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Snapshot 14

Black Youth Labour
Challenges and Outlook



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Recognized in Canada since 1995, Black History Month (BHM) is about celebrating and uplifting Black People in North America, highlighting and increasing awareness of their realities and issues they have faced, given the racism they have faced across the continent. While many of the same issues faced by Canadian youth as a whole—covered in our [January 2022 Snapshot essay](#)—are also faced by Black Canadian youth, in this February 2022 Snapshot we focus on Black youths' specific challenges, outlook for the year 2022 and possible solutions. The Black population in Canada is, on average, a younger population than Canada as a whole; according to the 2016 Census [1] the average age of Black Canadians is 31 years old, compared to 40 years old for the entire Canadian population. As such, Black Canadians and Black youth in particular are an important demographic worth, for the sake of both the Black community and Canada's futures.

Housing is one area of concern for Black Canadians—and by extension youths'—because the outcomes differ from their non-black peers. A Statistics Canada report analysing Census and National Housing Survey (2018) data showed that Black Canadians [have lower homeownership rates](#) and are more likely to live in unsuitable housing compared to the rest of the Canadian population. Less than half of Black population in Canada (48%) own the homes they live in, compared to almost three-quarters (73%) of all Canadians, while 15% of the Black population live in private dwellings categorised as failing core housing needs criteria [2], compared to 9% of the total population. Specifically, Black Canadians (29%) are three times likelier than the rest of the Canadian population (9%) to be in unsuitable housing. Moreover, with the rising cost of housing—especially in urban areas which is where 94% of Black Canadians live, this is even more significant. The expiry of pandemic rent discounts, freezes and eviction moratoria, combined with housing being a social determinant of health, lack of housing is an issue especially relevant to Black youth.

In line with the housing concerns are “digital divide” [3] needs which affect youth in school or in the labour market. As Black youth are almost entirely found in urban and more connected areas, their needs are more about affordable data/mobile plans, not having private space to take calls or enough private devices (laptops, tablets) for all the members of a household. With the normalisation of remote and hybrid school, work and other

[1] We await the results of the 2021 Census that will provide an updated distribution.

[2] Core housing needs criteria are **affordability (costs less than 30% of pre-tax income), condition (not requiring any major repairs) and suitability of the dwelling (has enough bedrooms to meet the household members' needs based on their ages and sexes)**. A household is in core housing need if their dwelling falls below standards of at least one of the three criteria, and they would have to spend more than a third of their pre-tax income to find suitable housing.

[3] The “digital divide” is a term used to describe lack of access to digital tools and the internet purely arising from economic or geographic status.



services, these problems make it harder for Black youth to partake in the pandemic economy and to an extent, the recovery.

Mental health and stress are issues that all youth, regardless of race have had to deal with. As the pandemic has required more isolation and less in-person contact with friends or chances to do things they enjoy, and much more screen time resulting in what has been nicknamed 'Zoom fatigue'. Prior to the pandemic however, there were already [documented systemic, practitioner-related and community-related barriers](#) to Black youth accessing mental healthcare. The pandemic has [worsened mental health conditions and led to increased substance use](#) for youth as a whole, none of which bodes well for the mental wellbeing of Black Canadian youth.

A key difference between black youth and their nonblack peers is the immigrant background; [89% of black Canadian youth have an immigrant background](#) i.e., at least one parent born outside Canada, thrice as many as nonblack Canadian youth (29%). This immigrant background comes with certain pressures and expectations for Black youth. One such example, which in a way aligns with previous recommendations for youth overall, is the pressure to choose white-collar lines of work e.g., doctor, lawyer, engineer. This pressure is sometimes justified as a way to ensure that the immigrant parents' sacrifice of moving or working odd jobs is not wasted on a financially unrewarding or less respectable (often manual) job. However, this mentality needs to change, as some of these jobs are in demand, financially rewarding and the pressure can sometimes only serve to stifle youth and stop them from exploring other interests. Furthermore, the high proportion of black youth who are immigrants also raises the issue of terms of employment for gig and other precariously employed workers, who are often recent immigrants trying to gain some economic footing, albeit older (25+).

Although at the time of writing, pandemic restrictions driven by the Omicron variant are being lifted across the country. Nonetheless it is still officially a pandemic and Covid-19 remains a threat, as does the possibility of newer variants developing. As such, another concern specific to Black youth as the year goes on is high rates of Covid infection in their community, as well as the lower willingness to get vaccinated. In a [Statistics Canada survey conducted in late 2020](#) as the vaccine rollout was being approved, only 56.4% of Black Canadians reported they were willing or somewhat willing to take the vaccine, the lowest of any ethnic group measured, and much lower than the willingness for Canadians as a whole (76.9%).



