

OPINION

Black Canadians' economic disadvantage is worsening – here's how to fix it

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A Black activist holds up their hand during a public event in Toronto on June 25, 2017.

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Canadian multiculturalism promises equality of opportunity for all who call this diverse nation home. However, for Black Canadians, this promise is shattering, as their success in the labour market continues to falter.

Our research, alongside numerous other studies, paints a stark picture of the challenges facing Black Canadians, including Canadian-born children of immigrants – the second generation. The labour market disparities between Black and white Canadians are not improving; in fact, they are worsening. To ensure shared prosperity and social cohesion, Canada must act.

Earlier studies have found that although racialized second-generation Canadians achieved education levels surpassing the Canadian average, their success in labour markets fell short, with Black Canadians experiencing the most significant disadvantage.

Our new census-based study shows this distinctive Black disadvantage has worsened.

A cohort of second-generation Black men, born in the late 1960s and early 70s, faced significant inequalities but obtained proportionately more university degrees than third or higher generation white Canadians – those generally considered the mainstream.

By the time they reached younger adulthood (aged 26-35) in 2001, despite their higher levels of postsecondary education, the median employment earnings of this cohort were 15 per cent below that of mainstream Canadians. That's a significant economic hit.

For the more recent second-generation cohort of Black Canadians – those born in the late 1980s and early 1990s – inequalities persist and in fact outcomes have worsened. Like their predecessors, these second-generation Black men aged 26-35 in 2021 are



educated, mirroring mainstream university-attainment rates. But their earnings are devastatingly worse – a massive 33 per cent below their mainstream counterparts.

The significant economic hit suffered by the earlier second-generation cohort has become a body blow for today's young Black men.

Second-generation Black women have fared somewhat better than their male counterparts, but their economic position has also deteriorated. The earlier cohort was better educated than white women, with university attainment exceeding the Canadian mainstream average for women by eight percentage points and incomes that were 18 per cent higher in 2001. Despite their higher levels of education, the recent second-generation cohort reported 10 per cent lower earnings than those of the mainstream. Such a substantial decline exacerbates economic challenges facing the Black community.

These negative trends have no parallel in other racialized minorities in Canada. In addition to the widening earnings gap between Black and white Canadians, we are now seeing increasing divergence between second-generation Black Canadians and other racialized second-generation groups, such as South Asian and Chinese. This trend jeopardizes the social cohesion of Canada as an immigrant society and undermines the future of multiculturalism.

The roots of Black inequality may be different in Canada than those seen elsewhere. Nonetheless, no country escapes the legacy of centuries of slavery endured by Africans. Slavery existed in colonial Canada, and after it was abolished in 1834, Black people who fled American slavery by seeking freedom in Canada experienced racism here, such that the majority of them returned after the Civil War. Historical policies and practices actively put Black communities in Canada at a disadvantage.

After Caribbean immigration to Canada increased throughout the 1960s, governments refocused immigrant recruitment on Asia. This had the effect of slowing growth in the Black community. Excessive and discriminatory policing practices in the Black community produced alienation and demoralization. Recent historical research reveals that government security agencies made covert efforts to discredit Black activism further destabilizing community life. Black men were



subjected to heightened scrutiny and exclusion. This environment exacerbated Black Canadians' employment problems.

The worsening trend of Black disadvantage must be addressed. Reversing it will require new thinking and action at all levels of government and society. The federal government only recently started to move beyond traditional approaches of addressing the challenges faced by racialized minorities to recognize the extraordinary disadvantage facing Black Canadians.

Recently, the federal government promised to include Black workers as a distinct employment equity group. This is a positive step, but it is only a step, and so far, only a promise. In 2020, a Black class-action lawsuit against the federal government alleging systemic employment discrimination in the Public Service of Canada not only proposed the creation of a separate Black employment equity category, it also recommended establishing a Black Equity Commission to develop measures and coordinate efforts, and setting up an external reporting mechanism for discrimination complaints. These and many other sensible measures were contained in the report of the federal Employment Equity Act Review Task Force released in December. They are needed to counter Black employment exclusion, and the government should not resist the changes that the report recommends.

Provincial authorities must also act. In Ontario, employment equity was scrapped amid concerns of "race quotas," but federal experience shows this fear is baseless. Meanwhile, opportunities have been lost.

Support for Black communities must extend beyond tokenism to include meaningful investments in education, job skills training, and community development. By acknowledging and rectifying historical injustices, we can uphold the ideals of multiculturalism and ensure the Canadian dream is achievable for all.

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