



# **WINS Canada: Racial, Gender and Disability-Related COVID-19 Employment Inequities 2022**

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<http://www.winscanada.com>

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## **Land Acknowledgment**

WINS Canada acknowledges that we live and work on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

Today this gathering place is home to many First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and acknowledging reminds us that our great standard of living is directly related to the resources and friendship of Indigenous people

## **WINS Canada: Our Vision & Mission**

Winning Inclusive Solutions (WINS) is a not-for-profit founded in 2018 by Dr. Hitu Sood. We promote inclusive policies and programs in Canada's workforce and are committed to advocate and help take steps towards ensuring the creation of more equitable workplaces in which diverse members of our society can flourish.

We bring a growth mindset to diversity issues. The key to equity is a paradigm shift that sees all members of Canadian society being accepted and valued for their distinctive strengths. This shift can be brought about only by questioning the status quo. WINS is committed to being part of such advocacy. We offer an embracing community of support in which diverse professionals can learn and network with like-minded others.

As part of our Showcasing Diverse Voices initiative, in February 2021 WINS launched an online survey to understand the viewpoints and unique challenges of skilled immigrants. The report was published in May 2021 and is available on our website.

In 2022, WINS launched an online survey to understand the employment inequities that Canadians faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic either because of gender, race, or differences in ability. Its purpose is to provide evidence that will infuse WINS' upcoming advocacy work with employers, government, and society at large. This initiative is part of our ongoing campaign to understand and create awareness of the employment issues faced by different populations during the pandemic.

This report showcases the key findings based on our 2022 community research and makes recommendations based on the survey data collected from April to June 2022.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Employment inequities are a reality for many who live and work in Canada. These inequities have been significantly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. From a global perspective, the economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic has been devastating: hundreds of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people has skyrocketed. Here in Canada the coronavirus pandemic made precarious living circumstances more common, especially for workers who are racialized and/or women. Many of these workers have faced unsafe labour conditions, diminished protections from the virus or from workplace violence, and discrimination when searching for employment. These impacts have been worsened by systems that continue to perpetuate racism, ageism, sexism, and homophobia, in addition to other structural and social factors that further marginalize some members of society, such as homelessness.

## **2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

What are some of the specific causes for the pandemic's serious impact? Empirical evidence shows that the parts of the Canadian economy most impacted by the pandemic were customer-facing service industries. In particular, food service, hospitality, retail, and other non-union jobs were hardest hit because of shutdowns, restricted commercial operations, and legal mandates (Lemieux et al., 2020). Many of the jobs affected had a high proportion of women job holders. A large proportion were low-paying as well.

While women workers experienced a high rate of pandemic-based joblessness, they also bore the brunt of intensified child and family care responsibilities. Restricted childcare options as well the advent of at-home schooling required them to navigate a host of obstacles while maintaining, and in some cases searching for, employment. Immigrants and visible minorities were also heavily affected. One recent study found that 34% of front-line and essential service workers identify as visible minorities, compared with 21% in other sectors. (Government of Canada, 2021a). Not surprisingly, racialized women were especially harmed. Mothers have suffered rates of depression and anxiety twice as high as the Canadians as a whole, and rates are even higher for mothers who are racialized (Skrzypinski, 2021).

Many commentators have noted how the ability to work from home helped prevent or lessen the business interruption caused by the pandemic. However, this was not a universal solution. Given most front-line and essential services were unable to shift to remote work, the pandemic clearly illustrated society's dependence on jobs disproportionately staffed by visible minorities. A few key statistics reveal the extent of this grim reality:

In Canada, from January 2020 to January 2021, the unemployment rate increased by 5.3 percentage points among Black Canadians, compared to 3.7 percentage points among non-visible minority Canadians (excluding Indigenous people). In the three months ending in January 2021, the unemployment rate among Black

Canadians (13.1%) was about 70% higher than that among non-visible minority Canadians (7.7%) (OECD, 2022).

For many workers, job security during the pandemic was not the only concern. They were distrustful of the tactics implemented by their employers to protect their health and safety. For example, one global study found that more than two-thirds of workers viewed their employer's pandemic-related policies as insincere, while three-quarters of workers in white-majority countries saw their employer's racial policies as ingenuine (Van Bommell et al., 2022). Often issues at home intensified the difficulties of daily life. With family care and childcare sustaining major disruptions as facilities were closed temporarily or in some cases permanently, some women had to leave the workforce to provide the missing care no longer available from public organizations. Gendered division of responsibility is not new to Canadian households, but more households experienced a greater division of home care labor as a result of the pandemic (Leclerc, 2020).

