



Labour Market Challenges and Discrimination Faced by Racialized Groups in the Black Creek Area

Research Bulletin

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Income Security,
Race and Health Project

This bulletin is the first in a four-part Research Bulletin series based on a study conducted by the Income Security, Race and Health working group. The study investigated relationships between employment, income and health insecurities faced by precariously employed racialized groups in the Black Creek area of Toronto.

This bulletin discusses the multiple barriers and discriminations that racialized groups face in the labour market. Results from this study indicate that racialized people living in the Black Creek area face numerous systemic barriers, discrimination and challenges

that prevent them from finding stable jobs that they want. While some of these challenges are related to broader macro-economic shifts in labour market conditions, study findings provide important insights into how racialized people are acutely affected by these conditions.

Findings highlight that discrimination, particularly race-based discrimination (based on socially produced ethno-racial features including skin colour, accent, religious or cultural affiliation), is a pervasive factor that undermines racialized people's search for stable jobs. It also affects experiences within the workplace including the types of work that racialized people are given, occupational mobility, and job security. At the same time, there appears to be little or no formal recourse for racialized people to file complaint about or counter these experiences in the labour market. The Black community, the Arabic-speaking community (particularly the Muslim community), and people with low English language fluency experience racism more frequently and more intensely. Place-based stigma associated with the Black Creek area and the lack of stable jobs and rise in "temp agencies" in the area further exacerbate the systemic discriminations facing racialized residents. These multiple systemic layers of barriers hinder racialized people from getting stable

jobs despite their exhaustive use of employment services offered by government and community agencies.

Many studies have documented non-recognition of foreign credentials/work experiences (and the requirement of "Canadian education/experience") as the most significant barrier that precludes recent immigrants from finding stable jobs in their field. Results from this study indicate that racialized immigrants continue to find it difficult to secure stable jobs in their field even after accumulating Canadian education/work experience. Non-recent immigrant participants and Canadian-born participants emphasized that having a Canadian education and work experience does not necessarily lead to stable employment.

More broadly, study findings add to the small but growing body of critical evidence about ethno-racial segmentation of the labour market. Socially constructed ethno-cultural factors, including ethnicity, race, religion, language, accent, and country of origin, play a prominent role in mediating labour market access and outcomes. Reversing this situation requires bold policy interventions capable of promoting employment equity in all sectors (starting with the public sector) and overcoming racialized discriminations in the labour market. >

KEY FINDINGS

FINDING 1 Racialized people (immigrant and Canadian born) face multiple systemic barriers in the labour market that preclude them from getting stable jobs they want; current macro-economic shifts, particularly the rise of precarious forms of labour, are exacerbating these barriers that racialized people face.

FINDING 2 Racialized people experience multiple forms of discrimination in the labour market, particularly based on ethno-racial background (i.e., race, ethnicity, religion, first language, accent, person's name, country of origin).

FINDING 3 Formal recourse for racialized people to file complaints about or counteract

systemic discrimination and exploitation in the labour market appear to be lacking or inadequate.

FINDING 4 For many racialized immigrants, the "Canadian experience" requirement is the most significant barrier in getting stable employment. This barrier is not necessarily overcome even after investing in and accumulating substantial

years of Canadian education and experience.

FINDING 5 The Canadian labour market appears to be highly racialized. Socially constructed ethno-cultural factors, including ethnicity, race, religion, language, accent, and country of origin saliently mediate labour market entry and outcomes.

ABOUT THE STUDY METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

In line with community-based research principles, we recruited and trained several residents from the Black Creek area to collaborate with us as research partners (peer researchers) in this project. Peer researchers were actively involved in all phases of the project including developing the research questions, data collection, analysis and writing.

