

We Are All Part of the Problem and the Solution



ALISSA SCHACTER
Equity Officer and Policy Counsel



Black and Indigenous people are telling us they are exhausted; they are tired of fighting for equality and being told there is no systemic racism in Canada.

The power of an image is worth a thousand words. The clear video footage of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin callously taking the life of George Floyd caused the long-simmering racial tensions in the U.S. to boil over with unprecedented intensity. Black and Indigenous people have been decrying the police brutality and other forms of insidious systemic racism they're subjected to for many years. Martin Luther King Jr. said that "a riot is the language of the unheard". If we somehow did not hear them before, we surely hear them now.

It may be reassuring to take false comfort in the fact that things aren't "as bad" here in Canada. The truth is things are no better in Canada. Black and Indigenous people are subjected to carding, unlawful searches, "starlight tours" and [police brutality](#) with disproportionate frequency, and they're over-represented in our [jails](#) and [child protection system](#). Toronto criminal defense lawyer, Marie Henein articulately chronicles the issues of systemic racism in policing and the criminal justice system in her recent opinion piece in the [Globe and Mail](#). Black people in Canada also face poorer [education](#) and [health](#) outcomes, [earn less](#) than their white counterparts, and the list goes on. Similar data exists with respect to Indigenous people.

It is time for us to listen. Black and Indigenous people are telling us they are exhausted; they are tired of fighting for equality and being told there is no systemic racism in Canada; they are tired of hearing white people apologize and express solidarity with their moral position but fail to take concrete action. Those of us who are not members of a visibly racialized or otherwise marginalized group can never fully understand what it is like to be constantly "othered", but we must work to try, and take on the fight for

equality as if it were our own. We must speak up around family dinner tables, with our friends, and in our offices and boardrooms, regardless of whether the offending comments were intentionally racist. We must make space for Black and Indigenous voices in our offices, neighborhoods, schools, and elsewhere, and if those voices aren't represented in those spheres, we must take steps to change that.

How we think about racism must change

In a recent panel discussion on '[Black Lives Matter – where do we go from here?](#)' hosted by CBC Asks, Winnipeg defense lawyer and author Zilla Jones suggested that how we think about racism has to change:

"Many people take it as a personal attack on their character or their morality. They're afraid of confronting racism because they can't admit or contemplate that they could be a racist. It's a matter of acknowledging that because we've grown up with these biases... in society around race, that you've absorbed some of them. It doesn't make you a racist or a bad person, but you need to question some of the assumptions and things you've learned. We all have biases. Being aware of them, educating yourself and questioning yourself is important. Be humble; we can all learn."

How to be an Ally

There are many resources that provide guidance on how to be an ally, including [Becoming an Ally](#) from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and [How to Be an Ally if You Are a Person with Privilege](#) by Frances E. Kendall. [Dr. Rahsaan Harris](#), CEO of the Citizens Committee for New York City, sums it up succinctly: to be an ally, we must put our egos aside, be willing to listen without taking offence

and be able to sit with our own discomfort. Both the [Canadian Bar Association](#) and the [American Bar Association](#) have free, general resources available online for helping to improve inclusion and diversity in law.

Listening to the Perspectives of Black and Indigenous Lawyers

The following are personal accounts of what it's like to work in law or study law as a Black person in Canada and the U.S. Indigenous lawyers in Canada have reported similar types of experiences, as recounted in the last two links:

[Black on Bay Street](#) by Hadiya Roderique

[I was Warned my Brown Skin Would Make it Harder for Me to be a Lawyer](#) by Washim Ahmed

[Why Women and People of Colour in Law Still Hear "You Don't Look Like a Lawyer"](#) by Tsedale Melaku

[Why We Need More Black Students in Canadian Law Schools](#) by Kayla Smith and Charles Campbell

['It Could Have Been Me': Black Attorneys Reflect on George Floyd's Death and What Comes Next](#) by Dylan Jackson

[I'm a Black Woman. I'm Tired of People Being Surprised I'm a Lawyer](#) by Phillis Rambsy

[But I Was Wearing a Suit](#) produced by the Continuing Legal Education Society of British Columbia

[Reconciliation's Uphill Battle: Indigenous Legal Education](#) published by Canadian Lawyer

Systemic racism is a societal problem; we're all part of the problem, and we all must be part of the solution. Let's each reflect on what implicit biases we carry, what practices we're engaging in that may unintentionally be perpetuating injustices, and what steps we can take to change.

Resources

Here are some additional resources to assist you in learning about and reflecting on the issues:

[The Skin We're In](#) by Desmond Cole

[How to be an Antiracist](#) by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi

[White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism](#) by Robin DiAngelo, PhD

[Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World](#) by Layla Saad

[Between the World and Me](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates

[On the Other Side of Freedom: The Case for Hope](#)

[Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race](#) by Reni Eddo-Lodge

[CBC's list of 25 Books About Being Black in Canada](#)

[21 Things You May Not Know About The Indian Act](#) by Bob Joseph

[Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City](#) by Tanya Talaga

[Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada](#) by Chelsea Vowel

[From the Ashes](#) by Jesse Thistle

[Broken Circle: The Dark Legacy of Indian Residential Schools](#) by Theodore Fontaine

[The Education of Augie Merasty: A Residential School Memoir](#) by David Carpenter and Joseph Augusta Merasty

[Indigenous Writers Recommend Books](#) by Indigenous Authors