

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE PROJECT IN THE GTA

**Overview
Report**

**Executive
Summary**

July 2017



Background

The Black Experience Project began with a central question “What does it mean to be Black in the GTA?” From there, the study embarked on a journey of answering this question in an authentic and respectful way. Launched in 2010, the Black Experience Project (BEP) is a research study that 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 contribute to the health and vibrancy of the Black community, and by doing so, the health and vibrancy of the entire GTA and beyond. 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. These results will also help the broader community (e.g., community leaders, decision-makers, policy makers, general public) understand and appreciate the diversity and vibrancy of the Black community within their vicinity.

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 – including the time of slavery. But in recent years, that history has been shaped by successive waves of immigration. Canada’s own history of anti-Black racism, segregation and exploitation is well studied. 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, its persistent activism and advocacy for civil liberties and human rights, while often missing from textbooks, is well documented.

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 almost 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, but it has experienced economic, educational, social, and political disparities that continue to this day, much of which are rooted in anti-Black racism. 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 lower income, have higher rates of unemployment, experience higher rates of incarceration, suffer poorer health outcomes, and are more likely to be victims of violence. The historic foundations of colonialism and anti-Black racism have stood as systemic barriers to collective and individual success. 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.



The BEP study

The Black Experience Project set out to answer the question “What does it mean to be Black in the GTA?” through a lens of “asset-based” research, and drawing on critical race theory which acknowledges historical and structural sources of inequality. This project provides the opportunity to build on positive narratives about the GTA’s Black community, effectively portraying its rich diversity, successes, and contributions; and creating a better understanding of obstacles and challenges that the community faces.

The project consists of three phases:

PHASE 1 – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (May 2011 – March 2014). A fundamental premise of the project is to ensure 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.

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 1504 Black individuals across the GTA (The results of the survey are presented in this report).

PHASE 3 – POST-STUDY DISSEMINATION AND ENGAGEMENT (July 2017 and beyond). Once the research has been 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, with the goal of: a) widely sharing the research findings with the community and with all sectors; b) prompting further analysis and discussion of the research and its implications; and c) working toward meaningful next steps in strengthening the community.

The study employed established survey research methods to capture and document the lived experiences 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 target population was defined as individuals between the ages of 16 years and older living in the Greater Toronto Area, who self-identify as either Black or of African heritage. The study sample was designed to provide representation of this population, to the extent possible, across a number of relevant demographic and ethnic characteristics; these include geographic location of residence (region and local municipality), age, gender, household income, and ethnic or cultural background. Participants were selected according to pre-set criteria or quotas to help ensure that the characteristics of the sample approximated, as much as possible, the characteristics of the target population. Individuals were recruited for participation using a “quota sampling” approach based on matching the most current population data published by Statistics Canada.

Individuals were recruited for participation through extensive outreach across the GTA to build awareness and interest in the study. 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. The outreach and interviewing period took place between February and December 2015.

Key Conclusions

Identity: Shared experiences of Black identity in spite of diversity

There is a remarkable degree of consensus on a number of key questions relating to race and racism. BEP participants are nearly unanimous in their agreement that being Black is important to their identity and their social relationships. They also share the conviction that Black people in the GTA are treated unfairly because of their race. This commonality of attitudes about the importance of race and the pervasiveness of racism, however, co-exists with a diversity of identities. BEP participants are diverse in terms of both their ethno-cultural backgrounds and the terms they use to express their racial identity. While some ethno-cultural or racial identities are chosen more frequently than others, Black identity predominates. This ethnic and racial diversity is accompanied by other forms of diversity, such as differences in socio-economic status, country of origin, religion, gender and sexual orientation.

Community strength and engagement

BEP participants are active in, and engaged with, their communities – in some cases, more so than Canadians in general – with comparatively high rates of volunteering and of membership in clubs or organizations (some of which specifically address the interests of the Black community). They have been most actively engaged in religious organizations (historically safe sites for education and advocacy). On average, more frequent experiences of anti-Black racism coincide with higher levels of community engagement, suggesting that discrimination sparks activism more often than alienation. BEP participants are aware and proud of the ways in which Black individuals and communities persevere in the face of discrimination. They consider this perseverance to be one of the Black community's strengths, and many say they respond to experiences of unfair treatment and anti-Black racism by resolving to overcome them in various ways.

