Understanding Student Perspectives: Racism, Discrimination, and Belongingness in an Ontario University Environment

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Executive Summary

This report examines data collected from the *Racism, Discrimination, and Belongingness in an Ontario University Environment* survey, which explored students' experiences and perceptions of racism and discrimination at McMaster University. The survey was released with the intention to provide actionable insights to foster a more inclusive campus environment for racialized students.

Within a three-week window in March 2024, we collected 283 survey responses from undergraduate students. Our recruitment process included physical posters, Instagram posts, McMaster Avenue to Learn announcements, and word of mouth.

Among the findings from our data, a few key points stand out. First, a minority of students reported direct personal experiences with racism and/or discrimination on campus (16%). However, significantly more students (37%) indicated that they had witnessed racism on campus. Second, among racialized groups, Middle Eastern or West Asian students, followed by Black students, were the most likely to report experiencing racism on campus. Black, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and South Asian students were more likely than average to have witnessed racism or discrimination on campus. Third, among religious groups, Jewish students, followed by Muslim students, were the most likely to report experiencing racism or discrimination on campus. Sikh and Hindu students were also more likely than Christians or those without a religious identification to say they had experienced it. Fourth, most students who had experienced racism on campus said it had impacted their mental health. More than half of these students said it had affected them "significantly" or "extremely," while only 2% said it had not affected them "at all." Fifth, most students said they were unaware of existing campus resources and/or services to address racism and discrimination. Many who were aware of such resources did not utilize them and did not formally report incidents of racism or discrimination on campus.

We conclude our report by making several recommendations to McMaster University for reaffirming a caring and inclusive campus that fosters a sense of belonging, especially for racialized students who have been the targets of racism and discrimination. First, there is a need for more research to investigate these important issues. We recommend conducting a similar survey with a larger, representative sample of a range of demographic groups to assess the generalizability of our findings. We also recommend more qualitative research to examine the nature of students' experiences with racism, their sense of belonging on campus, and sources of support (or lack thereof). Assuming our survey findings hold up, and based on previous literature in other contexts, we also propose the following:
1. Continuing to increase diversity among faculty, staff, and university leadership.
2. Encouraging university instructors – and offering resources to help instructors – to continue diversifying the voices and perspectives represented in the curriculum.
3. Systematically evaluating anti-racism and cultural competency training initiatives.
4. Enhancing and promoting greater awareness of the process for reporting racism and discrimination on campus and ensuring that any such reporting system is carefully designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and fairness to all parties.
5. Enhancing and promoting greater awareness of support services and resources, especially for Black, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Jewish, and other racialized students.

Background

Diversity + Equity Network (DEN) is a McMaster Student Union (MSU) service that empowers and represents the vibrant and diverse communities and people studying at McMaster University.

In fall 2023, a social media poll released by MSU DEN revealed that 43% of respondents (56 individuals) reported experiencing racism on campus. Upon further research, we found there was a lack of open discussion and information about racism and discrimination at McMaster. To better understand students' experiences with and perceptions of racism and discrimination, we conducted a research study supervised by Dr. Jeffrey Denis, an established Sociology faculty member who specializes in the study of these issues. The contributors to this study are students affiliated with DEN and/or the Sociology Department.

Purpose

This research study was developed to understand how McMaster undergraduate students experience and perceive racism, discrimination, and belongingness. It examines how students of diverse intersectional backgrounds may have differing experiences, which informs their perceptions of comfort and safety on campus.

Limitations

It is important to highlight the political climate that likely informed how some participants responded to our survey. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East, including what has been described as a "genocide" in Gaza (Albanese, 2024; Mian & Brown, 2024), has been associated with an increase in activism, including encampments at McMaster University and campuses across North America. Over the past year, Hamilton police reported a significant uptick in hate incidents and crimes, particularly targeting Jewish and Muslim, as well as Black and 2SLGBTQQIA+, people (Chandler, 2024). Additional contextual factors that may frame participant responses include the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Dunivan, 2022), Indigenization initiatives (Lewis, 2021), and the rise of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies and programs on campuses (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). Readers should keep this context in mind when interpreting the survey findings.

We view this study as a first step in determining the overall prevalence of racism and discrimination on campus, the range of student and university responses to racism and discrimination, and the impact of these experiences on students' mental health, among other issues. In releasing this report, we aim to provide a foundation for further research to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences and to provide insights on how post-secondary institutions can better respond to racism and discrimination and support marginalized students.

Introduction

Concepts and Terminology

To contextualize our study, it is important to define and distinguish some key terms, including racism, racialization, and discrimination.

Racism is an ideology in which one or more racialized group(s) assert moral, intellectual, cultural, or biological superiority over other racialized group(s) (Clair & Denis, 2015). According to many social scientists, racism also involves the exercise of power, in which claims of racial superiority are used to justify or prescribe the domination, exploitation, or otherwise inferior treatment of racialized groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Henry & Tator, 2010; Quillian, 2006; Wilson, 1999). In North America, racism generally takes the form of white supremacy, which entails systematic advantages, such as access to resources and opportunities, for persons defined as white, and systematic disadvantages for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (Olivier et al., 2019).

Racism hinges on the socially and politically constructed concept of "race." Specifically, racialization is a process in which "perceived patterns of physical difference – such as skin colour, nose shape, or eye shape – are used to differentiate groups of people, thereby constituting them as 'races'" (Clair & Denis, 2015, p. 857). Racialization is not a neutral process. Historically, racial constructs emerged in the context of European colonialism, trans-Atlantic slavery, and the global spread of capitalism; they are "a device the powerful have used to control capital, labor, land, and other means of wealth accumulation" (Livingstone, 2022, p. 557). As such, racial categories – and their meanings and boundaries – are social and political products, which are often contested and which can and do change over time and place (e.g., who is defined as "white").

Racism also takes multiple forms and exists at multiple levels. It may be embedded in organizations, expressed in interactions, or internalized by individuals. Systemic or institutional racism refers to laws, policies, norms, and procedures that create, perpetuate, or condone racial hierarchies or the inequitable treatment of racialized groups (Banaji et al., 2021; Olivier et al., 2019). By contrast, interpersonal racism involves individual-level prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. Prejudice and stereotyping denote attitudes and beliefs, such as feelings of hostility, condescension, or fear towards a racialized group, and inaccurate or over-generalized ideas about the group and its characteristics (Allport, 1954; Bobo, 1999). Discrimination refers to behaviours or actions towards a racialized group or its members, namely treating some people worse than others due to their (perceived) racial group membership (Clair & Denis, 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Discrimination can range from the subtly expressed resentment of racialized group(s) to the avoidance of contact with them, their exclusion from resources and opportunities, the display of racially derogatory symbols or images, and overt hatred and violence.

In the Canadian post-secondary context, racism and discrimination often take more covert forms. For instance, racial microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007: 273). From the perspective of people of colour, microaggressions are tinged with explicit and implicit racial snubs, put-downs, or patterns of disrespect (Sue et al., 2009). Some documented forms of microaggressions include being overlooked, rendered invisible, ridiculed for one's accent, having one's values and needs disregarded, assumptions about low intelligence or ability, and structural barriers on campus (Houshmand et al., 2014; Yosso et al., 2009).

Recent literature on the experiences of racialized students in educational settings also points to the concept of raciolinguistic ideology (Kubota et al., 2023). This ideology assumes that racialized students are not on the same level as white students, even though they are equally competent in the English language, and it leads to the questioning of racialized students' linguistic competence. Such stereotypes are dangerous because they homogenize diverse groups of people, distort perceptions of them, and often limit their opportunities and well-being.

Although it is important to confront racism, discrimination, and stereotypes, doing so can be challenging, especially for racialized students. It is incumbent on people in positions of authority to take a clear stand against racism and to welcome and promote diversity. In a classroom setting, the level of discomfort may vary based on the instructor's awareness and willingness to address and facilitate discussions about racism (Sue et al., 2009). More generally, the capacity to speak out against racism and build more inclusive and equitable environments depends on the policies and norms of a given institution and the resources and services available for constructively addressing racism and supporting the targets.

Racism in Post-Secondary Institutions

Universities across Canada often emphasize their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Henry et al., 2017). However, beneath this public image, racialized students continue to face significant challenges that impact their well-being (Henry et al., 2017). Studies reveal a discrepancy between universities' claims and the actual levels of inclusivity and belonging experienced by racialized students (Bailey, 2020; Cote-Meek, 2014; Hampton, 2016). Canadian universities also tend to deny the existence of racism within their institutions, which leads to inequalities remaining unaddressed and racialized students often feeling neglected (Henry & Tator, 1994, 2009).

In principle, one might expect Canadian universities to be more attuned to racism compared to universities in other countries due to the Canada's official multiculturalism policy adopted in 1971 (Houshmand et al., 2014; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008) and its more recent stated commitments to reconciliation (TRC, 2015). In environments where overt racism is less accepted, individuals may resort (consciously or not) to subtle forms of racism, expressing biases while maintaining a facade of politeness or tolerance (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2021). In practice, the operation of EDI policies at some institutions illustrates this point.

EDI policies have been implemented at several Canadian universities amid the growing public discourse surrounding racism and discrimination. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and #StopAsianHate, more than three-fourths of Canadian universities have articulated EDI goals, and more than 70% of these institutions have developed EDI plans (Tuitt & Stewart, 2021). But, according to Pohl et al. (2022), EDI policies have only further contributed to the systems of domination and oppression through "performance culture" (Pohl et al., 2022, p. 32). In addition, many higher education institutions have focused on creating a shiny image of university institutions as being diverse without meaningfully addressing racism; that is, they have sought to change public perceptions of whiteness rather than "changing the whiteness of organizations" (Pohl et al., 2022, p. 39). Indeed, the development of EDI initiatives among many post-secondary institutions has often failed to bring about impactful change and has instead "focused more on how to assimilate minorities into the existing campus culture" (Tuitt & Stewart, 2021, p. 100).

In many cases, this has led to the implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives via "culture neutral policies and practices" (Tuitt & Stewart, 2021, p. 100). For instance, a critical analysis of three EDI initiatives at a Canadian university found that these initiatives shared roots with ideals of academic objectivity, colour neutrality, and meritocracy, making systemic changes hard to achieve (Burke, 2021). Similarly, a qualitative analysis of the EDI policies at Canadian research-intensive universities' (U15) found that most universities were using recruitment campaigns to increase diversity on their campuses, but failing to adequately support racialized groups once recruited (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). While Canadian universities continue to raise awareness about EDI issues, and some important steps have been taken (including targeted faculty hiring initiatives), many barriers continue to prevent post-secondary institutions from establishing spaces that are truly free of systemic oppression (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019).

Other practices of racism commonly seen in universities are covert. For example, a McMaster-based study about Indigenous students' experiences with racism described how the existence of colour-blindness (denial of racism) and the discomfort with talking about race impacts the relationships and interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Bailey, 2016). Most students agreed that the racism they had experienced and/or witnessed on-campus was covert, whether it occurred within friend/peer groups and/or in the classroom. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students also varied in their perceptions of how welcoming the university was, with Indigenous students being less likely than settler students to view McMaster as a safe space (Bailey, 2016). Themes of isolation and lack of belonging were often expressed by Indigenous students, as well.