While the virus' subsequent variants may end up being less lethal or transmissible, this concern is still valid because many of the reasons for the higher infection rates and vaccine hesitancy uptake that existed pre-2022, are still present. Reasons for vaccine hesitancy amongst Blacks in general, point towards the Black overrepresentation in the Health care and Social Assistance sector and larger proportions of visible minorities living in lower income neighbourhoods and working frontline (contact heavy) jobs in retail and health care. As these patterns are still very much the case at the time of writing, it would be best to learn from the lessons of the previous waves in protecting black youth and their community. While racially disaggregated health data collection is still in its infancy, [researchers in Ontario](#) using postal code/neighbourhood information as proxies have seen [lower vaccination rates in Ontario's](#) black population, compared to neighbourhoods or areas with fewer Black residents.

In addition to the issues outlined above, there is also the ever present reality of anti-Black racism faced by Black youth. The discrimination that Black youth face worsens their challenges, while also being a challenge in and of itself. One way discrimination manifests is through the stereotyping and the burden of low expectations. This means that employers, teachers, service providers and others with whom Black youth engage, view them as being less than capable due to their race or other factors connected to their race e.g., postal code, accent, their neighbourhood. The most prominent example can be seen in education, to which we now turn.

Black youth in education

The effect of discrimination in education can be seen in the practice of streaming and the mentality/self-belief of black youth, which in turn affect in Black youths' educational outcomes. Although Black youth have the same high/secondary school completion rate as the rest of Canadian youth, their postsecondary education (college diploma or university degree) attainment rates are lower than their nonblack peers; 51% of black male youth and 34% of black female youth had post-secondary qualifications in 2016, compared to 62% and 41% of their non-black peers respectively. Streaming is the grouping of students based on their assumed ability after the ninth grade into an Academic stream (towards university), Applied stream (towards college) and/or an Essentials stream (vocational, unable to go directly to a PSE) [4].

[4] James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). Towards race equity in education: The schooling of black students in the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto, ON: York University. <https://youthrex.com/report/towards-race-equity-in-education-the-schooling-of-black-students-in-the-greater-toronto-area/>



While arguments can be made for the benefits of streaming as teaching to students' levels, in practice it becomes a way for teachers and administrators to act on their stereotypes of black students as being less capable, with Toronto District School Board (TDSB) data showing that twice as many black students (39%) ended up in the applied stream as non-black visible minorities (18%) and white students (16%), and that Black students were the most represented in the essential stream. As such, students' postsecondary options and potential are limited. Moreover in the TDSB, [Black high school students had the highest proportion of students not applying for any form](#) of post-secondary education when compared to their nonblack peers. Discrimination can also affect self-belief. Consider that in 2016, although almost all black youth aged 15-25 (94%) wanted to achieve at least a bachelor's degree, only a smaller share (60%) thought that they would actually achieve that aim, compared to 79% of similarly aged non-black youth. Moreover, while the practice of streaming has been applied to steer Black youth in high school towards applied paths leading to skilled trades or college diplomas, [the percentage of Black journeypersons in skilled trades still remains lower](#) than their share in the national population.

Black youth and networking for successful employment

While the importance of building up and having a career network applies to all youth, it is especially important for Black youth. This is mainly because of their immigrant background, which often means that because Black youth have not been in the country as long, Black youth have not had as much time to build up a network compared to those with deeper and older roots in the country. With the tendency to be concentrated in the Health care & Social Assistance, Manufacturing and Administrative Support, Waste management and remediation services in adulthood, it is something that is especially important if they are to enter or find their way into a wider range of sectors. Black youth should be better equipped for employment in a wide range of industries over time, so that they are not concentrated in a few industries as they become older. Networks could play a role in encouraging employment opportunities for Black youth in industries in which they are not traditionally concentrated in.



Addressing these issues

Having outlined some of the challenges, we now highlight some of the steps taken to address them, as well as our own suggestions.

In light of the housing issue, in February 2022 the National Housing Co-investment Fund launched/announced funding of up to [\\$50 million dedicated to building housing for Black Canadian families](#) to support Black families housing needs, with \$40 million specifically for home ownership. Laptop loan or share programmes, like the TDSB's [student device programme](#) for every new cohort incoming 5th and 9th graders, or [the one launched in December 2021](#) by corporate sponsors, Toronto Police 31 division and Toronto City Council in the Jane–Finch neighbourhood to give out 1000 laptops, are a possible solution to addressing the digital divide concern mentioned before. To help improve response capacity and help develop culturally sensitive approaches to dealing with mental health issues amongst Black Canadians, in February 2022 [Public Health Canada announced an investment of \\$400,000](#) in the TAIBU Community Health Centre in the Greater Toronto Area.

