

Introduction

Building Towards Action

We need to find solutions to the problem. Not just research. Research is great as the foundation, as the backbone, as a start. But it can't stop there. I hope it goes somewhere. I want it to come back to me, to the community, to the people who care about this, and to the people doing this who say there is no racism in order to make them understand there is racism: "Like, here it is, in case you didn't know." — Research participant

A short while ago, when we got together to begin analyzing the data collected over the many years of this research project, we found ourselves talking not just about the communities we had explored, but about what we had learned about our communities and ourselves in the process. We recognized that this research had particular challenges and difficulties, one of which was that we were not researching an abstract concept, or something that affected only the study participants. As we were delving into the lived experiences of African Canadians in three Canadian cities, we were also exploring our own experiences. In conducting this work, we realized that we could not divorce ourselves from this research. Therefore, throughout the collection and analysis of the data and the writing of this book, we continued to present ourselves as engaged members of a community. For some of us, being African Canadians living and working in the three communities of interest — Halifax, Calgary, and Toronto — we were also exploring our own realities. The experiences of the participants were our experiences; their stories, our stories.

This research held many learnings and surprises for us. Some of them had to do with what we were learning about ourselves, about our very cultural, social, and geographical existence, and how it was different from or similar to the experiences of the research participants and our co-researchers. We were also learning about the diversity, complexity, and contradictions inherent within individuals as well as within the Black population in Canada. In exploring the impact of this research on ourselves, we found that we were no longer in the same place that we were when this research began. This particular piece of work has changed both our reasons for and methods of conducting research, as well as our sense of ourselves as "representing" these communities.

This project also held surprises for us. For example, we were surprised

at what the census data showed about the size of the Caribbean community in Calgary — we did not think that the community was that large. At other times, the research confirmed what we had suspected — we were not surprised that racism has scarred people of African descent across the country. Being our lived experience, we understand the experience of racism and its impact on individuals, families, and communities. We have also spent our careers researching racial inequality and the impact of racism, and so we have both an intellectual and a personal understanding of the experience of racism and its impact. Yet there were times when the voices of those across the country helped us to understand racism and our communities in a new way. New pieces of information, new insights, and new knowledge have reshaped our thinking as we proceeded with this project.

The Origins of This Project

The Racism, Violence and Health Project, the first study of its kind in Canada, was initiated in 2002 by a group of researchers in three universities in three parts of the country — a group that includes the authors of this book. Through this research, we set out to form an understanding of the impact of racism, combined with other stressors, on the health and well-being of African Canadians. Our main objectives were to determine perceptions of racism-related stress in Caribbean, immigrant African, and Canadian Black communities. We wanted to document the first-voice accounts of Black men, women, youth, and elders about their experiences of racism and violence, as well as document the impact of those experiences on themselves, their families, and their communities. Through this project, we also sought to analyze how those experiences differ across a range of social and economic variables and to explore how the experiences are related to the health of individuals, families, and communities.

Participants in our study told us that racism is complex, involving inter-related incidents that are all equally important and reinforce other experiences. As a result, there is no way to unravel a person's experiences of racism, because there is no distinct beginning or end to these experiences in education, employment, interactions with police and the justice system, and within their personal lives — these threads are interwoven with each other and throughout a person's life. Because racism is “everyday, everywhere, all the time,” research participants told us that it forms “a filter,” or it becomes “a smog” through which they view the world. Some said that it is like water for fish: simply the element in which life is lived. As a Canadian Black woman in Halifax put it, “It sort of seeps through our dreams.”¹ It is this continuing Canadian reality — a nightmare for some — that our project set out to explore.

We asked African Canadians in three distinct and growing Black com-

munities a range of questions in order to find answers to some key research questions: How do African Canadian boys, girls, men, women, and elders experience racism and violence in their lives? How do racism and violence affect the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities? What actions do these people take to counteract the effects of racism and violence in their lives? What other actions can individuals, families, and communities take to increase their understanding of the root causes and effects of racism and violence?

