

# THE INTERSECTION OF BLACKNESS & DISABILITY IN CANADA

A BRIEF OVERVIEW & A CALL TO ACTION

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report came out of a need to acknowledge the gaps in culturally responsive services for Black Canadians with disabilities. The disparities experienced by both Black Canadians and Canadians with disabilities have been well documented by federal agencies and community organizations such as The Wellesley Institute and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

However, little is known about the experiences of Black Canadians with disabilities who will experience disparities in education, employment, and entrepreneurship based on the intersection of anti-Black racism and ableism. When we examined the data separately, the following can be noted:

- Black people represented only 3.4% of the Canadian population, [1] with the largest population of Black Canadians residing within Ontario (52%). [1] Canada's Black population experienced higher unemployment rates (12.5% vs. 7.3%), [2] earned less than White Canadians (73¢ for every dollar) [2] and were more likely to have a slightly higher labour market participation (69% vs 64.8%). [2]
- 1 in 5 Canadians aged 15 and older had one or more disabilities. [3] Although 22% of Canadians had disabilities, [3] this population disproportionately experienced higher unemployment rates, with a reported 59.4% being employed in 2017 compared to 80% for those without disabilities. [3] Canadians with disabilities also had lower post-secondary degree attainment (13.2% vs. 20.7%) [3,4] and were more likely not to complete high school (27.4%) due to systemic ableism and inaccessibility. [3,4]
- With an intersectional analysis, we see that anti-Black racism, ableism, along with gender biases, this population is at an even higher risk of experiencing health, poverty, human rights violations, unemployment and underemployment, and overall exclusion from participating fully in the Canadian economy. [5-10]
- Consequently, the disparities in access to employment, entrepreneurship secure equitable income, and education contribute to poorer health and higher mortality rates, and increased use of government income programs. [5-10]

The limited inclusion of Black people with disabilities and apparent gaps in services, programs, and policies demonstrate that the intersectionality of race, gender, and disability is a critical area for research, service, and collective action. ÀŞË Community Foundation for Black Canadians with Disabilities is determined to identify these gaps and negated dialogues within the Black Disability community. They demonstrate the current siloed understanding researchers, policymakers, and service agencies have of the experiences and needs of Black Canadians with disabilities.

Recent research and subsequent policy decisions, including the Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism and the Ontario Anti-Black Racism Strategy, attempt to address systemic anti-Black racism across various sectors, but overlooks the importance and diverse experiences of those with intersecting identities such as race, gender, and disability. From the social determinants of health perspective, we can see how experiencing compounding oppression such as systemic anti-Black racism, gender bias, and ableism might contribute to how one accesses and fully participates in Canadian society. [11] A brief service scan was conducted to assess the availability of specialized services across Canada, and more research is critically needed in this area. From anecdotal evidence, it was not surprising that the results in this report were staggering, showing that services for Black Canadians and those with disabilities were often siloed and not working towards a more intersectional collective approach. [12] Services targeting this population must be culturally responsive to meet their unique needs grounded in anti-racism and disability justice.

# DISABILITY IN CANADA



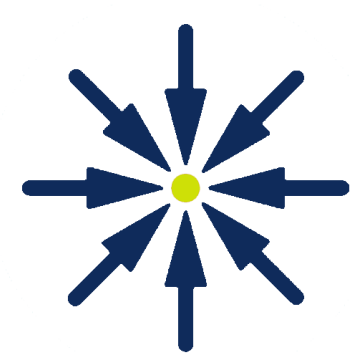
— In 2017, 1 in 5 Canadians aged 15 years and over had one or more disabilities. [3]

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes that "disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." [13]

In 2018, Statistics Canada released a report called *Canada Survey on Disability*, which showed that 22% of Canadians aged 15 years and over had one or more disabilities. [3] Furthermore, of the 6.2 million Canadians living with disabilities, approximately 21.4% of identified as immigrants. [14]

## Most Common Types of Disabilities in Canada

According to the report disabilities related to pain, flexibility, mobility, and mental health were the most common disability types reported in the survey. [3]



Pain-related  
15%



Flexibility  
10%



Mobility  
10%



Mental health-related  
10%

Seeing 5%

Hearing 5%

Dexterity 5%

Learning 4%

Memory 4%

Developmental 1%

Canadian's living with disabilities have historically encountered systematic exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination. [13] Canada instituted discriminatory policies that have restricted the immigration of persons with disabilities, forced sterilization, and institutionalization. [13]

Many persons living with disabilities are excluded from educational and employment opportunities due to multiple barriers - such as attitudinal and physical barriers etc. - making it difficult to actively participate. [13]

## Ableism & Barriers

Ableism refers to systemic and attitudes in society that devalue and exclude persons with disabilities from citizenship participation that has been grounded in a social construct of disability that paternalizes disability. [11,15] Thus, unsupportive and inaccessible environments tend to exacerbate disabilities intentionally excluding those with disabilities from participating in various facets of society. Systemic discrimination against people with disabilities is linked to a deficit view of those with disabilities and perceived to be a "burden" on society. [11]