Other trends were also at work. Many employees left jobs in search of more meaningful work. For those forced, almost overnight, to work remotely to maintain productivity and work expectations, not all wanted to return to a fully in-office work environment. According to a recent study, the desire to work remotely permanently accounts for approximately 33% of workers' top reasons for searching out new employment. The search for higher salaries and the ability the pandemic provided to procure professional development and upskilling or promotions were additional considerations. Flexible working schedules and locations, in addition to competition among Canadian employers to secure top talent, have enabled many employees to jump to a new organization or potentially a new field altogether (Dobson, 2022). Additionally, many employees, post-COVID-19, are beginning to indicate that they would prefer to continue working from home. For example, the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), which represents about 70,000 workers, has done some studies of its membership. The responses suggest that 60% would prefer to stay working at home, 25% would prefer to move to a hybrid format, and only 10% would prefer to go back to the office full time (Thompson, 2022).

### **3. METHODS**

To investigate the issues discussed above, our survey focused on exploring experiences with employment during the pandemic. The survey was created using Google Forms and was hosted by WINS. After identifying key demographic information about each participant, survey questions covered how the pandemic affected participants' personal income, their employment and workplace relationships; their personal and family supports; and, if applicable, their experience with employment searches. The questions were presented in multiple choice format and some offered open-ended text input so participants could give further explanation or details about their responses. Participants were not allowed to skip questions, though open-ended follow up questions were optional. Analysis was done through Google's online interface.

To ensure the validity of our research, we made sure that multiple members of our organization independently analyzed the survey data. To ensure reliability, we engaged in frequent testing and

comparison of our data with findings of other studies as well as with the significant range of comments on particular topics that we received from participants.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From April 21 to June 3 a total of 610 completed responses were collected, with participants spending an average of 5 to 10 minutes on the survey. Participants were asked a pre-qualifying question on whether they were located in Canada. Out of the 610 participants, 45% identified as Canadian ethnicity and 16% as Indigenous Canadian ethnicity. The remainder identified themselves with ethnicities from around the globe. Overall, 68% identified as being a member of a racialized group and 26% stated they had a declared disability, while 58% were women and 41% were men, fully 80% had some form of childcare responsibilities, while 44% stated they were working from home and 81% were under the age of 44.

In analyzing the survey data, we were able to highlight differences in participants' responses based on race (i.e., racialized versus non-racialized), gender (i.e., women versus men)<sup>1</sup> and differences in ability (i.e., those with a disability versus those without a disability).<sup>2</sup> Many of the results generated from this analysis are in line with the findings from other empirical studies summarized in this report's introduction. At the same time, some of the results show distinctive nuances that even we, as researchers, found challenging given our presumptions based on popular media.

Our nine main findings relate to the impact of COVID-19 for participants on their: (i) incomes, (ii) work day, (iii) mental health, (iv) amount of time spent on family support, (v) relations with their manager, (vi) transparency of their organization's policies and programs, (vii) perceptions of differential treatment within their organization, (viii) perceptions of support by their organization, and (ix) workplace relations. Race as opposed to gender was a key differentiator in the case of the first seven findings, and gender as opposed to race in the last two. Differences in ability were a key differentiator in the case of four of the findings.

We look at each in turn.

- i. ***Changes in income.*** A negative change in income was more common for racialized survey participants (77% for both women and men) than for non-racialized participants (71% for women and 64% for men) and more common for participants with a disability than for those without (82% versus 71%). These results correlate with evidence from other research, with

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<sup>1</sup> Our in-depth analysis did not include other gender categories because the number of participants identifying with these categories was too low to be able to incorporate them.

<sup>2</sup> Our in-depth analysis did not divide the individual groups – racialized women, non-racialized women, racialized men, and non-racialized men – into those with and without a declared disability because the number of participants with a declared disability was too low to be able to undertake this division.

the differences typically attributed to the precarity of many of the jobs in which racialized individuals and individuals with a disability find employment.