We conducted eight focus groups with different racialized groups living in the Black Creek area (n=105). Focus group participants completed a survey at the beginning of the focus group. The sample size for the survey is 78. All participants self identified as being precariously employed. Focus groups were organized by language and ethno-specific groups and were facilitated by peer researchers from these backgrounds (Vietnamese-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Hindi/Urdu-speaking, Arabic-speaking, Black community, Canadian-born community, an all-male focus group, and one mixed focus group). We also conducted three focus groups with service providers working in the employment, settlement and community services sector in the Black Creek area (two with front line staff and one with management staff). The Black Creek area was selected for the study because it has one of the highest proportions of racialized residents in Toronto, and high levels of poverty, unemployment and sub-standard housing and services. This community was also selected because of the rich history of resident-led social activism in the area.

By “racialized groups” we refer to non-dominant ethno-racial communities who experience race as a key factor in their identity through racialization (Galabuzi, 2001). Racialization is the process whereby racial categories are constructed as different and unequal in ways that lead to regressive social, economic and political impacts (Galabuzi, 2001). While Statistics Canada uses the term “visible minorities”, Access Alliance and many other organizations including the Ontario Human Rights Commission use the term “racialized groups”, as the former term is more static and relates primarily to number and colour while the latter recognizes the dynamic and complex process by which racial categories are socially produced by dominant groups in ways that trench social inequalities.

FINDING

1

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Racialized people (immigrant and Canadian born) face multiple systemic barriers in the labour market that preclude them from getting stable jobs they want; current macro-economic shifts, particularly the rise of precarious forms of labour, are exacerbating these barriers that racialized people face.

This study has generated an extensive list of systemic barriers that racialized people face as individuals and as a group in securing stable jobs they want. See Table 1 for this list. These barriers can be broadly categorized into three types: barriers related to mainstream labour market conditions/shifts; barriers related to discrimination and exclusion; and systemic barriers related to service access/quality. Participants pointed out how these different systemic barriers are experienced in interlocking ways to produce multiple exclusions to stable employment pathways.

The Canadian labour market has been undergoing major shifts during the last couple of decades. These include the shift toward precarious forms of work (part-time, casual, on-call, etc.) and declining entitlements (no extended health coverage and other benefits), weakening of unions and the security they provide, recession, outsourcing, growth of the technology-heavy and knowledge-based sector, and the growth in temporary employment agencies. These broader macro-economic shifts impact all communities. Racialized groups may be negatively affected much earlier or more acutely by these shifts. As one service provider participant incisively highlighted that racialized people are “last to be hired and first to be fired.” Many participants shared sad stories of losing their jobs due to current changes:

“My job was a general labourer/machine operator and then there were mergers in the company and loss of positions. Some positions were redundant so you have to go to the agency... and you will be on call. Sometimes there are jobs, sometimes two days a week, sometimes one day a week so therefore it is not stable and not certain as to next day what is going to be happening.”—Participant from All-Male focus group

TABLE 1. TYPES OF SYSTEMIC BARRIERS FACED BY RACIALIZED PEOPLE

Systemic Context	Type of Barrier / Challenge	List of Barriers / Challenges
Barriers related to mainstream labour market conditions/shifts	Barriers due to growing precariousness and instability of the Canadian/global labour market	Systemic reduction in full-time stable jobs with benefits and shift to part-time, temporary, contract jobs with little or no benefits; increase in temp agencies; recession; outsourcing
	Barriers due to lack of or weak implementation of employment rights and protections	Lack of or clawback of extended benefits (extended health insurance, vacation time, sick leave, parental leave, etc.); weak health and safety protocols (unsafe working conditions, lack of proper attire); lack of training and professional development; lack of protection against exploitation and workplace discrimination by employers
Barriers related to discrimination/exclusion	Racialized discrimination	Discrimination based on socially constructed ethno-racial factors including race, ethnicity, religion, country of origin, first language, accent, cultural affiliation of person's name
	Gender-based discrimination	Women barred from getting certain jobs; women more likely to get bad shifts and lower pay rates
	Discrimination, exclusions and xenophobia faced by immigrants	Non-recognition of foreign degrees and foreign work experience; difficulty getting accreditation; barriers in getting Canadian education/experience; non-recognition of Canadian education/experience; not having strong social networks; negative presumptions about recent immigrants being "ignorant"; newcomers more likely to get bad shifts and lower rates of pay
	Discrimination based on immigration status	Non-status taken advantage of and exploited by employers
	Discrimination based on language	People with low English fluency more likely to get bad jobs and low pay
	Place-based discrimination	Discrimination due to living in the Black Creek area; increased insurance costs just because of Black Creek address
	Age-based discrimination	Older people and older immigrants less likely to get jobs
Systemic barriers related to service access/quality	Lack of accessible and affordable services	Lack of accessible/affordable childcare; lack of accessible/affordable education and training programs
	Transportation barriers	Lack of good public transportation; length of travel from home to work; rising cost of transportation
	Lack of access to information	Information gaps about where and how to find stable jobs; about how to build long-term employment security; how to file complaints or counter discrimination in the labour market; about workplace safety
	Limitations and structures of disincentives in welfare and other support services	Multiple disincentives in Employment Insurance, Ontario Works and other governmental supports that prevent recipients from pursuing training and re-entering labour market

