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Discrimination and Public Perceptions of Aboriginal People in Canadian Cities

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Introduction

The topic of discrimination against Aboriginal people in Canada is important because, at the individual level, it can negatively affect a person's self-esteem, identity and life chances. At the group level it can lead to unfavourable stereotypes as to how Aboriginal people are perceived by non-Aboriginal people and themselves, thus impacting the nature of Aboriginal culture. The issue is particularly important for Aboriginal people living in urban areas because it is in cities where the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is most acute. With over half the population of Aboriginal people in Canada living in urban areas it is important to understand the nature of the relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in these contexts.

There has been extensive research on the nature and extent of discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban areas (Stymeist, 1975, Maidman, 1981, Lawrence, 2004, Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, *Urban Aboriginal Task Force* [UATF], 2007, McCaskill, 2011). Most studies focus on the nature of discrimination and its impact on Aboriginal people. For example, a recent study of five urban centres in Ontario discovered that 78% of Aboriginal people stated that discrimination against Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people was a problem (UATF, 2007). In addition, the research tends to relate to discrimination in particular sectors such as the criminal justice system, housing, health care, homelessness, employment and education; also against specific groups such as Aboriginal women, the elderly, two-spirited individuals, Aboriginal offenders or the homeless. Discrimination and the related concept of racism are about social categorization and unequal treatment of one group by another and involves power. The phenomenon intersects with a history of colonialism, government policy, the media and the patterns of interactions between

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canadian society. Discrimination is exhibited on the individual, institutional and society levels. The research demonstrates that, despite significant anti-racism initiatives and educational efforts, discrimination against urban Aboriginal people persists.

Alternatively, few studies exist regarding the perceptions of non-Aboriginal people toward Aboriginal people including their awareness of Aboriginal history and issues they face in urban areas. A recent study of eleven cities in Canada (Urban Aboriginal Peoples' Survey, 2010) discovered a low level of understanding of the urban Aboriginal experience. For example, just over half of the non-Aboriginal people surveyed had heard or read of anything about the topic of Indian residential schools. The study also discovered that the majority of Canadians perceive Aboriginal people to be socio-economically well off, or better off, compared to other Canadians. This finding holds despite evidence that demonstrates that a significant proportion of urban Aboriginal people suffer from poverty and related social problems. Furthermore, there was an overall sense among members of mainstream Canadian society that they do not consider themselves to be discriminatory towards Aboriginal people.

Thus, there appears to be a major gap between the reality of Aboriginal peoples' socio-economic status and the degree of discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban areas and the perceptions of non-Aboriginal people. The nature of this gap is not adequately understood. It is a complex phenomenon as it relate to a number of dimensions such as beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours and will vary with such factors as age, gender, social class, religious affiliation, ideology and ethnicity. It is also influenced by media images of Aboriginal people as well as government policies and representations presented by Aboriginal people themselves.

This paper will examine this phenomenon by addressing the following research questions: What is the state of public discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban centres? What is the nature of public understanding of discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban areas? What is the best way to address the issue of discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban areas in an effort to move forward? Implications for policies and programs relating to ameliorating the problem and implications for further research will be addressed in the last section of the paper.

Discrimination, Racism and Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal Encounters

To appreciate the impact of discrimination on urban Aboriginal people it is important to understand the nature of discrimination and racism well as the history and contemporary situation of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. Discrimination against Aboriginal people is fundamentally about treatment based on racial classification and differentiation in which one group dominates, or attempts to dominate, another, and, in the process, categories them as inferior. It exists in institutional arrangements and practices as well as at the individual level and results in differential treatment based on the social categorization, usually of a minority group by a dominant group which holds power in a society. In doing so the dominant group seeks to impose upon those people a categorical identity which is primarily defined by reference to their purported inherent differences from, and inferiority to, the dominating group.

A minority group refers to a collective within a larger society having common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a shared language and culture. Minority groups are the product of both identification and bonds by members of the group themselves and the process of

categorization by the dominant society. Thus discrimination involves interaction between groups and the maintenance of boundaries between *us* and *them*. Within the minority group feelings of solidarity and social cohesion are formed and are crystallized into individual and collective identities based on shared history and culture. Those identities are validated and reinforced by members of the group and tend to persist over time.

At the same time, group boundaries and identities tend to be reinforced through interaction with other groups. Members of the dominant society may ascribe characteristics of the minority group based on perceptions such as their origins, values and behaviours, often with an emphasis on differences. The interaction between groups will tend to reinforce individual identifies of members of the minority group because what other people think of us is important in terms of our self-esteem and image of ourselves, especially if the other group is dominant and has a negative image of the minority group and hold specific norms and values. Therefore, identity is influenced by both self-definition and the definitions of oneself offered by others. The interaction with the dominant society, from the minority group's point of view, can strengthen a sense of belonging to and solidarity with their group as well as reinforce boundaries between groups in response to the social categorization by outsiders (Eriksen, 1993). On the other hand, when opportunities for mobility between groups are available and social boundaries between groups are weak, members of minority groups may choose to take on significant characteristics of the majority group, in the process becoming bicultural or even assimilating into the dominant society (Schermerhorn, 1970).

In many cases the interaction between minority groups and the dominant society occur through *stereotypes* which are images of the *other* rooted in assumptions, knowledge, beliefs and expectations, often based on false understandings involving negative categorization, which can

influence an individual's judgements and behaviour without accurate information. Stereotypes are frequently based on racial, ethnic or national categories. Stereotypes are often based on deep-seated beliefs, attitudes and understandings of the world imbedded in specific cultures reinforced through language, symbols, convictions, religious beliefs and mental categories. Frequently, individuals are not aware of the presuppositions and assumptions they make based on their particular culture, making inter-cultural understanding and interaction particularly challenging.