- ii. ***Changes in the work day.*** A negative change in the work day was more common for non-racialized participants (51% for men and 49% for women) than for racialized participants (43% for men and 42% for women), with little difference for participants with a disability and those without (47% versus 44%). This racial difference may be attributable to issues of perception. When compared with non-racialized workers, racialized workers are often in positions where disruption and instability is typical, so that the changes brought about by COVID-19 were perceived as less of a change, due to differences in resilience. There is a growing body of literature that supports such a conclusion. For example, studies by University of Michigan researchers have been studying the so-called Black-White health paradox, which can be defined as less frequent depression despite a higher prevalence of chronic medical conditions among blacks compared to whites in the USA. This can be attributed at least a part, say these researchers, to differences in resilience (Assari et al. 2015).
- iii. ***Impact on mental health.*** A negative impact on mental health was more common for non-racialized participants (63% for men and 61% for women) than for racialized participants (58% for women and 43% for men), with little difference for participants with a disability and those without (52% versus 55%). One possible explanation for the higher incidence of mental health issues among non-racialized than racialized individuals is that, as in (ii) above, the non-racialized individuals may not have the same built-in resilience to the vagaries of fate that many racialized individuals have as a result of their own personal backgrounds or those of family members. This result serves as a useful reminder that employers should be as aware of the mental health challenges among non-racialized employees as they are of the same challenges among racialized employees.
- iv. ***Amount of time spent on family support.*** An increase in the amount of time spent on family support was more common for racialized participants (74% for both women and men) than for non-racialized participants (67% for women and 68% for men), with little difference for participants with a disability and those without (68% versus 73%). The fact that race is the main dividing factor in this area goes against a priori assumptions that it would be women, both racialized and non-racialized, who experience the greatest family effects. One possible explanation is that racialized individuals in Canada, on average, had an appreciably higher incidence of COVID-19 than non-racialized individuals (Thompson et al., 2021), which meant the need for support in their family situations was greater. This result serves as a useful reminder that researchers need to be careful in assuming which dimension of intersectionality will dominate over others in any particular context.
- v. ***Relations with management.*** A perceived positive change in relations with their manager was more common for racialized participants (26% for women and 24% for men) than for non-racialized participants (16% for men and 15% for women) and more common for

participants with a disability than for those without (39% versus 16%). The direction of this racial difference goes against the findings found in most other studies, and could be revealing aspects of the work experience of non-racialized individuals that have not been widely studied. The result related to ability likely flows from the fact that managers are likely to be more sympathetic to individuals with a disability. In addition, these individuals can benefit from accommodation procedures available under provincial government legislation (AODA in Ontario).

- vi. ***Transparency of organizations' policies and programs.*** The perception that their organization was not transparent about their policies and programs to assist in the removal of workplace and COVID-related obstacles was more common for non-racialized participants (71% for men and 73% for women) than for racialized participants (50% for men and 53% for women) and more common for participants without a disability than for those with (69% versus 24%). The racial difference could be due to the fact that non-racialized individuals may have been able to judge the transparency of their organization's policies and programs through the use of informal channels to address questions and concerns—something they are likely to be more comfortable with than racialized individuals. The result for ability likely follows from the same reasons as in (v) above: the fact that managers are likely to be more sympathetic to individuals with a disability. In addition, these individuals can benefit from accommodation procedures available under AODA.
- vii. ***Differential treatment by employers.*** Perceived differential treatment by employers between male identified and female and nonbinary employees was more common for racialized participants (35% for both men and women) than for non-racialized participants (15% for men and 10% for women) and more common for participants with a disability than for those without (64% versus 16%). These results correlate with evidence from other research.
- viii. ***Support by organizations.*** A perceived increase in support by their organization was more common for men (75% for racialized and 62% for non-racialized) than for women (58% for racialized and 56% for non-racialized), with little difference for participants with a disability and those without (65% versus 63%). The result for gender is potentially an issue of perception, especially given the significant body of empirical evidence which suggests that women have been more affected by the pandemic than men (Jones, 2021).
- ix. ***Workplace relations.*** A perceived negative change in workplace relations was more common for women (26% for non-racialized and 25% for racialized) than for men (20% for both non-racialized and racialized), with no difference for participants with and without a disability (23% in each case.) The dominance of gender over race in the results could be due to the fact that workplace-based relationships with colleagues are more important for women. As for the dimension of race, it is possible that working at a distance, as was the case for so many during COVID-19, reduced racial visibility and conflict in the workplace to the potential benefit of



racialized employees. Indeed, there is empirical evidence to suggest exactly this (Business Wire, 2022).

### **Our Participants' Feedback in Their Own Words**

Some of our participants had interesting things to say that helped shine light on the quantitative results supporting our findings. We provide a sampling of these comments, grouped by relevant finding, below:

#### **(i) *Changes in income***

I have watched my former colleagues in the restaurant and hospitality sector suffer terrible insecurity as their workplaces were repeatedly opened and shut-down without warning or notice.

Many people have gained business opportunities during this pandemic, and many have lost their jobs as a result

A lot of people can't find jobs. I have a part-time job now and occasionally get a little income. I hope the virus is over soon.

#### **(ii) *Changes in the work day***

Working from home saved me a lot of time with my commute. It also gave me a safe and comfortable place to work from, and the flexibility to manage my ADHD better. It also resulted in more "insider" information being shared because there were fewer "water cooler" conversations from which I was excluded.

Fewer interruptions during the day means I can focus better to complete my tasks and prioritize accordingly

#### **(iii) *Impact on mental health***

The 100% WFH impacted me negatively because my anxiety and feelings of isolation increased. My sleep patterns have changed. I exercise regularly and eat healthy, but the mental health aspect is still worse than before the pandemic.

