than the systemic foundation of the country's laws and institutions; and this is regardless of whether the target is Indigenous, Black, South Asian or Chinese. Moreover, this perspective is largely the same across the population and racial groups, although younger Canadians are more apt to see both causes as equally problematic, and First Nations respondents are more likely than others to believe that Black people in Canada experience systemic racism. At the same time, many Canadians also recognize that racialized persons are systematically treated less fairly than whites in a number of settings, such as accessing medical services, in stores and restaurants, and in the criminal justice system.

In terms of racism directed at one's own group, large majorities of Indigenous Peoples (especially First Nations) and Black people say their own group experiences ongoing discrimination and unfair treatment in Canada today, and also are most likely to believe that this treatment has a significant negative impact on people they are close to. Identification of one's own group as the target of racism is somewhat less widespread among those who are South Asian, Chinese or from other racialized backgrounds. In comparison, very few white Canadians believe their racial group often encounters racism, although a significant proportion maintains it happens sometimes or rarely (reflecting, for example, the experiences of people who are Jewish).

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<sup>8</sup> Modern racism is defined as a more contemporary and subtle form of prejudice that focuses on racialized people as a group rather than as individuals, and looks more at their place in society than at individual characteristics.

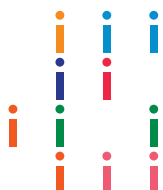
Perceptions and knowledge about racism are based in part on seeing it happen to other people. A significant proportion of racialized Canadians (and especially Indigenous and Black people) report having witnessed the discrimination of others due to their race, including people of their own racial background as well as those with other backgrounds. Such observations have taken place in a range of settings, most commonly on the street, on public transit, in stores and restaurants, and in the workplace.

## **Personal experience with discrimination and racism**

Discrimination due to one's race is a common experience in Canada, with one in five Canadians having experienced this regularly or from time to time, and another three in ten indicating it has taken place, but only very rarely. Not surprisingly, such treatment is most widely reported by Indigenous and Black people, to a lesser extent among other racialized groups, and even by four in ten white Canadians who say this has happened to them if only on rare occasions. These differences in the likelihood of reporting discrimination across racial groups is evident in a number of settings, but is most apparent in situations involving the police and in the workplace.

Racial discrimination also takes the form of day-to-day experiences involving subtle slights or insults (e.g., micro-aggressions), such as being treated as not smart, as suspicious, mistaken for someone who serves others, or ignored when requesting services. Such experiences are reported by individuals from all racial groups, but most commonly by Indigenous Peoples (especially in the case of being unfairly stopped by police) and Black people (not being treated as smart, others acting as if you are suspicious), and to a lesser extent by South Asians and people of "other" racial backgrounds. Younger Canadians, regardless of race, are more likely than older ones to report experiencing all forms of negative day-to-day experiences.

Canadians who experience racial discrimination are affected in different ways; some report they are bothered quite a bit and others insist not at all. Negative impacts are most likely to be reported by Black people, as well as by women, younger people, and those who are experiencing financial insecurity. Racialized Canadians are more likely than not to say their race or ethnicity has made it more difficult for them to succeed in life, and this is most commonly reported by Black people. Three in ten racialized people say they downplay their racial background from time to time (if not regularly), with this practice most widely reported by Indigenous Peoples.



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