Frequently, an unfortunate consequence of negative stereotypes is that minority groups can be treated as a member of a category irrespective of the quality of the individual. In many cases, the results of such treatment results in characteristics that further set the minority group apart from the dominant society and debar it from participation. If the dominant group controls access to scarce resources and values that are deemed to be desirable and can define the criteria of social eligibility, by declaring ineligible those with differing characteristics and excluding them on the basis of negative social categorization, the dominant group can limit the minority groups' life chances (Kramer, 1970). An unfortunate consequence of this situation is that those who are defined as ineligible can become as unequal as they are treated. Minority status becomes self-perpetuating as exclusion extends over time. Often, over time, deprivation of access to dominant values and resources leads to a lack of qualification for them.

Members of the minority group which increasingly interact with mainstream society, such as urban Aboriginal people, will desire being accepted as equals in competing for jobs and housing, the attainment of a stable economic existence and avoidance of discrimination and exploitation. As they integrate into urban centres they want acceptance as equals not debarment based on negative stereotypes. Discrimination can engender frustration at the lack of control

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over their lives as they are forced to accommodate, frequently at considerable social and psychological costs. The stability of an individual's identity may be undermined as well a lessening of the motivation to aspire to the benefits of an urban life that may seem unattainable. Ambivalence about both self-image and group identification may result. Living with lowered social opportunities, members of minority groups may begin to incorporate the inferior images attributed to them. This can result in low self-esteem and identity confusion as well as a variety of coping mechanisms as they come to terms with their situation. Furthermore, frustrations relating to a legacy of colonialism, discrimination and negative stereotypes can engender destructive attitudes and behaviours that are frequently turned inward toward one's own group, often termed "horizontal" or "lateral" violence (Brubaker 2004).

Historically, for many Aboriginal people in Canada the interaction with the dominant society was largely negative, frequently characterized by the pattern described above. For instance, government assimilationist policies such as the residential school system, having Aboriginal spiritual ceremonies outlawed by the state, having natural resource management practices criminalized, the policy of enfranchisement, facing discrimination from members of the dominant society as a result of negative stereotypes along with other pressures resulted in an intolerant situation for a large number of Aboriginal people. Government policies were often based on the belief that Aboriginal cultures were inferior to Western cultures and there was a sense of responsibility to "civilize" Indigenous people. Emerging from residential schools with neither the knowledge to neither function in Aboriginal communities nor the skills to integrate into the larger Canadian society, Aboriginal people were often marginalized from both. The negative consequences and adaptive strategies emerging from the tensions resulting from the

assault on their cultures are well known and include high rates of suicides, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, poverty, domestic violence and low levels of educational attainment.

In the contemporary period where increasing number of Aboriginal have moved to urban areas and the contact with members of the mainstream society have increased, the situation is more complex. It is important to recognize that cultures adapt and people not only respond to their situation, but they also create it. Aboriginal people have been engaging in a number of positive adaptive strategies as part of their increasing interaction with the dominant society in urban centres. The significant advances entailed in Aboriginal self-government and control over their own institutions; improved levels of educational attainment; increased economic mobility through employment; economic development through the establishment of Aboriginal businesses; a vibrant urban Aboriginal arts community; and the establishment of numerous Aboriginal organizations in cities are all testaments to urban Aboriginal peoples' ability to master change and utilize new technologies and political possibilities for their own ends. Many urban Aboriginal people participate in the larger society while at the same time retaining important aspects of their Aboriginal culture. For the vast majority, their identity as an Aboriginal person has remained a fundamental component of the way they define themselves (UAPS, 2010, McCaskill, 2011).

At the same time, research demonstrates that, for a significant number of Aboriginal people, attaining a satisfactory urban existence remains a challenge (McCaskill, 2011). Many urban Aboriginal people struggle with poverty and meeting their basic needs for adequate housing, income and employment and health. In addition, single parent households, addictions, domestic violence, homelessness, physical and mental health problems, lack of adequate housing, unemployment and racism still affect a significant proportion of Aboriginal people

living in Canadian cities. Many urban Aboriginal people continue to struggle to overcome these issues in their "healing journey". In this process there is a danger that, for some Aboriginal people, the negative experiences may become fixed into a form of "victimization" or "social deficit" based on a prevailing image of being characterized by social problems. This image is often reinforced by Aboriginal organizations in an effort to access resources for programs to meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

Canadian public perceptions of urban Aboriginal people in the contemporary period are also more complex than in the past. The facile stereotypes of "primitive" people and "the Indian problem" based on negative images of the 1940's, 50's and 60's have given way to more complex understandings as members of the dominant society become more educated and sensitive to the reality of Aboriginal people. A number of diverse and often contradictory images of Aboriginal people have emerged. Aboriginal people are often regarded positively as "traditional ecologists" who have understood how to live on the land for generations. Increasingly, members of mainstream society view Aboriginal people as "victims" based on the publicity regarding the impacts of residential schools and unfair treatment by governments. A related image is that of "social deficiency" characterized by poverty and dysfunction as a result of media attention on social problems in urban areas. Another stereotype that persists is that of the "welfare dependent" Aboriginal person who relies on government assistance. Similarly, the notion of the "special status" Aboriginal person who receives special privileges such as paying no taxes is common among non-Aboriginal people. Another positive image is that of the "successful" Aboriginal person who has attained a high profile, economic success and a stable urban lifestyle. All of these images, while possibly containing an element of truth, are based on generalizations, stereotypes and are rarely the result of intimate knowledge of urban Aboriginal

people. The next sections will discuss the state of public discrimination against Aboriginal people, the nature of public understanding of discrimination and provide some ideas as to how to address the issue.

Discrimination and Urban Aboriginal People

The question, "what is the state of public discrimination (or racism) against Aboriginal people in urban centres" has been the subject of numerous studies. Early research on Aboriginal people coming into contact with non-Aboriginal people in cities report discrimination was a major issue. For example, a 1975 study conducted in a small city in Northwestern Ontario (unnamed) found a substantial degree of racial segregation based on social categorization. Aboriginal people were restricted to patronizing a small number of businesses in town and the boundaries between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people were very precise and rigidly drawn (Stymeist, 1975). Any interaction between groups was based on negative stereotypes.