The research findings reported in this book unsettle a number of existing assumptions about the homogeneity of African Canadian communities and raise many new questions. Unlike many previous studies that focused on one city or the Black population as a whole, the results of the Racism, Violence and Health Project reveal the complex, fluid, and sometimes contradictory social identities of African Canadians within these different communities.

Understanding the Black community as a diverse community requires that we situate it specifically in the Canadian context of place, generation, and time. As such, we identified three communities of interest. These groups reflected the larger immigration patterns of people of African descent to Canada. The first group of interest is composed of Canadian Blacks, i.e., members of the Black community born in Canada and whose mothers are Black and born in Canada, i.e., third-plus generation Black Canadians. Many Canadian Blacks have a history in Canada that stretches over centuries, with the largest communities being in Nova Scotia and Western Ontario. The second group is composed of people of Caribbean origin who are either the first or second generation to be living in Canada, large numbers of whom immigrated to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s. The third and final group of interest is composed of Black people who came from sub-Saharan Africa (those of the first and second generations in Canada), most of whom immigrated since the 1980s. Immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa have tended to settle mainly in Canada's largest urban centres.

At this stage, it is important that we clarify the terms we will be using throughout this book. We prefer to use the term "African Canadian" to refer to all people of African descent living in Canada, regardless of their place of birth. This term will be interchangeable with "Black Canadians" and "Black people." When we are specifically referring to people who were born in Africa we will simply refer to them as "Africans." We will also use the term "Canadian Blacks" to refer to those whose families have been in Canada for three generations and more and who have a longer ancestral history in Canada than do other African Canadians. First- and second-generation Blacks from the Caribbean will simply be referred to as "Caribbeans."

When referring to these groups, the term "first-generation" Canadian refers to those who were born outside Canada. We use the term "1.5 genera-

tion” to refer to those who immigrated to Canada before the age of 18 and therefore have the dual experience of being an immigrant and also the experience of growing up and going to school in Canada. The “second generation” are those who were born in Canada to immigrant parents, while the “third generation” refers to those born in Canada to Canadian-born mothers.

The Context of This Research

As part of this project, we especially wanted to explore the lives of African Canadian youth. Indeed, a key impetus for our study was what appeared to be the increasingly volatile and violent lives of Black youth in this country. That situation had become all too evident in recent years after a number of shootings and weapons-related incidents had occurred among Black youth in Toronto. These incidents were then duly sensationalized in the press, so much so that the news media had dubbed the summer of 2005 “The Summer of the Gun.” As the violence continued in the fall and winter months, it was renamed “The Year of the Gun.”

An account of some of the many incidents from that year may help explain the excited tenor of the media reports. In April, 26-year-old Livette Moore, a mother of four children, was coping with the recent death of her husband from cancer. At the insistence of her friends, she decided to go out to a friend’s birthday celebration at a “Jamaican-themed” club in Toronto’s west end. That night, she was caught in a gunfight between two gangs. She was shot several times and killed.

On November 19, an 18-year-old Black male named Amon Beckles was shot and killed on the steps of a Toronto church. He was attending the funeral of his 17-year-old friend Jamal Hemmings, who was gunned down only days before in a parking lot in front of Beckles.

In 2005, there were 52 victims of gunfire in Toronto, a city that typically sees less than 60 murders of all types in a year. In that year, murders in Toronto reached 80. While less than the previous high of 89 in 1991, the increased use of guns in these killings was a cause for concern. Of concern also was the increasing number of African Canadian murder victims and suspects. Rosemary Gartner, a criminologist at the University of Toronto, reports that over the decade ending in 2005, 45% of homicide victims in Toronto were Black, a 300% increase over the decade before (Digman 2007).

The names and faces of most of the victims of murder in 2005 and after are long forgotten by most except the victims’ family and friends. There are two, however, both 15 years of age, whose killings galvanized public opinion and helped fix government attention on the violence as an indicator of much greater social and economic problems. In downtown Toronto on Boxing Day 2005, on a street full of holiday shoppers, 15-year-old Jane Creba was shot and killed as she was caught in the crossfire of two rival gangs. While other

innocent bystanders have been killed, it took the killing of a young White student on a downtown street, away from the confines of certain “troubled” neighbourhoods, to raise the alarm throughout the city and highlight the fact that anyone can be a victim of this violence. Two years later, the fatal school shooting of 15-year-old Jordan Manners in a Toronto high school served as a catalyst for a closer examination of the role played by schools and the community in the multiple issues contributing to violence among Black youth.