In a follow-up study, Bailey (2020) examined Indigenous students' experiences with systemic and interpersonal racism at three post-secondary institutions in Ontario: McMaster University, Lakehead University, and Trent University. This study showed that Indigenous students faced more barriers than non-Indigenous students in moving through their university education, due in part to the persistence of settler colonial narratives that continue to shape campus experiences (Bailey, 2020). "Regardless of differing campus contexts," Bailey found, "Indigenous students [faced] high levels of racism on a regular basis, which has significant impacts both personally and academically" (Bailey, 2020, p. iv). Specifically, she highlighted three types of discrimination that negatively impact Indigenous students' daily experiences: "blatant (overt) discrimination, a lack of support and/or follow through (involving the implementation of new academic or support programs), and a more generalized lack of consideration of Indigenous students' needs/experiences" (Bailey, 2020, p. 217). This study also highlighted the detrimental effects of lateral violence and internalized racism within Indigenous student communities – phenomena clearly rooted in structural oppression (see also Alfred, 2009; KweyKway, 2017; Pyke, 2010). At the same time, Bailey described Indigenous students' creativity and resilience in responding to racism and supporting one another. In addition, she acknowledged that some students credited their universities, including McMaster, for recently making important institutional changes, such as hiring more Indigenous faculty members and developing and expanding culturally appropriate academic and support services with Indigenous students (Bailey, 2020).

Racism experienced on campus by university students is not just a Canadian issue; it has been documented among various racialized groups in the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. For example, U.S. research repeatedly shows that African American students experience more incidents of discriminatory treatment than their non-Black peers (Surez-Balcazar, 2003). A UK study on Black students' experiences of racism speaks to how the burden of addressing racism often falls on Black students themselves (Osbourne et al., 2023). Based on 30 interviews with Black students, this study highlighted how Black students faced a culture of "acceptable racism" (p. 51). In this culture, there was a denial of responsibility and a failure to acknowledge both the persistence of white privilege and the harms and marginalization experienced by Black students (Osbourne et al., 2023). Black students in Canada have reported similar experiences. Specifically, Black students experience a level of normalization of anti-Blackness on campuses in Canada, ranging from microaggressions to racial slurs and violent threats, and Black scholars continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions (Cameron & Jefferies, 2021).

In addition to anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, several studies have documented the persistence and growth of antisemitism and Islamophobia on university campuses. A recent U.S.-based study found that Jewish college students often felt emotionally attacked for their ties to Israel and self-identified progressive Jewish students especially felt excluded from seemingly progressive student movements (Farber & Poleg, 2019). The authors added that college diversity officers and courses often "failed to include issues of concern to Jewish students" and that counsellors and support staff were often "unprepared to deal with concerns specific to Jewish students" (p. 2034). According to a 2023 study, 73% of Jewish college students in the U.S. had experienced or witnessed some form of antisemitism since the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year alone (ADL CAR, 2023). Canadian reports similarly describe "how antisemitism has roiled university campuses," with an escalation in incidents since October 2023 (Aschaiek, 2024).

Muslim students also frequently face "stereotypes, marginalization, and exclusion" on university campuses (Ahmadi, Cole, & Prado, 2018). In a UK-based study, Allen (2023, p. 1) documented widespread anti-Muslim "hate incidents on campus; Othering in the learning and teaching spaces; and microaggressions in university accommodation." Similarly, in a U.S.-based analysis, Shaheen (2024, p. 41) identified multiple "structural and interactional manifestations" of Islamophobia on college campuses. To address these issues, Shaheen called for codified religious accommodations, appreciation for diversity within the Muslim community, investment in student support services, and more interfaith engagement. At present, however, Islamophobia and hate incidents targeting Muslim students appear to be increasing, including in Canada (e.g., Sanchez, 2024).

Beyond the student level, a substantial body of research documents experiences of marginalization among faculty members of colour. Women of colour faculty, in particular, have reported feeling like "outsiders-within" (Samuel & Wane, 2005, p. 79), due to often being the only member of their racialized and gender category in their department, surrounded by Eurocentric curricula, facing opposition from white students, and experiencing a lack of administrative support (e.g., Cote-Meek, 2014; Dua & Lawrence, 2000; Henry et al., 2017; Samuel & Wane, 2005).

Previous literature also shows that experiences with racism and discrimination in university settings can have broader implications for the health and well-being of targeted groups. For example, in a U.S.-based study, Chou et al. (2012) described the chronic effects of racism on mental and physical health. Repeated experiences of racism can elicit "racial battle fatigue," which is a state of chronic exhaustion caused by repeated exposure to racial discrimination, microaggressions, and systemic racism (Wong et al., 2022, p. 653). More generally, experiences with interpersonal racism and discrimination have been associated with poorer physical and mental health on a range of indicators, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and other known determinants of health (Paradies et al., 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2013). A recent CBC article highlights that one of the challenges faced by many Black students is dealing with imposter syndrome — the feeling of self-doubt or whether one is worthy of belonging (Brown, 2024). Despite succeeding academically in their programs, various Black students at McMaster expressed uncertainty about their accomplishments (Brown, 2024). These findings echo earlier U.S.-based studies on "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1999).

As highlighted in this section, the existing academic literature underscores the persistence of racism and discrimination on university campuses in Canada and abroad. In many cases, these phenomena are linked to institutionalized whiteness and settler colonial privilege, which often create structural advantages for white students and lead to the marginalization of racialized students. The long-term consequences for the health and well-being of racialized people and the inclusivity and productivity of our society are profound.

Gap in Literature and Study Rationale

There remains a need for more research focusing specifically on the experiences of racialized undergraduate students in Canada. This focus is essential as undergraduate students already navigate a myriad of challenges, and racism exacerbates these struggles, affecting their academic performance and overall experience. Moreover, racism and discrimination can severely impact the mental health and well-being of racialized students. Studies have highlighted how daily expressions of harm, whether implicit or explicit, contribute to the marginalization and isolation of racialized students. These experiences have an impact on students' physical, mental, cultural, and social well-being, and some authors emphasize the role of instructors in either perpetuating or mitigating the harm (Banerjee et al., 2022; Brockbank & Hall, 2022). Furthermore, previous studies have indicated significant differences in self-rated health among racialized students and non-racialized students (Banerjee et al., 2022).

In the U.S. context, Chou et al. (2012) reported that after controlling for socioeconomic status, level of education, age, and gender, an association was found between perceived racial discrimination and the lifetime prevalence of mental health issues like major depressive disorder, panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders (Harrel & Sloan-Pena, 2006). The stress and mental health outcomes resulting from experiences with racism can also trigger past racial traumas and lead to unhealthy coping strategies, what the authors refer to as "disengagement coping" (Wong, et al., 2022, p. 653). In their "call to action" for the Canadian education system, Cameron and Jefferies (2021) emphasize that Black and Indigenous students continue to be undervalued and even "criminalized" in public and post-secondary institutions, leading to psychological harm, stress, and negative impacts on human development, and demotivating students from attending their classes and pursuing their education (p. 2; see also Maynard, 2022).

Despite the importance of understanding the impact of racism on racialized students, there is a notable lack of quantitative research in this area, especially with undergraduate students in Canada. While previous qualitative studies provide a valuable understanding of the lived experiences of racialized students in educational institutions, there have been few surveys on these topics with undergraduates at Canadian universities. Our study begins to address this gap by conducting a survey of undergraduates' experiences with and responses to racism at McMaster University. In addition to providing baseline data to inform more in-depth future studies and policy initiatives, this report aims to shed light on the complexities involved in McMaster University's efforts to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, regardless of racial background.

Study Methodology

In this study, a quantitative online survey was created and administered to examine the perceptions and experiences of racism, discrimination, and belongingness among undergraduate students at McMaster University. Participants completed an online consent form before participating in the study. A raffle system was created to compensate participants for their contributions, with 10 participants receiving e-gift cards. The study received ethics approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB).

Participants were recruited based on a single eligibility criterion: they must be undergraduate students at McMaster University. For data collection, we used convenience sampling to reach as many undergraduates as possible. A pre-written email, recruitment poster, and social media post were distributed to McMaster students, outlining the study's purpose and the details of potential monetary incentives after participation. Additionally, the research team connected with professors across many departments and conducted in-person announcements. We also initiated contact with some students who attended MSU events and peers with whom we were connected, and our survey was released to some school newsletters, such as the MacPherson Institute.

The survey was launched to McMaster students on March 1st, 2024, and closed on March 22nd, 2024. It consisted of 21–33 questions, some of which asked about the participants' demographics and others relating to their personal experiences with racism or discrimination, cases where they had witnessed racism, as well as their awareness of and satisfaction with relevant campus services and resources.

The number of questions was dependent on their response to whether they had experienced racism or not, as well as their responses to the demographic questions. Participants were then prompted to answer additional questions. Most of the questions were administered in a multiple-choice format, which included the options "N/A" and "Prefer Not to Say." We also incorporated questions featuring a Likert scale, asking respondents to specify their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. For example, for the question "Has racism on-campus contributed to any feelings of: ..." respondents had to answer on a scale, ranging from one to five, pertaining to the listed feelings of shame, displacement, and more.

Stata — a statistical analysis software program — was used for data analysis and the creation of crosstabulations. The survey results were downloaded into an Excel file, which was then opened in Stata. The variables were tabulated in the software, and these tables were copied into an Excel file where the tables and figures were created.

Results

In this section, we share some of our major survey findings. In total, 283 students participated in the survey. After reviewing participants' demographics, we analyze data on students' experiences with racism and/or discrimination, the reporting of racism on campus, witnessing acts of discrimination, impacts of racism or discrimination on mental health, awareness and satisfaction with campus resources, and recommendations for university initiatives to address racism and discrimination. It should be noted that sample sizes (N's) may vary across tables and figures due to missing data. While most surveys were thoroughly completed, not every respondent answered every question. In addition, respondents could select multiple options in response to some questions, so totals may occasionally add to more than 283 (or 100%).

