



# Race relations in Canada **2021**

A survey of Canadian public  
opinion and experience

## Executive Summary

**Enviro**nic  
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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 was created in 1996 to reaffirm justice and equality for all in Canada. The mandate of the Foundation is to facilitate throughout Canada the development, sharing, and application of knowledge and expertise to contribute to the elimination of racism and all forms of racial discrimination in Canadian society.

### **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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# Introduction

## Background

Canada is an ethnically and racially diverse society, with more than four in ten residents either first or second generation in the country. In comparative terms, Canada is among the most welcoming of countries when it comes to acceptance of such diversity. The 2018 Gallup World poll puts Canada at the top of 140 countries in citizens rating their community as a good place for ethnic and racial minorities. And in historical terms, race relations in Canada are the most positive in the country's history – a far cry from previous eras, which included explicit discrimination against those who were not white and Protestant, be it French, Irish, Chinese, Jewish, East Indian, Black or Indigenous.

At the same time, racism and discrimination against those who look different remain an underlying reality in Canada. People with racialized identities and backgrounds face ongoing challenges, both at a personal and an institutional level. In particular, the legacy of colonialism and the government's assimilationist policies toward First Nations, Métis and Inuit people still makes itself felt in various ways, most recently with the discovery of unmarked graves of children at residential school sites. The country's jails and prisons continue to have a significant overrepresentation of Canadians who are Black or Indigenous.

There is the desire or tendency to see the state of race relations in Canada today as either good or bad, but the reality is that there is no single story. Some see a positive story of dramatic improvements 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 a negative story of 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. There is no easy way to reconcile these perspectives, but what can help is credible, empirically-based evidence about the current situation, and how progress is or is not being made over time. This includes measuring the collective beliefs, attitudes and experiences of Canadians, both racialized and not.

## The research

**RACE RELATIONS IN CANADA 2019 SURVEY.** In 2019, the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, conducted a landmark national survey to address this evidence gap. The purpose was to establish new benchmark indicators of race relations across Canada from the perspective of its citizens, and to provide the foundation for monitoring progress over time. The primary focus of this research was on public attitudes, perceptions and experiences as they pertain to relevant dimensions of race relations, and in particular, from the perspectives of Canadians across ethnic and racial backgrounds.

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

### **RACE RELATIONS IN CANADA 2021 SURVEY.**

Since 2019, the landscape of race relations has changed significantly. In May 2020, the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer launched an unprecedented movement of anger, political advocacy, and renewed attention to racism and racial violence across the USA and around the world. In Canada, the fight for justice and respect for Indigenous Peoples continues to evolve, and in May received a fresh jolt with the discovery of 215 unmarked graves of Indigenous children at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in B.C. As well, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the existence of anti-Asian sentiment in many parts of the country.

In this context, the Environics Institute and the Canadian Race Relations Foundation – with the financial support of Pfizer Canada – conducted the next wave of this research program. The new survey identifies how Canadians' perspectives and experiences have changed (or not) over

the past two years, and addresses new themes of current relevance. The 2021 survey focuses on the following themes:

- Opinions about the general state of race relations in Canada and local communities;
- Perceptions of the extent and type of racial discrimination, generally and against one's own group;
- Personal experience with discrimination and racism;
- The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on racial discrimination; and
- Local policing and the need for reform.

As in 2019, the current survey is national in scope, and includes significant oversamples of the country's largest racial groups, in order to measure perspectives and experiences of both racialized and non-racialized Canadians. This research consisted of a survey conducted online between May 13 and June 11, 2021, with a sample of 3,698 Canadians, ages 18 and over. The sample was stratified to ensure representation by province, age and gender, according to the most current population statistics. In addition, oversamples were collected with individuals who self-identify as Chinese, Black, South Asian, East or Southeast Asian, or Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit) to provide for sufficient representation of each group for analysis. The survey was conducted in English and French (as per respondent's preference).

## About this report

The following sections of the report present the results from the survey, with a focus on comparisons across groups based on their ethnic and racial backgrounds, as well as by selected population characteristics (e.g., region, gender, household income, age cohort). The current results are compared with those from the 2019 survey to identify how perspectives and experiences have changed (or not) over the past two years. Finally, the report includes selected references to comparable American data where relevant.

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.