Although Toronto was a focal point for this kind of news, similar incidents were reported in all major urban centres in Canada. The cycle of violence and hopelessness among Black youth is most pronounced in neighbourhoods marked by poverty, high mobility, family dysfunction, crime, and the availability of drugs. While media focus has been on the symptom of the problem, gun violence, little attention has been paid to the root causes. Racism, at the root of much of this violence, creates the inequalities in Canadian society that shape the social conditions and structural context that govern the lives of these youth. It is these social conditions that create the conditions for violence. The violence among youth, and the alienation that it is indicative of, is not limited to males. Several adult participants were shocked by the number of young women they have seen involved in fights, drugs, and gangs. They talked of the marginalization of young Black women and the limited options that are available to them. They told us that rather than broaden the horizons of both Black boys and girls, the education system often limited the options available to youth. These options are then further limited once youth enter the labour market. Many then turn to crime in order to survive economically.

The police and the legal system compound the problem by promoting and being susceptible to the dominant negative stereotypes that construct all young Black men as dangerous, crime-prone hoodlums. Several youth involved in our research project expressed enormous frustration at racial profiling by police and the criminalization of Black male youth by society. Negative stereotypes and the mass media’s sensationalization of Black crime and gang violence work in tandem to alienate the Black community from the police and from mainstream society.

Many of those we heard from recognized that violence and the conditions that breed violence within society must be addressed. As one participant said, if the issue of Black-on-Black violence is not sufficiently addressed within the community, it will “lead to the loss of an entire generation.” Many research participants were concerned that the issue of violence within Black communities had “become so normalized, that is it no longer a big deal.” Not surprisingly then, despair, hopelessness, powerlessness, and alienation are particularly acute among segments of the African Canadian youth popula-

tion. They feel unwanted by mainstream society, by the education system, by the legal system, and sometimes even by their own communities and families.

Our research was also conducted in the post 9/11 context, when the bombings in New York (2001), Madrid (2004), and London (2005) had brought a heightened awareness of terrorism. The arrest of 18 Muslim men in Toronto in 2006 compounded public fears and suspicions not only towards Muslims, but also towards immigrants and those simply considered different. The resulting new source of racism created a new sense of vulnerability on the part of those who might be considered targets. However, despite the common concerns that lent a feeling of timeliness and relevance to our project, our focus remained on the African Canadian experience in Halifax, Calgary, and Toronto. We continued to believe in the importance of the unique context and experiences within each African Canadian community that have helped to set the stage for this research.

Why Halifax, Calgary, and Toronto?

A number of Canadian cities are home to sizable Black populations and could easily have been suitable sites for our study. As explored in more detail in Chapter 2, Halifax, Calgary, and Toronto respectively represent small, medium, and large cities with very different histories of early Black settlement and more recent arrivals of immigrants, refugees, foreign students, and domestic and migrant workers. We believe that these cities reveal the diversity of Black experience and opinion in this country.

Halifax was selected because of its long-established African Canadian communities that go back several generations. In 2001, Canadian-born Blacks made up 90% of all Blacks in Halifax, compared to 45% in Calgary and 40% in Toronto. An estimated 20,000 Black people live in Nova Scotia, with about 13,000 of them living in the Halifax Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). Blacks also constituted the largest racial minority group in Halifax. While 7% of the population identified as a racial minority, 52% of racial minorities identified as Black.

However, the long history of settlement does not mean equality. A main concern for this community is racism within the public school system, evidenced by the practice of streaming in the public schools, a continuing lack of Black teachers and guidance counselors within the school system, and a Eurocentric course curriculum, which hinders advancement of Black people in Nova Scotia.