“The company that I worked for before, for two years – I just got laid off. They tried to have a union. There was a big changing of the guards that happened in the big head company in Montreal. And they just closed it all down, fired all the workers. Big companies own multiple companies. It could be Nike today and Reebok tomorrow but it is still Nike who owns it or whatever. Just as an example. That is what they did when everybody tried to fight for their rights and get a union in the company. They closed it down and just changed the name, and hired new employees.”—Participant from Canadian-born focus group

The growing trend in employer strategies to intentionally not create full-time permanent jobs, avoid giving raises and benefits even for long time employees, create precarious work schedules, hire through temporary employment agencies are the very problematic practices that create long term employment insecurity for working families, particularly racialized families. Limitations in services and supports can also directly or indirectly become barriers in achieving employment and income security. Lack of affordable childcare was cited, particularly by women participants, as the most significant barrier to finding and keeping stable jobs. The following quotes highlight how lack of affordable childcare creates a negative cycle of not being able to find stable jobs, which in turn prevents people from being able to afford childcare services.

“You have to actually structure your life or your work schedule for the week – you have [to have] somebody to take care of your kids. If you don’t have somebody to take care of your small kids then you can’t go to work. There is a conflict right there – you want to work but don’t have the necessary childcare.”—Participant from All-Male focus group

“I have been here for seven years. I have felt frustrated since being here because I have four children and I never found a place to leave them. If I took them to daycare I would have to pay a lot so I said, ‘No, I can’t work because everything I earn I will have to pay to the daycare. It is not worth it.’”—Participant from Spanish-speaking focus group

Inadequate public transportation, as well as the rising cost of public transportation, were also mentioned by many as barriers to securing stable jobs.

Several participants discussed the structures of disincentives within Employment Insurance, Ontario Works and other government sanctioned tax rebates and financial support for low-income people that undermine employment and income security. Examples of systems of disincentives that participants mentioned include immediate loss of EI or welfare once you enter the labour market irrespective of the quality of the jobs, and Ontario Works limiting people to take only one training course once in two years.

FINDING

2

DISCRIMINATION IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Racialized people experience multiple forms of discrimination in the labour market, particularly based on ethno-racial background (i.e. race, ethnicity, religion, first language, accent, person’s name, country of origin).

Study findings about discrimination faced by racialized people in the labour market are very disturbing. Focus group participants talked about how attributes such as their skin colour, language and/or accent, birthplace, cultural and religious practices negatively impacted their job search. They talked about islamophobia, physical markers of “difference” and language-based discrimination and argued that these employer-driven forms of racialization and discrimination significantly restrained their employment opportunities and made their experience in the labour market considerably difficult:

“Because they are Hispanic they have limitations in terms of advancing, there are people who think we are less than others, no?”—Participant from Spanish-speaking focus group

“He [Employer] picks on us because we are Vietnamese.”—Participant from Vietnamese-speaking focus group

Racialized people with low English language fluency can experience such discrimination even more frequently and acutely:

“I find that I have been working many years and never got a raise. And often when I work, the boss would bully me. Same with supervisors... Because I don’t speak English well.”—Participant from Vietnamese-speaking focus group

“My friend’s husband didn’t know English, he didn’t have time to study English either, he has family to support and he needs to find an apartment and pay the rent, so he went to work in a factory, but it was metallic and steel things. Imagine, he has a disability now, because he didn’t know how to speak the language so they sent him to do the most difficult work and he used the wrong equipment.”—Participant from Spanish-speaking focus group

Several participants talked about discriminatory experiences based on their accent that resulted in a negative outcome in their job search, particularly during the job interview.

