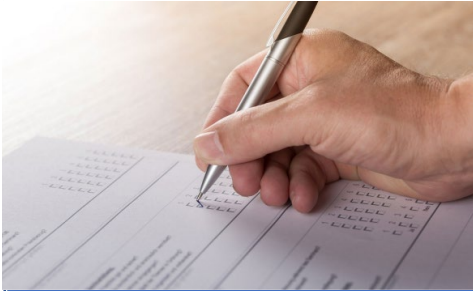


FACT SHEET

SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION OF RACE IN CANADA



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

POLICY BENCH

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Overview

- Canada's Indigenous population is rapidly growing, along with the country's racial and ethnic diversity
⇒ increasing the likelihood of inconsistencies between different measures and understandings of race and identity, which can negatively impact health and other social and psychological aspects of life.
- There is a need for more evidence-informed strategies for the collection of racial identity data by service providers
⇒ to assess and monitor racism and discrimination, remove systemic barriers, evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services, and create more equitable systems.
- There is no "gold standard" for collecting race-based data
⇒ multiple measures of race, such as social-identification and self-identification, should be used to better capture the multidimensional and fluid nature of racial identities.

What is the issue?

Canada is lagging in the collection of population-based, disaggregated, and high-quality data on race and ethnicity, which is crucial for our understanding of equity and diversity issues across the country. There is a need for better inclusion of such data; however, there are concerns from various groups about the appropriate procedures for collecting this information. Public sector workers (e.g., child welfare) often populate these fields based on their own observation or perception of people's identities, including their race and Indigenous status – a practice known as social identification or participant observer identification (POI) – which can lead to bias as well as inaccurate and missing data.

Why is the issue important?

- 1) Understanding the impacts of socially-assigned race and how race and identity are interpreted in different contexts has implications for examining the effects of racism in society, as well as data collection and analysis practices.¹
- 2) Better tools and procedures for collecting race-based data are needed to understand and reduce gaps and inequities through more equitable policies and services.
- 3) Issues of data governance are especially relevant and important for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples in Canada as data from Indigenous peoples and communities must comply with the sovereign inherent jurisdiction of Indigenous leaders.

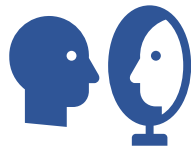
Understanding race and Indigenous identity

Race is a multifaceted and multidimensional social construct that is used along with ethnicity to categorize and characterize various populations.^{2,3,4,5} There are added complexities around identifying Indigenous peoples due to the varying definitions and understandings of Indigenous status (i.e., legal and/or family and community-based definitions) – each having a different impact on an individual’s legal and jurisdictional rights as well as their day-to-day experiences.⁶

Dimensions and measurement of race

There are two main approaches to the identification of race:

- 1) **Self-identification** – one’s own internal or subjective understanding of belonging to one or more racial or ethnic categories
- 2) **Social identification** – describes how race is externally assigned or imposed by others through observation, inference, or perception



However, racial identity can also be seen to have **multiple dimensions** beyond these two main types that represent many different aspects of one’s complete race identity, and these dimensions may not always correspond with each other.^{1,5}

Policies and Practice

The collection of identity-based data is crucial for identifying, understanding, and addressing inequities in all public and social services across Canada, but the quality of the data and how it is collected and used is just as important.⁷ A lack of coordinated and disaggregated race-based data collection practices can result in data discrepancies, affecting the reliability and consistency of data across sectors and jurisdictions.

History of Data Collection in Ontario

For a long time, Ontario lacked a systematic approach to race and identity-based data collection which limited comparability across sectors and the ability to use data to measure and address inequities.⁸ However, the passage of the *Anti-Racism Act* in 2017 mandated public sector organizations within child welfare, education, and justice to collect and report race-based data within specified timeframes.

National Data Collection Efforts

The national Census has undergone several changes over time to enhance its race-based data collection efforts. For example, it began collecting information about race and ethnicity in 1996 by adding a question about whether Canadians identified as a ‘visible minority’. It also implemented a distinctions-based approach in 2021 by replacing the collective term “Aboriginal” with “First Nations, Métis or Inuk (Inuit)” to measure Indigenous identity in a more meaningful and relevant way.⁹

New pan-Canadian minimum standards for the collection and use of race-based and Indigenous identity data within the health sector have come from the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) in 2020. These standards better delineate the concepts of race and ethnicity, enable the recognition of multi-racial identities, and recommend a distinctions-based approach for collecting information about Indigenous identity.^{10,11}

Indigenous data governance
Additional consideration must be given to data concerning Indigenous identities to ensure that information collected about FNMI peoples is used to promote positive community outcomes. ¹² Indigenous data governance principles may vary between communities and organizations, including the OCAP™ principles, which assert that First Nations peoples should have ownership and control over the collection, use, and transmission of First Nations data and information.