The 2001 census data shows that 49% of Black Nova Scotian men have less than high school education, compared to 36% of White men. In addition, 40% of Black women have less than high school, compared to 35% of White women. Local organizations and individuals want to see these numbers change. Groups such as the Black Educators Association of Nova

Scotia, the Council on African Canadian Education, and the African Nova Scotian Services branch of the Nova Scotia Department of Education were born out of this need for change.

Calgary's booming population, now on the cusp of one million people, has become particularly diverse in the past two decades. In 2001, 17% of the city's population identified as belonging to a racialized community, with 8% of that group being Black. Calgary's quickly growing Black population is made up primarily of African immigrants. African-born people made up 50% of Calgary's first-generation Black population. While the Black community in Calgary has been in existence since the early 1900s with the migration of African Americans from Oklahoma, there has been a dramatic increase in the population in the early 1970s due to the influx of migrants from other parts of Canada and immigrants to feed the labour needs of Alberta's booming oil industry. The perception of the availability of jobs also attracted Caribbean immigrants to come from other provinces, such as Nova Scotia and Ontario.

With the influx of immigrants and refugees from Africa, one of the most contentious issues facing the African Canadian community in Calgary is under-employment. Many well-educated African immigrants settle in Calgary or remain after completing their education. However, their educational achievements do not translate into employment opportunities that allow their knowledge and skills to be fully utilized. Many in the community maintain that racism plays a large part in the challenge to find meaningful and well-paid jobs. As a result, having enough money to meet daily living needs in a city where the cost of living has increased in recent years has become a difficult challenge for some members of the community.

In recent years, major concerns related to the education system in Calgary have emerged. Community members contend that the education system has served to perpetuate the stereotypes of African Canadians, which in turn negatively affects the self-esteem of their children. Specific concerns noted were forms of harassment such as name-calling, the assumption that African Canadian students are not strong academically, and the lack of African Canadian teachers who could serve as positive role models. Community members came together about four years ago to respond to issues in the education system and other concerns such as racial profiling.

Toronto has the largest Black population in Canada, with almost 50% of all African Canadians residing in this CMA. A sizable proportion of this grouping are of Caribbean origin; 65% of the first-generation Blacks in Toronto are Caribbean-born. Vancouver and Toronto are the two most ethno-racially diverse cities in Canada. In Toronto, 37% of the city's total population identify themselves as members of a racialized community. Of these people, 18% identified as Black.

With its large and more diverse Black population, Toronto is home to issues that resonate more generally across the country. Even when they have comparable education and experience, Blacks in Toronto are likely to earn less and to hold fewer professional and managerial positions than their White counterparts. Due to discrimination by landlords, Blacks, particularly African immigrants, face significant barriers when it comes to obtaining appropriate housing. Issues of schooling and crime dominate the race-centred discourse in the city. For years, education advocates in Toronto have called for the establishment of Black-focused or African-centred schools to help counter the high rates of alienation, failure, and drop-out among African Canadian youth.

In selecting these cities, we by no means wanted to subscribe to any rigid notion of “boundary.” The Black community in Halifax, for example, cannot be understood as having a fixed or static boundary. Several Black communities exist in and around Halifax, and while those communities are certainly distinct and unique, they also share many commonalities and connections. What happens in North End Halifax has an impact on what happens in North Preston, East Preston, Cherrybrook, and elsewhere in the region.

The Black community of Calgary also has much in common with the outlying communities. A fluid connection exists, for example, between the Sudanese Black community in Calgary and in the town of Brooks, about 184 kilometres down the road. People who are unable to find work in Calgary often move to Brooks in search of work. Once there, they experience a host of social problems that they did not have in Calgary.

It was also necessary to have a similar vagueness of boundary in our definition of “the Black community” in Toronto. Events within the city of Toronto relate to, influence, and are influenced by events in other parts of the Greater Toronto Area, such as Brampton to the west, Markham to the north, and the Durham region to the east.

The complications and diversity within these three communities were revealed in the demographics of the 2001 census, which helped us form our research strategy. We had initially assumed, for instance, that a large majority of Calgary’s Blacks are the descendants of African Americans. The statistics, however, reveal that a surprising number of 18- to 30-year-old Canadian-born Blacks had only recently moved to Calgary for employment or schooling. We also discovered that Calgary’s African population was growing at a faster rate than its Caribbean population.