The significant point that emerges is that the Native person is ultimately helpless against the violence of the whites...the Native person enters a strange and hostile place when he or she comes into town. Virtually all the whites in town are united in their opposition to Indians (Ibid, p71).

A study carried out in Edmonton in 1971 also found that discrimination in employment, restaurants and housing was a major issue for Aboriginal people. As a participant in the study said:

There is quite a bit of prejudices. I went into this one restaurant and I had to wait a long time before I was served... Well let us face it, if you are an Indian, you can't get a house unless it is a miracle. They have so many excuses...The sign can still be up for rent and

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you walk to the house and they say, "I am sorry, the house has been taken"(Indian

Association of Alberta, p 113).

Similarly, the *Ontario Task force on Native People in the Urban Setting,* a research
project conducted in 32 towns and cities across Ontario in 1981 reported that discrimination
against Native people was a significant factor impeding Native peoples' integration into urban
communities (Maidman, 1981). Specifically, discrimination was most likely experienced when
trying to obtain housing, find employment, being involved in the justice system, in the
educational system, in retail and financial institutions, accessing social welfare agencies and in
the health care system.

The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) published in 1996
discovered that one of the most difficult aspects of urban life for Aboriginal people is dealing
with the personal impact of racism. The report suggests that discrimination has a negative effect
on cultural identification because, as discussed above, developing a personal identity is a social
process guided by interaction with others. The negative stereotypes attached to them by
mainstream society are imposed upon the Aboriginal identity already internalized while growing
up, often leading to identity confusion and low self-esteem. As one respondent put it:

I'm a really confused young person...I had a lot of anger and a lot of unresolved issues in

my life...All my life I wanted to be White...because they had the money and they have the

nice cars...I thought that was the way to live...Until every time I tried to be White I'd fall

short (RCAP, Volume 4, p 528).

Several more recent major studies of urban Aboriginal people in cities across Canada
concur that discrimination and racism remain an important issue for Aboriginal people.

The 2007 study, the *Urban Aboriginal Task Force (UATF),* a study of Aboriginal people in five cities in Ontario (Ottawa, Barrie/Midland/Orillia, Sudbury, Thunder Bay and Kenora) found that 78% of respondents from all five cities felt that racism between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in those cities was a problem. Figure #1 illustrates the responses by city.

Figure #1
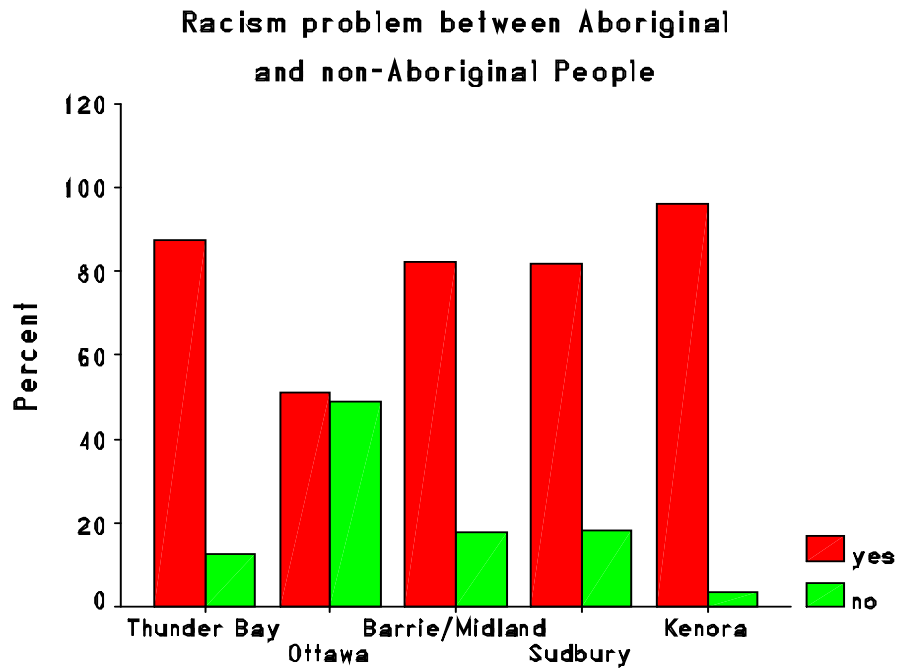
As was the case with the earlier studies, the UATF determined that racism occurred in a variety of locations in the cities including restaurants and malls, the workplace, housing and schools as shown in Figure #2.

Figure # 2

Places where racism occurs

other
13%

workplace
19%

restaurant/mall
27%

housing
17%

school
24%
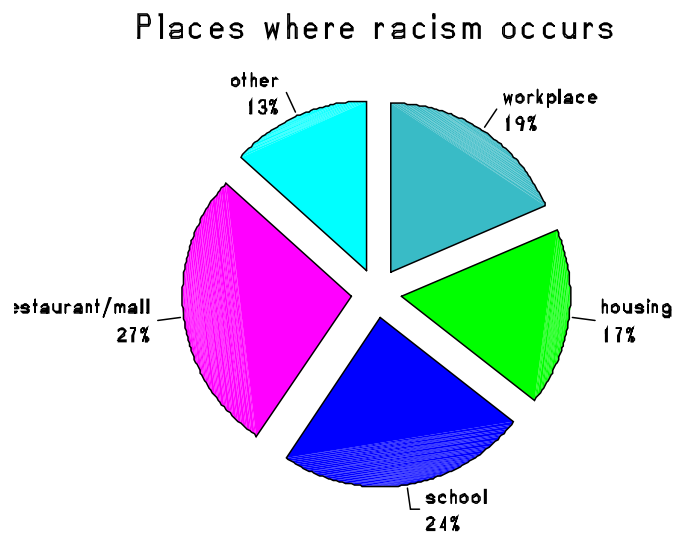
Similarly, the *Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP)* conducted in 2011 found that

discrimination affected several groups in the city. The study discovered that 58% of men in

the sample considered racism by non-Aboriginal people to be a problem in Toronto and

indicated that it was prevalent in a diversity of systemic and institutional contexts

(McCaskill, 2011, p 135). An even larger percentage of Aboriginal women (72%) and Elders

and seniors (68%) in the study indicated that discrimination was a problem. The TARP

research confirmed the UATF's finding regarding the places in the city where discrimination

occurs but added the justice system, particularly the police, security guards and the courts, as key locations of racism against Aboriginal people in the city.

