PERSONS OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN CANADA: A DIVERSITY OF ORIGINS AND IDENTITIES

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Who are the people of African descent in Canada? How can they be defined based on results from the Canadian census and what are their main demographic and ethnocultural characteristics?

In its resolution 68/237, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the International Decade for People of African Descent, 2015-2024, on the theme "People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development".

Official documents of the United Nations clearly define the people of African descent, who, all over the world, make up some of the most marginalized groups. Indeed, they are designated as "descendants of those Africans that were displaced to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade many generations back, or more recent migrants who have journeyed to the Americas, Europe, Asia and within Africa itself".

Moreover, the backgrounder of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, entitled *People of African Descent*, emphasizes that "People of African descent comprise a heterogeneous group with diverse histories, experiences and identities. The circumstances in which they live and the problems they face differ. What unites them, however, is that they have long been denied the full realisation of their human rights [...]".

In the context of the International Decade for People of African Descent, an expert working group on people of African descent was established with the mandate to study the problems of racial discrimination faced by people of African descent in the diaspora and to draw up proposals with a view to eliminating this discrimination.

To do this, this working group proceeded to gather all available international data and analysis to conduct a mapping exercise and prepare a baseline report on the human rights situation of people of African descent.

As part of this request, it asked the various countries to provide disaggregated data on this population, in particular with regard to "race", color, language, religion, sex, age and nationality. Such a request therefore confirms the very heterogeneous nature of the characteristics of this population.

PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT AND THE CANADIAN CENSUS

The Canadian census provides very rich information on the ethnocultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the Canadian population. The large number of questions asked on this subject thus makes it possible to account for the very great diversity of identity, ethnic and cultural markers of the population.

The main ethnocultural or immigration questions in the Canadian census include the place of birth of respondents and their parents, ethnic or cultural origin, and that of population group, which is used to derive the so-called visible minority population, in accordance with the Employment Equity Act.

According to the 2016 Census, the number of people who declared one or the other ethnic or cultural origins from the African continent amounted to 1,067,925, while the number of people who declared being "Black" during this census reached 1,198,540. Conversely, the number of Blacks who reported that the ethnic or cultural origin of their ancestors was one of the African origins was half of that, at 592,015. This means that there are in Canada more Blacks than people reporting African ethnic or cultural origins (ancestries).

Thus, 606,525 Blacks, or nearly 51% of them, declared no African ethnic or cultural origin. It should also be noted that four out of 10 Blacks living in Canada in 2016 were born in Canada.

Finally, to add to the complexity of this portrait, we note that from less than 5,000 people in 1961, the number of immigrants born in Africa reached 637,485 in 2016. Of these, 62% arrived in the country during the previous 15 years. In 2016, Quebec and Ontario were the provinces of residence for almost three-quarters of immigrants born in Africa, followed by Alberta (14%) and British Columbia (7%).

While in Quebec, Morocco and Algeria were the main countries of birth for these immigrants, those in Ontario came mainly from Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa.

A significant number of people born in Canada had at least one of their parents born in Africa. More than 60% of the 374,450 so-called second generation Canadians had both their parents born in Africa, while almost a quarter of them had either their mother or their father born in the African continent.

MULTIPLE ETHNIC OR CULTURAL ORIGINS

As can be seen in Table 1, in 2016 more than 3% of the Canadian population reported having an African ethnic or cultural origin. But several people declared more than one origin, African or not. Thus, of the 1,067,925 people who reported African ancestry, 36% reported it in combination with another ethnic or cultural origin.

In addition, around 60 different origins were reported in 2016. Of these, Moroccan, Egyptian, Algerian, Somali and Nigerian origins were the ones most often reported.

Within the population of people identifying themselves as "Black" to the population group question, there is also a great diversity of origins, both as single and multiple responses. As shown in Table 2, the Jamaican origin came first with 258,345 people. Haitian, Canadian, English and Somali origins followed, as specific origins. In addition, almost 77,000 black Canadians have reported having Scottish or Irish origins.

WHO IS OF AFRICAN DESCENT?

The great diversity observed both within the black population and among those of African descent is eloquently illustrated when we break down the so-called visible minority population according to place of birth. As shown in Table 3, one can see that among the approximately 690,000 people who reported that they were born in Africa in the 2016 Census, less than half, or 316,000, identified themselves as Black.

In fact, 170,240 people identified as Arabs, more than 54,000 identified as South Asians, and almost 121,605 people were identified as not belonging to a visible minority. Conversely, of the approximately 1.2 million black people in Canada in 2016, there were 316,095 who were born in Africa, just over 26% of them.