This picture of diversity and demographically shifting ground actually helps to illuminate one of the key findings of our research: African Canadian communities are complex geographic and cultural spaces. To understand the lived experiences of African Canadians, then, we must find ways of looking or talking across, within, and between these many fluid ethno-cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries.

The African Canadians with whom we spoke also shared common concerns, especially in light of recent high-profile events. There were complaints from African Canadians about racial profiling, harassment, and brutality by police in all three cities. There was concern resulting from the shootings and homicides that involved young Black men in these cities. These events took place in the context of the judicial system's sanctioning of police actions, accompanied by sensational media coverage. While African Canadians had long identified their increasing concern regarding the frequency and gravity of racism-based violence, the public, provincial governments, and the media — while rhetorically registering concern or horror — seemed to assume that these incidents were created by, and were therefore the problem of, “the Black community.”

A Community Model of Recruitment and Research

From the start, the Racism, Violence and Health Project (RVH Project) was designed with a focus on community involvement and community capacity building by including the participation of African Canadian educators, students, community activists, and community organizations in each city as co-investigators, research assistants, and collaborators, as well as expert panel and reference group participants. In total, this project relied on the support and participation of over 300 African Canadians in the three cities.

This project was seen as a means of enhancing the participating Black communities' understanding of the impact of racism and violence on health and well-being. We hope that by helping to create greater knowledge and awareness of these problems, members of the respective Black communities would feel more empowered to take actions to address them.

The project's team comprised Wanda Thomas Bernard (Halifax), Carl James and Akua Benjamin (Toronto), Dave Este (Calgary), and Bethan Lloyd, who, as the project coordinator, worked in Halifax. Tana Turner joined the project during the writing of this book. The research team also included Carol Amaratunga, of Dalhousie and Ottawa universities, and Fred Wien, of Dalhousie University.

Reference Groups

In the first month of this project, the research team at each site set up reference groups comprised of 10 to 12 individuals, who would play a central role in linking the team members to various individuals and organizations in the respective African Canadian communities. The reference group members were chosen based on a number of factors: interest in participating in the project as a whole; representation of the diverse cultural backgrounds of the African Canadian communities; representation of health service agencies

working with different populations of Black communities; representation of those who had worked with African Canadian men, women, and families who had been somehow involved with the legal system; plus any other interested individuals whose participation would further the work of the project.

Members of the reference groups quickly became involved in the planning of the community forums and in participating as facilitators in the forums. They provided advice on the administration of the questionnaire and helped to recruit participants for the planned research. Most also became members of the expert panel set up in each site to assist with the development of the sampling strategy. Members of the reference groups provided feedback on the draft questionnaire and participated in the pilot testing of the questionnaire. They suggested possible research assistants and suggested names and contact information for participants based on the sampling strategy.

Community Forums

The community forums and subsequent community meetings provided over 300 African Canadians (100 in each site) with an opportunity to engage in open-ended discussions concerning their experiences with racism and violence, the impact of those experiences, and their coping strategies. We also used these forums and meetings to talk about developing education, service delivery, and prevention programs that would be needed to address the identified issues.

The forums were aimed at introducing the RVH Project to the larger African Canadian community and at providing an opportunity for individuals to engage in a dialogue concerning their experiences with racism and its impact on their own health and well-being, as well as on that of their families and communities. Subsequent forums centred on more specific issues, including the issue of violence, and featured focused discussions on the impact of racism on the well-being of African Canadians. The data obtained from the participants in these forums assisted the research team in the development of the survey and the interview guide for the in-depth interviews.²

The feedback reports generated from the initial forums were placed on a project website <www.dal.ca/rvh> and mailed to participants. Each city had at least one university research team member and a number of research assistants who had extensive involvement in the African Canadian communities in their respective cities. While these teams were interested in the larger issues affecting African Canadians, they also ensured that the research addressed local concerns. After the first community forums in each site, the research team developed a questionnaire to capture, quantitatively, not only experiences common to African Canadians across the three sites but also to explore the impact of these experiences on individuals and the three communities.