

RACISM, XENOPHOBIA AND HATE IN CANADA

(Life and Mission Agency – Justice Ministries report, A&P 2021, p. 427–29, 38)

ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/JUST/report-29/presbyterian.ca/wp-content/uploads/Racism-and-Hate-in-Canada-Study-Guide_revised.pdf

A previous version of this section of the report, which was originally a section from the 2020 Justice Ministries interim report, has been adapted and expanded into a study guide called “Racism and Hate in Canada” which is now available on the Social Action Hub. This section of the 2021 Justice Ministries report includes updated statistics and material as well as recommendations which are not part of the study guide.

Canada is increasingly racially diverse and the number of Canadians who see this as a positive thing is on the rise – though that number still appears to fall just shy of a majority of Canadians.²⁸ It is not surprising, then, that despite an encouraging trend, racism and xenophobia continue to be serious problems in Canadian society. In fact, while an increasing amount of Canadians are identifying that racism is a problem that does not belong in Canadian society, there is also an increase in the number of Canadians who are becoming attracted to or recruited by far right racist groups; a recent study found that there are over 6,600 social media channels and accounts based in Canada that are advocating right-wing extremism.²⁹ This past year (2020) has brought the issue of systemic racism increasingly into the public eye, as crimes based on hate, including race-based hate, continue an upward trend even as more people start speaking out.

Rising Hate: racist or xenophobic harm and violence

Recent data from across the country shows that there is an increasing number of people in Canada who escalate racist or xenophobic thinking to acts of hatred or even physical violence. It has become clear, for example, that hate crimes in Canada are on the rise. According to data from Statistics Canada’s 2019 report entitled “Police-reported hate crime in Canada, 2017”:

- “In 2017, police reported 2,073 criminal incidents in Canada that were motivated by hate, an increase of 47% or 664 more incidents than reported the previous year.
- The increase in the total number of incidents was largely attributable to an increase in police-reported hate crimes motivated by hatred of a religion (+382 incidents) or of a race or ethnicity (+212 incidents).
- Between 2016 and 2017, the number of police-reported crimes motivated by hatred of a race or ethnicity increased 32%, from 666 to 878. Much of this increase was a result of more hate crimes targeting the Black (+107 incidents) and Arab and West Asian populations (+30 incidents). Hate crimes targeting the Black population remained one of the most common types of hate crimes (16% of all hate crimes [reported]).
- Compared with 2016, the number of police-reported hate crimes motivated by religion rose 83% in 2017, from 460 to 842. Hate crimes against all religions saw increases. Police-reported crimes motivated by hate against the Muslim population rose from 139 incidents to 349 incidents in 2017 (+151%). Hate crimes against the Jewish population continued to rise in 2017, from 221 to 360 incidents (+63%).”

It is important to note that these statistics represented reported hate crime; communities who are hesitant to report crimes targeting them due to issues such as mistrust of police or social services will be underrepresented in this data. The data from 2018 has since become available and it has shown a decrease from 2017 but Statistics Canada notes in its study, “Police Reported Hate Crimes in Canada, 2018”, that even with that decrease, 2018 still had the highest level of reported hate crimes than any other year in the last ten years except for 2017. As of writing (February 2021) The data for 2019 and 2020 has yet to become available, though preliminary numbers from 2019 show an increase over 2018 that still falls below the record numbers from 2017.³⁰

In addition to statistics such as those listed above, there is a deeply concerning rise of white supremacism groups, certainly south of our border but also here in Canada. For example, Barbara Perry, an expert on hate crimes and professor in the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology has noted that there are currently “at minimum” 130 active far-right extremist groups across Canada, which she points out is an increase of around 30 percent from 2015. She adds, “Most of these groups are organized around ideologies against certain religions and races, with anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiments being the most common, followed by hatred for immigrants, Indigenous people, women, LGBTQ communities and other minority groups.”³¹ One of the groups that was active at the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol building in Washington D.C. was a Canadian-founded group, the Proud Boys, which – after its involvement in that attack became clear – has just been designated a terrorist organization.

Hate groups such as the Proud Boys, often collectively referred to now as the “Alt Right”, actively recruit new members to their cause. Those who have left the movement explain that a primary recruitment tactic in Canada is using people who look and seem respectable to be the “face” of recruitment or interacting with the public. These individuals then find people dealing who are struggling with insecurity, including in areas such as job loss or relationships. They identify the types of fears that person is experiencing and exploit those fears, blaming target minority groups such as those listed in the statistics above for the hardship, pain or anxiety someone who is economically or relationally vulnerable is experiencing and offering them a purported solution – to disempower or harm target groups in order to supposedly “regain” the power, wealth, security or sexual relationships they “should” have instead, “by natural right”.³²

Uncertain times and economic hardship increase the opportunities for these groups to recruit. As more people become insecure, their vulnerability to being radicalized based on their lack of security and the supposed security and power the group offers, is heightened. Narratives that equate “free speech” with hate speech or misinformation and “government control” with health measures taken, for example, during the pandemic, are often used to stoke fears. Many of the groups are recruiting heavily using narratives about lockdowns during the pandemic being aimed at “taking away our freedoms” or supporting conspiracy theories put forward by groups such as QAnon that work to undermine people’s trust in any description of reality not espoused by the group.³³ In short, the groups function in ways similar to a cult. As many of these hate groups have white supremacy as a founding ideal, (as well, often, as misogyny) the means and goals they pursue are explicitly racist, have the aim of furthering white supremacy and harming anyone who the group either considers not white or (if white) not living according to the group’s ideals.