“So the type of things we are talking about now the important aspect is that our accent in English is the first step of contact – for instance, if you give an interview over the phone or make

your first contact with the employer. When the employer notices this is the type of English you are speaking... As immigrants, our different English accent is the first hurdle in securing a job and at the onset itself you take up secondary preference in the employer's mind."—Participant from Hindi/Urdu-speaking focus group

The following quote from a Black participant poignantly captures explicit racism that Black people can face in the labour market.

"She spoke to me on the phone; she doesn't know what background I was from. When I went to the interview, the guy at the front said, 'No that cannot be the person that came for the interview.' I was sitting right there. When she saw it was a Black person she said no that cannot be the person that came for the interview. I was sitting right there."—Participant from Black community focus group

Another Black male participant called into question the insidious practice of delegating the hardest work to Black males:

"Like for a Black kid... when you do go out and work, you get these crappy jobs and you are just sitting there like 'Oh man this is eight hours I got to lift boxes and do this and do that.' Especially young Black males, which is one thing I put down [on the survey]. They are expected to do more than they are capable of. I am 5'5" and 150 pounds. Every time I walk into a place they put me on the hardest machine, the hardest job. They say, 'You're young, you're Black.' Well they don't say, 'you're Black', they say, 'you're young' but I know in their head they are thinking 'you are Black'. So I am sitting here doing the hardest job making \$9 or \$10 an hour."—Participant from Canadian-born focus group

A female Black participant concurred that this happens to Black women too:

"And as a Black woman in the workforce they dump everything on you. They think you can handle everything, you know."—Participant from Black community focus group

Participants from the Arabic speaking focus group collectively stressed that Islamophobia has become intensified in Canada during the last couple of decades and is very frequently expressed in the Canadian labour market. Since the hijab is one of the external expressions of Muslim people, female Muslim participants who choose to wear the hijab are particularly vulnerable to experiencing Islamophobia in the labour market.

Two Muslim women recalled how negative experiences related to wearing the hijab directly resulted in them leaving their field of work:

"I had similar experience: I worked before the day care in a hair salon. I have an experience in that and certificates. Since my husband could not find a job I had to work in a salon. I worked for less than three months. On third month, the owner, who is a Jordanian Christian, told me if you could remove the veil. It was a men's and women's Salon. If it was only a women's Salon I would not mind, but since it was unisex, I cannot remove it. I refused to take the hijab off; he really wanted me to work with him, but without the hijab. I, then, had to leave the job. He tried to convince me to stay and work because he liked my work but I refused because I did not want to remove the hijab."—Participant from Arabic-speaking focus group

"My friend is a dentist; she could not work here as a dentist so she worked as a dentist hygienist. The main problem she would face is the working with the hijab, her look. At the end she worked somewhere but not in her specialty or education."—Participant from Arabic-speaking focus group

Focus groups with Black Creek residents reveal the multiple forms of racialized discrimination that hampers their entry and mobility in the labour market. Individuals are passed up for interviews and stable jobs because they wear hijab, speak with an accent, or are from a specific ethno-racial group. These experiences reflect the systemic production of racialized employment insecurity.

FINDING

3

LACK OF FORMAL RECOURSE TO
COUNTERACT DISCRIMINATION

Formal recourse for racialized people to file complaints about or counteract systemic discrimination and exploitation in the labour market appear to be lacking or inadequate.