Institutional and interpersonal racism

Direct experience with racism is a common experience among BEP participants. Two thirds say they frequently or occasionally experience racism and discrimination because they are Black. Eight in ten report experiencing one of several forms of day-to-day micro-aggressions, such as having others expect their work to be inferior or being treated in a condescending or superficial way.

While participants from all backgrounds are affected by these experiences, in many cases those with lower incomes are affected more intensely. In other instances, however, Black individuals face racial prejudice and experience effects regardless of income. Black individuals with higher socio-economic status are just as likely as those with lower socio-economic status to be arbitrarily stopped in public by the police for no apparent reason. It may be the case, then, that the disadvantages of lower income often compound experiences of anti-Black racism. But this does not mean that Black individuals with higher incomes are insulated from experiences of unfair treatment based on race. Racism affects all BEP participants, regardless of their socio-economic background.

Racism also poses challenges in education for Black students. Almost half indicate they felt that being Black presented challenges not faced by other students. While many participants have had positive experiences in high school, about four in ten say they felt accepted by their teacher “only sometimes” or “never.” This may signal widespread institutionalized problems with the education system, described in other research.

In the workplace, one-third identify challenges linked to being Black, whether it involves explicit racism or discrimination, or an uncomfortable workplace culture in which they do not feel they are treated professionally or accepted. BEP participants are much more likely to mention negative, rather than positive ways in which being Black has made a difference in their work experience. The most common experiences involve having their competency questioned, dealing with racism and stereotypes, and having their qualifications overlooked or not recognized.

While specific experiences of racism differ, so too do the ways in which, BEP participants report being affected by them: some are more bothered by these experiences than others. While some experience a loss of self-esteem or an increase in self-doubt, others say that these experiences have in fact made them stronger or reinforced their drive to succeed or bring about change.



Relations with police services: a special case

Experience with police services stand out as much more negative than those with other public institutions. Negative experiences with the police services are common. For instance, participants are more likely to be stopped in public than to be helped by the police, and younger Black males are particularly likely to experience police harassment. Not surprisingly, BEP participants almost unanimously condemn the way in which Black people are treated by the local police. Participants, however, are precise in their criticism of the police: they combine generally positive support for the police in their broad role in protecting community safety with a sharply focused criticism of the police's racial bias.

Black youth and young adults: the unfulfilled promise of being Canadian

The majority of today's generation of young Black adults is Canadian-born. And unlike their mostly immigrant parents and grandparents, they are also more diverse in terms of their identities and the racial composition of their friendship networks. They also have higher levels of educational attainment than their older counterparts. It is notable, then, that they seem more, rather than less, affected by racism. Young Black Canadian-born adults are more likely to identify racism as an obstacle they face; more likely to say they experience some forms of unfair treatment because they are Black; and more likely to be adversely affected by these experiences. It appears, therefore, that young Black adults are more impatient with the failure of Canadian society to deliver on the country's promise of equality.

Worlds apart: perceptions of the Black community

There is a world of difference between the attributes that BEP participants ascribe to the Black community, and those they believe non-Black people ascribe to them. Participants take great pride in the strengths of the Black community in terms of its perseverance and resilience in the face of anti-Black racism, which has persisted over generations. At the same time, participants are proud of their contributions to the social, political and cultural advances that have made the GTA a better place to live. However, participants believe that many non-Black people cling to stereotypes, are in denial about anti-Black racism, and lack knowledge and awareness of the strengths and contributions of the Black community. In fact, when asked what they believe are the most common beliefs that non-Black people hold about Black people, all the examples mentioned are negative ones, such as beliefs relating to criminal behaviour, violence, gangs or drugs, as well as the belief that Blacks are uneducated, lazy and lack ambition.



