The Impact of COVID-19 on Black Students in Toronto Research Report

MAYA YAYA

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The purpose of this research project was to identify how Black students experienced the pandemic in Toronto, and to identify their needs.

The project sought to answer the following questions:
• What areas of Black students’ lives were most impacted by the pandemic?
• What needs exist for Black student and how should they be addressed?
Method

The study was conducted as a virtual focus group discussion. The setting was informal to increase participants’ comfort and to promote a sense of honesty. The intention was to hear participants’ realities and experiences through holistic conversation. Participants were asked the following questions:

1) How has school changed for you within the past 2 years?
2) How has work changed for you within the past 2 years?
3) How has your social life changed over the past 2 years?
4) How has your physical and mental health changed over the past 2 years?
5) Do you feel like the pandemic has impacted your future? If so, how?
6) How could you have been better supported during the pandemic?
## Focus Group: Pros and Cons

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<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Non-verbal cues, such as tone and body language</td>
<td>• Limited depth</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Time efficient</td>
<td>• Uncertainty regarding accuracy of participants’ answers</td>
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<td>• Richer insight due to follow-up questions and prose</td>
<td>• Increased chance of moderator bias</td>
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<td>• More room for clarification on questions</td>
<td>• Increased potential for groupthink and peer pressure</td>
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<td>• Participants more engaged</td>
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Sample Breakdown

• 7 Participants
  • 2 College students
  • 5 University students
  • 1 student-athlete
  • 1 business owner
  • 1 artist
  • 1 young parent
  • 1 member of the Toronto Youth Cabinet
  • 1 high school-to-university student
  • 2 men
  • 5 women
School

100% of participants found that the “quality of education” decreased
  • Participants commonly expressed that they felt like they were “teaching themselves”.

57% of participants felt that they were “not getting their money’s worth”

85% of participants found that school was “more stressful”
  • Participants mentioned:
    • Decreased motivation and focus
    • Hard time transitioning from in-person to virtual
    • A “Very unique kind of burnout” and “zoom fatigue”
    • Overwhelming sudden “loss of social interaction”
Physical and Mental Health

85% of participants felt that Black people experienced the pandemic differently than others.

- Many participants pointed to the string of Black murders by white people in 2020 and the “trauma” they endured by seeing Black bodies being assaulted and violated.

28% of participants felt personally affected by Doug Ford’s sanction of arbitrary stops and interrogations (i.e. “carding”).

- Participants expressed feelings of fear and anger

71% of participants described symptoms of depression

42% of participants experienced weight gain as a result of changed habits.

0 participants described getting COVID-19 or any related symptoms.
On the other hand...

85% of participants felt that the pandemic “impacted their future for the better”

42% of participants did better in classes

• Participants expressed that EI, CERB and paid leave allowed them to redeem time, which they, in turn, spent on school and extracurricular activities.

57% of participants experienced some sort of mental and/or emotional “growth”

• Participants expressed that they’ve found more time to “reflect on their past, present and future”.

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**Need 1: Equal Access**

**Recommendation 1:** The government should reverse budget cuts to education so schools can provide more and better resources:
1) Equipment (i.e. Tablets, laptops, computers, food security, Wi-Fi...and “more bursaries to close the gap”)
2) Support systems (i.e. Therapists, faculty, tech support...).

**Recommendation 2:** The federal and provincial government should work hand in hand to provide subsidized education for students in need and decreased tuition for all students amid the pandemic.

**Recommendation 3:** The government should start working towards a universal basic income to close wage gaps.
Need 2: Curriculum Adjustment

Recommendation 1: Teachers and professors must seek feedback from students to ensure that their course content is effective despite online learning format.

Recommendation 2: Teachers and professors must compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction by evaluating their students in more engaging ways.

Recommendation 3: Teachers and professors must not compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction by requiring more work from students.

Recommendation 4: Teachers, professors and students must maintain a standard of patience and understanding with one another to decrease stress.
Need 3: Safe Spaces for Black Students

**Recommendation 1:** Educational institutions must create culturally-informed spaces (independent from students initiatives) for Black students, faculty and staff to interact and network.

**Recommendation 2:** Educational institutions must strengthen their ties to their Black student body to better understand their unique needs.

**Recommendation 3:** Educational institutions must provide better Black-specific resources and must hire more Black staff to address Black students’ unique needs.

**Recommendation 4:** Educational institutions must better reflect their Black students in courses by offering more Black-centered courses and by hiring more Black professors.

**Recommendation 5:** Educational institutions must enforce a firm standard of anti-racism, and must require all students, teachers and professors to pass a mandatory racial sensitivity course.
**Need 4: Accessible Resources**

**Recommendation 1:** The government must better advertise the programs it sponsors to support Black communities so those in need are kept aware of the programs that exist to support them.

**Recommendation 2:** The government must re-define who is considered ‘low income’ or ‘in financial need’ to ensure that all students in need of financial support are able to find support.
Future Research

This research topic could be further explored through comparative research:

1) To further explore the impacts of the pandemic within the scope of race, the experiences of different races amid the pandemic could be evaluated to identify similarities and differences.

2) To further explore the impacts of the pandemic from a intersectional point of view, the focus could shift from race to gender. The experiences of Torontonian and Black men, women and LGBTQ+ amid the pandemic could be evaluated to identify similarities and differences.

3) To explore the relevance of location, the geographical focus of the study could be expanded to address the experiences of Torontonians in comparison to residents of other cities amid the pandemic.

4) To further expand the geographical focus of the study, a future study could evaluate how developing countries experienced the pandemic in comparison to more developed countries.
Authorship