These trends of increased hate crimes and a rise in white supremacy in Canada are troubling but the church is not powerless to address them and could be a voice and a model of how racism and xenophobia must be rejected in favour of inclusive and anti-racist communities. Indeed, as early as 1972, The Presbyterian Church in Canada stated, “Racism practiced by the white-skinned against their darker-skinned brothers is one of the world’s basic problems and a blatant denial of the Christian faith.” (A&P 1972, p. 269–70, 59) This statement was made in the context of Apartheid but the sentiment that racism is “a blatant denial of the Christian faith” remains. There is no place in Christian belief, practice or identity for white supremacy – or any kind of racism.

Racism disrupts the heart of society, cutting through community relationships and alienating neighbour from neighbour. More than that, it speaks the message that some people are worth less than others and so it matters less if bad things happen to them. The effects of such messages are chillingly apparent in the statistics cited in this report and in other reports such as the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls discussed earlier. Addressing and ending racism and white supremacy – which is not only the product of hate groups but as a founding tenet of systemic racism and the Doctrine of Discovery is present throughout Canadian culture – is further complicated by the fact that many of the communities targeted can be hesitant to speak to police. This is due to a significant history of racism in police forces in Canada as well, which we speak about below. This history, which continues to manifest itself today, has taken the shape of racial profiling,³⁴ overrepresentation of minorities being arrested and harsher sentencing for minorities,³⁵ and even police brutality and statistically increased likelihood of lethal force being used by police against minorities. A look at the numbers is telling: “Indigenous people make up only 4.8% of the population yet represented 15% of total fatalities [of civilians shot by police]. Members of the Black community, which makes up only 3.4% of Canada’s population, represented 9% of the fatalities. Both racial groups are disproportionately affected by police violence relative to other ethnicities.”³⁶

Racism is deadly and this is one of the reasons Christians must speak out against it. In the words of professor and lawyer Pam Palmater from “Guns and White Supremacists Don’t Mix,” in *Macleans*: “Racism is lethal for Indigenous peoples and easy access to guns by those who hold racist views increase the risk. To treat gun control as sex-neutral or race-neutral further perpetuates the risk to women and Indigenous peoples. Canada should be engaging with First Nations and Indigenous women’s groups to address the threat of gun violence by both white nationalist hate groups and individuals with extreme right-wing, racist views.” As we can see in incidents such as the 2017 shootings at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec, the 2018 shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the 2015 Charleston Church shooting of Black parishioners, racism is deadly for other groups too.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada continues to work to find ways to eliminate racism and xenophobia in its policies and practices, including ways to build and maintain an ethos where racism is pre-empted by fulsome and faithful love. As we continue to work toward achieving these goals, as some of the recommendations in the section of our report on the Doctrine of Discovery note, we need to continue to examine and update our policies and practices, to ensure they foster the kind of community in which racism and xenophobia can’t flourish.

Justice Ministries is involved in a time of listening, research and learning and will bring recommendations to the General Assembly next year on how the church can be faithful to its call as disciples of Christ and engage in ministry that is anti-racist.

Recommendation LMA-018 (adopted, p. 38)

That congregations and presbyteries be encouraged to study racism and xenophobia in Canada, especially ways the church can contribute to ending racism and xenophobia in Canada and in the church.

Justice Ministries can be contacted for an up-to-date list of resources and webinars that can be used for this purpose. The Canadian Council of Churches provides an extensive list of resources on anti-Black racism specifically, at interculturalleadership.ca/wp-content/uploads/Resources-Anti-Black-Racism-Canada.pdf.

Recommendation LMA-019 (adopted, p. 38)

That congregations be encouraged to study government resources such as “Taking Action to End Online Hate” or church resources such as “Racism and Hate in Canada” and discuss the problem of online radicalization for hate groups, especially the rising number of white supremacist or neo-Nazi groups and how to stop it.

“Racism and Hate in Canada” can be downloaded on the Social Action Hub at presbyterian.ca/justice/social-action/anti-racism. “Taking Action to End Online Hate” is the June 2019 report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights available at ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/JUST/Reports/RP10581008/justrp29/justrp29-e.pdf.