

# Systemic Racism

## How does systemic racism differ from individual racism?

**Individual racism** is easy to define. It includes prejudices, implicit biases (unconscious beliefs or attitudes, that come from messages and stereotypes that we pick up from the world we live in), and also enacting racism. These individual beliefs may include the opposition to interracial marriage, believing that Black people feel less pain than White people, not wanting Black, Indigenous or people of colour (BIPOC) to live in your neighbourhood, or not believing that inequality based on race is real and a problem.

**Systemic racism** consists of rulings, statutes, policies or practices promoted by a government, organization or industry, such that one ethnic group is granted certain rights and privileges, while denying those same rights and privileges to other groups in that society. These systems include education, healthcare, justice, workplaces (hiring practices and wage gaps), media and entertainment.

Individuals may not see themselves as racist, but they benefit from systems that have been designed to benefit White people. The benefits derived simply from being a White person is what the term privilege was coined to describe.

## What are some examples of privilege and systemic racism?

In Peggy McIntosh's famous essay called "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack(1)," she presented a number of statements of easily taken for granted privileges that point to established policies that fueled systemic racism. The following statements, that most BIPOC cannot count on, demonstrate systemic racism:

- If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
- I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
- I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

Dr. Hadiya Roderique, a writer, speaker and consultant living in Toronto, Ontario wrote of systemic racism faced by Black people. Not only does she fear for her own health if she were to become pregnant, but also worries about a life of risk and heartbreak that her child would face being a person of colour.(2) Dr. Roderique spoke of her worry about being a Black woman in a medical system that doesn't value Black bodies. Black women are more likely to have pre-term births(3) and pregnancy-related mortality is highest in Non-Hispanic Black women.(4) A recent survey of White medical students found that 40% thought that Black skin was thicker than White skin and 21% thought Black people had a stronger immune system and aged more slowly than White people.

Black and Hispanic mothers' concerns of future discrimination that their unborn children will face, can contribute to their babies' poor sleep, inflammation, and other negative health effects. This presents one

example of intergenerational transmission discrimination(5) created in a society where systemic racism persists.

### **Does systemic racism occur in Canada?**

Many of the statistics quoted above are based on research in the United States, but these statistics, in many cases, can be applied in Canada. Denying systemic racism in Canada, is in and of itself, systemic racism. Both the US and Canada are founded on colonized land and both countries have a history of Slavery. Canada is not that different from the US, and systemic racism exists in Canada. We only need to look to Indigenous residential schools as one example of systemic racism.

From the 1880s until the 1990s, residential schools represented the attempt to assimilate Indigenous children. Funded by the Canadian government and mainly run by the Catholic church, over 150,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes to attend these schools. The schools stripped the children of their Indigenous heritage, traditional livelihood skills and trained them for menial tasks. Intergenerational effects of residential schools continue to impact the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health of survivors, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.(6)

Other examples include Chinese labourers coming to Canada to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway, many of whom died during the construction. Upon completion of the railway, the Canadian government introduced a 'head tax' that applied to only Chinese immigrants. During the second world war, 20,000 Japanese people (many of whom were Canadian citizens) were forced into internment camps with the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December of 1941. The government sold their homes and businesses to pay for their internment.

BIPOC continue to face systemic racism when accessing health services, education, in the workplace, in the justice system and in practicing their culture.

### **How can I live healthfully while facing racism?**

Living with racism is a heavy burden that can wear BIPOC individuals down and can cause negative health outcomes.(7) Facing individual racism in your community or workplace, on top of the structure of systemic racism that you live in can become physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting, especially when individual stories of racism fill your news and social media feeds every day.

Living with racism is not a burden to carry alone. While it's everyone's responsibility to be a part of the solution to dismantle system racism and biases, BIPOC individuals sometimes need support to cope with living with racism.

The following can help alleviate the negative physical and mental effects of racism:

- Talk to trusted allies. Talking about racism that you've experienced can help alleviate the stress, anger and frustration you're feeling.
- Build a strong network of trusted friends and family. Leaning on family and friends for support can help reduce negative thoughts and feelings.
- Seek professional support to help work through difficult or negative thoughts and feelings.

### **How can I support my BIPOC friends and colleagues?**

Offer support to BIPOC friends and colleagues, but avoid offering advice or minimizing their experiences by comparing to your own experiences. If there are stories in the news about murders, violence against marginalized people or unfair treatment, avoid asking your BIPOC friends or colleagues how they're doing or

expect them to include you in their grief. Instead, continue to educate yourself and work to break down the policies that support systemic racism.

### References:

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