Participants from all focus groups highlighted the lack of accessible and effective processes to overcome discrimination and exploitation they face in the labour market. Individuals are sometimes uninformed about Canadian labour rights and legal resources available to them. In other cases workers are apprehensive to take any legal actions against their employers for fear of losing their job. In the words of one participant:

"Somebody, we want to know who we could contact, who is looking out for the working people? Mistreated at the job... You can't get anything, they can't do anything for you, and if you pass them and go to the manager you are wrong. Right? We don't know who to go to, to talk to about the treatment on the job. What we face day by day on the

job. If you're mistreated or you get fired for some reason, we don't know who to talk to. A long time ago we used to have, you can go to Human Rights."—Participant from Black Community focus group

People with low English language fluency face more hurdles in “talking back” or filing complaints about the discriminatory experience and thus are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace. As one participant from Vietnamese community put it:

“And sometimes when they know English they'll exclude you, like one group can speak English and another group cannot, they get pick on... People who can speak English can talk back and we don't so we can't, and we get angry and don't know what to do. And just go to the washroom and cry. Sometimes I see my friends get pick on, I cry with them.”
—Participant from Vietnamese-speaking focus group

Participants from all focus groups stressed that, while other conditions like poor health could be changed, racialized discrimination is so deeply instituted that it is difficult or even impossible to overcome. This perception is captured in these following quotes:

“But racial discrimination will never go away. So that is not something you can change.”—Participant from All-Male focus group

“[Having] income security, decent work and health does not ensure the end of racism. Racism is an independent variable. Racism will still prevail. It will not change based on our good income and health. It depends on the attitudes or mindset of society.”—Participant from Hindi/Urdu-speaking focus group

FINDING

4

PERSISTENCE OF “CANADIAN EXPERIENCE” REQUIREMENT

For many racialized immigrants, the “Canadian experience” requirement is the most significant barrier to getting stable employment. This barrier is not necessarily overcome even after investing in and accumulating substantial years of Canadian education and experience.

Findings from this study confer with what other studies have found: that non-recognition of foreign credentials/work experiences and the requirement of “Canadian experience” is the most significant barrier that hinders racialized immigrants from getting stable jobs in their field. There were several participants with multiple graduate degrees from their home country; these participants mentioned

that these degrees carry little recognition in the Canadian labour market. Recent immigrants are particularly likely to face this barrier in professions with stringent regulations (like engineering and the medical field):

“We suffer from discrimination in evaluating our education or degrees. The system here does not allow us to work with our degrees. We have to do more exams and get license.”
—Participant from Arabic-speaking focus group

“All jobs require Canadian experience; but if we are immigrants, how are we supposed to have Canadian experience? How can I have Canadian experience if I am not allowed to work? My husband is here and for a whole year he tried to do exams here. He is an engineer, but he cannot work in his field here. He looked for a job for two years and could not find any in his field. He worked in very low paid jobs; he worked as a technician and got \$12 an hour. He worked in all sort of work that does not fit his work experience and knowledge of the field. The country does not allow him to gain this ‘Canadian experience.’”—Participant from Arabic-speaking focus group

Closer analysis of narratives from non-recent racialized immigrants reveal that this barrier is not necessarily overcome even after investing in and accumulating substantial years of Canadian education and experiences. Study results confirm existing evidence on precarious employment that have found that once you take up precarious types of employment or “survival jobs” or “odd jobs” it is very difficult to get out and get stable employment in your own field, irrespective of how long you have held that “Canadian experience.” In the words of one participant:

“I have been in Canada 10 years, and I'm still not working much. Some days I work a bit at the hotel, some days I work a bit at the hospitals... I work a bit at the community [centre] and sometimes they all get mixed up. Ten years living here and ten years having the same problem... one cannot live like that, its not like someone that goes to work of eight hours or four hours, or you know, defined days to go to work... that's my stress because I have not found anything secure up to now.”—Participant from Spanish-speaking focus group

Several racialized immigrant participants who had gone back to school in Canada and obtained degrees and certificates noted that these investments had not resulted in stable jobs for them. This is partly because the colleges and programs that are accessible and affordable carry limited weight in the labour market. The following quote capture this dynamic:

“Since I came to Canada, you know, I can’t get this job because you need Canadian experience, otherwise you need to go to school. And I’ve been going to school since I came to Canada and I can’t move forward because, like, I’m here at Seneca College a year now and I don’t have the money to move forward because I can’t get OSAP even if I make up all the documents that they wanted and the English and whatnot. So you don’t have this power to go forward because how do you go to college when you can’t afford it, when you don’t have OSAP.”—Participant from Black community focus group

Others talked about financial barriers to pursuing education in Canada. Narratives from service providers confirm that accreditation and training that immigrants acquire after coming to Canada may not necessarily increase their chances of getting stable jobs in their field:

“But then the other thing is even if newcomers get their accreditation, the employers are still discriminating against them... because they still feel like, ‘well you are still from whatever country so you really can’t do the same work as in Canada, right?’ So it is still going to fall back on the employers and I thought the government should bring more awareness, inform the employers more and train the employers so that they understand that these newcomers that are coming here, they are just as knowledgeable, just as worthy as any other worker, right?”— Participant from Management Service Provider focus group

FINDING

5

ETHNO-RACIAL SEGMENTATION OF THE LABOUR MARKET

The Canadian labour market appears to be highly racialized. Socially constructed ethno-cultural factors, including ethnicity, race, religion, language, accent, and country of origin saliently mediate labour market entry and outcomes.

Study findings add to the small but growing body of critical evidence that the Canadian labour market is highly racialized and that access and quality of employment is segmented along ethno-racial lines (see deWolff, 2000; Galabuzi, 2001; Khosla, 2002). In the absence of proactive employment equity and anti-discrimination measures, these racialized inequalities in the labour market will continue to worsen. This argument is captured in the following two quotes, one from a community participant and one from a service provider:

“It is so true, it’s exploitation. I feel like it is legalized slavery. I’ve been in an environment where we were standing on an assembly line, packing and it was just the worst position... it was unbearable and there were people old enough to be my father and mother over there... it is the working conditions, they are horrible. And how they oppress you because you are a person of colour... it goes back to other systems of inequality and that we’ve been talking about for 100 years. Things will never change.”—Participant from Canadian-born focus group

“Part of the difficulty is the labour market and the issue that you know, ‘last to be hired and first to be fired’ is still true today and I think part of it, with the kind of the economic situation for a lot of companies, employment equity kind of flew out the window. And then it became this excuse, well we can’t do employment equity because we’re in this economic downturn. Well I say that’s bullshit.”— Participant from Management Service Provider focus group ■

CONCLUSION

Study results highlight that racialized people living in marginalized neighbourhoods face multiple systemic barriers in the labour market that prevent them from getting stable jobs in their field. These barriers are becoming compounded due to neoliberal macro-economic shifts towards precarious forms of labour, rise of temp agencies, and weakening of labour and social protections.

Findings underscore that racialized discrimination is the most pervasive factor that undermines the employment security of racialized people. Accessible and effective recourse to addressing and overcoming discrimination in the labour market is lacking. For many racialized immigrants, the “Canadian experience” requirement is the most significant barrier to getting stable jobs. This barrier is not necessarily overcome even after investing in and accumulating substantial years of Canadian education and experience.

Employment equity policies and anti-discrimination measures are urgently required to promote employment security for racialized groups. At the same time, policy makers need to take a decisive stand to reverse the shift towards precarious forms of labour since the tremendous social and health costs to society greatly outweighs any perceived temporary savings in labour costs for employers.

ABOUT THE INCOME SECURITY, RACE AND HEALTH PROJECT

The Income Security, Race and Health (ISRH) Working Group is a multi-stakeholder collaborative research group comprising academic, community agency, and peer researchers established in 2006 in Toronto under the leadership of Access Alliance. Using community-based research (CBR) principles, the key goal of the working group is to investigate the systemic causes of growing racialized inequities in employment and income, and to document the health impact. The ISRH working group intends to use evidence from this study to mobilize progressive policy changes to overcome the systemic income and health inequalities that racialized groups in Toronto face.