Demographics

Year of Study

Figure 1 presents a breakdown of the year of study of survey participants. Around 32% of students in the study were in their first year, 23% were in second year, 27% were in their third year, and 18% were in their fourth year or higher.
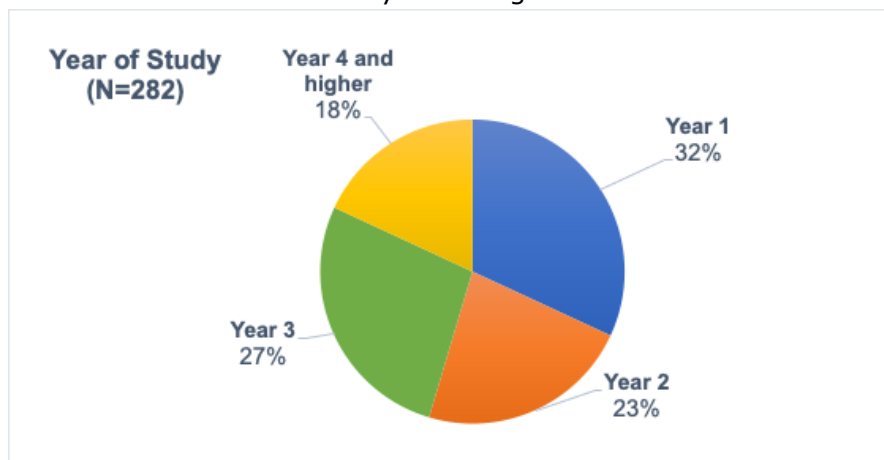

Figure 1. Year/level of study of survey respondents

Faculty/Program of Study

Figure 2 presents the faculty/program of study of the students who participated in the survey. The Faculty of Social Sciences had the most respondents, with a total of 78 (around 28%), followed by the Faculty of Science with 61 respondents (22%). Thirty-one respondents (11%) were in Engineering, 24 (8%) were in Humanities, 22 (8%) were in Business, and smaller numbers were in Health Sciences (6%), Kinesiology (6%), and Arts & Science (5%). The "other" category includes students from Bachelor of Technology, Computer Science, Nursing, Integrated Science, and those who preferred not to answer, representing about 5% of survey respondents.
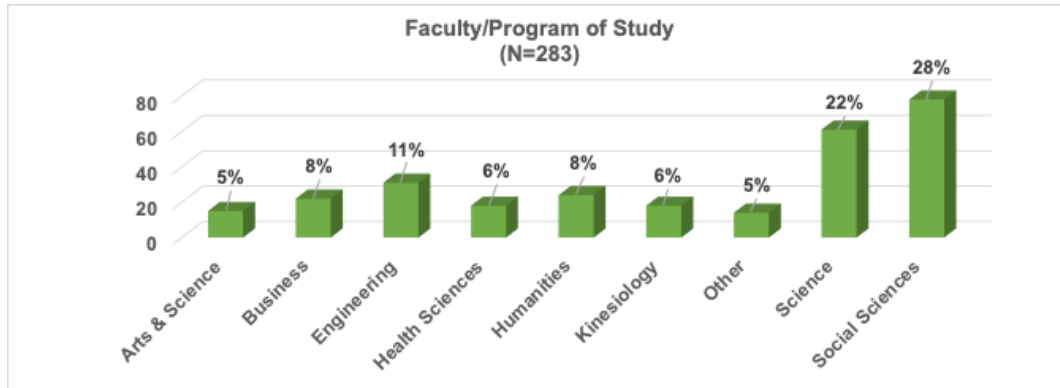
Faculty/Program of Study (N=283)

Arts & Science	Business	Engineering	Health Sciences	Humanities	Kinesiology	Other	Science	Social Sciences
5%	8%	11%	6%	8%	6%	5%	22%	28%

Figure 2. Faculty/program of study of survey respondents

International or Exchange students

Students were also asked if they were international or exchange students. About 10.5% of participants said they were international or exchange students, 82% of students said they were not, and about 7.5% preferred not to answer.

Racial or Ethnic Identity

Figure 3 depicts the distribution of respondents according to their self-reported racial or ethnic identification. The group with the highest number of respondents was that of European/white descent (e.g., British, French, German, Italian, Polish, Swedish) at 34%, followed by South Asians (e.g., Afghan, Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan) at 30%. About 14% of respondents identified as East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese), 12% identified as West Asian or Middle Eastern (e.g., Armenian, Iranian, Iraqi, Jordanian, Palestinian, Saudi, Syrian, Turkish, Yemeni), 9.5% as Black, 5% as Southeast Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Filipino/a, Indonesian, Laotian, Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai, Vietnamese), and 3% as Latin American (e.g., Argentinian, Bolivian, Brazilian, Colombian, Costa Rican, Peruvian).

It should be noted that the Black category includes members of the Black North American, Black Caribbean, Black African, and Black "other" (e.g. Indigenous peoples from Australia) communities, which unfortunately had to be combined here due to the limited sample sizes and concerns about privacy/confidentiality. Similarly, the "other" category includes students who identify as Jewish (self-identified as an "other" race in response to this survey question), as Indigenous (to Canada), and as Indo-Caribbean, among others.
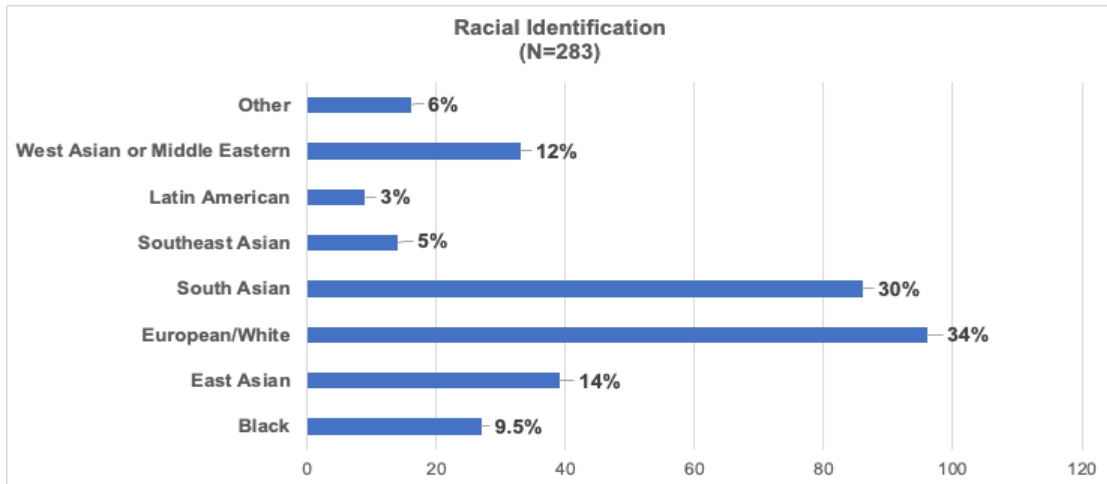
Figure 3. Self-reported racial/ethnic identification of survey respondents

(* Note: The total here adds to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one racial/ethnic identification.)

Religion

Figure 4 presents a chart showing the percentage of respondents (out of all those who had a religious affiliation) who identified as being part of specific religious communities. Out of 283 respondents, 117 students (41%) said that they do not belong to a religious or spiritual community and 12 students (4%) indicated that they preferred not to answer the question. Of the 154 respondents who indicated that they belong to a religious or spiritual community, 36% said they were affiliated with Islam, 34% with Christianity, 14% with Hinduism, 8% with Judaism, and 6% with Sikhism. The "other" category includes students who identified as Buddhist and/or with other religious identifications.
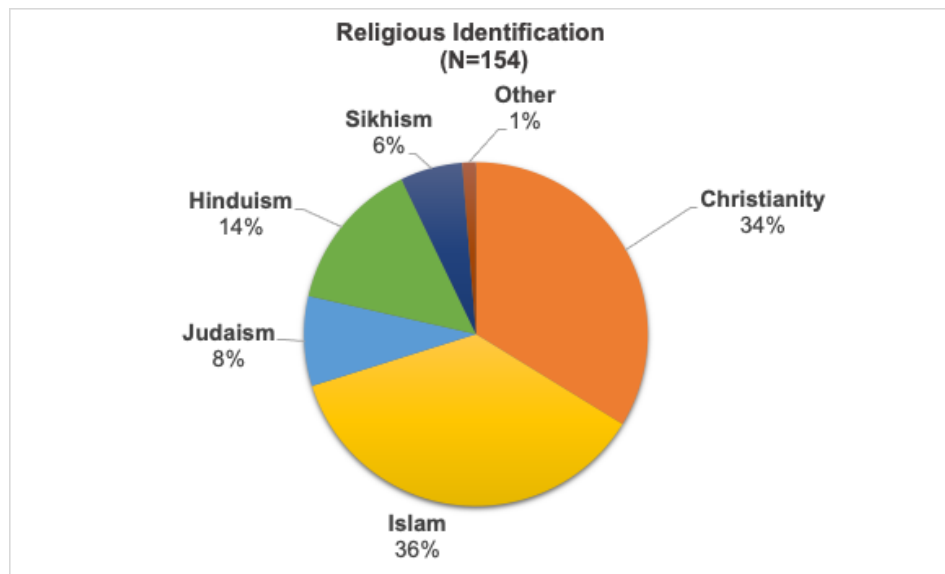

Figure 4. Religious identification among survey respondents with a religious affiliation

Gender

Figure 5 provides the gender breakdown of respondents. Here, 17% identified as cis-males, 75% as cis-females, and 5% identified as non-binary. The other category (4.5%) includes students who identified as transgender man, transgender woman, two-spirit, questioning those who prefer not to say, and those who selected the option "other," all of which have been combined due to limited sample sizes and concerns about privacy/confidentiality.
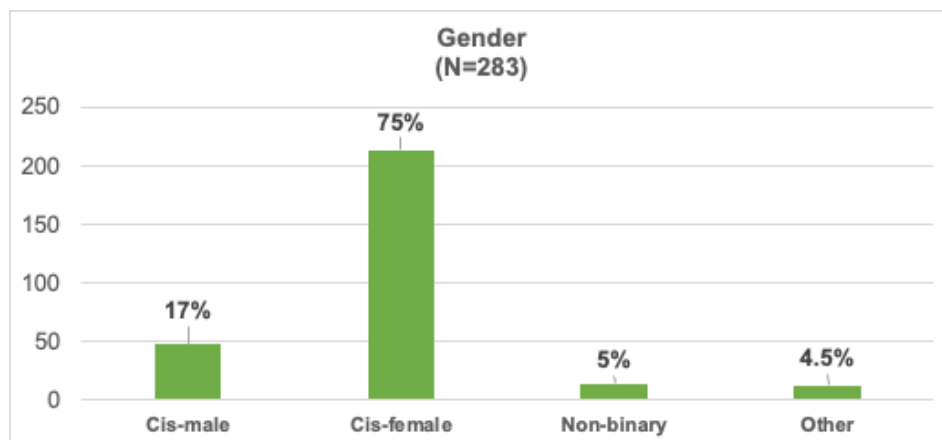

Figure 5. Self-reported gender identity of survey respondents

Experiences of Racism and/or Discrimination

Out of the 283 survey respondents, around 16% (45) reported personally experiencing racism and/or discrimination on campus, 76% (215) said they had not experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus, and 8% (23) preferred not to answer the question.

Experiences of Racism and/or Discrimination by Year of Study

Table 1 presents the distribution of survey respondents who said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus according to their academic undergraduate levels. Among respondents who answered these questions, around 19% (17/90) of level 1 students reported experiencing racism and/or discrimination on campus, compared to 12.5% (8/64) of level 2 students, 17% (13/77) of level 3 students, and 14% (7/51) of level 4 and higher students.