Next Steps

The BEP results and insights reinforce findings over the last 50 years but provide new empirical evidence to help inform action. The study points to aspects of success and contributions that should be acknowledged and celebrated, as well as to the undeniable reality of anti-Black racism, and the obstacles and challenges it presents. These challenges require thoughtful attention and effective solutions.

A research study such as the Black Experience Project cannot on its own fully capture the strength and contributions of the GTA Black community, nor can it address the persistent challenges and systemic inequalities in society. What it does provide is an empirically based understanding of what it is like to be Black in the GTA. This can help create new conversations that lead to transformational change, by providing an honest and constructive focal point for discussion, and a way forward.

Lead Partners



The Environics Institute for Survey Research
Non-profit. Founded in 2006 to sponsor original public opinion and social research on issues of public policy and social change.



Ryerson Diversity Institute
Undertakes research on diversity to inform fact-based change strategies.



United Way of Greater Toronto and York Region
Leading charity dedicated to creating opportunities for a better life for everyone in our region.



YMCA of Greater Toronto
Leading charity offering opportunities for personal growth, community involvement and leadership.



Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora
Engages in community responsive research and programs that promote equity and social justice.

Project Sponsors

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Major Sponsors



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Regional Sponsors





Research Advisory Group

The following individuals served in a volunteer capacity as research advisors to the Black Experience Project during Phase 2.

Dr. Uzo Anucha - York University
Mr. Mohamed Elmi – Ryerson’s Diversity Institute
Dr. Gervan Fearon (emeritus) – Ryerson University/Brandon University
Dr. Grace-Edward Galabuzi – Ryerson University
Dr. Michael Hall – YMCA of the Greater Toronto Area
Dr. Carl James (Chair) – York University/Jean Augustine Chair
Ms. Michelynn Lafleche – United Way Toronto & York Region
Dr. Kwame McKenzie – Wellesley Institute
Dr. Lance McCready – Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto
Dr. Jeffrey Reitz – University of Toronto
Dr. Dominique Riviere – Studio Y, MaRS Discovery District
Dr. Miriam Rossi (emeritus) – University of Toronto
Ms. Marva Wisdom – Wisdom Consulting/Environics Institute

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)
Midanya 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



It isn't often that a community gets to conduct a SWOT analysis of itself but a keen reading of the BEP report will reveal our community's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. How we use this information is our challenge to address. There is no question that the findings of the BEP can help our community find solutions to its challenges and to play a stronger role in the Canadian narrative. I know these findings can help students envision their future and I'm confident it will do the same for the wider community.

Trevor Massey

Chair, Lifelong Leadership Institute

The data contained in this report provides current experiential evidence of how systematic racism continues to negatively impact the black community which will assist in making informed decisions going forward. There has been progress, but there is so much more work to do and it starts with using the voices of those who contributed to this report to pave a path towards tearing down the walls of Anti-Black Racism. As woman of colour and senior leader at the Region of Peel I am very proud of this report and look forward to incorporating our learnings into making Peel the kind of community where everyone can thrive, regardless of their colour, race, faith, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, age or socio-economic status. This is a very important step, but now the hard work begins.

Juliet Jackson

Director, Culture & Inclusion, Region of Peel

I believe the Black Experience Project will greatly benefit my community and endure as a foundational and groundbreaking survey research on who the Black people of the five regions of the Greater Toronto Area are and were in the window of 2010 to 2017. This is why I earnestly and irrevocably support the Black Experience Project.

Mahad Yusuf

Executive Director, Midaynta Community Services

The Black Experience Project provided the opportunity to engage directly with the Black community to identify systemic and institutional restorative measures that will positively contribute to their experience and well-being. The Durham Regional Police Service intends to proactively incorporate the relevant insights from the study throughout our organization to enhance transparency, accountability, and respectful engagement.

Paul Martin

Chief of Police, Durham Regional Police Service

For more information, visit:
theblackexperienceproject.ca