Four studies focusing specifically on racism have been carried out in Ontario including, Thunder Bay (Haluza-DeLay, 2003), North Bay (Curry, 2004), Timmins (Curry, 2004) and Sault St. Marie (Curry, 2004). The studies in the latter three cities were conducted as part of the *Debwewin: A Three City Anti-Racism Initiative in Northeastern Ontario* in 2004. The studies discovered that racism was an issue in all three cities with 59% of all respondents in North Bay and 54% in Sault St. Marie stating that they had observed discrimination based on race against someone in the past year. The number of Aboriginal people in those cities who has witnessed discrimination was substantially higher, 70% in both cities. Furthermore, 45% of Aboriginal people in North Bay and 52% Sault Ste. Marie had experienced discrimination personally. The studies also discovered a discrepancy of perceptions regarding the amount of discrimination in the cities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with Aboriginal people reporting substantially more discrimination. For example, only 7% of non-Aboriginal people suggested that discrimination against Aboriginal people was widespread in North Bay compared to 30% of Aboriginal respondents. As one of the non-Aboriginal participants who felt that discrimination was an issue said:

I hear things that are negative about Aboriginals all the time, especially at work.

Racism exists in North Bay. Natives are looked down upon. Natives have a tough time because of their reputation of drinking.

The studies conclude that racism against Aboriginal people occurs in a variety of locations especially in stores, restaurants and schools and, to a lesser extent in social service

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agencies. On the other hand, police and medical personnel were not perceived as a problem to the same extent. Despite the problem associated with racism overall more Aboriginal people were generally more satisfied with their life (in North Bay, 65% and Sault Ste. Marie, 46%) than dissatisfied. But a substantial percentage of Aboriginal people in North Bay (48%) and Sault Ste. Marie (54%) stated that problems related to racism made those cities a less desirable place to live compared to 32% non-Aboriginal people in North Bay and 31% in Sault Ste. Marie. It is interesting to note that despite the existence of racism the majority of Aboriginal people believe that having people from many ethnic backgrounds and races make living in the city make it a better place to live.

The largest study of urban Aboriginal people in Canada is the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (UAPS)*, which researched Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in eleven cities (Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Ottawa [Inuit people only], Montreal and Halifax) published in 2010. It confirmed the findings of the other studies. It determined that, on average, 71% of Aboriginal respondents from all the cities believed that non-Aboriginal people have a generally negative impression of Aboriginal people (UAPS, p 73). The highest per cent of respondents who said there was a generally negative impression were in the prairie cities with Edmonton (80%), Winnipeg (75%) and Regina and Saskatoon (71%) scoring the highest. Halifax was the lowest (52%). Consistent with the other studies, women tended to believe non-Aboriginal people held negative opinions (75%) compared to men (66%) for all cities.

Further, Aboriginal people in the eleven cities had a clear impression of the nature of the negative images non-Aboriginal people had of them. By far the most commonly mentioned negative stereotype they believed non-Aboriginal people had related to addictions problems

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(74%); followed by lazy and lack of motivation (30%); lack of intelligence and education (20%); relying on welfare and social assistance (20%); are perennially unemployed (18%); are homeless and panhandlers (13%); abuse the system (12%); engage in criminal activities (12%); and do not pay taxes and get a "free ride" (12%) (UAPS 2010).

The report also asked whether respondents felt that non-Aboriginal peoples' attitudes toward Aboriginal people were getting better, worse or staying the same. Overall, the findings were split with 40% of participants thinking impressions have improved; 41% saying that they have stayed the same; and 16% suggesting they have gotten worse. Again, the most pessimist views of the situation were in some of the prairie cities. For example, 24% of participants in Regina and 23% in Winnipeg stated that non-Aboriginal peoples' impression were getting worst compared to only 6% in Vancouver and 13% in Toronto (UAPS 2010).

A large majority of Aboriginal respondents in the study indicated that they have experienced unfair treatment because of being Aboriginal. In terms of answering a questions about being teased or insulted, 70% of Aboriginal participants in all cities stated they strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. Interestingly, Toronto had the highest rate of unfair treatment, with 51% who strongly agreed compared to 39% in Regina and Vancouver and 28% in Winnipeg. Similarly, more than half of the participants in all of the cities stated that they had little or no confidence in the criminal justice system (UAPS 2010).

Despite this perception of negative behaviour and unfair treatment, the UAPS found a seemingly contradictory pattern of Aboriginal people feeling accepted by non-Aboriginal people. Only about one-third of the individual in the study strongly (8%) or somewhat agree

(28%) with the statement "I don't feel accepted by non-Aboriginal people". Regina and

Saskatoon had the highest rates of not feeling accepted with Vancouver and Winnipeg having

the lowest. Also surprising is the finding that 70% of the respondents feel that their

experiences with non-Aboriginal people have shaped their lives positively, making them

stronger and more motivated to succeed (36%), had mentoring and a sense of direction

(18%), more accepting and tolerant (17%) and reinforcing their identity as an Aboriginal

person (12%). On the other hand, 18% of participants suggested that experiences with non-

Aboriginal people have shaped their lives negatively in terms of discrimination and racism

leading to shame, lower self-confidence and self-esteem and hiding their identity as an

Aboriginal person. Respondents in Toronto (27%) and Regina (25%) were among the

highest to report negative impacts on their lives compared to 11% in Winnipeg and 19% in

Vancouver. Interestingly, a study of eight Aboriginal youth in Toronto also found that

despite being forced to engage with negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people by members of

mainstream society they were able to, in many cases, resist certain aspects of those

stereotypes (Restoule, 2008).

