

## [What is systemic racism? There is broad national confusion about the concept](#)

*The idea of systemic racism is not about individual attitudes. It is about how society works. Good people can participate in systemic racism*

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RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki said that systemic racism exists in the force, but struggled to give any examples. PHOTO BY ADRIAN WYLD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

**ANALYSIS:** Systemic racism is a tough topic. Part of the problem is definitional, about what the word “racism” means and how it can be “systemic.” Conversations get trapped in cycles of mutual incomprehension, with people literally not talking about the same thing, and many ending up offended.

This week for example, Brenda Lucki, the RCMP Commissioner, stated definitively to a parliamentary committee that systemic

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[Video: Leaders couldn't agree on systemic racism says PM Trudeau](#)

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racism exists in the RCMP but, when asked for an example, described an obstacle course test for officers biased in favour of tall people, and “there are people in different cultures who may not be six feet including there’s not a lot of women that are six-feet tall that would not be able to get through that type of test.”

Then she mentioned an aptitude test before deferring the question to a subordinate.

Confusion over systemic racism goes deeper than political gaffes on hot button topics, to the philosophical concepts that frame our common understanding of race, society, and an individual’s place in it.

So, what is systemic racism? Does it have a different meaning than racism?

One way to think about racism is as a feeling of bias, scorn or disgust at people of other races in general, or one in particular. It is a private malice, a personal, internal, subjective, psychological phenomenon. Racism, on this view, is an emotion, a sort of hatred.

Canada’s First Ministers took this view in their statement on Thursday, in response to anti-racism protests, that “Hate has no place in Canada and will not be tolerated.”

The statement pledged unanimous support for urgent progress on “complex and long-standing issues,” but the very next day Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed disagreement behind the statement, saying he advocates a formal recognition of “systemic racism” in order to better address it, but there was not a consensus on this among provincial premiers.

There is broad national confusion about this concept. The suggestion that Canadian society is racist can sound insulting, because if Canada is racist, then Canadians themselves must be racist and full of hate.

This sense of insult is an obstacle to understanding what “systemic racism” means. A claim about society blurs into a claim about an individual. “Systemic racism” can come across as an accusation.

One way out of this mess is to get over one’s self.

The idea of systemic racism is not about individual attitudes. It is about how society works. Good people can participate in systemic racism.

As an Ontario Superior Court judge put it this month, in sentencing a 25-year-old Black man on gun charges, the offender’s life prospects were limited from birth by poverty and anti-Black racism in his Canadian society: “This was not simply the usual vicissitudes and general unfairness of life. It was systemic and structural.”

Thinking of racism as just a feeling is what allows for the metaphor of the “bad apple” as an explanation for police brutality, which ignores the botanical reality that bad apples spoil good ones. In Minneapolis, for example, one of the officers charged with aiding and abetting second

degree murder was being trained by the officer who asphyxiated George Floyd. If you consider racism just a feeling, then it is always the personal exception, never the systemic rule.



A still image from a video taken by a bystander on May 25, 2020, shows Minneapolis police arresting George Floyd. PHOTO BY DARNELLA FRAZIER/FACEBOOK/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Canada's anti-racism strategy has fallen into this conceptual trap, with its emphasis on attitudes rather than economic equality, said Anne-Marie Livingstone, a post-doctoral researcher on racial stratification and urban poverty, who is in the process of leaving Harvard University's Canada Program for the University of Toronto's Munk School program in Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies.

This theoretical confusion is part of the reason Canada's strategy is not working so well, Livingstone said.

She has researched police profiling in Montreal, for example, and found racism conceptualized as a problem of individual biases and errors, which left police leaders blind to how new laws on minor incivilities like loitering fell heaviest on Black kids in areas where police are more present, creating cycles of resentment, mistrust and pointless police involvement for young people.

It also blinded police to their own role in reproducing stereotypes about young Black men through public messaging with an emphasis on "street gangs," which grabbed more attention

as a racial explanation for social problems, far more than other factors like poverty, over which police have little control.

Livingstone identifies as Black and has grandparents from Jamaica, Guyana, Quebec, and the Netherlands. She grew up in Quebec where she was forced to position herself against an exclusionary society, which takes the historically unjustified view that “you’re either white or you’re not Quebec,” she said. “It has no room for confusion, like me.”

On race in Canada, however, confusion and uncertainty have always been the norm. It is bafflingly complex. Even the data are suspect, where they even exist, as many institutions have resisted calls to collect race-based data, such as Health Canada and provincial health ministries monitoring the pandemic, which have only recently pledged to start. Ontario’s police watchdog also said it would start collecting race data just this month.

In a conference this week on systemic racism with the Association for Canadian Studies, attendees heard the numbers that paint a systemic picture in which, for example, Black people in Toronto were ten times more likely to be carded by police, Black students were more likely to be expelled from school, and Black parents more likely to be investigated by child protective services.

The pandemic has offered an especially revealing glimpse of how Black Canadians have been disproportionately affected by the virus, not only because of higher rates of economic vulnerability and closer living conditions in the tower blocks that made up many of Toronto’s inner suburban community outbreaks, but also because of over-representation as frontline health-care workers.

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Even among those who professionally study these social patterns, race is poorly understood and applied as a concept for statistical analysis. Livingstone said it tends to be treated as a biological category of marking people in contrast to a presumed norm of whiteness.

Race is complex, she said, and cited her own research, and the discovery that in one cohort of high school students, Canada-born Black students had higher graduation rates than Canada-born white students, but the overall “Black” category was skewed down by lower achievement among recently arrived Black students. The whole thing promoted a false stereotype of race-based underachievement.

“In Canada, we like to think racism is marginal. It’s either not really serious, or we can deal with it afterwards, whereas in the U.S, it’s front and centre,” Livingstone said.

Not so, she said. Consider the policy of official multiculturalism. The ideology affirms the Canadian self-image of tolerance and cultural diversity, she said, but fails to account for differences in power, and therefore obscures inequality. “It’s amazing how taken for granted that is.”

The first and fundamental critique of multiculturalism, she said, which is often obscured when Canadians praise themselves for being so welcoming of people from distant lands, is about the place of Indigenous people, and how to square that with the nation’s professed values.



Dahabo Ahmed Omer of the Federation of Black Canadians. PHOTO BY JULIE OLIVER/POSTMEDIA/FILE

Canadians have a tendency to think the social changes of the latter 20th century settled the problems of systemic injustice once and for all, with legislated equality. Charter rights and official multiculturalism, makes it hard to see one’s country as racist.

Proud of their country, Canadians struggled during the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and are struggling now again over anti-Black racism.

It has been hard for many Canadians to take a systemic view of racism for the first time, confused by fast-moving protests and urgent conversations about matters of intense controversy.

It is hard even for the experts in the field. June Francis, director of the Simon Fraser University Institute for Diaspora Research and Engagement, said she is often asked to prove racism exists, and struggles to do so dispassionately, without reference to her own experiences as a victim of racism, which are emotionally harder to share than structural theories.

“I need therapy for them,” she said.

The time is past for pondering and debating what the problem might be or how to name it, Dahabo Ahmed Omer of the Federation of Black Canadians, and an organizer against police racism in Ottawa, inspired by the police killing of Abdirahman Abdi told the conference. “We know what the problem is. It’s time to save lives.”