TABLE 1. Experiences of racism and/or discrimination according to respondents' year of study

Undergraduate level	Experiencing racism and/or discrimination				
	No	Prefer not to say	Yes	Total	Percentage saying yes
Level 1 (Year 1)	64	9	17	90	19
Level 2 (Year 2)	52	4	8	64	12.5
Level 3 (Year 3)	60	4	13	77	17
Level 4 and higher (Year 4 and up)	38	6	7	51	14
Total	**214**	**23**	**45**	**282**	**16**

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Experiences of Racism and/or Discrimination by Racial/Ethnic Identification

Table 2 shows the distribution of survey respondents who encountered racism and/or discrimination on campus according to their racial/ethnic identification. Students in the "other" category had the highest levels of experiencing racism and/or discrimination on campus at 37.5% (6/16). This category includes Indigenous (to Canada), Jewish (self-identified as a race), and Indo-Caribbean students, among others. Unfortunately, the limited sample sizes prevent us from breaking down these individual categories due to concerns about privacy/confidentiality. Among identifiable categories, students who identified as West Asian or Middle Eastern had the highest levels of experiencing racism and/or discrimination at 25% (7/28). The second highest rate was reported by Black students, with 22% (6/27) saying they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus. Following that, 17% (14/85) of South Asian, 15% (6/39) of East Asian, 14% (2/14) of Southeast Asian, 11% (1/9) of Latin American, and 10.4% (10/96) of European/white respondents reported personal experiences with racism and/or discrimination on campus.

TABLE 2. Experiences of racism according to self-reported racial/ethnic identification

Race/Ethnicity	Experiencing racism and/or discrimination				
	No	Prefer not to answer	Yes	Total	Percentage saying yes
Black	19	2	6	27	22
East Asian	31	2	6	39	15
White/European	81	5	10	96	10.4
South Asian	62	9	14	85	17
Southeast Asian	12	0	2	14	14
West Asian or Middle Eastern	19	2	7	28	25
Latin American	6	2	1	9	11
Other	9	1	6	16	37.5
Total	**239**	23	52	**314**	**16.5**

(* Note: The totals here are inconsistent with the figures above (45 out of 283 respondents said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus) because some respondents indicated multiple racial/ethnic identifications.)

Experiences of Racism and/or Discrimination by Religious Identification

Table 3 presents the distribution of survey respondents who encountered racism and/or discrimination on campus according to their religious identification. Jewish students were the most likely to say they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus at 62% (8/13). Significant numbers of Muslim (25% or 14/56) and Sikh (22% or 2/9) students also said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus. By contrast, 6% (3/52) of Christian students and 10% (12/117) of students who did not identify with any religious group said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus.

TABLE 3. Experiences of racism according to religious identification

Religious identification	Experiencing racism and/or discrimination				
	No	Prefer not to answer	Yes	Total	Percentage saying yes
Christianity	45	4	3	52	6
Islam	37	5	14	56	25
Judaism	2	3	8	13	62
Hinduism	16	3	3	22	14
Sikhism	5	2	2	9	22
Do not belong to any religious group	100	5	12	117	10
Other/prefer not to answer	10	1	3	14	21
Total	215	23	45	283	16

Experiences of Racism and/or Discrimination by Faculty/Program of Study

Table 4 presents the experiences of racism and/or discrimination depending on students' faculty/program of study. Out of the 45 students who said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination, 9 of them were in Social Sciences, 7 were in Science, 6 were in Engineering, 6 were in Health Sciences, 5 were in Humanities, 5 were in the Arts and Science program, 4 were in Business, and 3 were in other faculties/programs. While the sample sizes are relatively small, it seems that the likelihood of experiencing racism and/or discrimination may vary depending on one's faculty/program of study. Specifically, we found that 33% of Arts and Science students and 33% of Health Sciences students experienced racism and/or discrimination, compared to 21% of Humanities students, 19% of Engineering students, 18% of Business students, 11.5% of Social Sciences students, and 11% of Science students. In addition, 9% of students in the "other" category (which included Kinesiology, Integrated Sciences, Computer Science, Bachelor of Technology, and those who preferred not to answer) reported that they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus.

TABLE 4. Experiences of racism and/or discrimination according to respondents' faculty/program of study

Faculty/program of study	Experiencing racism and/or discrimination				
	No	Prefer not to say	Yes	Total	Percentage saying yes
Arts & Science	9	1	5	15	33
Business	16	2	4	22	18
Engineering	23	2	6	31	19
Health Sciences	10	2	6	18	33
Humanities	16	3	5	24	21
Science	49	5	7	61	11
Social Sciences	66	3	9	78	11.5
Other	26	5	3	34	9
Total	217	23	45	283	16

Sources of Racism

If students had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus, they were asked what the source of racism was. Figure 6 shows the breakdown of reported sources. It should be noted that students were allowed to select more than one source. Thus, although 45 students said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus, there was a total of 76 responses regarding the source of racism. In total, 50% (38) of these responses indicated fellow students as a source, 28% (21) identified faculty, 10% (8) identified university policies and/or programs, 9% (7) identified the administration/administrative staff, and 3% (2) cited an "other" source of racism.
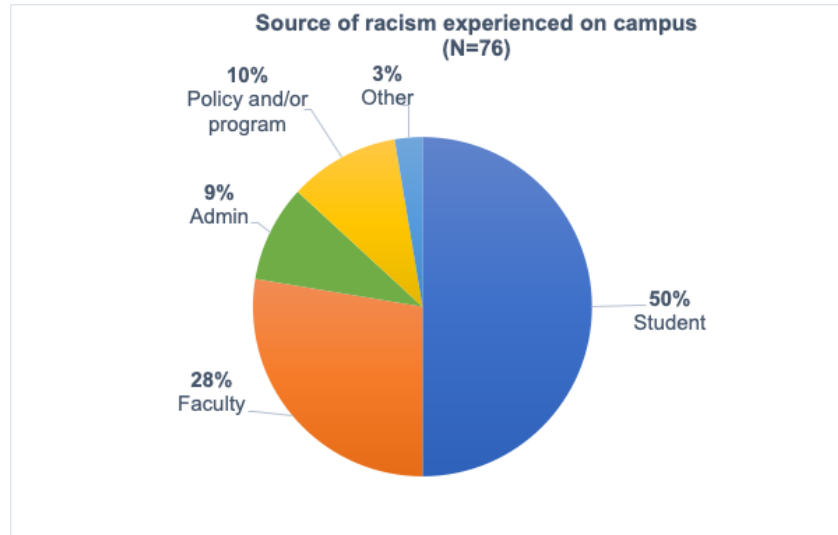

Figure 6. Source of racism for survey respondents who had experienced racism on campus

Nature of Racist Incidents

Figure 7 below provides a breakdown of the nature of students' experiences with racism. It should be noted again that respondents were allowed to select more than one option. In total, students provided 78 responses regarding the nature of the racist incident they experienced on campus: 51% of these responses indicated that the incident was verbal, 41% said it was microaggressive, 5% said it was physical (i.e., physical violence), and 2.5% specifically mentioned antisemitic material in readings and/or posters.
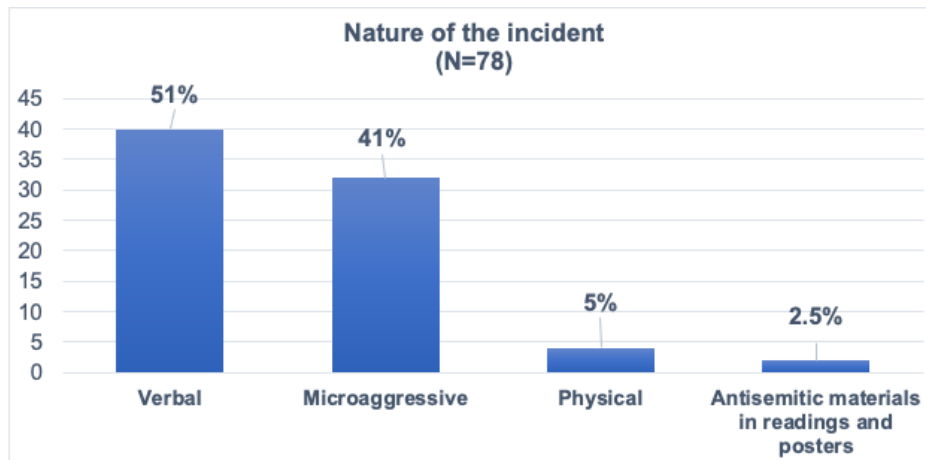

Figure 7. Nature of racist incidents experienced by survey respondents

Reporting Racism on Campus

Among participants who said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus, around 76% (34/45) of these respondents did not report their experiences to any campus authorities or services, whereas around 24% (11/45) officially reported the racist incidents.

Place of Reporting

Figure 8 presents the breakdown of where (if anywhere) students reported experiences of racism. Again, students could select multiple options, so the total adds to 50, not 45. In total, 60% of these responses indicated not reporting the racist incident or seeking support anywhere on campus, whereas 40% indicated that they did report their experiences (beyond our survey). Places of reporting included the student's Faculty Office or Department (10%), the Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO) (8%), the McMaster Student Wellness Center (4%), individual faculty members (professors) or TAs (4%), and other services (2%). In addition, 12% of responses indicated seeking support outside the existing campus resources (e.g., from an off-campus organization).
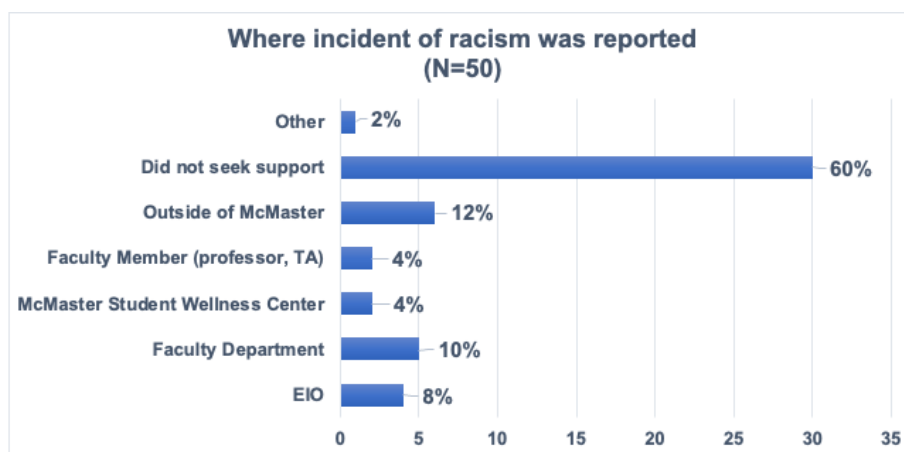

Where incident of racism was reported (N=50)

Category	Value
Other	2%
Did not seek support	60%
Outside of McMaster	12%
Faculty Member (professor, TA)	4%
McMaster Student Wellness Center	4%
Faculty Department	10%
EIO	8%

Figure 8. Where racist incidents were reported by survey respondents
(* Note: The N here adds to more than 45 because students could select multiple responses).

Reporting racism to campus authorities or services by faculty/program of study

Table 5 presents the faculty/program of study of students who did or did not officially report their experiences with racism and/or discrimination. While the numbers of those who reported their experiences are relatively small, it is still worth noting some differences in reporting by faculty/program of study, as they may be suggestive of broader trends. Around 27% (15/27) of students in the Humanities, Arts and Science, and Business fields and 27% (4/15) of students in STEM (Engineering and Science) fields reported their experiences of racism on campus, while 18% of students in Social Sciences and 18% in Applied Health Sciences (Nursing, Kinesiology, and Health Sciences) reported their experiences of racism.