In 2009 Statistics Canada conducted a large national survey of over 27,000 individuals

relating to discrimination and victimizations (Statistics Canada, General Social Survey-

Discrimination and Victimization, 2009). A limited number of Aboriginal people were

included in the sample. Interestingly, a larger percentage of Aboriginal respondents reported

facing some type of discrimination in the past five years (21%, n= 865) generally than

because of their race of colour (13%, n=872). The survey also asked respondents to articulate

where discriminations occurs most frequently. Fifty-seven percent (n=177)[1] of Aboriginal respondents reported that they had experienced discrimination from a person of authority or from a service provider; 47% (n=177) in a store, bank or restaurant; 35% (n=177) on the street; 33% (n=177) at work or when applying for a job; 27% (n=177) while attending school; 21% (n=177) when dealing with public hospitals or health care workers; 13% (n=177) on a bus, train or airplane; and 11% (n=176) when dealing with the police or courts. These statistics are similar to the findings of other studies in terms of specific places where discrimination occurs but somewhat lower regarding overall discrimination.

There have also been several studies that focus on discrimination and racism relating to particular groups or specific sectors of society. Research into the Canadian justice system in urban areas have frequently documented a pattern of negative relations between Aboriginal people and the police, courts and correctional system (see for example: La Prairie, 1994, Manitoba Justice Inquiry, Ipperwash Inquiry Report 2007, Mann, 2008, UATF, 2007, APS, 2010, McCaskill, 2011). Similarly, there are numerous studies documenting discrimination in housing for urban Aboriginal people (see for example: Chu, 1991, McCaskill, 1995, Cohen, 2004) and Aboriginal people who are homeless in Canadian cities (see for example: Beavis, 1997, Raine, 2007, Ward, 2008). Issues related to discrimination against urban Aboriginal women have been the subject of a great deal of research, including violence against women (see for example: Williams, 1997, Manitoba Justice Inquiry, Amnesty International, 2005, Hawkins, 2009). Two-spirit Aboriginal people have also suffered serious discrimination through homophobia in Canadian cities, particularly transgendered individuals and those who are HIV positive (see for example: Deschamps, 1998, Monette,

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[1] It should be noted that Statistics Canada suggests that interpretations of data with a small number of responses in this survey should be done with caution due to the small size of the sample.

2001, Barlow, 2008, Ristock, 2010). Racism was discovered to be a key factor in the

formation of Aboriginal gangs in urban areas. As one study suggested:

> *Almost all individuals who were interviewed believed that Aboriginal gangs are the result*
> *of racism...Their sense of Aboriginal pride and gang loyalty are a direct response against*
> *societal attitudes...their showing of pride and symbols is their answer to racism* (Gulyas,
> 2003, p 39).

The research clearly demonstrates that individual and systemic discrimination and racism

is a fact of life for a significant number of Aboriginal people in Canadian cities. For many,

the consequences of discrimination are a reduction in their life chances to become successful

urban citizens and take their rightful place as valued members of Canadian society. For

individuals the internalization of the negative attitudes and stereotypes attributed to them can

result in lower self-esteem, lack of confidence and identity confusion. At the systemic level

the legacy of colonialism and government policies has sometimes led to tension and conflict

and claims that public institutions have contributed to human rights violations, discrimination

from the exercising of inherent Indigenous rights, dispossession from lands and resources and

the erosion of Aboriginal languages and cultures (Turtle Island Support Group, 2002).

 Yet the negative effects of discrimination and racism should not be overstated; they are

complex social processes. Not all urban Aboriginal people have experienced discrimination.

As stated earlier, many Aboriginal people feel accepted by non-Aboriginal people. Others

have resisted being defined by others and have used stereotypes to motivate themselves to

overcome the negative images attributed to them. As the *Urban Aboriginal Task Force*, the

Toronto Aboriginal Research Project and the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* studies have

demonstrated, a significant number of Aboriginal people have attained a high degree of social and economic success in Canadian cities. For example, the UATF reported that, on average, 26% of households in the five cities in Ontario were earning over $40,000 per annum. The TARP discovered that 37% of the participants in Toronto were in that income category and that there was a substantial urban Aboriginal middle class. Furthermore, the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* found that the majority of Aboriginal people in the eleven cities studied were either very happy (58%) or somewhat happy (36%) with their lives. It can be assumed that these individuals have successfully integrated into urban life and for whom discrimination is not a significant issue in their lives.

Public Perceptions of Discrimination against Urban Aboriginal People

Answering the question "what is the nature of public understanding of discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban areas?" is a difficult question to answer because there are few systematic empirical studies on the subject. The recently published *Interim Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC, 2012) suggests that discrimination has been an important part of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and that non-Aboriginal Canadians have been denied a proper education as to the nature of Aboriginal societies and the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Canadians generally have been led to believe – by what they have been taught and not taught in schools – that Aboriginal people were and are uncivilized, primitive and inferior, and continue to need to be civilized...They have not been well informed about the nature of the relationship that was established initially between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and the way that relationship has been shaped by colonialism and

racism. This lack of education and misfortune has led to misunderstanding and, in some cases, hostility between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians on matters of 76%.

A Saskatchewan Elections study of public attitudes towards Aboriginal people published in 2012 discovered that there was general agreement (58%) with the statement, "generations of discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Aboriginals to work their way out of the lower class". Those with university degrees tended to agree more frequently with the statement (70%) compared to 52% of respondents with a high school diploma or less. There were little differences between men and women or among difference age groups (Atikinson, 2012).

