

Study reveals gaps when it comes to recognizing racism in Ontario university sports

October 27 2021



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An anti-racism project led by a University of Toronto researcher in collaboration with Ontario University Athletics found many "completely

unaware of the depths of the problem."

The project, led by Janelle Joseph, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education (KPE) and her Indigeneity, Diaspora, Equity and Anti-Racism in Sport (IDEAS) research lab, aimed to shed light on OUA racial demographics and members' experiences and understandings of [racism](#)—and propose strategies for change.

"The OUA anti-racism project was unique in that it examined a single athletic organization from the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders, including administrators, coaches and [student athletes](#)," said Joseph.

"This allowed us to get a good understanding of the relationship between individual experiences and systemic barriers, especially across a large and diverse province such as Ontario."

The OUA established the Black, biracial and Indigenous (BBI) task force in August 2020, with the KPE-led project stemming from the group's work. Nearly 45 percent of an estimated 11,200 members of OUA—including 4058 student athletes, 716 coaches and 227 sport administrators—completed questionnaires designed by Joseph and her team. Additionally, 107 members participated in interviews and focus groups, including all 20 OUA athletic directors.

Among [the report's](#) key findings: universities across Ontario share similar experiences with racism in sport, meaning racism can't be dismissed by universities as a problem that only happens elsewhere—on a different team or at a different school.

"The assumptions that racism exists only in the United States or only at those universities about which public reports have been shared is what allows racism to perpetuate," said Joseph. "But in the same way that

culture has shifted on how sexism or concussions are viewed in the OUA today, there needs to be a public acknowledgement of 'hidden' racism in order to prevent racial injustice."

While demographic findings echo previous research on the subject showing disproportionate recruitment, hiring and leadership opportunities for white student athletes, coaches and administrators, the report provides further insights into members' experiences and understanding of racism.

For example, while only only percent of OUA members see racism as "extremely common," there is a large percentage of student athletes (52 percent) who see racism as "not at all common." That's a concerning result since 72 percent of student athletes identify as white and, according to the researchers, "seem to be unaware of how 'everyday racism' operates."

"Racism can take many forms," said Sabrina Razack, a Ph.D. student in Joseph's IDEAS research lab. "Overwhelmingly, the examples shared by OUA members fall into the category of microaggressions, which, whether intentional or not, are still deeply felt by racialized members of the community and perpetuate exclusion."

Razack points out that, while 41 percent of student athletes, coaches and staff said they "never" witnessed or experienced racism, those who said they experienced it "a lot" (8.9 percent), "most of the time" (1.7 percent) or "all of the time" (2.5 percent) should concern us. Of those who said they experience it "all of the time," 31.5 percent identify as Black.

"The biggest surprise for me was the disparity between how racism was a common, daily experience for some and yet completely unknown by others" said Joseph. "Those who are racialized described racist jokes and barriers to recruitment and promotion that, sadly, had become expected.

Meanwhile those who had not witnessed, heard or seen racism first hand were completely unaware of the depths of the problem."

To make significant change, Joseph says there is a need to first increase awareness of racism and how racial inequities are embedded in the fabric of university sport.

"We know the range of ways racism occurs and have tools for change recommended directly by OUA members," she said. These include:

- **Education:** create campaigns, using social media and other channels, to shift culture and build awareness of what racism looks like, provide ongoing educational tools
- **Recruitment:** remove experience and education barriers from job descriptions while intentionally mentoring and recruiting qualified Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) candidates
- **Supports:** create and hire for a position devoted to anti-racism for case management and programming, hire racialized students, implement mental health supports
- **Accountability:** collect data on racial demographics and anti-racism initiatives within the OUA, specify a zero-tolerance racism policy, share publicly, commit to specific changes

Gord Grace, the president and CEO of the OUA, wrote In the introduction to the report that the takeaways from this study will serve as a foundation to support future strategic action and help make the organization a more inclusive and safe community for all. To that end, the OUA has already begun implementing some of the recommendations from the report, including the launch of the Black or Indigenous Heritage Student-Athlete (BIHS) bursary, which was announced in September.

"The entire OUA community is thankful for the opportunity to work with the IDEAS Research Lab, not only because of the exemplary work done within the Anti-Racism Project, but because of what it will mean moving forward for the entire university sport landscape in Ontario and beyond," said Grace. "With this invaluable research in hand, we are truly motivated and better informed to help address real change in the OUA."

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Study reveals gaps when it comes to recognizing racism in Ontario university sports (2021, October 27) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-reveals-gaps-racism-ontario-university.html>

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