On the education front, [Ontario has discontinued streaming](#) from Grade 9 starting in the 2021/22 school year, and will continue the process for destreaming older students in the coming school years. Discontinuing streaming across high schools helps ensure that if or when Black youth end up in vocational and skilled trades, it is by choice. Not because teachers and administrators pushed them there because they saw that as 'easier' for Black youth to do because it is considered less intellectually tasking. Furthermore, the recently passed [Working for Workers Act](#) makes it easier for un(der)employed immigrants with foreign qualifications and licences in certain professions including education to work in their area of training without needing Canadian experience. This can be used by the province to hire or assign more Black teachers to the predominantly Black neighbourhoods, potentially addressing the issues of representation, absence of role models and "self-belief" felt by black students.

Representation across the board still matters for Black youth, as it helps to show them their goals are possible and have been achieved by people who have the same backgrounds as or look like them. Therefore, it is still important for the sake of their own self-belief for black youth to see black Canadian party leaders and leadership candidates, ministers etc. It is also important because a critical mass of black people in various positions helps ensure that black Canadians' issues can be advocated for. However, to avoid resorting to tokenism, we need to keep in mind that representation is not where it ends, and such presence needs to be followed up with concrete or substantial changes.



Another step for furthering the development of Black youth going forward is getting them into a wider range of sectors, especially the ones with high demand now like technology and other STEM roles, which would need to start from the secondary level and is part of why the ending of streaming is important. This widening of sectors is also being helped and promoted by networks and social innovation programmes like Black People in Tech Network (BPTN), Black Business Professionals Association (BBPA) and employee resource (ERG) groups in tech or tech adjacent firms like Twitter's [Blackbirds](#). Groups like these help with recruiting and increasing the presence of Black youth in these sectors through the outreach they do from job fairs to university student organisations and importantly for younger youth, show them that it is possible for them as Black people to attain these positions. Keeping track of this and other aspects of Black youths' plights, would be made easier through more frequent release of disaggregated race-based data, perhaps by making it more available monthly through the labour force survey (LFS) instead of just the census. That way, it is easier to analyse and keep track of black and other visible minorities' needs and data remains more current. Ontario, where more than half of Canada's black population lives, has led the way with this through its [Anti-Racism Act](#) (2017) that mandates collection of race-based data, and this has been acted on to varying extents in [health care](#) and [policing](#).

On the expansion of career options, with the [recent/increased calls](#) for more skilled tradespeople and the fact that [sectors like transportation, warehousing and real estate are increasingly aging sectors](#), it would be worth taking advantage of this for Black youth. With certain industries like trucking, construction and logistics aging and in need of younger labour, it could be an opening for black youth to strengthen their presence in those sectors. However, this must be a choice taken by the youth and/or their parents, not a decision made for them due to their instructors' implicit biases. Programmes like Alberta's [Registered Apprenticeship Programme](#) and Ontario's [Youth Apprenticeship Programme](#), both designed to get youth at the high school level interested in the skilled trades, might help, as might Ontario's [Black Youth Action Plan](#) with its industry led youth career initiative programme. However, complaints about the terms and conditions of work (the agreed responsibilities and benefits of a job, between employee and employer e.g., wages/salary, overtime, benefits & insurance) abound, and will need to be improved as the post-Covid recovery continues, if these sectors are to experience any growth in their youth participation, black or otherwise.



Given some of the issues mentioned in the sections above, black youth would benefit from services that account for the uniqueness of their experiences (discrimination, immigration history, geographic clusters where they live) relative to the larger cohort of youth i.e., culturally sensitive. According to internal focus groups conducted by CCYP, the most positive result of the pandemic induced isolation is that black youth had more time to reflect and learn new things (hobbies and career related), while also engaging in their own way in the movements and increased consciousness that resulted from the 2020 summer of protests following George Floyd's murder. Black youth hope the flurry of black-focused programmes, scholarships and hiring initiatives that were begun in response to the 2020 protests, are maintained and kept running to show a proper commitment to black youths' longer term development (education, training & employment), not just eye service gimmicks. This is what one of CCYP's internal projects, due to be launched later in the Spring, seeks to remedy by improving the capacity of Black-serving, Black-focused and Black-led (B3) organisations, as well as supporting non-B3 employment service providers in better catering to black youths' socio-economic needs. While no number of programmes alone will solve racism, we can do our part to better position black youth for success in spite of it.