TABLE 5. Survey respondents reporting racism to campus authorities or services according to their faculty/program of study

Faculty/program of study	Reporting racism			
	No	Yes	Total	Percentage saying yes
Humanities, Arts & Science, and Business	11	4	15	27
Social Sciences	9	2	11	18
STEM	11	4	15	27
Applied Health Sciences	9	2	11	18
Total	**40**	**12**	**52**	**23**

Witnessing Acts of Racism

We also asked respondents whether they had witnessed any acts of racism on campus. Overall, 37% of students said they had witnessed such acts. Table 6 provides a breakdown of this distribution based on respondents' self-reported racial/ethnic identification. Notably, students who identified with a racial/ethnic group in the "other" category (Indigenous, Indo-Caribbean, Jewish, etc.) (50%), as well as Black (48%), West Asian/Middle Eastern (46%), Latin American (44%), and South Asian (42%) students, were more likely than European (29%), East Asian (28%), and Southeast Asian (21%) students to say they had witnessed racism on campus.

TABLE 6. Survey respondents who witnessed racism on campus according to their self-reported racial/ethnic identification

Race/Ethnicity	Witnessing acts of racism on campus				
	No	Prefer not to answer	Yes	Total	Percentage saying yes
Black	11	3	13	**27**	48
East Asian	27	1	11	**39**	28
European	64	4	28	**96**	29
South Asian	44	5	36	**85**	42
Southeast Asian	8	3	3	**14**	21
West Asian or Middle Eastern	13	2	13	**28**	46
Latin American	5	0	4	**9**	44
Other	8	2	10	**20**	50
Total	**180**	**20**	**118**	**318**	**37**

Impact of Racism or Discrimination on Mental Health

Figure 9 demonstrates the impact of racism or discrimination on students' mental health. Of the 45 students who said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus, 20% said they felt that it had "extremely" impacted their mental health, 33% said it had impacted their mental health significantly, 33% said it moderately impacted them, and 11% said their experience with racism slightly affected their mental health. Only 2% of students said experiencing racism or discrimination did not impact their mental health at all.
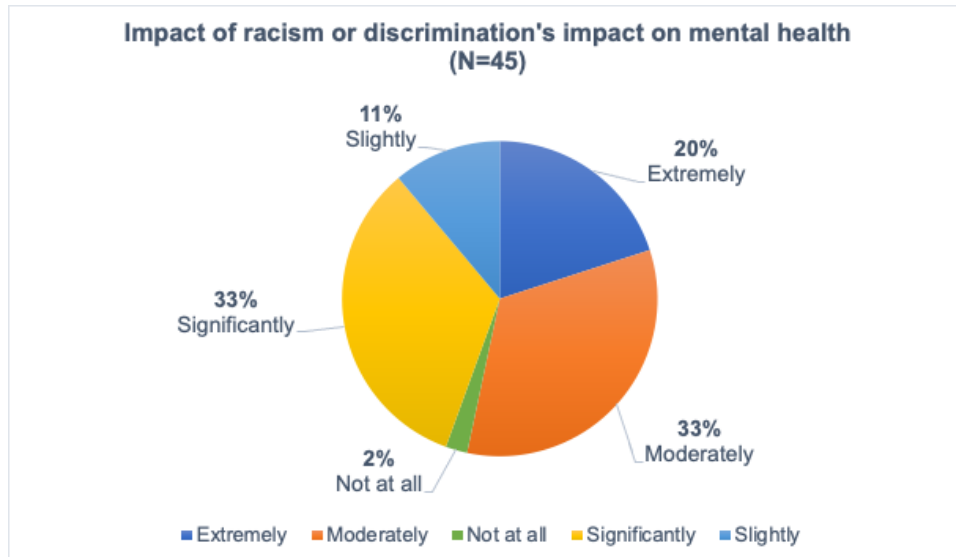
Figure 9. Impact of experiencing racism or discrimination on survey respondents' mental health

More specifically, students were asked to rate the extent to which racist and/or discriminatory incidents had impacted them on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, where 1 means "not at all" and 5 means "extremely." For example, they were asked about feelings of otherness, lack of belonging, sadness, anger, and loneliness. Notably, 54% of students reported feeling "significantly" or "extremely" othered, while 36% felt a significant or extreme lack of belonging. Similarly, feelings of sadness and anger were prevalent, with 56% and nearly 50% of students, respectively, rating these emotions as significant or extreme. Responses to the question of shame were more divided, with 40% feeling it "not at all" or "slightly," and 38% feeling it significantly or extremely. When it came to feelings of loneliness, 29% felt it significantly or extremely, while 46% felt it "not at all" or "slightly."

Awareness and Satisfaction with Campus Resources

Figure 10 presents the breakdown of survey respondents' awareness about campus initiatives that aim to address racism and discrimination. Of the 279 students who answered this question, 35% said they were not aware of any relevant campus initiatives, nearly 40% said they were not sure, and only 25% said they were aware of initiatives addressing racism on campus. For the latter group, some commonly mentioned initiatives included student-run clubs like the Black Student Association, and Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights (SPHR); Indigenous Student Services; Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO); and McMaster Student Union Diversity + Equity Network.
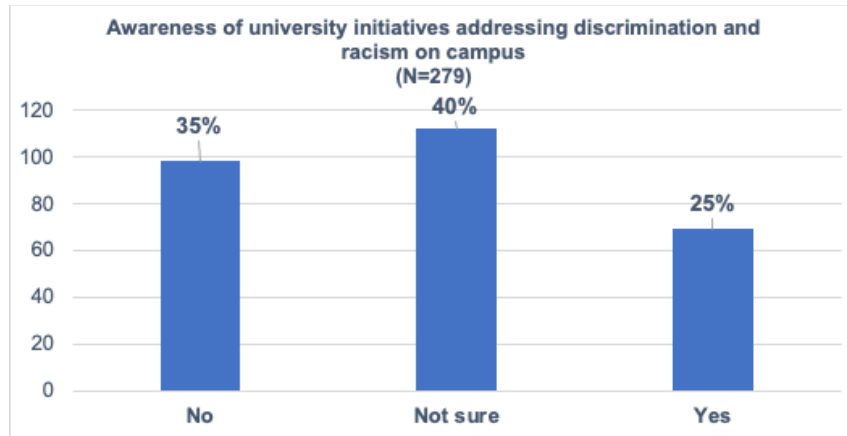
Figure 10. Student awareness of initiatives addressing racism and discrimination on campus

Satisfaction with university efforts to address racial discrimination

Figure 11 presents the breakdown of students' overall satisfaction with the university's efforts to combat racial discrimination. Out of the 283 respondents to this question, 10% were "very dissatisfied", 17% were "somewhat dissatisfied", 43% said they were neutral in their satisfaction with university efforts, 25% were "somewhat satisfied", and only 5% of respondents were "very satisfied."
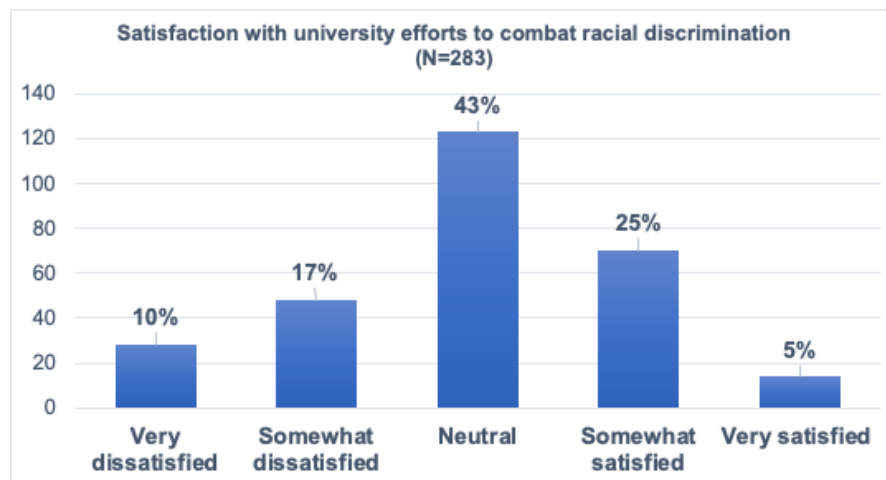
Figure 11. Student satisfaction with the university's efforts to combat racial discrimination

We also asked students whether they thought the university's efforts at addressing racism on campus were sufficient. Figure 12 provides a breakdown of student responses to this question. Out of the 283 respondents, around 36% did not think the university's efforts were sufficient, 42% were "not sure," and 20% believed that the university's current efforts were sufficient.

Figure 12. Perceived sufficiency of university's efforts to address racism on campus
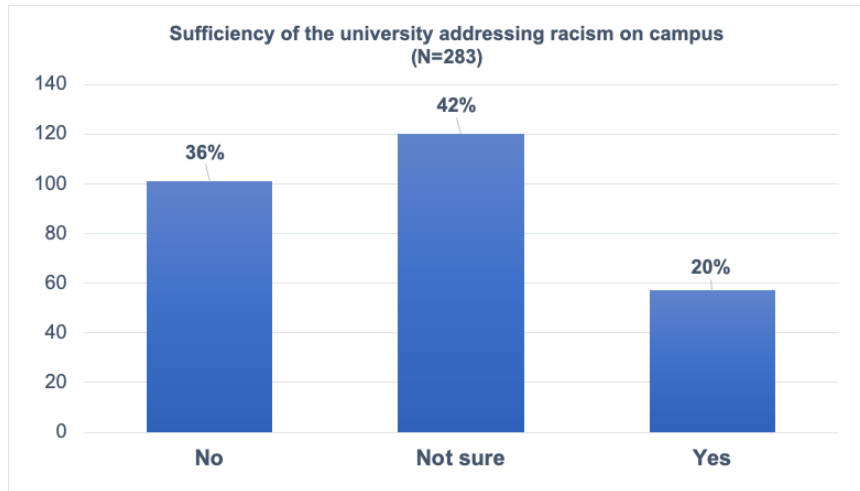
Initiative Recommendations

Finally, we asked survey respondents about initiatives they felt would improve campus inclusivity and belongingness at McMaster University. Students were given a list of possible initiatives to choose from, based on previous literature and discussions among the research team. Overall, the most commonly recommended changes were "increased diversity in faculty" (52%); "improved reporting of racism incidents" (51%); "anti-racism training for faculty and staff" (49%); "increased representation in university leadership" (48%); "increased diversity in curriculum" (45%); "enhanced cultural sensitivity programs" (44%); and "increased diversity in student body" (37%). The percentages in this table were calculated based on the total number of respondents to this question, which was 283. However, it should be noted that the total number of responses was 306, as students could select more than one option.