In 2007, we used photovoice methodology to document the impact of poverty on racialized residents of Black Creek. For the second phase (2008-2009), we conducted eight focus groups with different racialized groups in Black Creek. Focus group participants also completed a survey about employment and health status. We also conducted three focus groups with service providers (management and frontline). In line with CBR principles, we trained and engaged low-income racialized community members as research collaborators (peer researchers) at all phases of the project.

This study has generated rich evidence about the types of systemic barriers and challenges that racialized groups experience in the labour market and the multiple, compounding negative effects these have on their health (at individual, family and community levels). Study findings about labour market barriers are discussed in this research bulletin. The remaining three research bulletins and other reports from this study can be obtained from: <http://accessalliance.ca/research/activities/isrh>

TO BE CITED AS

Access Alliance (2011). Research Bulletin #1. Labour Market Challenges and Discrimination faced by Racialized Groups in the Black Creek Area. Toronto: Access Alliance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The content of this bulletin was analyzed and prepared by the core team of the Income Security, Race and Health project: Yogendra B. Shakya (Access Alliance), Ruth Marie Wilson (Access Alliance), Patricia Landolt (University of Toronto), Grace-Edward Galabuzi (Ryerson University), Z. Zahoorunnisa (Lead Peer Researcher from Black Creek), Darren Pham (Peer Researcher from Black Creek), Felix Cabrera (Peer Researcher from Black Creek), Sherine Mohamed Abdel Aziz Dahy (Peer Researcher from Black Creek), and Marie-Pier Jolie (Graduate Research Assistant).

Advisory Committee members and collaborators in the project include: Michaela Hynie (York University), Sarah Flicker (York University), Lisa Brown (Black Creek Community Health Centre), Nury Rugeles (Delta Resource and Family Centre), Dianne Broad (Griffin Centre), Michelle Ashem (Toronto Public Health), Safy Abouzaid (Peer Researcher), and Celina Knight (Peer Researcher).

We would also like to thank the following partners for various supports and advice to the project including providing meeting space, helping with recruitment, promoting our events, providing relevant references/resources and other assistance: Jackeline Barragan (Black Creek Community Health Centre), Sue Levesque (YorkU-TD Community Education Centre), Seneca College in Yorkgate Mall, Black Creek Community Collaborative, Laura Metcalfe (Community Development Officer, City of Toronto), Farid Chaharlangi (Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty), Sabrina "Butterfly" Gopaul (Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty), Delia Ta (Yorkgate Employment Resource Centre, JVS Toronto), Lorna Weignand (Doorsteps), Diane Patychuk (Steps to Equity), Naomi Ives (Parkdale Community Legal Services) Michael Kerr and Avvy Go (Colour of Change – Colour of Poverty).

Thank you to the following research assistants for helping to co-facilitate (with peer researchers) the focus groups in first language of study participants: Kenza Belaid, Hannan Harb, Qamar Zaidi, Sugandha Nagpal, Nayrouz Abu-Hatoum, Paloma Villegas, Francisco Villegas, Diana Younes. Hats off to students who helped with this project as part of the student placement: Alberto Almeida, Denise Chung, Davina Balram, Theon Harrichand, Nyembezi Zviuya and Marie-Pier Joly.

Special thank you to Colette Murphy from Metcalf Foundation and Brenda Roche and Bob Gardner from The Wellesley Institute for advice along the way, including input about policy implications of study findings.

Thank you also to Marguerite Pigeon (for editing and proofreading), Victor Szeto (for layout and design), and Alvin Ng (for printing).

Of course we could not have done this without the help of several Access Alliance staff including: Rabea Murtaza, Matt Adams, Carolina Rios, Helene Gregoire, Sharmila Shewprasad, Andrew Koch, Thuy Tran and our Executive Director, Axelle Janczur.

The Income Security, Race and Health project was funded by generous grants from:



**METCALF
FOUNDATION**

The views and opinions expressed in the paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Wellesley Institute or Metcalf Foundation.

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