Although information from the Canadian census reveals that the population of African descent has a large black population, it also suggests that the population reporting an African ethnic or cultural origin is very diverse and should continue to evolve towards even greater diversity, if we judge by the significant growth in multiple responses to ethnocultural questions in the census of population.

As for the black communities of Canada in particular, they are themselves also very diverse and therefore far from being homogeneous. The analytical products released by Statistics Canada in 2019 and 2020 on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Canada's black populations indeed reflect this diversity as well as the important issues and challenges faced by many members of these communities.

TABLE 1: EABOUT 60 DIFFERENT AFRICAN ORIGINS WERE REPORTED IN THE 2016 CENSUS

	Total reponses*	Single reponses	Multiple responses
African origins	**1,067,925**	**682,570**	**385,355**
Other African origins, n.i.e.	212,005	76,790	135,215
Moroccan	103,945	72,625	31,320
Egyptian	99,140	62,915	36,225
Algerian	67,335	49,520	17,810
Somali	62,550	54,755	7,795
Negerian	51,835	38,170	13,665
Ethiopian	44,060	34,255	9,805
South African	41,375	8,005	33,370
Congolese	38,365	29,680	8,685
Berber	37,065	22,965	14,095
Ghanaian	35,495	26,535	8,960
Black, not otherwise specified	30,385	5,530	24,850
Tunisian	25,650	17,620	8,025
Eritrean	25,260	20,625	4,630
Cameroonian	24,615	20,605	4,010
[...]	[...]	[...]	[...]
Ewe	845	320	530
Wolof	835	460	375
Harari	660	395	265

The sum of the ethnic origins is greater than the total population because a person can report more than one ethnic origin in the census questionnaires.

"Other African origins, n.i.e." includes general responses indicating African origins (e.g., "African") aswell as more specific responses indicating African origins that have not been included elsewhere (e.g., "Saharan").

* In 2016, 3,1% of the Canadian population reported at least one African origin, either alone or with other origins.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population.

TABLE 2: MAIN ETHNIC OR CULTURAL ORIGINS AMONG CANADA'S BLACK POPULATION

	Total reponses	Single reponses	Multiple responses
Total – Ethnic origin	**1,198,545**	**846,530**	**352,015**
Jamaican	258,345	153,845	104,505
Other African origins, n.i.e.[1]	163,590	74,065	89,525
Haitian	156,915	124,195	32,720
Canadian	138,655	45,075	93,580
English	58,345	10,070	48,275
Somali	57,555	51,830	5,730
Nigerian	50,410	38,035	12,370
French	47,890	4,445	43,445
Ethiopian	41,270	33,225	8,045
Scottish	40,615	790	39,825
Trinidadian/Tobagonian	38,055	13,900	24,155
Congolese	37,590	29,460	8,130
Irish	35,840	570	35,265
Ghanaian	34,460	26,385	8,075
West Indian, not otherwise specified	30,050	12,285	17,765

1 Includes general answers referring to African origins (e.g. "African") as well as more specific answers referring to African origins not included elsewhere (e.g. "Saharan").

Note: The total of all ethnic origins is greater than the total population because a person can declare more than one ethnic origin in the Census questionnaire.

Source: Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population.

TABLE 3: DIVERSITY AMONG THE BLACK POPULATION AND THE POPULATION OF AFRICAN DESCENT

		Visible minority population				
	Total population	South Asian	Black	Arab	Other visible minority groups	Not defined as visible minority
Total – Place of birth	**34,460,065**	**1,924,635**	**1,198,540**	**523,235**	**4,028,170**	**26,785,480**
Born in Canada	26,240,510	593,885	523,065	141,335	1,135,495	23,846,735
Born outside Canada	8,219,555	1,330,750	675,480	381,895	2,892,675	2,938,755
Americas	1,281,150	66,515	331,935	4,565	451,015	427,120
North America	338,630	12,730	18,565	3,670	26,030	277,630
Central America	192,365	70	490	75	142,630	49,100
Carabbean and Bermuda	403,550	20,060	298,030	160	63,330	21,975
South America	346,600	33,655	14,850	655	219,030	78,405
Europe	2,229,440	22,915	22,830	5,320	19,830	2,158,540
Africa	689,630	54,265	315,095	170,240	27,425	121,605
Asia	3,948,635	1,163,570	4,255	201,600	2,388,495	190,715
Oceania	70,575	23,485	365	175	5,895	40,650

Source: Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population.