On the other hand, there were a number of seemingly contradictory findings related to providing any special treatment for Aboriginal people. When asked whether Aboriginal people should "work their way up without any special favours" (as was the case with ethnic groups), a strong majority of participants agreed (72%). Again the results varied with level of education (only 54% with university degrees agreed compared to 82% with a high school diploma or less). Men (75%) were more likely to agree with the sentiment than women (69%). Also, a larger percentage of older individuals (over 55) strongly agreed (47%) than youth (18-35) (39%) or those 35-54 (38%). Similarly, there was a small majority of respondents (53%) who did not think that governments should not do more for Aboriginal people, compared to (42%) who said that governments should do more. Again, higher educated individuals and women tended to be more positive toward governments doing more with little variation regarding age. There was also strong opposition to Aboriginal people having their own post-secondary educational institutions (68% disagreeing) and for Aboriginal people receiving their own separate share of natural resource royalties ((73% disagreeing). It would appear that the study's findings indicate

that, while there is acknowledgement that discrimination is a major factor affecting Aboriginal people, there is little support for any special treatment for Aboriginal people. It also found that there tended to be more support for Aboriginal people receiving special treatment among the young and more highly educated individuals.

> *For some people, it's possible they believe race doesn't matter. They don't understand, or they see how racism and racial attitudes are a challenge for Aboriginal people. The belief that everything should be race-neutral is fine when you're in the dominant race* (Star Phoenix, March, 2012).

It is important for the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of non-Aboriginal Canadians toward Aboriginal people to be researched in a systematic and empirical way in order to fully comprehend the phenomena. As mentioned earlier, the most comprehensive study of non-Aboriginal attitudes toward urban Aboriginal people is the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* which surveyed 250 individuals in each of ten cities about their views of Aboriginal people and what informs those views (UAPS, 2010). Attitudes varied among the cities but overall non-Aboriginal Canadians' impressions of urban Aboriginal people are generally positive, with the most common notions being that they were the "first people" (18%), that they belonged to three groups, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (12%), that they have been mistreated by government and Canadians (9%) and that they have distinct cultural and artistic traditions (9%). Only a small percentage of respondents held negative views such as Aboriginal people getting tax breaks (5%).

The majority of participants stated that their opinion of urban Aboriginal people had not changed in recent years (65%) with 21% saying that their impressions are now more positive and

10% saying they are worse. Interestingly, of those who reported that their views of urban Aboriginal people had improved, developing a personal relationship (22%); increased visibility in the community and media (20%); educational, social and economic gains (19%); gaining a better understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues (13%); and knowledge gained through educational or awareness courses (11%) were the most frequently mentioned factors.

On the other hand, among the 10% of respondents saying their impressions of urban Aboriginal people have gotten worse, 19% said that they rely on "handouts" and make minimal contributions to society; that Aboriginal people are constantly making demands or protesting issues (15%); that there is an increase in Aboriginal crime (15%); and that there are taking advantage of laws (13%). Changes in impressions toward being more negative varied greatly among cities with the prairie cities tending to have the highest rates. For example, in Regina (20%) and Winnipeg (19%) of participants said their opinions had gotten worse compared to only 8% in Toronto and 5% in Vancouver.

The UAPS discovered that the public was divided on the issue of whether Aboriginal people possess unique rights and privileges with 54% replying in the affirmative and 39% believing that they are just like other cultural or ethnic groups in Canada. Most of the prairie cities scored lowest on the issue of that Aboriginal people have special rights. University graduates tended to believe that Aboriginal people possess unique rights. Further, overall there appears to be a positive attitude that Aboriginal history and culture is very important (45%) or important (42%) in defining Canada, especially among young people. In addition, the majority of urban non-Aboriginal people in the study recognize the contributions that Aboriginal people have made to the environment, culture and arts and national identity with 36% from all cities saying they have made a major contribution and 38% a moderate contribution.

The study ascertained that, in general, non-Aboriginal Canadians are not aware of the important issues facing urban Aboriginal people, with 31% being unable to articulate key challenges facing Aboriginal people in cities. Of those who were aware of challenges, discrimination was identified as the leading issue (12%) along with threats to their culture (10%); difficulties in integrating into mainstream society (9%); poverty and homelessness (8%); unemployment (8%); and substance abuse (6%). Only 54% of urban non-Aboriginal people in the study had heard or read anything about Indian Residential Schools (UAPS 2010).

An important finding of the study relates to public perceptions of discrimination against urban Aboriginal people. The study found that 39% of respondents in all ten cities believed that Aboriginal people are discriminated against often and an additional 44% sometimes. These statistics have increased since 2004 as demonstrated in attitude surveys (UAPS, 2010, p 154). The highest percentages of individuals suggesting that there was discrimination against Aboriginal people in cities were in Thunder Bay (53%), Regina (52%) and Calgary (50%) with people in Toronto and Montreal scoring the lowest. Those respondents with a university education, have frequent contact with Aboriginal people and who are aware of the Aboriginal community in their city are the most likely to report that discrimination is a major issue.

Non-Aboriginal respondents in the UAPS were asked whether they were positive, negative or neutral about the presence of Aboriginal people in their cities. Overall, 44% said they felt positively, 45% were ambivalent and 9% were negative. However, there is a distinct pattern of cities with a substantial proportion of population of Aboriginal people being more negative in their attitudes (Regina, 34%, Winnipeg, 24%, Saskatoon, 19%, Thunder Bay, 16% and Edmonton, 15%). For those who have positive attitudes, those attitudes are mainly the result of constructive contributions Aboriginal people make to urban life such as the arts community

(36%) or the cultural mosaic of the city (30%). Negative attitudes relate to associating Aboriginal people with crime and gang violence (29%), poverty and homelessness (17%) and substance abuse (16%).

The degree of contact that urban non-Aboriginal people in the study had with Aboriginal people varied according to the proportion of the population of Aboriginal people in that city. Thus, 51% of residents of Thunder Bay, 48% of Regina, 48% of Saskatoon and Winnipeg had regular contact compared to 55% of Toronto residents having rare contact. Most members of the study had tended to learn about Aboriginal people through media such as television and newspapers (51%), through personal or casual contact (48%) or at school (39%).

