
COVID-19: THE PANDEMIC & HISTORIES OF INEQUITIES UNVEILED

IMPACT ON BLACK COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

In this paper, I will provide a brief description of pandemics, but paying particular attention to COVID-19 and its impact on Black communities in Canada. I will situate my analysis on Anti-Black Racism because black people have been disproportionately impacted by this pandemic. I will also briefly discuss historical inequalities and how the pandemic has unveiled long standing anti-black racism. **abstract**

Introduction:

A pandemic is the rapid spread of a disease to a large number of people in a very short period of time, across regions, countries and continents. A seasonal influenza is not a pandemic. The current pandemic, which was initially reference to as Coronavirus disease and later referred to as COVID-19, was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei, China. As I write this paper in September 2020, COVID-19 has touched every corner of the global, infecting over 31,762,607 and killing 973,956 around the globe. In Canada, we have 149,939 cases and 9,294 deaths (Henrik Peterson, Byron Manley and Sergio Hernandez, CNN, 23/09/2020). When COVID-19 broke out, there was a general feeling that everyone was being affected in the same way. COVID-19, supposedly, did not discriminate. However, this was an illusion because by June 2020, an analysis of those infected by the disease in Canada revealed that racialized, and in particular Black people, had higher numbers than the rest of the population (Global News Canada). That report further indicated there was a strong correlation between high COVID-19 rates and low income, types of employment, ethnicity and low levels of education. Bowden & Cain (2020) note that, unfortunately, many Black neighborhoods in Canada find themselves in these conditions primarily due to systemic anti-Black racism. There has not been enough research to support these claims; initial findings have created a need to pay close attention to various communities in Canada, and in particular, racialized and Black communities. It's important to explore the following questions:

- What really is anti-Black racism?
- How can we as Canadians collectively address anti-Black racism so that if/when there is another pandemic Black people will not be affected disproportionately?
- What has held together systemic barriers to equal employment, education health and economic opportunities for people of African ancestry?

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the world came to a standstill. Most companies laid off (see more detail in COVID-19 jobs tracker: Layoffs, furloughs and hiring during the pandemic) employees as they tried to adjust to current economic challenges, a strategy that left many individuals jobless. For instance, Air Canada indicated that there would be lay off between 50 to 60 percent of its workforce (Michelle Zadikian, July 2020). Other companies moved their offices to their employees' homes while schools closed, and most universities moved their teaching online. Businesses closed, followed by fear gripping the world as more and more people got infected and the death toll kept rising. Paying close attention to these numbers or even stories in the media, it was clear that COVID-19's impact was not evenly

distributed. Some of the health disparities are not new. For instance, Black people in the U.S. are two to three times more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than whites, and Hispanics are one to two times more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than whites.ⁱ COVID-19 has infected dementia patients and their caregivers. In the U.S., data shows the number of Black people who have died due to COVID-19. Unfortunately, in Canada, race-based data about which groups have been impacted by COVID-19 hasn't been collected. Toronto Public Health announced on April 22, 2020, that it would begin to collect this information to address health inequities.ⁱⁱ Racialized, and in particular Black people, were dying at a higher rate than the rest of the population. According to various news media reports and real-life stories, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the lives of Black people in all aspects of life. Andrea Huncar (September 2, 2020, CBC) reported on a study done by Edmonton-based African Canadian Civic Engagement Council and Innovative Research Group that confirmed layoffs disproportionately reduced work hours for Black Canadians. The study further revealed that men over 45 years were hardest hit; and national wide, 56 per cent of Blacks had been affected, compared with the national average of 46 per cent.ⁱⁱⁱ). This is further articulated in the article: *Black neighborhoods in Toronto are hit hardest by COVID-19 — and it's 'anchored in racism'* that indicated that the highest number of COVID-19 cases were in neighborhoods with Black communities. These findings are similar in Montreal and New York. More generally, communities in which there are higher shares of Black residents also experience higher infection counts. Large cities such as Calgary (Canada's fourth largest) and Hamilton (with population of more than half a million) as well as areas in Nova Scotia (a province with fewer than 1 million people overall) have both relatively high COVID-19 counts and relatively high shares of Black residents (Patrick Denice, Kate H. Choi, Michael Haan and Anna Zajacova report) (^{iv}). Other studies have shown that poorer access to health-care facilities by Black people has left many wondering why they are treated differently. A study of emergency room records in the U.S. found that health personnel rated the complaints of Black people as less serious than their white counterparts. The study also indicated that Black people experienced longer wait times in emergency rooms, even if they were facing medical emergencies where immediate intervention was necessary. Several studies have also found that physicians spend less time with Black patients and are less likely to see them as being honest about their symptoms compared to white patients.^v

In Black business areas such as Little Jamaica, located on Eglinton Ave West in Toronto, many restaurants, salons, and clothing stores are Black-owned. Some of these businesses have been in operation since the 1960s. Unfortunately, in the last six years, many of these Black-owned businesses have only operated at half capacity because of the ongoing transit construction, gentrification and road closures. These businesses were therefore doubly affected with the outbreak of COVID-19. Many business owners were already under a lot of pressure to close down permanently because of the significant drop in revenue, and COVID-19 only amplified that pressure. This area, at its peak, brought Jamaicans together to celebrate community, belonging, and a sense of familiarity through food, dance, and services. If many of these business owners are forced to close, a piece of Toronto history will be gone permanently.^{vi} Global News reports that since construction started six years ago, 40 per cent of stores have closed down or relocated.