Data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic
The need for collecting sociodemographic and race based data was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic – not only to fill existing gaps in data, but also to achieve more equitable pandemic-related outcomes. As racialized groups were disproportionately affected by the virus, this data was necessary to identify health disparities and barriers and develop evidence-based interventions to reduce these inequities. ^{13, 14}

Table 1: Benefits and challenges of race and identity-based data collection

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improves our understanding of gaps and inequities in the areas of health, education, and social services. ○ Informs policy and practice to address racial disparities and improve service outcomes, especially in healthcare and child welfare. ○ Drives evidence-based decision-making and ensures public accountability.¹⁵ ○ Helps evaluate, modify, and improve services and interventions over time.¹⁶ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Classifying people by race may reinforce racial/ethnic differences or divisions in society.¹⁷ ○ Understanding the complexity of racial identities (especially Indigenous identities) and recognizing that not all individuals can be placed into mutually exclusive categories. ○ The need for sufficient resources and training for service providers to collect and analyze the data may be a complex process.¹⁶ ○ Hesitancy towards government data collection efforts among Indigenous peoples due to histories of discrimination, racism, and negative experiences with research and data collection.^{12, 14}

Evidence on social identification of race

Published literature was scanned to examine the practice and consequences of the social identification of race – including tools and methods for race and identity-based data collection; levels of congruence/discordance between different measures; and dimensions of Indigenous identification.

Key Findings:

- There is no one ‘correct’ measure of racial/ethnic identity. Instead, the inclusion of multiple measures better captures the multidimensionality of race and the impacts of racialization.
- The accuracy of social identification of race is greater when the observer has more interaction with or knowledge of the individual, compared to solely relying on physical characteristics, contextual factors, or other readily available indicators.⁵
- Racial self-identity can change over time and across different contexts.¹⁸
- Mismatches between self-identity and social identification of race (more likely among multi-racial, Hispanic, and Indigenous people) can cause poorer health and psychological outcomes.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for research

- *Better understanding of the process of social identification of race and how it differs from self-identification would allow for* ⇒ More informed strategies for the measurement of race and the collection of race-based data to improve data accuracy.
- *Recognizing the multidimensional nature of race and the various social processes that influence racial identity will help to* ⇒ Mitigate identity mismatches (i.e., conflict between different dimensions of one's identity) and their negative consequences – especially for Indigenous populations as they are the fastest growing population in Canada and more likely to experience mismatch compared to other racial groups.^{10, 19}

Implications for service providers

- *Improvements in identifying and measuring race will support* ⇒ the delivery of more equitable and effective health and social services.
- *Training and guidance for anyone who is collecting race-based data and using both self-identification and social identification measures of race would allow for* ⇒ more consistent, reliable, and complete data for public reporting and interpretation.

Implications for policy

- *Improved accuracy and validity of data collection measures are needed to* ⇒ inform policy decisions that aim to reduce racial disparities.
- *Continued consultation with Indigenous partners and communities will* ⇒ accelerate the development of culturally appropriate and relevant data collection strategies and practices.

Table 2: Recommendations for data collection practices

1. Improved tools and measures:	More comprehensive methods and tools for data collection that incorporate more than one measure of race/Indigenous identity as well as multiple response options are recommended to better capture the multidimensional and fluid nature of racial identities.
2. Indigenous data considerations:	The collection of data about Indigenous identity requires additional considerations to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and priorities are incorporated and respected, including following key data governance principles and data sharing agreements.
3. Community engagement:	Any strategies that aim to address racial discrimination and inequities must include consultation with the affected communities from the outset. ^{10, 14, 20}
4. National data standards and guidance:	Stronger efforts to encourage and accelerate ongoing initiatives to enhance data collection at the national level are needed to promote the development of population-wide, high-quality race-based data in Canada.
5. More research:	Further research is needed to examine the accuracy of social identification across contexts and populations; the mechanisms by which race and identity are linked to various outcomes; and possible changes in racial identities over time.

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