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) reported that Ontarians with disabilities "have lower educational achievement levels, a higher unemployment rate, are more likely to have low-income status, and are less likely to live in adequate, affordable housing than people without disabilities.". [11]

The CRPD acknowledges how the intersections of disability, race, and gender may amplify a person's experiences of discrimination and impact their socio-economic outcomes. [13] Disability is said to be a "significant contributor to the number of workdays lost and the number of years of potential life lost, and is a good predictor of medical and social service utilization." [16]

## Historical Context of Structural Ableism in Canada

Canada's immigration policy in the 1880s was a deliberate project of replicating White British society, and those who were not White were "undesirable" and "unassimilable." [17] Racialized people were recruited only for their cheap labour and under "restrictive immigration policies", which exists today as the temporary migrant workers program. [17] Canadian immigration policy was and still remains rooted in racism, sexism, classism, and ableism where historically, these ideologies have worked to restrict racialized groups such as Black people and persons with disabilities.

Although The Immigration Act in 1967 underwent amendment, people with disabilities were still considered to be an "undesirable" class of immigrants to Canada. [11] More recently, in 2018 the Government of Canada announced changes to Section 38-1(C) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which excludes anyone who "might reasonably be expected to cause excessive demand on health or social services." [18,19]

The threshold for medical inadmissibility was increased to 99 thousand over 5 years (or 19 thousand per year). [19]

In the late 1920s to 1930s, people with disabilities were subjected to involuntary sterilization. [11] Both Alberta and British Columbia introduced sexual sterilization legislation and sterilized over 2,800 people with mental health and physical disabilities without their knowledge or consent. This law was repealed in 1972. [11]

People with disabilities have endured a long history of "institutionalization, seclusion and restraint". [11] As deinstitutionalization began from the 1960s, there was a lack of investing in ensuring accessibility, supportive living, and services to include the participation of people with disabilities. [11]

## Disability Policies in Canada

Upon till 2019 with the passing of the Accessible Canada Act, there were no federally mandated laws that were proactive in addressing accessibility and the inclusion of people with disabilities. The legislation has a mandate to "create a barrier-free Canada through the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to accessibility wherever Canadians interact with areas under federal jurisdiction." [20,21]

Human rights and employment equity have long existed and denounce the discrimination of people with disabilities and have legislated responsibility to accommodate. Although laws such as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantee people with disabilities the right to equal protection it was not proactive in providing legal rights to be full participants in society without barriers. [21] To date, the only provinces with disability policies include Quebec (Quebec's Act Respecting Equal Access to Employment in Public Bodies), Ontario (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities



Act), Manitoba (Accessibility for Manitobans Act), and Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Accessibility Act). [20]

These disability-specific legislations set out accessibility standards in customer service, transportation, built environment, employment and information and communications, that public and private organizations must implement within a certain timeframe. [21]

For further reading regarding the institutionalization and exclusion of people with disabilities please visit Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO) who has compiled a timeline of key events in disability rights since the 1800s which can be accessed here:

<https://www.djno.ca/history-of-disability-justice-right>



# Black Canadians with disabilities.

According to the 2016 Canadian census data, Black people represented only 3.4% of the total Canadian population. [1] The Black population in Canada is highly concentrated within certain regions – for example, 79% of Black people live in either Ontario or Quebec, where 52% live in Ontario and 27% live in Quebec. [1,22] Black people also represented 5% of Ontario's population and 4% of Quebec's population. [1,22] 7.4% of Toronto's population is Black. [23]

**Black people with disabilities** have multiple identities where they may experience multiple forms of discrimination and consequently require specialized and culturally responsive supports [7].

According to an American study that analyzed the 2006 American Community Survey, Black people fare worse than White people from chronic conditions to disability. [16] Furthermore, in 2018 the Disability Statistics Compendium argued that Black Americans with disabilities are being left behind even as more people with disabilities enter the workforce. [24] In the United States, the employment rate for Black Americans with disabilities is 28.6% compared to 73.7% among Black Americans without disabilities. [24] Due to the lack of race-based data little is known about the breakdown of employment outcomes for Black Canadians with disabilities.

