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Project Insights Report

Stoking the Flame: Equity, Inclusion, and the Black Experience in the Foodservice Industry



PARTNERS

The Re-Seasoning
Coalition



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



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Executive Summary

The Canadian foodservice industry plays a critical role as an entry point to employment, particularly for youth and newcomers. However, it continues to face significant labour shortages, with nearly 100,000 vacancies in 2024 and restaurants operating at approximately 80% capacity. The *Stoking the Flame* research project by the Re-Seasoning Coalition examined the persistent barriers facing Black workers and consumers in the sector, building on findings from a 2022 national study. The project used a mixed-methods approach, including a national survey of over 2,000 respondents, focus groups and interviews with individuals in the sector to explore systemic challenges and opportunities for more equitable practices.

Findings reveal a growing public expectation for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in foodservice; however, a gap remains between sentiment and workplace reality. Black youth show strong interest in entering the industry, yet face barriers to hiring, advancement, and leadership opportunities. One in two Black workers report experiencing discrimination, with limited access to safe reporting mechanisms, mentorship, and career development. At the same time, Black consumers play a key role in the foodservice market, being some of the highest consumers with dining out and food delivery and are more likely to support businesses that demonstrate EDI commitments.

The research highlights that centring Black voices and advancing equitable practices are essential to addressing labour shortages, strengthening workforce outcomes, and improving sector sustainability. It underscores the need for coordinated action across employers, policymakers, and industry leaders to embed accountability, inclusive practices, and targeted supports across the sector.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** One in two Black employees in the foodservice industry reported experiencing or witnessing racial discrimination in the workplace, with nearly half indicating they do not feel safe reporting these incidents.
- 2** Although Black workers are entering the foodservice industry at rates comparable to their non-Black counterparts, they experience disproportionately limited career advancement opportunities.
- 3** 54% of Black workers express interest in leadership and business training, but fewer than one-third report having access to such opportunities.

▶ The Issue

The Canadian foodservice industry provides the first job for many people, especially for youth and newcomers. However, recently, the food industry has struggled to fill vacancies and return to the post-pandemic levels. In 2024, nationally there were nearly 100,000 job vacancies and on average restaurants are operating at 80% capacity due to labour shortages.

This is in part due to the difficult work environments and systematic barriers that hinder the participation of racialized and newcomers in the foodservice industry. This is especially prevalent for Black employees. While Black youth job seekers note high interest in the foodservice industry and represent a growing population ready to enter the workforce, they continue to face barriers to entry, participation, and advancement in the sector. Black workers report facing both overt discrimination and bias during performance evaluations and interactions with customers.

These challenges are compounded by restaurants and industry organizations' limited implementation of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and policies to support employees. There is a gap in the development and adoption of inclusive practices across the sector to support Black workers. This highlights the need for policies and programs that address discrimination, race-based inequalities, and create pathways for the advancement of Black workers in the sector to curb the labour shortages.



What We Investigated

The Stoking the Flame research project from the Re-Seasoning Coalition explored the experiences of Black Canadians working in the foodservice industry. The work was informed by [previous research](#) and investigates what has changed since the first project, as well as what barriers the foodservice industry continues to face.

This research project sought to answer three questions:

- What are the social-emotional and structural barriers preventing Canadian foodservice leaders from adopting inclusive and anti-racist leadership practices, and what factors have affected the progress or lack thereof of SMEs in adopting inclusive, anti-racist practices since the social justice protests of 2020?
- What are the realities of being Black in the foodservice industry, and what are the specific policies or support mechanisms needed to enable Black employees, particularly youth, to thrive and advance in the industry?
- What are the gaps in current EDI practices as it relates to creating improved dining experiences for Black Canadians?

The project used a mixed-methods approach, including a national survey with over 2,000 respondents and focus groups and in-depth interviews from sector participants in Ontario and Quebec, conducted in English and French.

The data was analyzed through frameworks that illustrated how everyday choices in hiring, scheduling, training, supervision, and guest behaviour shape the experiences of Black workers and entrepreneurs. In addition, survey results were benchmarked against data from 2022 to highlight any shifts in results.

✔ What We're Learning

Public sentiment toward EDI in foodservice has strengthened, though gaps remain between beliefs and practice

Research findings from the 2025 national survey indicate that the majority of Canadians believe foodservice businesses should take an active role in supporting racial justice issues, rather than a passive or neutral stance. Positive sentiment has increased across several groups, most notably among white men, rising from 35% in 2022 to 50% in 2025. Support remained consistently high among Black men and women, non-Black racialized women, and white women. Additionally, belief in prioritizing EDI practices among restaurants and delivery apps increased across most groups, with the exception of white women, where a decline was observed. Despite this overall progress, a gap persists between individual attitudes and how EDI is being implemented within foodservice workplaces.

