

Black Lives Matter: A Canadian Problem?

You may have seen the video of George Floyd, a 46 year-old Black American, being killed by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020. The officer's knee was pressed against Floyd's neck, preventing him from breathing. If you have seen this deeply disturbing video, you are not alone. Tens of millions of people across the world have viewed it and many more know the circumstances of George Floyd's death, which triggered a summer of protests in cities across the United States, Canada, and in other countries.

The rallying cry of these protests was "Black Lives Matter". In addition to being a rallying cry for a protest movement, Black Lives Matter is an organization that began in 2013 as an online community in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch captain in Florida, who shot and killed a young Black male by the name of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012. In 2014 the first Canadian chapter of Black Lives Matter was started in Toronto after the killing of Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/six-years-strong/>)

The weeks and months following the killing of George Floyd saw a surge in awareness of the racial inequalities that continue to exist in the United States, Canada and other democracies. A survey of the Twitter activity of Canadian MPS found that among those who tweeted during the two weeks after Floyd's death, 44 percent posted about his killing and/or about Black Lives Matter. Among MPs of the major political parties, Liberal and NDP legislators were those most likely to have posted such tweets. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact->

[tank/2020/08/04/outside-u-s-floyds-killing-and-protests-sparked-discussion-on-legislators-twitter-accounts/](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-06/peaceful-protests-george-floyd-pr-june-2020-ipsos.pdf)) Canadians have been as likely as people anywhere to support peaceful protests sparked by Floyd's killing, 4 out of 5 supporting such protests. They have been much less supportive, however, of violent protests. About 7 of 10 Canadians polled in June of 2020 said that violent protests are an inappropriate response.

<https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2020-06/peaceful-protests-george-floyd-pr-june-2020-ipsos.pdf>)

In the conversation that has unfolded over the past several months, the term *systemic racism* has become better known to Canadians. Prime Minister Trudeau weighed in early when, during a press conference on June 11, 2020, he said the following: "Systemic racism is an issue right across the country, in all our institutions, including in all our police forces, including in the RCMP. That's what systemic racism is." He added, "In many cases it's not deliberate, it's not intentional, it's not aggressive, individual acts of racism, although those obviously exist. It is recognizing that the systems we have built over the past generations have not always treated people of racialized backgrounds, of Indigenous backgrounds, fairly through the very construction of the systems that exist." (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/rcmp-systemic-racism-lucki-trudeau-1.5607622>)

Most Canadians agree with the prime minister. An IPSOS poll taken in early July of 2020 found that 6 in 10 Canadians agree that there is systemic racism in Canada. Agreement is somewhat less when respondents are asked whether such institutions as the police, government, the courts, the education system and the media tolerate racism. About half of

Canadians agree that they do. The same poll found that 4 in 10 Canadians agree with the statement, "I believe that people of different races are fundamentally different from one another." Hmmmm. Perhaps not what you expected to find given the multicultural and tolerant self-image that most Canadians have of their country. (<https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/majority-60-see-racism-serious-problem-canada-today-13-points-last-year>)

One other finding from this IPSOS survey deserves our attention. Although 52 percent of Canadians disagree that racism is *an American issue*, 40 percent agreed that it is an American problem, not one that afflicts Canada. Only 1 in 5 strongly agreed that racism is a Canadian problem. (Ibid.)

Sandra Hudson, found of Black Lives Matter Toronto, agrees with the 1 in 5 who strongly agree that racism is a Canadian problem and not just a challenge for American society. In an interview with the CBC a few weeks after George Floyd's killing she said,

"I grew up in Toronto. I am telling you, the brutalization of Black people and the anti-Blackness that we face, it's not that different because of the little imaginary line that separates what is called Canada and what is called the United States.

"Our cultures are very, very similar. The thing that is very different about Canada is the denial that [Black Canadians] are faced with when we tell people outside of Black communities that this is a problem that needs to be addressed."

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/question-answer-sandy-hudson-black-lives-matter-defund-police-1.5613280>)

Hudson goes on to situate the lived circumstances of Black Canadians and the systemic discrimination they experience in the same reality of colonialism and control experienced by Indigenous Canadians in the past and present, a reality in which, she says, "police officers patrol Indigenous communities and Black communities, and they [stop and arrest] Black people and Indigenous people far more than anyone else, and they incarcerate Black people and Indigenous people at disproportionate rates to everybody else. We've never stopped being a community to be controlled and patrolled and surveilled by police forces."(Ibid.)

This connection between the experiences of Black and Indigenous Canadians, perhaps most egregiously when it comes to their encounters with the justice system, from policing to penitentiaries, has been an important aspect of the recent protests and conversations in Canada on race-based inequality. When protesters toppled and decapitated a statue of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald at Place du Canada in Montreal in late August of 2020, this came after a day of protest in cities across the country in support of defunding the police.(<https://blacklivesmatter.ca/defund-the-police/>) These protests were inspired by a broader narrative of decolonization that is seen as a root cause of race-based systemic discrimination, whether experienced by Black or Indigenous Canadians.

The conversation on systemic or institutionalized discrimination faced by Black Canadians did not begin with the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, in an important way it first exploded onto the Canadian scene in Montreal in the winter of 1969 when about 200 demonstrators occupied the computer center at Sir George Williams

University, now known as Concordia University. Many of the protesters were Black students from the Caribbean, including Anne Cools, who would eventually be appointed to the Canadian Senate. They were protesting what they claimed were the discriminatory grading practices of a biology professor. You can go online to read accounts of what ensued.(google, Sir George Williams Affair Canadian Encyclopedia) In short, it resulted in a major fire and the arrest of 97 persons, some of whom, including Anne Cools, were sentenced to prison terms.

Since then the focus of public protests for justice for Black Canadians has usually involved policing practices, triggered by the deaths of Black persons during encounters with the police. But until the months following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the days of violence that followed, nothing close to the scale of the racial justice protests that took place in Canada in the summer of 2020 had ever been seen.

So here's a question. What if any aspects of Canadian society and institutions would need to be changed in order to eradicate what most Canadians believe to be systemic discrimination in their country? Okay, that's a big question! If you agree with its premise, that race-based systemic discrimination exists, identify just one or two of the first and most important steps that would need to be taken in order to achieve greater racial equality.