## Cultural Perception of Disabilities

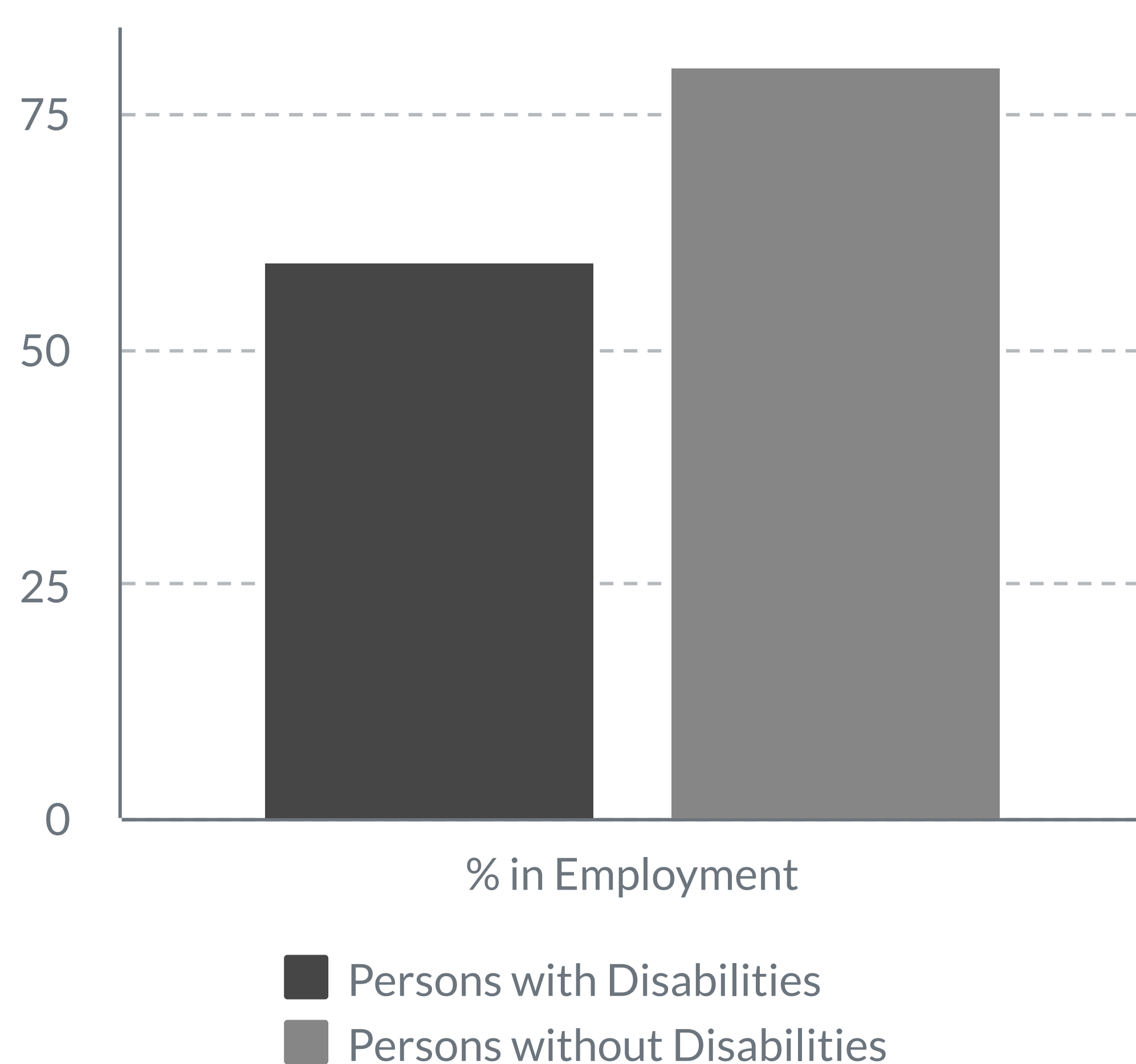
A UK study that evaluated a culturally responsive *Making Change Happen* program found that some racialized persons with disabilities sometimes experienced discrimination and prejudice within their own community and faith groups. [16] Due to ableist and paternalist notions of people living with disabilities, most are met with low expectations of their ability to participate in society, and in turn, "reduces their own aspirations, self-confidence and expectations." [12]

Religious and cultural identity forms a core part of racialized peoples' sense of self which is essential to structuring resilience. While religion and culture might influence how various communities approach disabilities and can present as a factor in stigmatizing racialized people with disabilities, it might also be a source of "inspiration and motivation for working to improve support for disabled people" within their communities. [12]

# DISPARITIES IN EMPLOYMENT

— Among those with disabilities who were not employed, 39% had “potential” to work. [3]

Disability in Canada correlates negatively with employment rates, income, education, and housing. [25] Canadians with disabilities aged 25 to 64 years were less likely to be employed (59%) than those without disabilities (80%). [3] People with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be living in poverty than people without disabilities (22.9% vs. 9.1%). [4]



Research has shown how the rates of employment for people with disabilities vary significantly depending on the severity of their disability. 76% of individuals with mild disabilities were employed and 31% of those with very severe disabilities were employed. [3,4] Persons with more severe disabilities (28%) were more likely to be living in poverty than their counterparts without disabilities (10%) or with milder disabilities (14%). [3]