The UAPS examined urban non-Aboriginal peoples' perceptions of the current state of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as well as ideas regarding changes in the future in those relations. Among the ten cities studied the perceptions of the relations between the two groups are split between those who believe that the relations are very positive (2%) or somewhat positive (45%) and those who hold the position that they are very negative (5%) or somewhat negative (41%). Again, respondents in the prairie cities tended to believe that relations were negative, with the scores being; Edmonton (62%), Calgary and Winnipeg and Thunder Bay (55%) and Regina (54%).

Further, the majority of participants declared that relations between the two groups have remained the same over the past few years (56%) compared to improving (29%) and deteriorating (10%). When asked why they felt relations were improving the most common answers related to, more visibility in society (25%); the fact that there is now more acceptance of different cultures and values in Canada (22%); increased personal experience with Aboriginal

people (10%); greater public understanding of Aboriginal issues (10%); Aboriginal people becoming better educated (10%); and more positive media exposure (9%). Conversely, those who perceive that relations are deteriorating give the following reason for their views; Aboriginal people protesting and demanding of rights and land (22%); discrimination against Aboriginal people (17%); dismissive attitude or blaming non-Aboriginal people (15%); and negative media exposure (11%). The majority of respondents believe that the quality of life of Aboriginal people in Canadian cities will improve in the future (66%) which was consistent across all UAPS cities. Educational opportunities (16%), equal treatment of Aboriginal people (14%), respect for Aboriginal cultures (10%), more funding for programs (8%) and providing employment and job training opportunities (8%) were the most commonly mentioned factors mentioned regarding improving the quality of life for urban Aboriginal people.

Finally, the UAPS set out a typology of "segments" or "clusters" of types of urban non-Aboriginal people based on their overall attitudes toward Aboriginal people based on patterns that emerged from an analysis of the findings. Four distinctive non-Aboriginal "worldviews" emerged. First, *cultural romantics* (45% of respondents) who stress the artistic and cultural contributions that Aboriginal people have made to Canadian society and who learn about Aboriginal people primarily through cultural activities. They believe that Aboriginal people have some unique rights but also believe they are just the same as non-Aboriginal people and are overall positive regarding the relations between the two groups and the future of Aboriginal people in cities. The proportion of respondents in this group is largest in Halifax (57%) and Toronto (55%) and lowest in Winnipeg, Saskatoon (34%), Regina (35%) and Montreal (37%).

The second largest category is termed *dismissive naysayers* (24%). Members of this group are characterized by; possessing a negative outlook toward urban Aboriginal people, think

that Aboriginal people are the same as other groups in Canada, believe that Aboriginal people are the cause of their own problems, that Aboriginal people are a neutral or negative presence in cities and suggest that Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal relations have gotten worse over the past few years. This group is most prevalent in prairie cities, Thunder Bay and Montreal (average 34%) and the lowest in Toronto (13%).

Connected advocates represent 17% of urban non-Aboriginal respondents in the study. They have a relatively high level of contact with and knowledge of Aboriginal people and their issues. They also believe that Aboriginal people are the subject of discrimination, think that Aboriginal people are different from other group because they have a distinct culture, are disadvantaged and possess unique rights and privileges and are pessimistic that the lives of urban Aboriginal people will improve in the future. Connective advocates are the most numerous in Winnipeg (30%) and Regina (29%) and the lowest in Halifax (12%) and Toronto (13%).

The fourth group are *inattentive skeptics* (14%) who believe that Aboriginal people do not suffer from discrimination, have the same socio-economic opportunities as other Canadians and have little contact or understanding of Aboriginal people. Montreal has the highest percentage in this category (21%) with the prairie cities having the lowest.

Addressing Discrimination: Policy Implications

The preceding analysis of Aboriginal peoples' awareness of discrimination and racism in urban centres in Canada compared to non-Aboriginal peoples' perceptions of the issue suggests that the problem is exceedingly complex. Therefore, addressing the issue of the best way to address the issue of discrimination against Aboriginal people in urban areas, is also very challenging. Very few clear patterns exist from the research findings, except the fact that there is

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general agreement that discrimination against urban Aboriginal people does exist and that, for many, it has damaging effects on Aboriginal peoples' life chances and the ability to live a good life in Canadian cities. Aboriginal people are more likely to believe that discriminations is more of a problem than non-Aboriginal people, but even among the latter group there is an awareness of the issue. The continued existence of discrimination means that, for a significant number of urban Aboriginal people, their life chances are restricted and their ability to attain social and economic success in the city is diminished. Being treated as a member of a category based on negative stereotypes manifest in such activities as racial slurs and bullying; being denied housing; racial profiling from police and security guards; being followed in stores; and hassles over the use of status cards. This can imply that even the most common everyday activities cannot be taken for granted for Aboriginal people and can have harmful impacts on individual's self-esteem and identity as an Aboriginal person.

However, as stated earlier, the issue should not be overstated. The research suggests that the situation is improving. An increasing number of Aboriginal people are becoming upwardly mobile and fashioning a stable lifestyle for themselves in Canadian cities. There currently exists a substantial Aboriginal middle class in urban areas who are not likely to experience discrimination from non-Aboriginal people. Also, the research has found that, in many cases, non-Aboriginal attitudes are changing for the better. Furthermore, studies point out that, overall, Aboriginal people tend to be satisfied with urban living.

There appears to be a number of factors that have contributed to the change. One of the most important is the social and economic success of urban Aboriginal people. The presentation of a more positive image in the media and role models of successful Aboriginal people contributing to the life of the city is a major reason non-Aboriginal people can relate to and

accept Aboriginal people because some of the negative images are no longer relevant. In addition, the research suggests that non-Aboriginal people who are more highly educated and have a better knowledge of the historical and contemporary issues that face Aboriginal people will be less prejudiced. Greater first-hand positive contact with urban Aboriginal people is another factor that contributes to a lessening of discrimination. It would also appear that levels of discrimination among younger people are less than older people which may contribute to a more positive future with regard to the issue.

