Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures

Working with Black Communities

📍 LOCATIONS

Across Canada

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KEY INSIGHTS

1 The Black population in Canada is diverse and growing, reporting more than 200 ethnic or cultural origins in 2016. By 2041, the Black population in Canada is expected to exceed three million.

2 Black peoples in Canada experience widespread systemic anti-Black racism in education systems and the labour market. More needs to be done to name and address anti-Black racism in the skills ecosystem, including efforts to change employer behaviour to make workplaces more inclusive.

▶ The Issue

Black communities in Canada make up an important part of the cultural mosaic that has underpinned Canada's growth and prosperity. In 2021, 1.5 million people in Canada identified as Black, accounting for 4.3% of the population. Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa-Gatineau are home to the largest Black communities in the country. There are long-standing Black communities in Nova Scotia, and in the Prairies the population has quadrupled in size from 1996 to 2016.

It's essential to recognize that Black communities are not a monolith—within this group are diverse peoples with varied backgrounds, identities, and experiences. In 2021, 43.6% of Black people in Canada were born in the country, while 56.4% were immigrants. This diverse group reported over 200 distinct ethnic or cultural origins in 2016, reflecting the vast and rich diversity within Black communities.

Despite deep roots and ongoing contributions, Black communities in Canada continue face widespread systemic anti-Black racism, including in Canada's education systems and labour market. This is true both for those born in Canada and those who came to this country as immigrants. From 2000 to 2016, Black people aged 25 to 59 experienced consistently lower employment rates than non-Black populations. While employment statistics vary across regions and over time, in May 2024, the unemployment rate for Black youth aged 15 to 24 was 24.4%, more than double the rate for non-racialized youth.

Systemic inequities often begin early in the education system. Many Black students face lowered expectations, disproportionate disciplinary actions and exclusionary practices in high school that limit their opportunities to thrive and succeed. These systemic challenges contribute to higher rates of school disengagement and reduce access to postsecondary pathways.

In 2021, just over a third of the overall Black population in Canada aged 25 to 64 held a bachelor's degree or higher, aligning closely with the national average. But educational attainment is significantly influenced by immigration status and exposure to the Canadian school system. Over fifteen percent, 15.8%, of the Black population who were third-generation-or-more (i.e., those who are born in Canada and whose parents were also both born in Canada) had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 24.0% among the overall population of those who were third-generation-or-more in Canada. In contrast, Black immigrants often arrive in Canada with higher levels of education due to the immigration selection process and condition of entry policies.

Discrimination in hiring remains a persistent barrier for Black jobseekers. Multiple Canadian studies have shown that fictional Black candidates (along with immigrants and other racialized groups) receive far fewer interview offers than identical fictional white, Canadian-born candidates, and that this is consistent over time and across cities and provinces in Canada. A 2011 study found that Black workers were more likely to be employed in lower paying, precarious work and were twice as likely to be among the working poor than white people in Canada. A 2021 Statistics Canada paper found that Black men were about 40% less likely than white men to work in management occupations. In 2020, only 4.5% of board positions in the corporate sector across Toronto, Vancouver, Halifax and Montreal were filled by racialized people.

Forty percent of all racialized respondents to the Survey of Employment and Skills, compared to only 9% of white respondents, reported race-based discrimination in the workplace. The proportion rose to nearly 50% for those identifying as Black (47%) or South Asian (48%). Ninety-six percent of Black respondents to a 2021 Canadian survey reported that racism in the workplace was a problem, and 47% indicated that they were treated unfairly by an employer in hiring, pay or promotion in the last 12 months. This discrimination also includes jokes, assumptions and stereotypes—microaggressions that impact Black employees' sense of belonging and overall mental health. Eighty percent of participants in the Black Experience Project reported experiencing microaggressions on a regular basis, including " … having others expect their work to be inferior, being treated in a condescending way, and having frequently had others react to them as if they were afraid or intimidated."

It's essential to acknowledge how intersecting identities such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, newcomer status and income level, compound the impacts of system discrimination for many Black individuals. Equity-informed approaches must address these complex layers of exclusion to design effective and inclusive policies.

Responses from service providers to the challenges faced by Black peoples in Canada have often focused on individual-level supports, such as job placement or training, without addressing the root causes of the disparities. Many employment programs still focus on obtaining any kind of employment, with less regard for well-paid, quality work with the potential for career progression. Too few initiatives target system racism in workplaces, hiring practices, or institutional policies and as a result the structural roots of inequality remain largely intact.