A 2013 report examining incoming sources among persons with disabilities living in poverty found that two-thirds of their total income comprised of government transfers (65.2%)

and about a third is from private market sources (34.8%), with earnings comprising about a quarter (wages and salaries at 23.7% and self-employment at 2.5%). [26] The report noted that the total national average income among people with disabilities living in poverty was \$10,335, where the highest (\$11,482) was reported in Alberta, Ontario (\$10,693), and Manitoba (10,532) and the lowest were reported in New Brunswick (\$7,771), Newfoundland and Labrador (\$8,432) and Nova Scotia (\$8,565). [26]

Among those with disabilities who were not employed, 39% had “potential” to work. [3] In 2002, Health Canada estimated that “the annual indirect financial cost to the Canadian economy in terms of lost productivity stemming from the non-employment of people with long-term disabilities was \$32.2 billion in 1998, which translates to \$40.2 in 2008 dollars.” [4]

## Educational Attainment

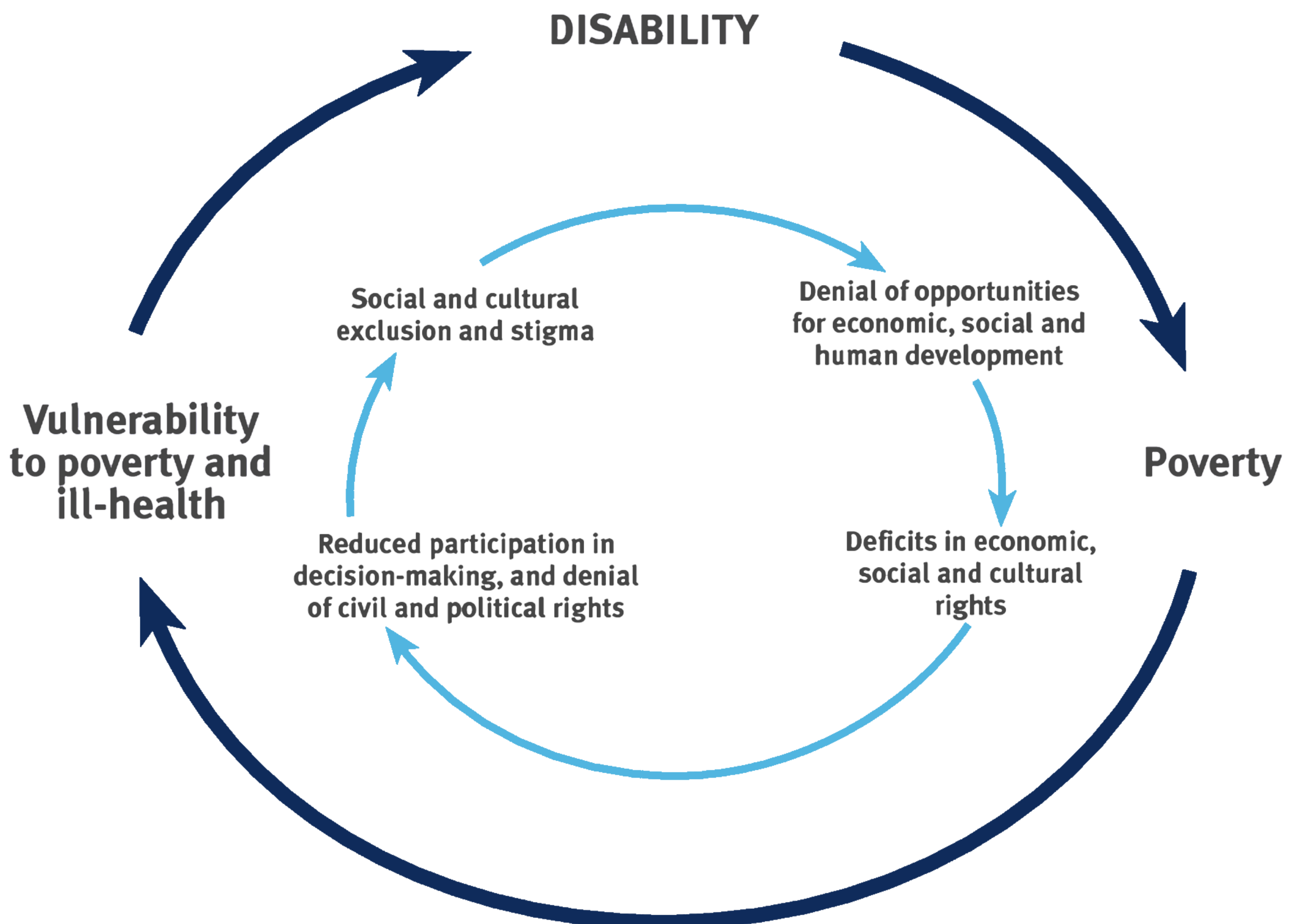
Educational attainment has a positive bearing on employment and income. [3,4] However, people with disabilities have lower levels of education in that they are more likely not to graduate from high school (27.4%), compared with 18.3% of people without disabilities. [3,4] People with disabilities are also less likely to have a degree or other certificate from a university (13.2% vs. 20.7%). [3,4]

