

Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion, and Policy Issues in Canada

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Summary

Does significant racial inequality exist in Canada, and if so, does such inequality have an effect on the cohesion of the society? Are current policies adequate to address the issue?

We know that within Canada's ethno-cultural diversity, visible minorities experience the greatest economic inequalities, and Statistics Canada's 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey shows that many visible minorities report experiencing discrimination and vulnerability. Since whites tend to remain more skeptical about the significance of racial discrimination, there is an apparent racial divide over the issue. Unfortunately, while a variety of research approaches show that discrimination exists, none has resolved the question of its relationship to overall inequality.

Partly as a result of a sense of exclusion (expressed in feelings of perceived discrimination and vulnerability), racial minorities are slower to become integrated into Canadian society than immigrants of European origins. Data from the Ethnic Diversity Survey includes seven indicators related to social integration: sense of belonging in Canada, trust in others, self-identification as 'Canadian,' acquisition of citizenship, life satisfaction, volunteering for work in organizations, and voting in elections. On several indicators, visible minority immigrants do not become integrated as quickly as those of European origins, and on all applicable indicators, members of the visible minority second generation are less integrated than their white counterparts. These trends vary among visible minority groups, but the differences between visible minorities and whites are more notable than variations among visible minorities. Analysis of social integration by immigrant cohort, generation, and age shows that racial gaps in integration emerge as more significant for the second generation than for their immigrant parents.

Lower levels of integration for visible minorities are not particularly related to income levels, which increase with experience in Canada. But they are partly explained by experiences of discrimination and vulnerability, which are especially salient in the second generation.

Existing policies related to multiculturalism and diversity in Canada emphasize laudable ideals of equality opportunity and opposition to 'racism.' Because they lack clear objectives, however, they may not address the issues effectively from the standpoint of minorities. The general lack of specificity may reflect the lack of an inter-racial consensus on the significance of discrimination, and also the lack of an effort to create such a consensus. Without a recognition of the significance of racial equality issues, the most important pre-condition for improved policy may be the creation of more effective means for the full participation of minority groups in Canadian policymaking.