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COVID-19 and Black Canadians' Oral Health and Access to Dental Care

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our oral health-care system. Early on, due to a state of emergency being declared across many provinces and the associated limitations on dental-care delivery, many patients could not receive the dental care they needed. If sequential waves of the pandemic continue, and renewed limitations on the dental-care sector are imposed, there is potential for the deterioration of oral health among the public in general, and among socially and economically marginalized groups in particular. This includes racialized groups, such as Black Canadians.

Statistics Canada estimates that roughly 1.2 million people constitute Canada's Black population (1). This population is socioeconomically and culturally diverse, as well as young and growing (1). Unfortunately, Black Canadians tend to make less income than their non-racialized counterparts, and experience unemployment and less educational attainment more often (1,2). First-generation Black Canadians also make less income than new immigrants that are not part of a visible minority, a finding that extends to second- and third-generation Black Canadians when compared to their non-racialized counterparts (2). Black Canadians are also the victims of hate-related crimes far more often than any other cultural group in Canada (2). In other words, Black Canadians are said to experience structural inequality and structural racism (3-6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated these experiences for Black Canadians and for visible minorities in general (7-11). What is less known, though, is what the impacts on Black Canadians might be in relation to oral

health and access to dental care. The COVID-19 pandemic will conceivably create greater barriers to care for those with lower incomes and limited insurance coverage. Moreover, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, people from all segments of society, including Black Canadians, may face loss of employment and employer-sponsored dental insurance, and the associated health impacts. In this article, we discuss the various ways that the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to greater inequity in oral health and access to dental care for Black Canadians. We also address the effects associated with the lack of federal and provincial race-based data on evaluating the impact on racialized groups while including our own findings through collaboration with the Federation of Black Canadians (FBC). The article also recommends proactive policies to address existing inequity in oral health and oral-health care among Black Canadians.

Oral health and health care among North American Black communities prior to COVID-19

Studies from the U.S. consistently show that African-Americans and other racialized or minority groups experience higher levels of oral disease and can receive a lower quality of oral-health care (12-16). Some studies suggest that racial and ethnic minorities receive a lower quality of health care, even when access-related factors such as patient insurance status and income are accounted for (17). While data regarding the oral health of Black Canadians prior to COVID-19 could not be sourced, we expect to observe similar patterns in Canada due to similarities to the U.S. in terms of dental-care financing and delivery.