TABLE 7. Suggested initiatives that the university could implement to improve inclusivity on campus

Initiative	Number of respondents recommending it	Percentage of respondents recommending it
Increased diversity in faculty	148	52
Improved reporting of racism incidents	144	51
Anti-racism training for faculty and staff	138	49
Increased representation in university leadership	136	48
Increased diversity in curriculum	126	45
Enhanced cultural sensitivity programs	124	44
Increased diversity in student body	104	37

Respondents also had the option of writing their own recommended changes. While only a handful of students took this option, some of their open-ended responses included addressing antisemitism, addressing anti-Palestinian hate, providing more support and safe spaces for racialized students, increasing diversity in the Student Wellness Centre, and cultivating an overall environment of more open communication about racism and inclusion. Below, we provide a few participant quotations to highlight students' ideas in their own words:

> "Although training is fine, I think it[']s necessary for McMaster to evolve and cultivate an enviroment where communcaiton around these topics [is] happening often and with respect. In a[n] academic setting, it[']s shameful no professors or students are holding lots of public events to discuss the issue."

> "Increased hiring of equitable staff focused on creating safe communities and focused on impact, not protecting McMaster's reputation..."

> "...regularly consult with students to assess whether the university is doing due diligence to ensure student safety and wellbeing."

> "Creating and upholding transparent ways for students to appeal university decisions made in case management, by counsellors at EIO, or made by Department Chairs and Undergraduate Chairs (especially considering immense power dynamics)."

> "When attempting to join a club for [my racialized group], I realized that there was none. It's hard trying to connect to people of my same background when there is nothing to connect us."

Discussion

Experiencing Racism

The results of our survey offer insights into the experience of racism among students on campus, highlighting both the prevalence and nature of these incidents. Notably, a majority (84%) of students did not report experiencing racism and/or discrimination on campus. This is a positive finding, implying that although instances of racism and discrimination exist, they are not a common experience for most respondents.

Nevertheless, 15.9% of the respondents reported experiencing racism and/or discrimination on campus. Every single act of racism should be taken seriously, and we have significant concerns about the severity and prevalence of these incidents.

First, it is important to recognize that significant numbers of students at all academic levels report experiences with racism and/or discrimination. Although the percentage of students experiencing racism across levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 (or above) does not appear to differ greatly, the data suggest that first-year students (Level 1) are slightly more likely to report experiencing racism compared to students at Levels 2, 3, and 4. This observed trend may reflect insufficient support systems or a lack of awareness of current initiatives tailored for new students. The slightly higher incidence among first-year students could be indicative of gaps in support or the transitional challenges that new students face. Although prior research does not indicate that first-year students are inherently more susceptible to experiencing racism, it is crucial for the university to address this issue by enhancing resources and education to foster a safe and inclusive campus environment from day one. Furthermore, while changes in experiences of racism may occur as students advance academically, these shifts could be influenced by evolving social circles, increased university support, or heightened awareness of initiatives. Admittedly, it is important to be cautious in interpreting these numbers due to the limited sample size. If this trend persists in larger, representative samples, however, further investigation into the reasons behind these differences across academic levels is certainly warranted.

The results also reveal significant disparities in experiences of racism among different racialized and ethnic groups. Among identifiable groups, Middle Eastern or West Asian students reported the highest rate of personal experiences with racism and/or discrimination on campus at 25%. In part, this elevated rate may reflect current conflicts in the Middle East that are reverberating at universities and other institutions around the world in the form of anti-Palestinian hate, Islamophobia, and antisemitism. Black students reported the second highest level of personal experiences with racism and/or discrimination at 22%. It should be noted that this category includes Black African, Black Caribbean, and Black North American students, each of whom may have different experiences and perceptions. Overall, though, the relatively high rates among Black students highlight and confirm the ongoing significance of anti-Black racism on Canadian university campuses (e.g., Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). South Asian and East Asian students also reported relatively high rates of experiencing racism and/or discrimination at 17% and 15%, respectively. Since this survey was conducted in wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that some of these incidents stemmed from anti-Asian xenophobic beliefs related to the virus (Yang et al., 2023; Lantz et al., 2023). Meanwhile, as expected by critical race theory and theories of white privilege (Banaji et al., 2021; Ray, 2022), European/white students reported lower rates of experiencing racism and/or discrimination on campus (10%). In our survey, 37% of students in the "other" racial group category also experienced racism and/or discrimination. This category included Indigenous (to Canada), Jewish (self-identified as a distinct race), and Indo-Caribbean students, among others, each of which included too few participants to meaningfully or ethically separate out into individual categories. We know from past research, however, that anti-Indigenous racism is a significant concern at McMaster (Bailey, 2016, 2020) and beyond (e.g., Cote-Meek, 2014; Denis, 2020; Henry & Tator, 2010). Antisemitism and anti-Indo-Caribbean sentiment also persist in educational settings (Aschaiek, 2024; Farber & Poleg, 2019; Warikoo, 2004).

Indeed, when examining how experiences of racism and/or discrimination vary by religious identification, our survey results suggest a particular problem with antisemitism. A majority of Jewish respondents (62%) said they had experienced racism and/or discrimination on campus, significantly more than any other group. Muslim (25%), Sikh (22%), and Hindu (14%) respondents also experienced higher rates than Christians (6%). While alarming, these results are not entirely surprising given the ongoing situation in the Middle East. Unfortunately, our survey does not enable us to identify the precise nature of these incidents. We would also be cautious in generalizing about the exact percentages, due to the relatively small sample sizes for some groups (e.g., 8 out of 13 Jewish respondents; 2 out of 9 Sikh respondents). Nevertheless, these findings are noteworthy and disturbing.

Further research with larger, representative samples must be done to investigate the experiences of Jewish, Muslim, Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups. It is crucial to reiterate that experiences of racism are not uniform across racialized or religious groups, including those who may identify with larger classifications such as "people of colour." Regardless, even within institutions that are dedicated to promoting equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID), interventions need to be put in place to combat racism and discrimination. Distinct strategies and approaches may be needed to address the distinct concerns and experiences of different groups, within the framework of a broad commitment to EDID and racial justice.

In developing interventions, it is also important to attend to potential differences across faculties, departments, and programs of study. According to our survey, students in some faculties/programs (e.g., Arts and Science, Health Sciences) are more likely to say they have experienced racism and/or discrimination than students in other faculties (e.g., Science, Business). This may be because they are in fact more likely to have such experiences. It also may be because, partly due to their areas of study, they are more likely to have the language to name racism and/or discrimination or are more inclined to speak out about it. Such faculty and departmental differences should be investigated more closely in future research and should be considered when developing interventions.

Our survey also showed that there are multiple sources of racism on campus, including faculty members, non-academic staff members, students, and policies. The most common sources reported were fellow students, which is perhaps not surprising due to the relatively high levels of interaction among students on campus and the fact that student attitudes and behaviours are embedded in and influenced by those of the wider society (Sydell & Nelson., 2000; Houshmand et al., 2014; Osbourne et al., 2023). To a somewhat lesser degree, instructors were found to be a source of racism as well. This raises concerns about the role of educators in perpetuating racist ideologies and discriminatory practices and may raise questions about the effectiveness of current EDI or anti-racism training initiatives. Survey respondents also cited institutional policies and administrative decisions as sources of racism, highlighting systemic issues within the university that could exacerbate racial inequities (Houhsmand et al., 2014; Brockbank & Hall., 2022).

Verbal racism and microaggressions were found to be the most common forms of racism experienced on campus. This is consistent with the findings of the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019), which noted that verbal racism was the most common form of racial harassment in Britain. Verbal racism frequently creates a hostile environment that compromises students' sense of belonging and safety, potentially affecting academic performance and overall well-being (Bannerjee et al., 2022). Since microaggressions are more covert, it is often difficult for racialized students to "prove" and formally report them (Houshmand et al., 2014). Some incidents may be ambiguous and may not constitute clear violations of harassment and discrimination policies, but are nonetheless stressful for the targets, who often feel silenced. It is incumbent on the university to provide confidential support services for students in such cases. Although it is not as prevalent, the existence of physical racism (e.g., physical violence against racialized students) is concerning and emphasises the necessity of preventative measures and prompt responses to such incidents.

To reiterate, it is crucial for the university to address these findings and take proactive measures to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

Reporting Racism/Discrimination to Campus Authorities or Services

Our study showed that most students who experienced racism on campus did not report the racism to any office or authority at McMaster. While concerning, this is consistent with previous studies and reports in Canada and abroad that indicate underreporting of instances of discrimination and racism by racialized students (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019; Wong et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022).

This lack of reporting could be due to a range of factors. One reason might be a simple lack of awareness of the relevant resources and services (see "Awareness and Satisfaction with Campus Resources"). It is important for the university to ensure that all students are made aware of reporting processes, policies, and support services from the start of their careers at McMaster.

Another barrier is the potential consequences that come with reporting racism. As highlighted by Sue et al. (2009), many racialized students fear the negative repercussions of reporting such incidents. As such, universities need to have systems in place that protect victims from facing sanctions. Indeed, due process (i.e., respectful and fair treatment of *all* persons involved, including victims and the accused) must be followed in investigating reported incidents of racism and/or discrimination. It is crucial that any such reporting processes and policies are widely perceived as both transparent and fair, and we fear that this is not the case today.

Another barrier noted in previous literature is a lack of trust in authority figures (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019; Kıroğlu & Kung, 2023; Mall & Payne, 2023). As noted previously, some students may not feel as though the university or the resources available to them fully consider their needs. This makes it hard for them to trust the university and report instances of racism. Due to their different personal and collective histories of interaction with academic institutions, levels of trust may vary significantly among racialized groups (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Maynard, 2022).

Racial battle fatigue can also lead to an underreporting of racism. Constant exposure to racial microaggressions and discriminatory incidents can result in emotional and psychological exhaustion among racialized students (Franklin, 2016; Wong, 2022). This exhaustion often manifests as a lack of motivation or energy to engage in reporting processes, which typically require reliving or recounting traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the burden of managing racial battle fatigue can consume a substantial amount of mental and emotional energy. Students of colour may find themselves focusing more on coping with everyday racism than on reporting specific incidents. Consequently, the priority shifts towards self-preservation and resilience rather than seeking formal recourse for discriminatory acts (Franklin, 2016).

When asked about where they sought support, a significant proportion of students said they either did not seek support or sought it from sources other than campus resources. This finding underscores a lack of awareness regarding available campus resources, as discussed in our section on awareness of campus initiatives, and/or a perceived unreliability or mistrust regarding these resources. Some students also reported seeking support from their department or individual faculty members, indicating (not surprisingly) that students tend to reach out to sources with whom they already have a rapport.

Witnessing Racism

Our findings revealed that 37% of respondents had witnessed an act of racism on campus, significantly more than the 15.9% who reported personally being the targets of racism and/or discrimination. One potential explanation for this difference lies in the demographic composition of our survey participants. As outlined in the demographic section, more than one-third of respondents identified as European/white. While such individuals are less likely to directly experience racial discrimination, they can still observe instances of racism.

Another significant factor contributing to this gap could be variations in the perception of what constitutes racism. Torres et al. (2020) highlighted how overt and microaggressive behaviours are perceived differently, with microaggressions being recognized as discriminatory only 45% of the time. This variation in perception can significantly influence how racism is reported and acknowledged.