Despite these ongoing challenges, Black communities continue to lead efforts for change. From launching businesses and cultural initiatives to mobilizing for equity and justice, Black leaders and organizations are building a better future for their communities and for Canada as a whole. Addressing anti-Black racism is critical not only for justice, but for ensuring that the full contributions of Black communities can be recognized, supported and celebrated.

🔧 What We Investigated

The Future Skills Centre has supported a variety of projects led by Black communities and developed in collaboration with them. These initiatives generally fall into one of four categories:

Research projects that explore ways to be more inclusive in educational and training systems and institutions that are persistently discriminatory
Projects have explored inclusive STEM pedagogy in K–12 settings; how digital transformations have impacted racialized immigrant women, and specifically women of colour in STEM programs; and how systemic discrimination manifests in artificial intelligence.

Supply-focused projects that serve a variety of equity-deserving groups, including Black peoples, newcomers, Indigenous peoples, women and those who are 2SLGBTQIA+. Projects provided a range of skills and training supports across many different parts of Canada, including wraparound supports to bolster participant success. These projects are not intentionally designed to serve Black communities but still benefit Black participants using a universal approach.

Supply-side projects that are based on the needs of and designed to specifically serve Black communities
These projects build understanding of Black communities into their project design by using participatory and user-experience approaches and often were implemented by Black-led organizations. Projects that fall into this category include the following:

- customized wraparound supports that address barriers outside of education and employment that may prevent participants from being successful;
- efforts to increase individual social capital in sectors where Black peoples are underrepresented, such as in arts and culture and in the real estate development sector;
- connecting Black youth with work-integrated learning and jobs that offer career progression and a good quality of life;

- virtual tutoring by teacher candidates to support Black children and families during school shutdowns.

Demand-side projects that seek to change the root causes of the disparities Black peoples face
Most of these projects aim to change employer behaviour in hopes of creating more diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces. Future Skills Centre–funded projects included:

- efforts targeting senior executives for personalized equity, diversity and inclusion coaching and training;
- zero-fee, organization-level assessments and recommendations related to hiring and recruitment;
- free training for HR professionals in inclusive hiring and advancement practices and online tools that reduce exclusionary language in job postings.

✔️ What We're Learning

Nothing for us without us
Meaningful participation, leadership and representation from Black communities are essential to designing effective training and employment programs that truly meet their diverse needs, strengths and lived realities. Many projects implemented equity-informed mechanism, such as:

- ensuring that project leaders, decision-makers and staff reflect the communities being served, centring Black voices and experiences in decision-making;
- creating and maintaining project advisory groups that provide input on project development, implementation and evaluation;
- building reciprocal and trust-based partnerships with Black-led community organizations and those deeply engaged with Black communities.

One-time consultations are not enough, especially for organizations that are not Black-led. Authentic representation and sustained, accountable engagement are necessary to ensure projects are responsive, culturally relevant and evaluated in a way that meets the needs of Black communities.

Equitable outcomes require wraparound supports that address the broader systemic barriers many groups face, including Black peoples
Funded projects, including universal programs and those designed for Black peoples, took steps to address intersecting challenges such as racism, mental health, trauma, food insecurity, family dynamics and experiences with the justice system. Offering holistic, personalized wraparound supports is one way to acknowledge and address the structural conditions impacting participants. These supports included ongoing needs assessments and connections to resources such as mental health services, safe housing, transportation, childcare and income assistance, among others. Community service organizations with long histories and trusted relationships in Black communities are best placed to provide these customized supports, and partner with more mainstream employment and training institutions to offer them to their clientele.

Be deliberate about building social capital in sectors that are historically underrepresented
Several projects focused on building relationships and expanding networks between Black participants and sectors where Black peoples are underrepresented, such as among vendors and in arts and culture, entrepreneurship and the real estate development sector. Even when not the core aim, these opportunities helped build confidence, skills and pathways to advancement that continued beyond the life of the program.

