

## Welcome but unequal?

### The 'Canadian experience' isn't the same for everyone

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What's it like to be part of an ethnic minority in Canada?

The experience may depend hugely on where you came from originally, what you look like, how the media view you and whether your ethnic community has a voice in the political arena.

The Diversity in Canada survey, conducted with 3,000 subjects in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal last year, took a closer look at how major ethnic groups perceive their treatment by the most powerful institutions of society: police, courts, employers, media and government.

Italian immigrants — the group with the longest history as a large ethnic minority in Canada — are the least likely to say they've experienced discrimination (only 22 per cent), and they express a degree of confidence in Canadian institutions that's even higher than the urban Canadian average.

But their experiences are drastically different from those who belong to the more "visible" minorities who make up the vast majority of recent immigrants.

More than one in three members of visible minorities report having experienced discrimination at some point: 52 per cent of blacks, 45 per cent of Chinese, 38 per cent of Hispanics, 37 per cent of South Asians and 36 per cent of West Asians/Arabs.

Though Canadian-born, Giuseppe Pelligra went back to Sicily with his family at age 8, returning to Toronto in 1982 at 22, speaking not a word of English. Now 45, the Toronto restaurant owner says he has never experienced overt racism — though admitting it's "probably because I have white skin."

Immigrants who choose to wear traditional dress, such as hijabs, make themselves targets, he argues. "If you wear that, you should expect you will face discrimination."

Parag Tandon, on the other hand, has seen blatant racism more than once since he arrived here from India in 2001.

"You bloody brown people have no concept of urban living," said a stranger whom he once accidentally bumped on the subway.

Another time, while still unfamiliar with some Canadian routines, Tandon asked a gas station attendant to explain how the self-serve system worked. The attendant swore at him, adding, "Who the hell gave you a licence and money to buy a car?"

But Tandon dismisses these incidents as isolated. "Canadians are the most loving, understanding people I've seen in my life, and I'm glad I'm one of them."

Asked whether "the courts in Canada generally treat people fairly, regardless of their ethnic background," Chinese and South Asians were more likely than the average urban Canadian to say they "strongly" or "somewhat" agree (77 per cent and 79 per cent respectively). Other groups expressed less faith in the courts, with West Asians/Arabs and blacks rating them lower (69 per cent and 70 per cent).

Blacks took the dimmest view of the fairness of Canadian police, with only half agreeing that "police in Canada generally treat all people fairly, regardless of their ethnic background."

South Asians were the most enthusiastic in their perceptions, with three-quarters rating the police as fair, well above the benchmark of 68 per cent.

Chinese Canadian Stephen Lam, 62, a social worker, has worked closely with police and feels our justice system is, by and large, fair to all.

"The one thing I had problems with, as to the police, was that they used to have special crime units associated with cultural groups, like the Asian Crime Unit. By doing so, they stigmatized the entire cultural group. It just wasn't good or fair," says the Markham resident, who came here from Hong Kong in 1992.

Abbas Azadian, a psychiatrist originally from Tehran, feels there's an invisible social hierarchy in place in Canada, where people of Western European background tend to rank at the top, followed by Asians, with people from the Middle East and blacks at the bottom.

Suspensions following the 9/11 terrorist attacks have also made things more difficult for those of South Asian and Arab/West Asian background. (The survey was done months before the recent terrorism-related arrests of 17 Muslim men and boys.)

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**'There is definitely discrimination out there, but it's not something you can easily prove'**

**Busha Taa, Ethiopian Canadian**

"I have had a friend's son being stopped three times on his way home, being questioned by police for 10 to 15 minutes each time. If a white young man is taking the subway home, do you think he'd be stopped that many times? This is scary to any parent," says Azadian, a 48-year-old father of three with a practice in Thornhill.

"You can say they are being sensitive, but when someone is given differential treatment for no reason other than their colour, race or physical attributes, we call it unfairness."

Azadian said he hasn't had direct contact with the justice system, but has friends and clients who have.

"I have positive views of the justice system. But I think the system works and is fair only when the defendants can afford to have a good lawyer," he notes. "But how many people, immigrants and visible minorities, can afford to hire a top-notch lawyer? So often, they have to compromise and make a guilty plea."

Laura Fernandez, a Yorkville spa owner who left Venezuela in 1976, says she has never experienced racism, though she has no doubt it exists here.

"What has saved my ass is my white skin and green eyes. Even back in Venezuela, that's a big plus. The world seems to have a mentality that white is best. It's not right, but that's the reality.

"I can camouflage," she adds. "If I didn't open my mouth, you wouldn't know I was an immigrant."

Having an accent can be a special hindrance in housing and employment, notes Busha Taa, president of the Ethiopian Association of Greater Toronto.

"Sometimes you call (Canadians) for jobs or an apartment. They can hear your accent on the phone and turn you down right there. And when you apply for employment and write down your (address) in a shanty part of the town, you get rejected.

"There is definitely discrimination out there, but it's not something you can easily prove. It's just so subtle," says the University of Toronto researcher in sociology.

All ethnicities surveyed, except Italians, were less likely than the average urban Canadian to agree that "employers in Canada are open to hiring people from any ethnic background."

Taa, 42, who fled political instability in Ethiopia in 1993, believes he experienced racism when he once applied for a tenured position. "Everything went well with my interview, and they didn't have an explanation why I didn't get it and they ended up hiring someone less qualified," he laments.

"I think the system in Canada is equal, but it's the individuals who are bad in treating people equally," Taa says. "I blame it on those individuals."

The media have an important role to play in promoting understanding and appreciation of diversity, he says.

"The problem is when one of us does something bad, everyone in the community get broad-brushed. People don't see that the person who does drug trafficking or kills somebody is just a bad guy. It isn't because he's black," he notes. "And reporters here only show up in our community when there's a bullet fired."

Not surprisingly, how they're portrayed in the media is a concern for several ethnic communities. Nearly two-thirds of black respondents and more than half of the South Asians, West Asians/Arabs and Hispanics said mainstream media "present negative stereotypes" of minorities.

The Chinese, at 44 per cent, and Italians, at 32 per cent, were least likely to report media bias.

Then there's the question of who represents them politically. Nearly half of the respondents rated Canada as "good" or "excellent" in the extent to which people have an influence over how they're governed — compared with just 36 per cent of the general urban population. But, except for Italians, all the groups agreed that Canada needs more politicians from diverse backgrounds.

"Politicians not only represent their own ethnic group, but everyone in their communities. But by having a diversity of people in government, it enriches the decision-making process and ensures that different perspectives are being represented and recognized. That's how we can promote harmony and tolerance as a nation," notes Azadian.

"When you see someone who looks like you in the government, you see you belong here. You are no longer isolated, marginalized and not counted."