Furthermore, individuals from racialized backgrounds often exhibit hesitancy in reporting personal experiences of racism as a form of self-preservation. Studies have indicated that some individuals may choose not to acknowledge experiences of racism as a coping mechanism to protect their mental and emotional well-being (Matheson et al., 2021; Karmali et al., 2017). For example, Karmali et al. (2017) observed that participants experiencing racism sometimes exhibited apathy and lacked physiological stress responses. In some cases, it may be less emotionally taxing to acknowledge racism towards others than towards oneself.

Regardless of the reasons underlying the disparity between witnessing and reporting racism, the fact that more than one-third of participants observed racism highlights its ongoing prevalence on campus. Furthermore, Black, Middle Eastern (West Asian), and South Asian students were more likely than European/white and East and Southeast Asian students to say they had witnessed racism on campus. This highlights that differently racialized groups both face and witness racism at different rates and in different ways, as noted in previous studies (e.g., Cotter, 2022; Nakano Glenn, 2015). Overall, these trends suggest an urgent need for steps to be taken to address and improve the racialized campus environment.

Impact of Racism on Mental Health

Our results highlighted that more than three-fourths of respondents who had personally experienced racism perceived their mental health to be "extremely," "significantly," or "moderately" impacted by these experiences. These results indicate the detrimental impact of racism on the mental health of racialized students and confirm previous findings from both universities and other settings (Banerjee et al., 2022; Currie et al., 2012; Hwang & Goto, 2008). Specifically, greater self-reported anger, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and loneliness have been reported by those who are victims of racial discrimination (Jochman et al., 2019).

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Negative impacts on mental health extend beyond psychological distress; they can profoundly affect a student's overall well-being and academic success (Banerjee et al., 2022). Furthermore, racialized students often carry additional burdens compared to their non-racialized peers due to the cumulative effects of discrimination, microaggressions, and the stress of navigating racially charged environments. Addressing these implications requires multifaceted interventions. Universities must prioritize mental health support tailored to the unique challenges faced by racialized students. Moreover, fostering inclusive and equitable practices within educational settings is essential to mitigating the mental health impacts of racism.

While our study only asked about mental health impacts among respondents who had experienced racism, it could also be valuable to understand the impact and severity of *witnessing* an act of racism on students' mental health. Previous studies indicate that negative socioemotional and mental health outcomes are often reported by children who have observed racist acts against their caregivers, particularly their mothers — a phenomenon called vicarious trauma (Heard-Garris et al., 2018). Further studies could benefit from investigating whether witnessing racism against friends or peers has similar negative impacts in post-secondary educational settings.

Awareness and Satisfaction with Campus Resources

Our results highlight that three-quarters of students either had no awareness of campus initiatives addressing racism or were not sure about campus initiatives that address racism. In addition, a considerable number of students responded that they were dissatisfied with campus resources and did not think the university addressed racism sufficiently.

This is especially worrisome because it is likely that students who took the time and energy to respond to our survey may have greater than average interest in conversations around racism and discrimination. Thus, if even students who are particularly interested in this topic are mostly unaware of campus resources and services to address racism, it is possible that the wider student population may be even less aware. Significant numbers also reported explicit dissatisfaction with campus resources and services. This is also a cause for concern because it likely means that many students who experience racism and/or discrimination on campus are not getting the support they need.

The results indicate that existing campus initiatives aimed at addressing racism may not be well publicized or communicated to students, leading to a lack of awareness among most students. This finding may also reflect a gap in communication channels or methods used to inform students about these initiatives. Even if initiatives exist, if students are not informed effectively, they may remain unaware. Legacies of mistrust due to the personal and collective experiences of various marginalized groups further compound this issue.

While most studies, including ours, have not examined the entire undergraduate population, studies analyzing specific demographic groups have reported similar findings. For instance, research on international student experiences reveals a sense of inadequate support and limited understanding of their needs within universities (Kıroğlu & Kung, 2023; Mall & Payne, 2023). Similarly, studies with Indigenous students indicate a lack of awareness regarding available resources and university administration not understanding their needs (Bailey, 2016, 2020). As such, the lack of awareness of resources and dissatisfaction with the existing resources indicate that at least some of the existing resources may not be sufficiently catered to the groups they intend to serve. University administrators must do their utmost to understand and meet the needs of racialized students and to formulate policies and initiatives around those needs. This requires listening, taking student feedback, and re-conceptualizing existing resources.

Furthermore, these findings underscore a broader communication gap within the university, where initiatives and resources intended to support students are not effectively reaching or engaging the diverse student body. Improving the visibility and communication strategies of these initiatives is crucial to ensuring that all students, regardless of racial/ethnic background or religious identification, are aware of and benefit from the supports available to them.

Recommendations

One of our study's aims was to understand how universities can foster a more inclusive environment for racialized students. To do so, we asked students about some initiatives they felt would improve campus inclusivity at McMaster. Below, we discuss these student recommendations in more detail.

Before doing so, we must acknowledge that our survey is just a first step. There is a profound need for more research to investigate these important issues. Our first recommendation, therefore, is to conduct similar surveys with larger, representative samples of a range of demographic groups to assess the generalizability of our findings. Larger samples would also enable more intersectional analyses (e.g., how experiences vary by race *and* gender, or by religious identification *and* international student status). In addition, we recommend more qualitative research (e.g., focus groups, in-depth interviews) to examine the nature of students' experiences with racism and discrimination, their sense of belonging on campus, and their sources of support (or lack thereof). Assuming our survey findings hold up, however, and based on previous research in other contexts, we would also propose the following:

1. Continuing to increase diversity among faculty, staff, and university leadership
2. Encouraging university instructors – and offering resources to help instructors - to continue diversifying the voices and perspectives represented in the curriculum
3. Systematically evaluating anti-racism and cultural competency training initiatives
4. Enhancing and promoting greater awareness of the process for reporting racism and discrimination on campus and ensuring that any such reporting system is carefully designed to ensure transparency, accountability, and fairness to all parties.
5. Enhancing and promoting greater awareness of support services and resources, especially for Black, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Jewish, and other racialized students.

Increased diversity among faculty and staff

One of the main recommendations provided by survey respondents was increasing faculty diversity. Interestingly, in 2023, McMaster was ranked by Forbes as the third most diverse employer, for both faculty and staff, in Canada and as the second most diverse Canadian employer among post-secondary institutions (Peachman, 2023). Moreover, McMaster has received recognition as one of Canada's Best Diversity Employers and one of Hamilton-Niagara's Top Employers (Canada's Top 100, 2024a; Canada's Top 100, 2024b). Despite these achievements, our respondents indicated that campus inclusivity can be further improved by continuing to recruit and retain a more diverse faculty complement.

Past research also indicates that diversifying faculty is important for racialized students (Banerjee et al., 2022; Park & Bahia, 2022; Henry et al., 2017). Increasing faculty diversity is crucial for creating inclusive learning environments, as diverse faculty members bring diverse perspectives and experiences that better reflect the backgrounds of the student body. Such faculty members may serve as role models and inspire students from underrepresented groups (Banerjee et al., 2022). Faculty diversity enhances learning by exposing students to multiple viewpoints and approaches, fostering critical thinking and empathy. Moreover, a diverse faculty addresses historical inequities within higher education, promotes innovative research and teaching methods, and could help mitigate biases and stereotypes (Banerjee et al., 2022; Park & Bahia, 2022). Ultimately, prioritizing faculty diversity contributes to a more inclusive, equitable, and enriched academic community that prepares students for success in diverse and interconnected societies.

Although our survey question focused on diversity among faculty, we believe the principle may be extended more broadly to all staff working at the university. That is, it could also be beneficial for students to see themselves represented when they talk to administrative or other staff members of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, which may also facilitate trust and communication.

Increased diversity among university leadership

Students also recommended diversifying university leadership positions (Deans, Vice-Presidents, Department Chairs, etc.). Like faculty and staff diversity, increased racial diversity among university leadership is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. When leadership positions reflect the diversity of the student body and faculty, it sends a powerful message of representation and opportunity (Brockbank & Hall, 2022; Sue et al., 2009). Diverse leadership brings a range of perspectives and experiences to decision-making processes, often leading to more innovative and effective solutions. Moreover, leaders from diverse backgrounds may be better equipped to understand and address the needs of diverse communities within the university and beyond. As such, diversifying university leadership addresses some of the unmet needs felt by racialized students currently. It could help foster a more positive and supportive atmosphere for all individuals, reduce bias and discrimination, and promote a culture of inclusivity and belonging. These needs have been echoed by similar studies that emphasize the need for increasing representation in leadership positions (Brockbank & Hall, 2022).

Increased diversity in the curriculum

Students also recommended incorporating more diversity into the academic curriculum. While respecting academic freedom and instructors' expertise in their own subject areas, we believe that, in general, diversifying course materials, such as expanding the range of Black, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ authors on reading lists, creates a greater sense of inclusivity and equity (Dewidar et al., 2022). When curricula are diversified, it may foster greater engagement among students, especially those who come from underrepresented communities (Dewidar et al., 2022). These students may relate more to the course content and thus participate more actively in their studies (Buitendijk et al., 2019). Such diversification has the potential to lead to a more enriching and well-rounded academic experience for all students, as it expands the range of voices and perspectives that are seen as legitimate and potentially enhances the overall sense of belonging within the institution.

In addition to increasing representation and engagement, diversifying academic curricula can encourage students to generate a wider range of ideas as well as promote more perspective-taking and problem-solving approaches (Buitendijk et al., 2019). This is due to the exposure one gets from various viewpoints, which ultimately prepares students for their future in a diverse workforce and society.

That said, we recognize that some faculties, departments, and programs of study have already done a great deal to diversify their curricula. Others have more work to do. The relevance and implications of this recommendation may vary depending on the course. Furthermore, while the diversification of curricula is highly encouraged, it may pose a challenge for some instructors, who are not currently equipped to teach such material. To mitigate this, the university should provide additional resources to help instructors find ways to make relevant changes while respecting and protecting their academic freedom. By offering support and resources, the university can ensure that instructors feel empowered to adapt their curriculum in ways that align with their teaching style and expertise. This approach may lead to a more inclusive and engaging learning experience for students, ultimately benefiting the entire academic community.

Anti-racism training and cultural sensitivity programs for faculty and staff – and the need to evaluate such programs

Students also recommended providing more anti-racism training opportunities for faculty and staff members. Some previous research similarly promotes anti-racism training in higher education settings (Brockbank & Hall, 2022; Sue et al., 2009; Yosso et al., 2009).

Educators, regardless of their background, can benefit immensely from learning how to navigate complex discussions on race, racialization, and racism and how to address biases effectively. Studies have observed that many instructors struggle with such dialogues, often reinforcing perspectives that privilege white students or ending discussions prematurely (Brockbank & Hall, 2022). Educators must acknowledge their susceptibility to biases and racial anxieties, a reality that impacts their interactions in the classroom. By investing in self-awareness and understanding their own racial and cultural identities, and by continuously seeking to improve their skills, educators can better navigate sensitive topics and foster inclusive environments.