## Acknowledgements

This research was made possible with the support from a number of individuals and organizations. The Environics Institute would like to acknowledge the substantive contributions of its lead partner, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (Mohammed Hashim, Sharon Pun, Angela Lee, Kimberly Bennett), and the generous financial support provided by Pfizer Canada. Appreciation is also extended to the research team at Maru/Blue (Rachel Spence, Deepakkumar Maurya, Balakrishnan V.) who managed the sample design and fieldwork. Finally, we offer our thanks to the 3,698 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.



# Executive summary

This latest research once again confirms the reality of racism in Canada. A significant proportion of the population experiences discrimination because of their race or ethnic background at least occasionally, if not more often, and has witnessed other people encounter similar treatment. Racial discrimination takes place across a range of settings, such as public spaces, in the workplace, in stores, and at school and university. And this is, by far, most widely experienced by Canadians who are Indigenous or Black, although it is by no means uncommon among those with other racialized identities.

There has also been notable change in public perspectives about race in Canada since the first survey two years ago, undoubtedly the result of high-profile incidents of racial injustice in the U.S. and Canada that have prompted renewed scrutiny of policing, institutional policies and the historical record. Broad public awareness and recognition of racism has expanded over the past two years, especially as it is affecting people who are Black or Indigenous, but also the Chinese community due to anti-Asian sentiments arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. And there is increasing appreciation of the systemic basis of discrimination in terms of racialized Canadians being treated less fairly than white people across a range of settings, such as when dealing with the police. Notably, however, the frequency with which racialized people report personal experiences with discrimination has remained largely unchanged since 2019, suggesting that it is awareness of racism in society rather than the problem itself that has undergone the most change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of, and increased the daily stress experienced by, many Canadians (especially youth and those with precarious incomes), but does not appear to have disproportionately affected racialized people in terms of their health, overall life satisfaction and access to needed health care services. At the same time, Indigenous and Black Canadians express lower confidence in the safety and effectiveness of vaccines and, for this and possibly other reasons, have greater hesitation about getting vaccinated. As well, the research confirms an increase in anti-Asian discrimination, with many who are

Chinese or of other Asian backgrounds reporting racially-motivated harassment in various forms (people feeling uncomfortable around them, being subjected to slurs and jokes, feeling physically threatened); treatment that has long been experienced by other racialized groups, notably those who are Black or Indigenous.

The injustices and challenges of racism notwithstanding, it is not a major fault line in Canadian society at this point in time. Despite growing recognition of the problem, Canadians are more likely than not to believe that race relations are generally good in terms of how people from different groups get along and in the equality of opportunity for people with different racial backgrounds. And a majority remain optimistic that progress toward racial equality will happen in their lifetime, although such optimism has diminished somewhat over the past two years, especially among racialized Canadians. Race relations in this country may now be at an important juncture, and the next two years might well prove to be a critical period of reckoning.

The following are key findings from the research.

## Summary of key findings

**STATE OF RACE RELATIONS IN CANADA.** A clear majority of Canadians believe that race relations in this country are generally good, both in terms of how well people from different groups get along with one another and the extent to which people from all races have equal opportunities to succeed in life. Moreover, views are comparatively more positive when the focus is on race relations in one's own local community. But opinions about the state of race relations are now less positive than in 2019, with somewhat fewer now describing them as generally good. This worsening change has occurred across the population, and racial and ethnic groups, but most notably among Black Canadians who, along with Indigenous Peoples, are the least likely to describe race relations as good in their description of race relations today (although, even among these groups, the positive outweighs the negative on most indicators).

While the public assessment of race relations as they are today has deteriorated from that expressed two years ago, there has not been a comparable shift in how Canadians believe race relations have changed over the past decade. As in 2019, opinions are divided among those who see improvement, those who see setbacks, and a plurality who maintain little has changed. Notably, however, racialized Canadians (especially those who are Chinese, South Asian or Black) are now more likely than before to say that equal opportunities for all groups to succeed have worsened over time.

A majority of Canadians are optimistic that progress toward racial equality will happen in their lifetime, but here as well a positive outlook has weakened since 2019. This downward shift in optimism is evident across the population, but most notably among racialized Canadians, especially those who are Indigenous or Chinese. Optimism about the future of racial equality is now most widespread among Quebecers, South Asians and newcomers to Canada, and least so among Indigenous Peoples (especially those who are Métis).