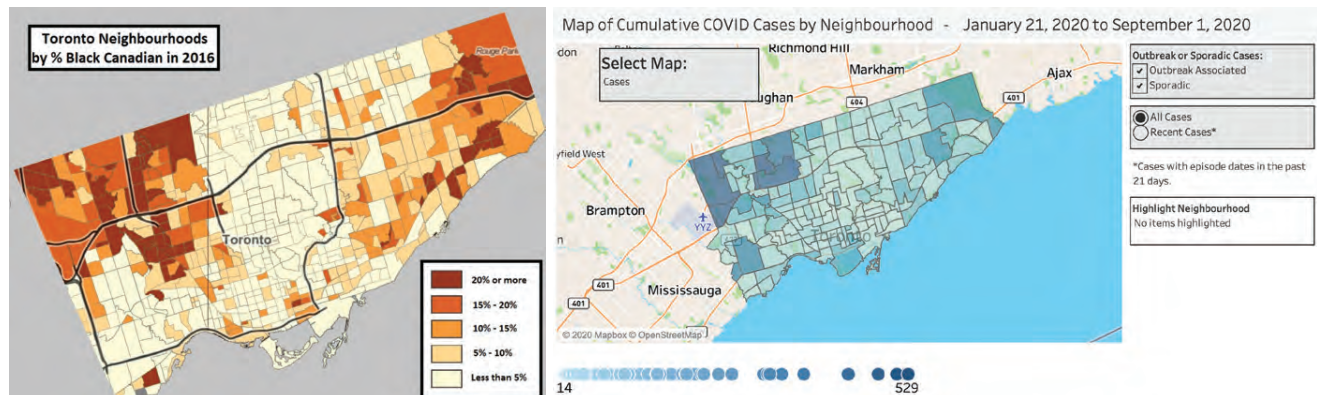


Figure 1. Comparison of map of Toronto Census tracts by percentage of population who identify as Black in 2016 (left) with City of Toronto map of cumulative COVID-19 cases by neighbourhood as of September 1, 2020 (right). Sources: Statistics Canada. Census Profile, 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Available from: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>; City of Toronto. COVID-19: Status of cases. Available from: <https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-latest-city-of-toronto-news/covid-19-status-of-cases-in-toronto/>

The need for large-scale studies on the oral health and oral-health care experiences of Black Canadians is fundamental to identify and address the unique needs that this population presents. On a small scale, we conducted a survey in collaboration with the FBC through which a set of short-answer questions were sent to FBC members across the country. Fifty-two responses were received regarding members' oral health and access to oral-health care before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our survey data shows that only 34 per cent of respondents described their oral health status as good or excellent. This is in contrast to a 2010 Health Canada Report on the general population, in which 84 per cent of Canadians reported their oral health as good or excellent (18). This suggests that the oral health of Black Canadians is lower than the general Canadian population. Therefore, even a temporary pause in the delivery of oral-health care can present negative outcomes for an already disadvantaged population.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Canadian communities

Black communities are amongst the most affected by COVID-19 in Canada. This is due to numerous factors, including the density of neighbourhoods, the job types of those living in these communities, the overall health of community members, and challenges in access to health-care services. According to a news report using data from Toronto Public Health, in the City of Toronto, four of the top five neighbourhoods with the highest COVID-19 infection rates are home to populations that are "over 60 per cent minorities and where 19 per cent of the population identify as Black" (19). In contrast, four of

the five neighbourhoods with the lowest infection rates were home to a population made up of fewer than six per cent Black Canadians (19). Similarly, another news outlet found that Montreal boroughs with a higher percentage of Black Canadian residents also had a greater number of COVID-19 cases (10).

The issue of employment is particularly important: Black Canadians are found to be at a greater risk of contracting COVID-19 due to their increased exposure, based on the nature of their work. For instance, Black Canadians are more likely than other Canadians to report that their job requires them to work with people face-to-face (9). They are also more likely to feel that no matter what steps they take, their day-to-day routine puts them at an uncomfortably high risk of contracting the virus (9).

With respect to access to dental care, in the findings from our study, 44 per cent of FBC respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had limited their access to dental care. This may be due to loss of income, employment, dental insurance, or concerns over infection. Whatever the case, these limitations could become exacerbated as the COVID-19 pandemic drags on, ultimately leading to impacts on oral health and systemic health.

In short, COVID-19 has the potential to widen any existing gaps in oral health and access to oral-health care among Black Canadians. By recognizing that this population is at higher risk for contracting COVID-19 and the impact that this can have on its health and oral health, we can begin to investigate methods for improving the situation to address social and health inequities.