Black youth show strong interest in foodservice careers, but employment outcomes remain uneven

Black youth continue to demonstrate high levels of interest and enthusiasm for careers in the foodservice industry, but face barriers such as bias in hiring practices and gaps in financial support. While rejection rates for Black individuals have improved modestly over time, shifting from 11% in 2025 compared to 9% in 2022, rates of employment growth for Black workers have remained relatively stagnant. In contrast, employment gains have been more pronounced among white men, increasing from 4% in 2022 to 14% in 2025. These findings highlight a disconnect between interest and equitable employment outcomes, showcasing that systemic barriers persist.

Barriers to advancement continue to limit career progression for Black workers

Although Black workers are entering the foodservice industry at rates comparable to their non-Black counterparts, they experience disproportionately limited career advancement opportunities. Since 2022, white and South Asian workers have captured the majority of employment growth and upward mobility within the sector. Black workers continue to be overrepresented in frontline roles. In addition, survey results from 2025 highlight that over half (52%) of Black workers report facing barriers to advancement, including limited representation in leadership roles and experiences of racial bias. While 54% express interest in leadership and business training, fewer than one-third report having access to such opportunities.

Experiences of discrimination remain prevalent and impact workplace inclusion

One in two Black employees reported experiencing or witnessing racial discrimination in the workplace, with nearly half indicating they do not feel safe reporting these incidents. Many also reported that their voices are not valued in decision-making processes, including policy and menu development. This trend continues among Black culinary professionals, with 71% reporting that their ideas are undervalued or appropriated. These experiences, combined with limited access to mentors and sponsors, reinforce systemic challenges and hinder a sense of inclusion and belonging within the industry.

Black consumers are key drivers of the foodservice industry and value EDI-aligned businesses

Black consumers play a significant role in shaping demand within the foodservice sector, with 78% reporting dining out or ordering food at least once per week, compared to 62% of white and 51% of non-Black racialized consumers. This positions Black consumers as a leading segment in overall industry consumption. Importantly, many indicate they are more likely to support businesses that demonstrate commitment to EDI, including fair treatment of employees and public support for racial justice. These findings underscore both the economic influence of Black consumers and the business case for advancing equitable practices.

★ **Why It Matters**

The research showcases that addressing the needs of Black workers and consumers can lead to more effective and responsive strategies across the foodservice sector. The findings show that Black consumers are not only highly engaged in the foodservice market but are also more likely to support businesses that align with EDI values. This highlights a direct link between inclusive practices and economic outcomes. More broadly, it suggests that policies and programs designed with equity at the centre are better positioned to meet the needs of a diverse workforce and customer base. This will ultimately strengthen sector sustainability, inclusivity and long-term competitiveness, while reinforcing the business case for advancing equity.

This research also demonstrates the importance of centring Black voices. Those with lived experience provide critical insights that are often overlooked in broader, generalized workforce studies. While overall workforce trends may suggest progress in equity, diversity and inclusion, the findings highlight that Black individuals continue to face distinct challenges and persistent systemic barriers. This underscores the value of engaging target populations directly to ensure recommendations are accurate and actionable. For policymakers and sector leaders, this reinforces the need to embed equity-focused, community-informed approaches into workforce research, funding decisions and program design to strengthen the relevance, credibility and impact of interventions.



State of Skills: Working with Black Communities

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.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

This project further underscores the importance of employers adopting equitable hiring and inclusive workplace practices. Moving beyond general commitments to EDI, employers and businesses must implement tangible and measurable actions to support a diverse workforce. The research reinforces the need for ongoing education and reflection, encouraging employers to examine how bias and system barriers exist within their organizations. This also points to an opportunity for industry-wide standards and accountability mechanisms to support consistent progress. Collectively, these actions are critical not only to support individual workers but to build a more inclusive and resilient workforce.

► What's Next

With the publication of this report, the [Re-Seasoning Coalition](#) also developed a toolkit focused specifically on Black youth to help equip small business owners, employers and team leads to better support employed and job-seeking Black youth. The toolkit is available [here](#).

Building off the work of this project, the Re-Seasoning Coalition will also be developing another toolkit specifically for culinary schools in Ontario to support Black students and alumni.

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

How to Cite This Report

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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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