Unfortunately, however, the empirical evidence on anti-racism training (and cultural sensitivity training, diversity training, etc.) is mixed (Chang et al., 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). At its best, some authors say anti-racism training goes beyond awareness of biases and power dynamics; it equips educators with tools to manage biases, enhances empathy, reinforces commitments to ongoing improvement, and engages participants in proactive and progressive conversations about race and racism (Gino & Coffman, 2021; Sue et al., 2009). Such training empowers educators to create spaces where difficult dialogues are not avoided but are rather embraced with accountability and sensitivity. It encourages a shared responsibility for addressing mistakes or harms, promoting the unlearning of historically harmful behaviours, and fostering equitable social interactions. According to Brockbank and Hall (2022), the shift towards decentering whiteness in pedagogy is fundamental to challenging colour-blindness and ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives. It involves moving beyond symbolic gestures and transforming classrooms into more inclusive and supportive spaces. This process involves continuous learning and engagement, providing educators with recurring educational opportunities to refine their skills and perspectives. Ideally, anti-racism training is not just about checking boxes; it is about cultivating a culture of equity, empathy, and social justice within educational settings.

In her recent book, however, sociologist Sarita Srivastava (2024) cautions that in practice anti-racism and diversity training is often performative and "disheartening for activists and educators" (85). In her analysis:

> While some approaches to workshops may be more successful than others, many participants have expressed a deep dissatisfaction with the perennial equity and diversity workshops and discussions on racism. The evidence shows that the formal, facilitated discussions, workshops, and trainings that are common to many organizations have largely failed to effect the desired changes in beliefs, consciousness, practices, or employment equity. Reviews of dozens of studies show that these workshops either do not reduce bias or produce only short-term reductions of bias and that, more importantly, they do not change behavior or the workplace in ways that lead to equity (Srivastava, 2024, p. 85).

Instead, Srivastava recommends an ACT framework that emphasizes asking questions and analyzing concrete local problems, collaboratively crafting solutions and a shared vision, and taking "one small action now" (245). Importantly, she says, these three steps should "begin from a place of collective commitment to shared values" (245).

Notably, McMaster University has offered several training programs through the Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO), including Employment Equity Facilitator training and unconscious bias training. McMaster faculty members also may take training programs through the Tri-Council research funding agencies, including programs focused on bias and gender-based analysis. Moreover, McMaster University's EDI strategy outlines multiple ways to promote employment equity and faculty and student diversity. These are commendable efforts by the university to promote equity and inclusivity at various levels. Far too often, however, EDI strategies and training programs are implemented (at universities and beyond) without any systematic attempt to evaluate whether the initiatives are indeed effective in helping to overcome bias, change behaviour, reduce incidents of racism and discrimination, or create more inclusive climates.

Indeed, as documented by past studies, some training programs (however well-intentioned) can backfire and make things worse, perhaps especially when trainees are mandated to attend sessions that are perceived as window-dressing (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). To the extent that existing training programs are not currently subject to rigorous evaluation, it is difficult to determine their effectiveness and tangible impact. Our recommendation, therefore, is to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of existing anti-racism (and related) educational initiatives among McMaster faculty and staff members. Such evaluations are necessary for determining which (if any) types of educational/training initiatives are most effective at reducing racism, improving understanding, and building a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Improving reporting systems and expanding (awareness of) support services

Students also recommended an improved reporting system for incidents of racism at the university. While the university has a detailed Discrimination & Harassment Policy, which outlines a process for reporting incidents or making official complaints (Associate Vice-President, Equity and Inclusion, 2022), it is not something a lot of students seem to know about. This is evident from the "Awareness of Campus Initiatives'' section above, where many survey respondents said they were unaware of relevant campus resources and services. Furthermore, while the policy notes that steps will be taken to maintain confidentiality, there are many circumstances under which confidentiality would be broken and/or police services would become involved. Racialized students who have previously faced discrimination or who have had challenging interactions with law enforcement or other authorities might have difficulty trusting and relying on the university, especially if the process is unclear (e.g., Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019).

As such, the university must ensure that its Discrimination & Harassment Policy is clearly and regularly communicated to students, faculty, and staff. The policy itself, including the reporting and complaint system, must be fair to all parties. Students need a clear and accessible way to report racism and human rights violations and to receive adequate support. Perpetrators must be held accountable for policy violations. At the same time, we are not calling for a system where all claims are taken at face value, where the accused (whether faculty, staff, or student) is assumed guilty until proven otherwise, and where those who make false and damaging allegations are not held accountable. It is understandable that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in all circumstances. In practice, there could be complex cases where different people view the same incident in different ways and there are strong claims on either side. Some cases of rude or objectionable behaviour may not rise to the level of policy violations. There also must be room for legitimate political disagreement and for ongoing (un)learning and dialogue. As a first step, it may be advisable for the university and for individual faculties/programs/departments to thoroughly review and evaluate all relevant policies and reporting procedures, ensure that they are fair and transparent, and then clearly communicate them to all concerned.

In addition to ensuring a fair and transparent reporting system, we believe that the university should make greater efforts to continuously ensure that racialized students are aware of support services on campus that aim to protect and enhance their mental health and well-being and help them deal with racist and/or discriminatory experiences. According to our survey, only one-quarter of respondents said they were aware of any such initiatives on campus. Further research should be conducted to better understand the reasons why the university's resources and services are unknown to and/or not being utilized by many students, and to develop strategies to increase awareness of these resources and services. In some cases, expansion of support services (i.e., counselling, peer support, cultural programs) may be needed. But, again, a clear first step is to ensure that students are aware of existing services.

Ultimately, developing an institution-wide strategy to tackle racism and racial inequalities should involve setting measurable targets and success indicators, along with adequate resources to support these efforts. The strategy must be guided by a widely shared vision and commitment to core values. Regular opportunities should be provided for faculty, staff, and students to share challenges, experiences, and best practices.

Limitations

Sample Size and Population

Although our study provides important and potentially useful findings, it is necessary to acknowledge some limitations. A primary limitation of this study involves the relatively small sample size, given the overall student population at McMaster University of approximately 32,000 (McMaster University Factbook: 2022-2023, 2023). With about 0.88% of McMaster's undergraduate population participating in our survey, the findings may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all students (McMaster University Factbook: 2022-2023, 2023). Participants responding to survey questions may have differing experiences and perspectives as compared to those who did not participate, thus potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, some faculties (e.g., Social Sciences, Science) are overrepresented, and others (e.g., Engineering, Nursing) are underrepresented, thus potentially skewing the data towards the experiences of students in specific academic disciplines. The limited student demographic data available from McMaster University further complicates the ability to assess the representativeness of our sample.

Nevertheless, our sample size is comparable to many previous studies of racism and discrimination in university settings, and we believe the data are suggestive of larger trends. Moreover, students who responded to the survey likely have greater than average interest in the topic given that they took the time to participate. This means that some of our findings – such as the lack of awareness of relevant campus resources and services – may *underrepresent* the full scale of the problem.

Small Cell Sizes

Due to small cell sizes (less than 10), we had to combine and remove some important categories from our tables and figures. For example, due to the small number of survey respondents who identified as Black Caribbean, Black North American, and Black African, these categories were combined into a single category, "Black." Unfortunately, we also had to combine other racial/ethnic categories, specifically students who identified as Indo-Caribbean, as Jewish Canadian, and as Indigenous (to Canada), among others, and labelled this category as "other." We recognize that collapsing (or removing) such categories is a major limitation and masks the internal diversity of several groups. For example, with larger samples, one might find that Black African students tend to have different experiences and perceptions than Black North American students. The category "Black" is not monolithic. Given previous research, including at McMaster, showing widespread racism against Indigenous students, our inability to comment meaningfully on Indigenous students' experiences is also a serious limitation. For these reasons, we suggest that further research with larger, more representative samples – perhaps using targeted recruitment methods to ensure sufficient participation from smaller racial/ethnic groups on campus – must be conducted.

Self-Reported Survey Responses

A more general challenge with survey research is the inability to ask follow-up questions. In retrospect, we would like to know far more about the nature of students' experiences with racism and belongingness on campus. Although we asked whether the racist incidents students encountered were physical, verbal, or microaggressive, we do not know details about the incidents. We also provided an "other" option where respondents could describe the incidents in their own words, but few respondents chose this option. Thus, in principle, it is possible that some students perceived incidents as racist that others may not have or that their understandings of racism may not align with the academic definitions provided above. At the same time, it is possible that some students did not report experiencing racism or discrimination when in fact they had been the targets, either because they did not realize it or because it was too painful to acknowledge. As noted above, our survey findings also highlight that a significant number of students chose not to report their experiences of racism to any university authorities or offices. While the reasons why students did not report should be more extensively investigated, some possible reasons include an overall lack of awareness, a fear of negative consequences, a lack of trust in institutions, and emotional or psychological fatigue. A broader implication is that, due to underreporting more generally, our data may not fully capture the extent and severity of racism experienced on campus. For all these reasons, we strongly recommend follow-up research, including more open-ended interviews, to develop a better sense of the kinds of racism and discrimination that students are (or are not) experiencing on campus.

Interpretive Options: "Neutral," "N/A," and "Prefer Not to Say"

Beyond these limitations, the survey design included options such as "Neutral" for various questions. While a small percentage of respondents responded this way and it is not a major concern, it still should be considered. Such an option may be interpreted differently by different participants, thus challenging the accuracy and meaning of the term itself.

To follow up on our survey, next steps in the research process should include: (1) conducting a similar survey with a larger, representative sample to assess the generalizability of our findings for a range of demographic groups, levels of study, and faculties/departments/programs of study; (2) implementing a qualitative research design — such as one-on-one interviews and/or focus groups — to better understand the lived experiences of students with racism, discrimination, and belongingness on campus, and their use (or lack thereof) of relevant campus resources and services; and (3) systematically evaluating campus initiatives related to EDI, including various forms of anti-racism and cultural competency training. Such evaluations would help clarify their efficacy and role in fostering and maintaining inclusive and equitable spaces.

Conclusion

To date, there has been relatively little research about undergraduate students' experiences with racism on Canadian post-secondary campuses. The broader culture of colour blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Henry & Tator, 2010; James, 2010) and political avoidance (Denis, 2020) inhibits constructive discourse about racism in Canada, including in universities. There is no denying that racism exists, and that racial inequality is embedded in many systems and structures in the educational sector and beyond. Our survey shows that significant numbers of undergraduates at McMaster have personally experienced and/or witnessed racism or discrimination on campus. Most of these students have not formally reported it to campus authorities or utilized relevant campus services, and most believe that it has negatively impacted their sense of belonging and mental health.

To address these issues, it is incumbent on McMaster University to improve communication about campus resources and services that aim to support students who are the targets of racism, and to expand such resources and services where they are lacking. The university's awareness and trust building efforts should also include carefully reviewing and clearly communicating its discrimination and harassment policies and reporting procedures to ensure fairness, due process, and transparency. In addition, the university may benefit from stepping back to holistically evaluate its approach to addressing racism, including the effectiveness of anti-racism training and other EDI initiatives. As part of this process, the university should consult more broadly with students about their experiences and perspectives, while also considering faculty and staff input. More generally, McMaster should continue to build on its commendable efforts to increase diversity among faculty, staff, university leadership, and curricula. Above all, it is essential to fully commit to supporting students who experience racism or discrimination and to promoting equity, diversity, and inclusivity throughout the institution.

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