Name and address anti-Black racism
A small number of projects explicitly named the presence and impacts of anti-Black racism and factored this reality into program development and implementation. For example, one project developed a curriculum for Black job seekers that includes content on microaggressions and how to advocate for themselves. Virtually all of the projects that named anti-Black racism explicitly and worked directly with participants (versus research projects) identified a need to engage employers and coaches/mentors in a conversation about anti-Black racism to position them to be supportive of Black job seekers, and had intentions of developing this program element in the future.

Build trusting relationships with employers to address root causes
Addressing the root causes of systemic exclusion requires deep and sustained relationships with employers. Projects that sought to impact the systemic racism faced by Black peoples in education and employment showed significant potential. These projects made valuable contributions in providing practical guidance and tools to employers to make their workplaces more inclusive and attract a more diverse talent pool. Most of these projects sought a change in employer behaviour—a complex undertaking that is made easier with trusting relationships. These projects employed deliberate relationship- and trust-building opportunities to achieve behaviour change.

⭐ Why It Matters

Canada's workforce is increasingly diverse. By 2041, the Black population in Canada is expected to exceed three million. Dismantling anti-Black racism is necessary to achieve equity and inclusion for Black peoples in Canada. It's also necessary to resolve Canada's current and future labour and skills shortages. For an economy to thrive, everyone needs to be supported to reach their potential.

There is a growing awareness of the root causes of the inequities experienced by Black communities in Canada. Federal efforts to develop anti-racism legislation are increasingly bolstered by provincial, territorial, regional and municipal government initiatives to tackle systemic racism and discrimination. One commonly identified area of growth within these policies has been the move to disaggregate data by race, as well as other socio-demographic characteristics, which is hoped to provide further quantitative evidence of the barriers faced by racialized peoples.

Increasing awareness has not yet translated into interventions at scale in the skills ecosystem. While universal programs are of benefit to many equity-deserving groups, they are not always relevant. Few large-scale skills-based programs are designed to meet the specific needs of Black communities.

More practical guidance in the workforce development and skills ecosystem is needed to support inclusive policy approaches developed in collaboration with Black communities. The skills ecosystem could better foster equity and opportunity by incorporating the following:

- more widespread use of program elements that promote equity, such as wraparound supports, building social capital and connecting to jobs with real career advancement opportunities, and including more career guidance and exploration programming for young Black students before they enter the labour market;
- more programming that names anti-Black racism and prepares job seekers to navigate it;
- more initiatives that seek to address systemic anti-Black racism by targeting employers and workplaces as the units of change.

The world of work is changing—Canada is poised for a massive transition to a net-zero economy, fuelled in large part by rapid changes in technology and automation. However, the future of work is not going to be more inclusive unless there are widespread, deliberate efforts to change today. Artificial intelligence is a good example, as research shows how this cutting-edge technology reproduces the long-standing biases of its creators.

In order to meet the skills demands of the future, Canada must deliver on its inclusivity and multiculturalism promises and work to dismantle the barriers, like systemic anti-Black racism, that stop people from reaching their full potential.

▶▶ What's Next

The Future Skills Centre is committed to the ongoing development of programs, policies and practices that identify and address the root causes of inequities in the skills development ecosystem. Future Skills Centre continues to work with its consortium partners, including the Diversity Institute, and its project partners to generate and share evidence about what works, for whom and in what context.

The Environics Institute and the Diversity Institute will continue to partner with the Future Skills Centre to implement the Survey on Employment and Skills to better understand and monitor trends in workplace discrimination.

🗐 Projects in this Report

Teacher Training in the Digital Era : Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion – Université de Montréal

Digital Transformation of Work: Gender Considerations and Impact on Racialized Women – University of Waterloo

An Equity Lens on Artificial Intelligence – University of Toronto

Harnessing the Digital Economy for Women of Colour in Canadian Undergraduate Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Programs – Ontario Tech University

ELITE Program for Black Youth – University of Alberta

Strength in Structure – Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity

Mapping Racialized Experiences in the Real Estate Development Industry – Monumental Projects Inc.

ArtWorksTO – Toronto Arts Foundation Neighbourhood Arts Network

ACCELERATE Leadership – Coalition of Innovation Leaders Against Racism

Workplace Inclusion Charter Expansion – City of Kingston and KEYS Job Centre

HireNext – CivicAction

Career Advancement for Immigrant Professionals – Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council

Study Buddy Program – Diversity Institute

Black African and Caribbean Entrepreneurship Leadership Program – Black Business and Professional Association

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

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