On the other hand, non-Aboriginal people reported a number of reasons for their discriminatory attitudes. The negative images and visibility of urban Aboriginal people experiencing problems such as homelessness, poverty, substance abuse and criminal activity tend to reinforce discrimination. In many cases, the media continues to emphasize the problems faced by Aboriginal people which, on the one hand, bring attention to the serious issues facing Aboriginal people, but on the other hand, can serve to reinforce negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Also, the perception that Aboriginal people are pressing for special rights and protesting issues is seen by some non-Aboriginal people as a source of concern. Further, in cities where Aboriginal people are experiencing problems, it is particularly visible and the interaction with Aboriginal people in cities is negative (e.g. witnessing homeless Aboriginal people on the street), there is a greater risk of discriminatory attitudes. This appears to be the case in the prairie cities and Thunder Bay where the proportion of the urban population and the visibility of Aboriginal people is the highest.

An implication of the research thus demonstrates a complex pattern of sometimes contradictory impacts of social processes involving Aboriginal people as it relates to the amount and nature of discrimination. As Aboriginal people come into increasing contact with non-

Aboriginal people, articulate the serious problems they are facing and assert their special rights under the constitution, two simultaneous processes regarding discrimination seem to be occurring. Some non-Aboriginal people become more informed and sympathetic to Aboriginal people in recognition of the historical wrongs they have suffered and current challenges they face and value the contributions that Aboriginal people have made to Canadian society (the *connected advocates* (17%) and the *cultural romantics* (45%) of the UAPS). Others take a very different view. Those termed *dismissive naysayers* (24%) and *inattentive sceptics* (14%) in the UAPS observe the same processes and come to very different conclusions. They tend to believe that Aboriginal people should not have special rights, but rather should be like other Canadians.

The presentation of an image of urban Aboriginal people suffering from a myriad of social problems and possessing special rights is "thus a double-edged sword". By emphasizing the challenges in cities Aboriginal people are able to articulate the valid concern that a great number of people face significant issues such as poverty, single parent families, homelessness, addictions, high rates of employment and inadequate housing and, further, are able to convince governments to allocate considerable resources to address the problems. An overemphasis on this image, however, can lead to a negative stereotype of urban Aboriginal people locked in a situation of *victimization*. However, that is only part of the story. The research has discovered that a less visible substantial urban Aboriginal middle class exits in Canadian cities whom are not confronted with social and economic challenges, are making major contributions to urban life and are not facing significant discrimination UAPS 2010, McCaskill 2011). These positive images need to be imparted to the general public.

Developing policies and programs to address the issue of discrimination there is a need to recognize the complex patterns uncovered by the research. Discrimination and racism tend to be

emotional issues and related to deep-seated beliefs, attitudes, values and understandings of the world. Often individuals are unaware of their cultural assumptions that can affect their attitudes and behaviour. Changing attitudes and reducing discrimination is often as much a matter of unlearning aspects of one`s own culture as much as it is learning about another. In many cities there are few opportunities for first-hand interaction between urban Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as the social boundaries between *us* and *them* are often relatively fixed. At the same time, Canada is a multi-cultural society with an ideology of accepting a diversity of cultures.

The main policy approach to addressing discrimination and racism has been through education, often termed anti-racism or cross-cultural awareness training, primarily focused on institutions such as schools, police services, government ministries, hospitals, etc. Efforts have been made to educate about human rights, examine institutional cultures looking at how they impact Aboriginal people and providing training that informs participants of Aboriginal history, culture, special status and contemporary issues. Fundamental to this approach has been the development of appropriate curriculum materials for use in the educational system. Several initiatives have been made in this regard such as the *Teaching Treaties in the Classroom Kit* developed in Saskatchewan. Eliminating inappropriate curriculum is also important. In service training and professional development for teachers is essential to qualify teachers to teach about Aboriginal culture as is connections to the urban Aboriginal community through the use of guest speakers, parent/community committees, audio-visual resources etc. Recent projects that address the related issue of bullying and the videos in the *It Gets Better* project which targets homophobia in schools and supports GLBT and Two –spirited students are having a positive impact. The formation of Aboriginal student groups can assist in establishing an Aboriginal

presence and present their issues. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Interim Report* recommends that the issue of residential schools and their impacts be taught in schools (*TRC Interim Report,* 2012, p. 28).   These initiatives can be effective only if they are encoded into policy, are well resourced and have the official backing of the educational administration at all levels.

The development of public awareness has been another important tool in addressing discrimination, either directly through media, public events, speakers` bureaus etc. or indirectly through educating people of the rights and issues of urban Aboriginal people and presenting a positive image in the media. The CBC radio program *Trailblazers* which reports on successful ventures of Aboriginal people is an example of the latter approach.

The formation of anti-racism groups in cities involving a diversity of representation including, official organizations such as City Councils, Chambers of Commerce, business leaders, educators, members of the public in partnership with Aboriginal agencies can be an important vehicle to raise the visibility of the issue and develop programs and events to attempt to lessen discrimination. Initiative that target specific locations where discrimination most frequently occurs, such as restaurants, retail stores etc. and particular groups such as landlords, police and security guards, employers etc. can address the issue where discrimination takes place.

Policy initiatives, cross-cultural training workshops, anti-racism initiatives and awareness campaigns can only be effective if there is sufficient reporting and enforcement. Human Rights Commissions, Ombudsman and other official groups require a broad enough mandate to report and publicize incidents of discrimination and follow through with appropriate consequences.

The research has demonstrated that addressing the issue of discrimination against Aboriginal people is a complex process and will take time to be successfully addressed. However, there is room for optimism in that urban Aboriginal people are increasingly becoming more upwardly mobile and successfully participating in the life in the city. Finally, the attitudes, for the majority of non-Aboriginal people, are changing to be more aware and accepting of Aboriginal people.

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