**AWARENESS AND PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION.** The reality of racism in Canada is widely acknowledged, and by a growing proportion of the population. As in 2019, Indigenous Peoples and Black people are most commonly seen by other Canadians to experience racial discrimination on an ongoing basis, and this view has strengthened noticeably over the past two years; relatively few now maintain that such mistreatment of these groups rarely or never happens. The most significant change since 2019 is a jump in the perception of discrimination against Chinese people (with seven in ten now saying this happens at least sometimes, if not often), likely due to reports of rising anti-Asian sentiment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic being linked to China. Perceptions of racial discrimination against Chinese people in Canada is now comparable to that believed to be experienced by people who are South Asian (unchanged since 2019) or Middle Eastern, and to a lesser extent those with backgrounds from East and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>1</sup> By comparison,

Canadians are least apt to say that Latin American people experience racial discrimination on an ongoing basis.

In terms of racism directed at one's own group, large majorities of Indigenous Peoples and Black people say others in their own group experience ongoing discrimination and unfair treatment in Canada today, with smaller proportions reported by members of other racialized groups. Perceptions of ongoing discrimination have increased noticeably since 2019 among Black and Chinese people, as well as among first-generation Canadians, with smaller increases among those who are South Asian and those who identify with another racialized group.<sup>2</sup> Those who are Black or First Nations are also among the most likely to say they have witnessed discrimination of other people in their own racial group (although such reports have changed little since 2019) and that such treatment has a significant negative impact on the people they are close to.

Canadians tend to see racism as a function of the prejudiced attitudes and actions of individuals rather than systemic inequities in the country's laws and institutions, but this perspective has shifted a bit toward the latter perspective since 2019. Systemic racism is most widely recognized as affecting Indigenous Peoples and Black people, and in both cases this view has strengthened noticeably over the past two years, as is also the case for the treatment of Chinese people, and to a lesser extent those who are South Asian. Systemic racism (and indeed racism in general) is much less likely to be seen as affecting Canadians who are East/Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern or Latin American.

As well, there is a growing belief among Canadians that racialized people are treated less fairly than those who are white in specific settings and circumstances, especially when dealing with the police, but also in the workplace, in the courts, in stores and restaurants, and when receiving health care services. Such racial bias is most likely to be seen as affecting Indigenous Peoples and Black people, especially in situations involving the police, but increasingly in terms of receiving health care services.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2021 survey included questions about society's treatment of three new racialized groups in Canada: Middle Eastern people, people with backgrounds from East and Southeast Asia, and Latin American people.

<sup>2</sup> "Another racialized group" denotes Canadians surveyed with racial identities other than those highlighted and oversampled in the survey (e.g., white, Black, Indigenous, South Asian, Chinese). These respondents are grouped together because there are insufficient numbers in each to identify for analysis purposes.

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM.** Discrimination and mistreatment due to one's race is a common experience in Canada. One-fifth of the population report that this happens to them regularly or from time to time, with another quarter indicating it occurs but very rarely. Such treatment is most widely reported by those who are Black or First Nations, and to a lesser but still notable extent by those who are South Asian, Chinese, East or Southeast Asian, or Métis, and even by a significant minority of those who identify as white. Since 2019, there is no change in the frequency of such reported experiences for the population as a whole, but it has increased noticeably among South Asian and Chinese people, and by only a small amount among those who are Black, while decreasing among Indigenous Peoples. Across the population, personal experience with racism is most apt to be reported by Canadians 18 to 29 years of age, first generation living in the country, or those with precarious incomes. Men and women are equally likely to report such discrimination.

Racism is encountered across a number of public settings, most commonly in the workplace, on the street, in stores and restaurants, and at school or university. Reported experiences by setting for the population as a whole are unchanged from 2019, but have increased among Chinese people in their encounters in the workplace, in stores and restaurants, and when using public services; and among South Asian people when using public services, and in dealing with the police and the courts.

Canadians who experience racial discrimination are affected to varying degrees; some report that they are bothered quite a bit and others insist not at all. Negative impacts are most likely to be experienced by those who are Black or First Nations, as well as women, second-generation Canadians and those with precarious incomes. As was the case in 2019, 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 those who are Indigenous or South Asian.

**IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.** The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have had little impact on Canadians' self-assessment of their own general health (as compared to that reported in 2019), but has more negatively affected their mental health and well-being. This latter change is evident across the population, but a decline in mental health

status is most pronounced among Canadians with limited education and precarious incomes, as well as those who are Black or First Nations (although Black Canadians continue to be more likely than other groups to report their mental health to be excellent or good). Experiences of daily stress (e.g., feeling nervous, depressed, lonely, having trouble sleeping) are most widely reported by Canadians ages 18 to 29, and those with lower household incomes, but does not vary as significantly across racial groups. At the broadest level, the pandemic has not had a significant impact on Canadians' level of overall life satisfaction, which has diminished only marginally since 2019 across the population and within most of the groups covered in this analysis.

Over the course of the pandemic, a majority of Canadians who required health care services say they were able to access what they needed all or most of the time. But this experience has been much more common for older Canadians than younger ones, with education and household income also noted as important factors. In terms of needing health care services in the future, Canadians express the most confidence in obtaining emergency care at a hospital, followed by non-emergency care with a family doctor or health clinic, and the least confidence in getting services for mental health and counselling. Once again, age and household income are important factors in shaping expectations for future access to services, while by comparison, racial identity makes much less of a difference both in obtaining health care over the previous year and expressing confidence in future access. Among the small proportion of Canadians who reported that they or someone in their household tested positive for COVID-19, most describe the care they received as excellent or good, with similar experiences indicated among both racialized and non-racialized people.

Canadians express a range in their level of concern about contracting the COVID-19 virus, with strong concern most evident among Asian Canadians (especially those who are East or Southeast Asian), as well as those who are first-generation and those with precarious incomes. One in ten reports having either avoided getting tested or downplaying possible symptoms, with these actions most common among younger Canadians, as well as those who are Indigenous or Black. Seven in ten Canadians say they have been vaccinated, with this rate highest among Asian people, and lowest among those who are Black or who

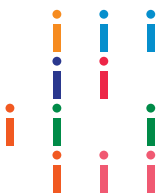
have low household incomes. Among Canadians not yet vaccinated, a majority say they will do so, compared with just over one in ten who do not plan to get vaccinated or remain unsure; this latter group is most likely to include those who are Black, Indigenous or another racialized group, as well as Quebecers, rural residents and those with precarious incomes. Not surprisingly, getting inoculated against COVID-19, or intending to do so, is closely linked to one's level of confidence in the safety and effectiveness of vaccines.

Apart from the impact that COVID-19 and lockdown measures have had on the mental health and economic well-being of many Canadians, the pandemic has also led to a rise in anti-Asian sentiment because of the virus's origin in China. Significant minorities of Chinese, and East or Southeast Asian Canadians, report encountering racially-motivated harassment since the pandemic outbreak, in the form of people acting uncomfortable around them, being subjected to slurs and jokes, and fearing someone might threaten or physically attack them. Moreover, this type of anti-Asian discrimination is recognized by others, with a majority of Canadians expressing the belief that Chinese Canadians are now experiencing more racial mistreatment than before the pandemic. But it is not only Asian Canadians who report racially-motivated harassment since the pandemic began. Such experiences are also commonly reported by other racialized people, especially those who are Black or First Nations.

On the positive side, a notable minority of Canadians from each racial group also say they have had others openly express support for them as a member of their race or ethnicity since the pandemic began, with this most commonly reported by those who are Black or First Nations.

**LOCAL POLICING.** Canadians as a whole are generally positive about the job performance of their local police force, as measured across five dimensions of service. The strongest ratings are given to how police treat people in respondents' own racial/ethnic group and how well police protect people generally from crime, with somewhat lower ratings given for using appropriate force for each situation, responding to disturbances caused by someone having a mental health crisis, and holding officers accountable when misconduct occurs. Not surprisingly, perspectives on local police performance vary by racial and ethnic group, especially in relation to how one's own group is treated: white Canadians are the most likely to say their local police are doing an excellent or good job on this dimension, while this much less apt to be the case among those who are Black or First Nations. Across the population, positive performance ratings of local police are most evident among older Canadians, and least so among those 18 to 29 years of age or those with precarious incomes.

With attention now being given to how policing needs to be reformed (if not "defunded"), the Canadian public is divided on the extent to which such change is necessary. Four in ten say what is needed is for police to do a better job of how they currently operate, while a one-third believe fundamental change is required, and another three in ten do not offer a clear opinion either way. This absence of consensus extends across the population, as well as across ethnic and racial groups, but the balance of opinion tips toward fundamental reform among Canadians who are Black, First Nations or South Asian, as well as among those ages 18 to 29 or those with precarious incomes.



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