

The Experience of Racism by Public Service Employees

Commissioned by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada

Report Authors

Monnica T. Williams, Ph.D., ABPP
University of Ottawa

Sonya C. Faber, Ph.D., MBA
University of Ottawa

Rehman Abdulrehman, Ph.D.
University of Manitoba

M. Myriah MacIntyre, B.A.
University of Ottawa

Tahlia Harrison, MFT, M.A.
University of Ottawa

Jade Gallo, B.S.
University of Ottawa

Annwasha Dasgupta, M.Sc.
University of Ottawa

Team Members

Project Leader

Monnica T. Williams, Ph.D., ABPP

Psychologist Interviewers

Rehman Abdulrehman, Ph.D.

Solomon Agaje, M. Phil. Psych.

Francine MacInnis, Ph.D.

Derrick Shirley, M.A.

NaTasha Williams, Psy.D.

Research Assistants

M. Myriah MacIntyre, B.A., Lead RA

Jade Gallo, B.S.

Tahlia Harrison, M.A.

Annwasha Dasgupta, M.Sc.

Mirana Rambelo

Daniel Zalewa, B.A.

Office of the Auditor General Team

Carey Agnew, Principal

Stephanie Moores, CPA, CA, Director

Younes Boukhaffa

Alina Dan

Sébastien Defoy

Hassen Elkamel

Raylene MacLellan

Juliana Shnaider

Amanda Cauchon

Tara Cranna

Dare Human Resources

Date: March 4, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this report is to investigate how certain key federal departments are managing their employees of colour with regard to job retention, promotion, and leadership roles, as well as fostering an inclusive workplace culture. The goal is to provide Parliament with impartial insights and recommendations to aid them in monitoring how the government utilizes resources and implements programs. We are focused on determining if these organizations have taken steps to rectify the systemic employment barriers faced by racialized workers and are making strides towards building a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

Although the diversity must be achieved in the entirety of the public service, the particular focus of this audit is on organizations within the core public administration related to procedural fairness, justice, and law. This includes the Canadian Border Services (CBSA), Correctional Services Canada (CSC), the Department of Justice (DOJ), Public Prosecution Services (PPSC), Public Safety (PS), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

METHODS

An audit interview guide was designed by the OAG, in consultation with their audit advisors and key leaders from racialized employee networks of the audited entities, to explore the lived experiences of racialized employees within the various departments, as well as their views on existing anti-racism initiatives and what change is needed for improved equity in the workplace. It was administered by diverse clinical psychologists to at least 10 participants from each department listed above (n=64). The interviews were then subjected to a qualitative analysis to identify major and minor themes.

FINDINGS

Although each department was evaluated separately, there were several common major themes present across all departments. All departments suffered from much racism at multiple levels. The most blatant type of racism identified was anti-Black racism, which was focused on the denigration of Black people, specifically, and often included racial slurs. Additionally, all departments reported racial microaggressions as a primary theme, which was exemplified by insensitivity or subtle acts of racism. When employees attempted to address the problem of racism, in all departments, they experienced a denial of racism from others, indicating a desire by leadership to hide problems rather than address them. Many participants felt gaslit and that their concerns were not being taken seriously, often due to a lack of empathy or understanding of their experiences as a racialized person. Many participants did not make a formal report of experiences of racism due to fear of retaliation, and this retaliation was a common theme, leading to the silencing of affected employees.

All departments also maintained racialized systemic barriers that thwarted equitable hiring and advancement of people of colour. This was often implemented by discrimination in job qualifications, and promotions were generally awarded to in-group members such that the leadership of most

departments was majority or exclusively White, leading to racial inequity or lack of representation of people of colour. As such, employees in every department emphasized the importance of collecting race-based statistics to illustrate the extent of the problem. However, in some cases, when statistics showed the presence of people of colour in the workplace, these numbers were used by leadership to deflect real concerns about ongoing racial problems. All departments reported a lack of accountability surrounding the implementation of effective EDI strategies; EDI committees and initiatives were described as simply window dressing or, worse yet, opportunities for White employees to engage in diversity work that could help advance their careers, whereas people of colour were often discouraged from EDI engagement. The attitudes of department leadership to EDI initiatives ranged from indifference to hostility.

Public servants in every department of all ranks reported a devastating mental health impact of racism, either personally or that they witnessed happening to other employees of colour. These impacts included stress, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, trauma, and hopelessness. Nonetheless, for the most part, affected employees of colour felt it was essential to tough it out so their job performance would not be affected, as they did not want to provide any excuses to be further mistreated.

There were certain themes that were present in some departments but not others. This does not mean that the specific issue was not present in other departments, only that it was not a focus of concern by enough interviewees to be included in this report as a highly prevalent issue.

One issue we have termed intersectional discrimination, focused on problems such as homophobia and Islamophobia against people of colour, and this form of discrimination emerged as a theme from all departments except CSC. CSC, instead, demonstrated a partial theme of harsher consequences against Black people for errors, which could be conceptualized as a more severe version of anti-Black racism. Another partial theme that emerged from CSC was termed Blue Line brotherhood, whereby the law enforcement culture prevents officers from reporting other officers of wrongdoing. This effectively shuts down the utility of any type of reporting mechanism for acts of discrimination. This problem was also alluded to by a participant in the CBSA, and it should be examined in more depth due to the silencing nature of this issue.

Another theme that varied between departments was best described as racist people in positions of authority, which generally included denigrating behaviors toward employees of colour or the abuse of power by managers and leadership. This was a major issue in the CBSA and present in all depts to some degree, though it did not emerge as a theme for RCMP or PS. Likewise, problems with racist coworkers and colleagues was a partial theme for CBSA and DOJ, which extended to interactions with the public, though experiences with the public were not a focus of the audit interview.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Racism is deeply entrenched at many levels in each department, and problems will not resolve without deliberate actions. Recommendations include:

- Numerical requirements for the composition of leadership, whereby racial demographics match the populations served.
- Both recruitment and retention plans for racialized employees, as well as career planning and mentorship.
- Accountability in implementing EDI initiatives, whereby managers and leaders are held accountable for EDI failures in their departments.
- Training accountability such that employees must be able to demonstrate actual learning of diversity issues on the job and not just pass a test.
- Experiential empirically-supported anti-bias training for leadership and persons involved in hiring and promotion.
- Objective standards for promotion and advancement, and even use of outside evaluators if necessary to prevent nepotism.
- Culturally-informed support and mental health treatment services must be provided to resolve distress and trauma experienced by racialized employees due to workplace racism.
- Consideration of intersecting identities and the added burdens this places on employees who are managing multiple sources of stigma.

See final OAG report with statistical data:

Reports of the Auditor General of Canada to the Parliament of Canada: Inclusion in the Workplace for Racialized Employees. Report 5. October 2023. Catalog number: FA1-27/2023-1-5E-PDF. Government of Canada.