The pandemic has not only affected Black-owned businesses, it has also impacted Black health-care professionals. Dr. Eileen de Villa, Toronto's medical officer of health, commented that data shows that Black people account for 21 per cent of reported cases in Toronto while making up only 9 per cent of the overall population. De Villa further stated that Arab, Middle Eastern, and West Asian people represent 11 per cent of the city's COVID-19 cases while only making up 4 per cent of the total population. De Villa

confirmed that racialized people made up 71 per cent of those hospitalized with COVID-19. Also, lower-income households and households with more racialized people were also disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Anti-Black Racism and COVID-19

COVID-19 has unveiled historical inequities and elevated race-based differences. As a result, anti-Black racism has become more visible. Anti-Black racism has not been addressed fully because of the discomfort it creates. Many find it easier to ignore it or sweep it under the carpet when mentioned. What many fail to see is how anti-Black racism illustrates the ways in which racism operates at personal, ideological and institutional levels. A discussion brings attention to Black-owned business closures, health inequalities, the disproportionate loss of jobs and the high death rate of Black Canadians. If COVID-19 had not occurred, these inequities could have continued undetected. With COVID-19 comes a spotlight on these long-ignored historical inequities.

Anti-Black racism, therefore, frames the discussion around the experiences of marginalized and in particular, Black people. Dr Akua Benjamin, professor emeritus from Ryerson University, defined anti-Black racism as “a particular form of systemic and structural racism in Canadian society, which historically and contemporarily has been perpetrated against Blacks”^{vii} (2003, p. ii) The framework provides a tool for disrupting racism by identifying and analyzing how it functions^{viii} (Henry & Tator, 2009). Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices such that it is either normalized or rendered invisible to the larger white society (Morgan and Bullen, 2015). For many years now, different groups have been pushing to have race-based data on different topics, but somehow various authorities have resisted it. It is important to note that due to the pressure from social activists and academics, the government of Ontario has been compelled to start collecting race-based data as of June 2020. Anti-Black racism is embedded in our institutional structures, governing bodies, policies. COVID-19 managed to lift the lid to expose some of the historical inequities that have been in existence for centuries. Effectively, anti-Black racism has immobilized Black people and undocumented residents, not only in Canada, but other parts of the world where they are the minority.

Discrimination due to 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, racial discrimination 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 are evident in several settings but are 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 like 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 especially in cases of being unfairly stopped by police. Different members of Canadian institutions have openly stated that anti-Black racism does exist. Anti-Black racism has brought to life a lot of frustrations and left individuals with many questions: How many more reports need to be written? What will it take to ensure the recommendations in these reports are implemented? There's this notion that Canada is somehow immune to widespread racism, an idea that is held up even by political leaders, showing a lack of awareness of the histories of the people they represent. An example is Doug Ford,

Premier of Ontario who said in an interview with The Toronto Star in June 2020, “Thank God that we are different than the United States.” Racism is more common in Canada than most people think. 40 per cent of racialized people in Ontario surveyed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in 2017, report experiencing discrimination because of race or color in the last five years. The reality is that racism has been around a long, long time. It’s deeply rooted in Canada’s colonial past. The effects of inequality and the trauma racialized people faced in the past still linger in modern society. COVID-19 has made that apparent.

Conclusion

The pandemic has contradicted the notion of Canada being an inclusive and pluralist society. We are all implicated in this. Various surveys indicate that one in five Canadians have experienced racism. This is particularly so among Black people. (Race Relations in Canada 2019; A Survey of Canadian Public and Experience. P.5). Racial discrimination is an everyday experience for many racialized people. Most times, it involves subtle micro-aggressions or slights, but collectively, these small actions can and do have big impacts. It is quite clear that Black people have had a major share of the negative impact due to COVID-19. However, it is important to state that the pandemic has also created an opportunity for the country to revisit this concept of anti-Black racism as well as rethink issues of diversity, inclusion, equality and recognition. During these difficult times, we must refuse to be drawn to politics of hate, race, gender, sexuality, privilege and discrimination of Black people. I believe, we can collectively address the issues of pandemic and the racial inequality by writing about them, introducing histories of Black people as equity deserving and not victims. The pandemic should be taken a moment in time to reevaluate who we are as Canadians. We must, seek ways to make this country fair for all citizens.

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ⁱⁱⁱ (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/black-canadians-covid-19-study-1.5708530>)

^{iv} (https://westergazette.ca/culture/how-black-canadians-are-disproportionately-impacted-by-covid-19/article_89293cc4-a033-11ea-ae15-631b3c049880.html)

^v (*Relationship between racial disparities in ED wait times and illness severity; DOI: 10.1016/j.ajem.2015.08.052*).

^{vi} (read more: Article: ‘Little Jamaica could be lost to history’: Advocates renew call for official recognition of cultural gem in wake of COVID-19, LRT construction and gentrification).

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