



BLACK CANADIAN COACHES ASSOCIATION



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DATA COLLECTION ON BLACK AND INDIGENOUS CANADIAN UNIVERSITY ATHLETES

The information available on the impact that being a black, indigenous, person of colour (BIPOC) student-athlete has on the quality of one's mental health is scarce if non-existent. I had grown exhausted from trying to find adequate support for my dwindling mental health in the athletic environment. I had grown even more tired of trying to shout to deaf ears that mental health services for these athletes is imperative.

Even amongst a group of professionals on various panels and groups that I have been a part of in supporting the BIPOC community, I found that I was constantly misunderstood and overlooked; there is minimal knowledge, and seemingly, even less concern for this extremely important topic.

“Do you mean, like, their mental health because of the impacts of COVID?”, “How is it different from being anyone else with mental health issues?”

No, not because of COVID - this isn't something new, either. Moreover, being a member of the BIPOC community, a *marginalized group*, can at times be a 24/7 mental health crisis in itself. Add being a student, and an *athlete* on top of all of that, and you, my friend, have a recipe for burnout, overwhelming anxiety and depression, if it comes to that.

Mental health as a whole is something that my entire life has revolved around. It is a massive, extremely important part of my life and something that I've learned to honour and admire. I could go on for days about how necessary it is that we take mental health more seriously and the varying complexities of the very idea of mental health, but that's a whole other story. In this case, I wanted to dial in on mental health and BIPOC student-athletes in universities across Ontario.

This ties into the work that I had done with the Black, Biracial and Indigenous (BBI) Task Force with the Ontario University Athletics (OUA) association. In fact, it started with this task force - one day in a coffee shop while on a Zoom call with the group, I continued to shout out my ideas about mental health in any break in conversation. I started talking over people because I was begging to be heard. While the group was supportive and did everything, they could to help me out, I felt that more needed to be done. It wasn't until I finally said, “screw it” and took matters into my own hands. I created a simple BIPOC Mental Health & Environmental Wellness Assessment and posted it all over social media. The responses I got were overwhelmingly wonderful. It had received numerous shares, saves and story posts on Instagram. It was incredibly well-received (with a few...interesting comments that I will later share).

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I kept the survey open for 1 month, but had already received over 70 responses in the first week. As it stands now, there are 78 responses, all which strongly signify the ways in which more adequate BIPOC-specific and BIPOC-experienced counsellors (or, even better, BIPOC counsellors, because we should support BIPOC businesses) are needed within the university athletic environments. I am slightly frustrated, more so impatient, as I know that this does not cover even a portion of what needs to be covered. It is more to gather insight as to how BIPOC student-athletes in the OUA are feeling in terms of their athletic environment and how it contributes to their mental wellbeing. I will be conducting further qualitative research in the near future to expand upon these findings.

Let's dive into some results:

Of the 78 student-athletes surveyed, 58 student-athletes feel underrepresented in their athletic environment. This is valid, as, in my school alone, there are two black coaches; football and basketball. Only one is a full-time coach. It took several racial microaggressions and uncomfortable incidents for myself and the few BIPOC athletes on my team to be told that from now on, if anything happens, we go to either one of those two coaches...because...they're the only ones that look like us (and the only ones who understand).

34 people reported that they seldom feel accepted in their team environment.

48 people have reportedly experienced microaggressions within the team environment. As the next question states, this has led to a handful of people feeling as though the microaggressions experienced have taken away from their feelings of security and enjoyment on their team.

Another interesting statistic that I came across was that 47 people expressed that, reportedly, there is either no "zero tolerance" rule for racist undertones and aggressions put in place on their team, or they have been established but not honoured.

24 people have stated that they often feel more stressed/anxious when entering the team environment; myself included. Walking into the change room, for me, has been a mini-anxiety attack from the beginning. Every. Single. Time. I simply do not feel comfortable or accepted. This has poorly contributed to my mental health as well as other fellow teammates and I can speak for several others, based off of the open-ended comments that I'd received at the end of the survey.

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42 students feel as though the work that their team/athletic department has done to uphold anti-racist ideals is inadequate.

Any support expressed throughout the peak of this year's Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has died down and were not acted upon, according to 48 student-athletes. Performative allyship, anyone?

These are only a few of the results, but I feel it is important to also discuss some comments that I've received on the survey.

"...We need more representation within the athletic department, and academic institutions taking accountability for their staff who have engaged in anti-black racist behaviour and microaggressions rather than consistently mentioning a 'Zero-Tolerance' policy".

"The lack of support and ignorance to mental health (...) lead me to quitting my varsity team".

"The microaggressions I have experienced within the athletic department have made my sport less enjoyable".

"Throughout my time at my school, I have never felt a part of the varsity 'family' (...) I know my teammates, especially those who are BIPOC-identifying, would agree".

"...I feel as if the members of administration don't think that we matter (...) It has taken a toll on my mental health (...) what is the point in representing a school and a varsity program that does not support you?"

And, my favourite one of all:

"I need whoever is reading this kill themselves. I say this in all seriousness, not as a joke. I implore you to commit suicide, reader. By alienating whites, you create a festering resentment that boils for years".

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Which, I think, speaks for itself. It signifies the overall reason behind why we are doing this exact research, and any work towards the BLM movement, systemic racism, and basic fundamental human rights, at all.

Overall, I think these results, as surface-level as they may be, clearly signify the ways in which we, plain and simply, need to do better (I cringe at that statement, as it's usually followed with minimal action and is said so emptily), however I mean that in the most literal sense possible. We need to do better and it is my goal to push for and create 'better'.

Payton Shank

Member of McMaster Women's Rugby Team

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