Though the pandemic made my work life better, it also made me realize my mental health would be improved by having a physical separation of work and home and more in person interaction with coworkers. My current company is 100% WFH though we have a workspace. My team is all over Canada so despite the workspace, I'm still missing the interaction with my coworkers.

#### **(iv) *Amount of time spent on family support.***

You have to be conscious that parents can't be online and available to work 24/7. People must feel able to say, I can't work for these hours but I'm available at these times.

More flexibility in scheduling meetings and completion of tasks. If I have a family-related responsibility during the day, I can complete the work later in the evening. The flexibility is key.

As a solo parent, my baby got sick quite a lot when he went into daycare and I went back to work. I don't have family nearby so if he gets a fever or a cough, I can go get him and still usually salvage some of my workday. When we transitioned back to in person work two days a week, a call from the daycare means I have to drive home and I end up missing most of the workday and have to take a sick day.

My productivity has increased many folds and provided me more flexibility to schedule my work and personal commitments. I would love to continue working from home for the rest of my career.

(v) ***Relations with management***

I actually got a new position so this is about my previous boss. Her style was already “micromanager” before the pandemic. During the pandemic it became a serious issue. Because technology allowed her different ways of watching over my work, it became nearly threatening. She would virtually sit inside my documents and watch me work. She would use g-chat to message me at 7:30 AM so the second I came online I would need to reply (meaning a few minutes past 9 would be “caught”). Likewise, she would message at 4:58 PM to make sure I was still working. I had to leave the position because the surveillance was overwhelming.

(vi) ***Transparency of organizations' policies and programs***

Felt unsupported with trying to balance work and childcare. Employer brought in self care and wellness experts but it is a systemic issue and not just an individual counselling issue.

There is less communication and less timely communication

Need 100% coverage for mental health services, not pushing a return to work every chance they had when COVID rates started to reduce (before they increased again), making performance expectations clear, training managers on how to be good managers virtually, increased efforts to address equity issues, greater flexibility

In retrospect there should have been intentional “team building” events

(vii) ***Differential treatment by employers***

Women were given jobs with less money and easier things to do.

Companies are laying off workers because of the pandemic! In some positions, companies are willing to keep men and cut women! But the women didn't do anything wrong and had been doing a good job, and the company used all sorts of reasons not to hire them

Some of our coworkers were paid more than others for the same position (e.g., one male co-worker made \$24/hr while I made \$18/hr in the same position).

**(viii) *Support by organizations***

My boss is very attentive to me

The communication between me and my manager during the COVID-19 pandemic went from face to face to phone to phone, which led to more trust between us.

**(ix) *Workplace relations***

I honestly think it's better. I know much has been made about "running into people in the halls" and having spontaneous conversations but when I'm at work, those a huge time sucks and to me they just add to the pressure to work outside of hours to make up the time. I love my 1:1s and zoom meetings with my colleagues. I think we collaborate well this way. And I put bookable "coffee chats" in my public calendar so colleagues can say hello without a reason. And they use it.

I feel like I developed closer, more honest relationships with some of my colleagues who I never would have met otherwise because they are in other locations. Going virtual leveled access to them for me (for some of them, it did not because they were front line)

We don't get to eat dinner with colleagues for long periods of time, and we don't get to do the things we love together

## **5. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FUTURE WORK**

- A. As illustrated by finding (ii) changes in the work day, researchers formulating agendas on topics related to diversity, equity and inclusion need to take care not to make a priori assumptions concerning the significance of one dimension of intersectionality over another. As supported by the studies we cited above, dimensions of diversity actually lead to some advantages for these individuals. This highlights WINS' belief that we should not always focus on what particular individuals lack; we should also keep in mind what strengths they bring to the table.
- B. As illustrated by finding (iii) impact on mental health, mental health challenges for non-racialized individuals need to be given as much attention by employers as these same challenges for racialized individuals. As we are living in a more precarious world, government and employers need to create more social infrastructure geared towards promoting the mental health of socioeconomically challenged segments of our society, whether they are racialized or non-racialized.
- C. As illustrated by finding (vi) transparency of organizations' policies and programs, organizations must emphasize policies and programs related to COVID-19 and its aftereffects, given that perceptions over the transparency of these policies differ so much between different employees, especially on the basis of race. Organizations should invest in training managers to be good at managing remotely and increase efforts to enhance equity and create greater flexibility for employees in the workplace.

- D. As illustrated by finding (ix) workplace relations, there is considerable evidence of positive impacts for a significant portion of employees who are working from home. Employers need to understand that remote work is not all bad, since so many studies show that there are benefits to working from home. The main issue is to offer more work-life balance regardless of whether a job is onsite, remote or hybrid.

## **6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **7. CONNECT WITH US**

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