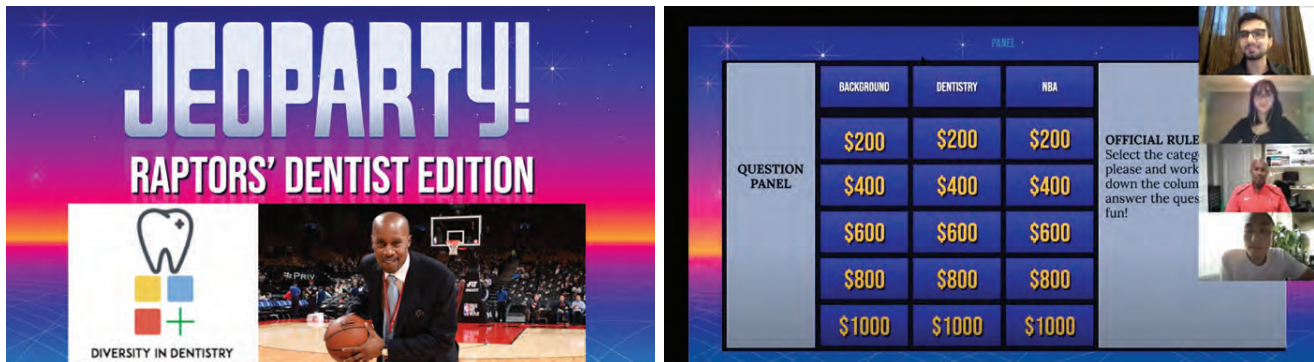


Figure 2. Jeopardy interview with Dr. Peter Nkansah in Diversity Talks, Episode 2.

The need for direct financial support by local, provincial and federal governments

In the months and years to come, governments may need to consider the introduction or buttressing of dental coverage supports for Canadians. This may mean improving current funding levels for existing public programs, expansions to those public programs to include more populations, and/or introducing new public programs altogether. Put another way, increasing dental-care fees in existing public programs matters, as does the appropriate funding of community clinics, hospital clinics, and university dental clinics. At its grandest, the introduction of a national dental-care program can mitigate poor access to dental care across all populations, including racialized communities. While the topic of funding mechanisms is beyond the scope of this article, other considerations are important as well.

For instance, an anonymous response from our survey stated: “I would emphasize having more dental clinics in Black neighbourhoods and Black communities that are staffed by qualified Black oral and dental professionals who provide thorough, accessible, and affordable, dental and oral services to uninsured and low-income racialized BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of colour] communities.” This response points towards the positive impact that concerns for diversity can have in this area.


Diversity in Dentistry: A student-led solution

In our efforts to improve access to dental care for Black Canadians and other minority groups, we have created an independent organization titled Diversity in Dentistry. The goal of our organization is to facilitate diversity in the dental profession by increasing the number of Black Canadian and minority dental students in Canadian schools, as part of a long-term plan for facilitating equity in access to oral care in underrepresented

communities. Our initiative offers free mentorship to prospective dental students from underrepresented backgrounds. Diversity in Dentistry hosts application workshops detailing the Dental Aptitude Test, personal statements, and interview processes. Thus far, our initiative has offered 75 pre-dental students mentorship with current Canadian dental students. Through the Diversity Talks Series, we interview dental professionals from diverse backgrounds to highlight cases of representation. It is our hope that by seeing and hearing from relatable, diverse individuals, our student members will be inspired to further their own journeys.

One such interview was a “Jeopardy Night” with Dr. Peter Nkansah, dentist for the Toronto Raptors. In this session, we were privileged to hear from a dentist anesthesiologist and sports dentist on everything from interpersonal skills to exciting NBA stories. This organization will continue beyond the COVID-19 pandemic to embrace diversity in Canadian dental schools. We hope to encourage individuals from underrepresented communities to pursue dentistry and ultimately offer dental care in their respective communities.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to affect the oral health and access to dental care of socially and economically marginalized groups, including Black Canadians. Support for communities at a higher risk for contracting COVID-19, worsening oral health, loss of income, employment and dental insurance, will need to be considered in the months and years ahead. Student-led initiatives, like the one described here, will hopefully engage young people from Black and other racialized communities to ultimately facilitate equitable access to oral-health care and reduce gaps in oral health between socioeconomic groups. 

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Lis Grinfeld is a first-year dental student at the University of Toronto. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree from York University. As a child immigrant from Argentina and a member of a religious minority, she appreciates the strengths and challenges that represent diversity in Canada today.

The Federation of Black Canadians (FBC) is a national, non-profit organization, driven by organizations across the country that advance the social, economic, political and cultural interests of Canadians of African descent. A priority area of the FBC is to develop a national action plan to improve the health and well-being of Black Canadians.

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For more information about Diversity in Dentistry, please visit its website:
<https://diversityindentistry.wixsite.com/divnden>.

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