It is important to note that higher levels of educational attainment for people with disabilities did not significantly increase the chances of employment or income security as the poverty rate was still high among people with disabilities regardless of education. [3] People with disabilities who have a degree from a university were 1.5 times more likely instead of twice as likely to have low incomes. [4]

## Disability Poverty Cycle

Poverty occurs as a result of structural violence and in addition to not having access to resources, vulnerable populations such as people with disabilities and Black people are unable to access resources due to discrimination and intentional and unintentional exclusion. [5] "Because disability and poverty are inextricably linked, poverty can never be eradicated until disabled people enjoy equal rights with non-disabled people." [5] This means that having a disability might lead to poverty on the individual and their family due to institutional and attitudinal barriers, and poverty might cause disabilities due to the lack of access to the social determinants of health (secure work and income, nutrition, healthcare etc.). [6]

Canadians with disabilities experience a disproportionately high level of poverty and being poor increases their chances of having a disability and reduced their access to vital services. [4,7]



Grech, S.. (2002). **Disability, poverty and development**. World hospitals and health services

## Racialization of Poverty

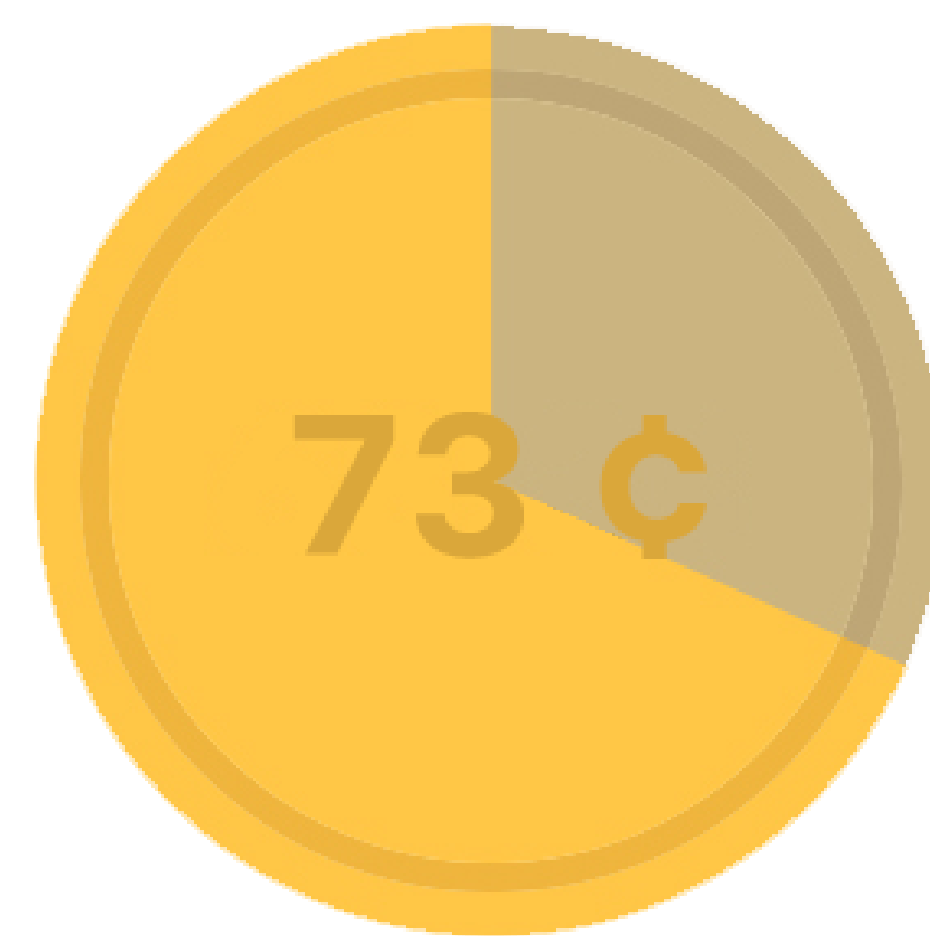
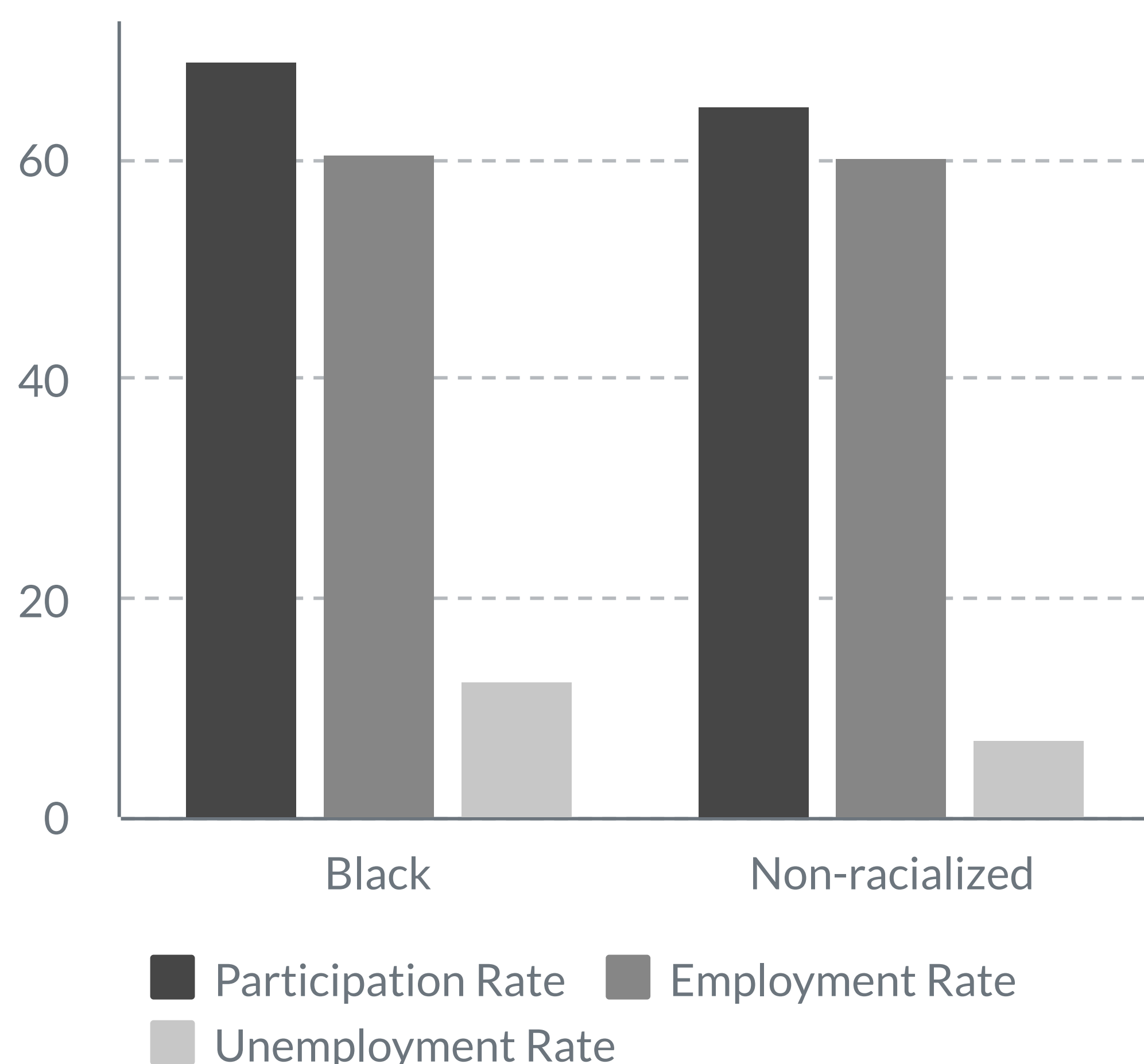
It is important to note that poverty is not evenly distributed and in Canada, the gap between rich and poor is widening and disproportionately impacts racialized communities. [8] 23.9% of Black Canadians are living in poverty. [9] Because of this gap, racialized people living in poverty are more likely to have poorer health, lower education, and fewer job opportunities, than non-racialized people. [10] Structural and Systemic racism plays a significant role in excluding and creating disadvantaged conditions and barriers for racialized people in accessing resources.

