



Challenging systemic racism and particularly anti-Black racism at the border

This is one of five issue papers outlining priority issues for advocacy identified by the CCR's [Anti-Racism project](#). The identification of priorities has been informed by member organizations and consultation with people with lived experiences, particularly those of African descent.

Summary of the issue

Racialized refugee claimants arriving at Canada's border face systemic barriers. Those from African countries or of African descent are more likely than others to be arrested and put in immigration detention. Processes for refugee claimants are often inaccessible and unsupported.

Barriers at the border

- Racialized people arriving at Canada's borders are too often treated unfairly and disrespectfully when making a refugee claim. They are disproportionately denied access to services, including temporary housing, in the early stages of the claim process.
- Racialized people, especially those from sub-Saharan Africa, are more likely than others to be detained on arrival in Canada and subjected to harsher conditions when released from detention.
- It is not only refugee claimants that are affected by racism at the border. Racialized people arriving in Canada, at an airport or land border, are more often subjected to secondary examination, and to be suspected of criminality or representing a security threat.

Voices raised denouncing racism

- [Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024-2028](#) notes the existence of systemic racism in the Canadian immigration system. "Despite Canada having formally abandoned a race-based immigration selection system, stakeholders and partners across the country are raising the alarm that racial discrimination persists."
- During the recent study of Bill C-20 (which will create an accountability mechanism for the Canada Border Services Agency), many Members of Parliament [reported](#) that they regularly hear from constituents and community leaders that people are often flagged at the border crossing because of their ethnicity. "As a racialized person, you're often looked at a bit differently, quite frankly, by those in positions of power" (Iqwinder Gaheer, MP). In the [Senate](#),

Senator Omidvar noted the existence of systemic racism, and the testimonies heard in committee highlighting “the vulnerabilities of individuals — racialized minorities, Indigenous peoples, people who may not speak either English or French, asylum seekers who are particularly vulnerable to law enforcement because of their context as well as those detained by the Canada Border Services Agency or in CBSA-run immigration holding centres”.

- In recent months, many newly arrived African refugee claimants have been left homeless, with some living on the streets. Two have died while unhoused. Kabu Asante, of the African Canadian Social Development Council, **asked**: “If we were not Black would we have been treated this way?”
- Analysis conducted by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch found **racism in detention decisions**: “Immigration detainees who are from communities of color, particularly detainees who are Black, appear to be held for longer periods, often in provincial jails. In 2019 the largest portion of immigration detainees held for longer than 90 days was from countries in Africa.”

Cruel and degrading treatment on making a claim

A participant from an African country in one of the project’s focus groups recounted how he felt he was treated like a criminal when he made a refugee claim at the border. An official mentioned his country of origin as grounds for disbelieving him. He was handcuffed and shackled (hands and feet bound like a criminal) and taken to a detention centre where he remained for three months, until further identity documents could reach him and he was released.

Recommendations

The government must address the systemic barriers at the border, particularly for refugee claimants from Africa countries through systemic wide ranges changes. Top priorities include:

- Implementing the CCR’s call for **Asylum with dignity**: including improving intake processes at the border and creating a welcoming and trauma-informed process for claimants.
- Introducing an anti-racism strategy within CBSA designed to identify and remove systemic racism at the border and in detention.
- Ensuring representation of racialized persons among CBSA officers, consistent with the Agency’s **equity and diversity commitments**.

This resource was produced with financial support from the Canadian Race Relations Foundation



**Canadian
Race Relations
Foundation**

**Fondation
canadienne des
relations raciales**