# RACIAL DISPARITIES IN INCOME

— Racialized Canadians have slightly higher levels of labour market participation, yet they continue to experience higher levels of unemployment and earn less income than non-racialized Canadians. [27]

The 2016 census showed that Black Canadians were more likely to be active in the labour force with participation rates of 69% compared to non-racialized Canadians at 64.8%. [2] Despite their high participation rates, Black Canadians have higher unemployment rates (12.5%) than their non-racialized counterparts 7.3%. [2]

## Employment, unemployment and participation rates by racialized group: Canada, 2016



## Racialization of Poverty & The Poverty Disability Cycle

The systemic barriers which intentionally exclude people of colour and disabled people from participating in the labour force in secure jobs have created not only a racialized and disability income gap which has been proven to negatively impact their health and well-being]. [28] Both the racialization of poverty and the poverty disability cycle demonstrates how poverty is disproportionately concentrated and reproduced among vulnerable communities across generations. [27]

## Social Determinants of Health Approach

A social determinant of health approach (SDOH), "considers the full range of modifiable economic and political conditions that lead to poor health outcomes and systemic health disparities." [37] Access to employment and secure working conditions are linked to health and health equity. [37]

The disproportionate representation racialized people and persons with disabilities in poverty is a direct result of a lack of access to the labour market creating financial insecurity, lack of personal and career development and actively participate in society.

## Income Distribution

Black Canadian workers earn 73 cents for every dollar paid to non-racialized Canadians. [2] The income gap is caused by the unequal distribution of higher-paying and secure jobs where many racialized workers are disproportionately represented in precarious low paying jobs. [28]



- Black students become “early leavers” of high school at higher rates – 23% compared to 12% of white students. [29]

***Anti-black racism is prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotyping, and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement. Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices, such that anti-Black racism is either functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the larger White society. [30]***

After the 1992 Yonge Street Riots then Premier on Ontario, Bob Rae commissioned Stephen Lewis to author a report on race relations in response. Lewis specifically named anti-Black racism as a potential cause for the uprising and lists the disenfranchisement of Black people from the mainstream as symptoms. Lewis noted that Black people were disproportionately unemployed, shot by police, inappropriately streamed in schools, and dropping out of school. [31]

Anti-Black racism manifests in different ways within society and is not always as obvious as one might think. Schools are said to be a microcosm of society where various forms of oppression are reproduced. [32] There are five stereotypes of Black students which causes disengagement, they were seen as immigrants, athletes, father-less, troublemakers and underachievers. [33] Anti-Black racism in high schools manifests in the disproportionate "drop-out" rates and the academic streaming of Black students in applied courses based on educators' implicit racial biases. [33] Educational streaming is described as the “grouping of students based on perceived ability and/or potential.” [34] Anti-Black racism plays a hand in the implicit biases and low expectations teachers have of Black students and explain why Black students are placed in courses that were below their ability, which is tied to the low expectations teachers

and school staff have of them. [34]

Despite the practice of academic streaming formally ending in 1999, Black students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) are twice as likely to be enrolled in applied courses instead of academic courses compared to their non-Black counterparts, which limits their opportunity for university education. [34] Students in “applied English and Math classes were less likely to: meet the provincial standards on math and reading tests; graduate high school; and attend post-secondary education.” [34]

Schools located in low-income areas tend to have more applied courses, which might be a symptom of poor funding allocation. Schools in these areas with a predominantly racialized population were not set up to support students to take academic courses hence they offer more applied classes that are attended by students from lower-income families. [34] The assumption is made that Black students lack the capacity to succeed in academic courses or their unsuitability for post-secondary education. [34] When these students graduate from high school, “they are often unprepared to find suitable employment, and if and when they do, they are likely to be trapped in precarious”, low-wage jobs, thus creating a cycle of precarity. [34]

“[C]hildren in low-income neighbourhoods, where limited resources and poverty were part of their reality, start with disadvantages that are made worse by a school system that does not help them overcome these disadvantages.” [34] Evidence of the effects can be seen in a 2015 TDSB student which indicated that 43% of Black students did not apply to post-secondary education and a higher percentage (21% versus 14%) applied to college. [34]

# Service scan across Canada & next steps.

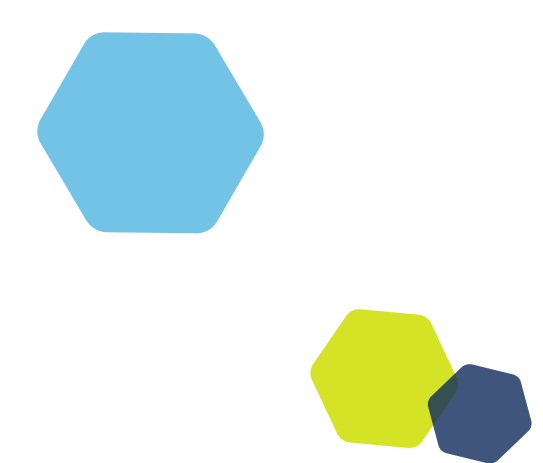
- Evidence from research suggests inappropriate, under-resourced services, results in high levels of unmet need among Black disabled people. [12]

There is a lack of integrative and specialized services that cater to Black Canadians with disabilities which aims at disrupting the poverty disability cycle and the racialization of poverty. The available services were siloed and singularly focused by offering either mentorship and career development programs for Black youths or only for persons with disabilities which might lack the nuances of the person's intersecting identities. Their experience of anti-Black racism and ableism in mainstream service provision often meant that minority ethnic users requested specialist, culturally responsive services. [12] This means that Black disabled people must choose between ethnocultural supports and support for disabled people - wherein disability services can be culturally inappropriate; services for Black people can be inaccessible to disabled people. [12]

## Next Steps

It is our hope that we disrupt the mainstream imagination of people with disability where a "normal disabled body" is constructed as a "white, straight, middle-class, wheelchair-using, mentally and emotionally normative man with citizenship" and shift to include a Black feminist understanding that includes Black disabled bodies. [35] The mainstream depicts and stereotypes Black bodies as "unvictimizable" and "dominant cultural representations of Blackness impede recognition of suffering, injury, and loss experienced" by Black people. [36]

We also hope to expand the narrative and acknowledge the need for a cultural shift and call for policy, research, and services that recognizes the intersection of race and disability, in particular, Blackness and Disability.



# NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

**Ableism** is defined as a belief system, analogous to racism, sexism or ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities. [11]

**Anti-black racism** is prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotyping, and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement. Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices, such that anti-Black racism is either functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the larger White society. [30]

**Disability** covers a broad range and degree of conditions. A disability may have been present at birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time. Section 10 of the Code defines “disability” as:

1. any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical coordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,
2. a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,
3. a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
4. a mental disorder, or
5. an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997*. [37]

**Disability Justice** is a framework that examines disability and ableism as it relates to other forms of oppression and identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, incarceration, size, etc.). [38] Patty Berne writes that a Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. [39] All bodies are caught in these bindings of ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation-state and imperialism and that we cannot separate them. [39]

**Racialized** is often referred to as “visible minority” by Statistics Canada and the Government of Canada and encompasses all people that are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour. [30,40] This definition includes those who self-identify as South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, mixed-race, and others who identify as non-White and non-Indigenous. [30]

**Structural Ableism** is derived from unchecked ableism has created a world in which people with disabilities face endless barriers to empowerment and liberation. One major mechanism of ableist structural violence is economic injustice; this, perhaps, has been the most recognizable form of indirect violence for disabled people. Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of disability, forming the disability-poverty circle. [41]

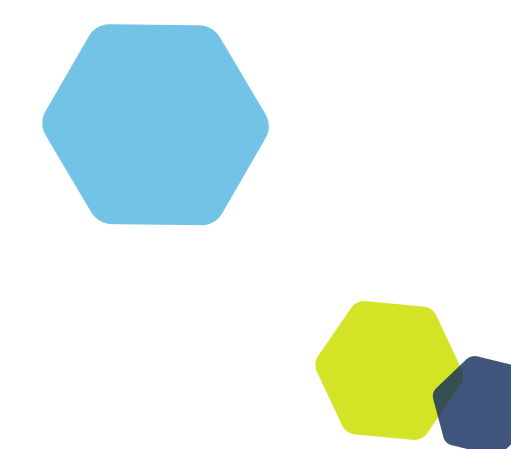
**Structural Racism** is a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. [42] It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy – the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people. [43] Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead, it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist. [42]

# NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

**Systemic Ableism** is described as the physical barriers, policies, and practices that get in our way and exclude [disabled folks] from full participation and equal opportunity. It is also the ongoing failure of people to fix these things. Systemic Ableism relies on normativity or “the way things are”, which passively [excludes disabled folks]. [44]

**Systemic Racism** or “institutional racism”, refers to how ideas of white superiority are captured in everyday thinking at a systems-level: taking in the big picture of how society operates, rather than looking at one-on-one interactions. These systems can include laws and regulations, but also unquestioned social systems. Systemic racism can stem from education, hiring practices or access. [45]

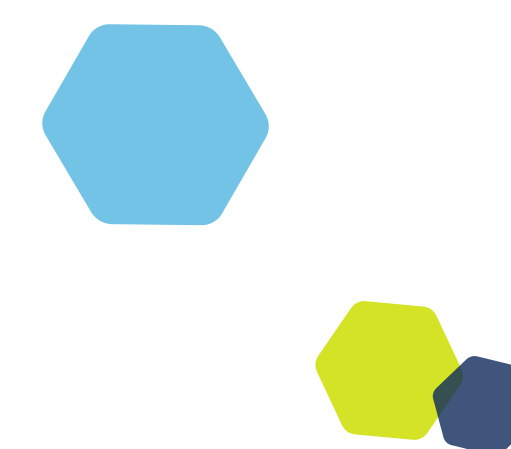
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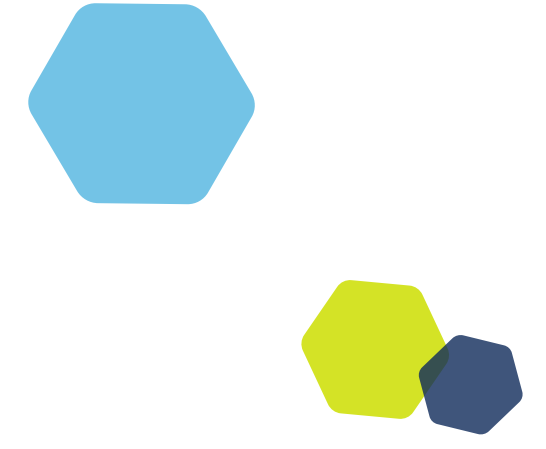
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