

Access to racial and ethnic data



Rationale

McCreary Centre Society supports the use of its data to understand the needs, strengths, and challenges of youth from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The Society acknowledges that comparisons between racial groups and between ethnic groups can highlight inequities. However, such comparisons can also reinforce harmful stereotypes, ignore protective factors and diversity within groups, and distract from the systemic issues that cause disparities. As a result, the Society has criteria in place for any study which intends to consider race and ethnicity using McCreary data, and applies a decision tree (see [page 3](#)) to ensure the study meets McCreary's minimum standards.

McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, and community-based projects.

Founded in 1977, our vision is that all youth are supported to be healthy and connected.

Background

The BC government's guide to working with data about racial and ethnic groups cautions that misinterpretation of findings comparing racial and ethnic groups often contributes to 'deficit thinking' about groups who are portrayed as needing additional supports (BC Data Service Division, 2023). A number of studies have found that emphasizing racial or ethnic differences can reinforce stereotypes, encourage 'victim blaming', exacerbate stigma, distort risk perceptions, ignore protective factors, and reduce support for important policies in groups who are not considered at risk (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2019; Cokley & Awad, 2013; Harell & Lieberman, 2021; Holder & Xiong, 2022; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2022; Stephens-Dougan, 2022; Charity-Parker et al., 2023; as cited in BC Data Service Division, 2023).

Such perceptions can affect policy and program planning, as well as how racial and ethnic groups are perceived more broadly (BC Data Service Division, 2023). The BC government guide also notes that there is evidence that studies that emphasize differences among groups tend to increase the risk of stereotyping

and incorrect attribution of responsibility, while those that illustrate variability within groups tend to decrease these risks (e.g., Harell & Lieberman, 2021; Holder & Xiong, 2022; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2022; Stephens-Dougan, 2022; as cited in BC Data Service Division, 2023).

In Canada, Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) is viewed as a key component in the development of effective policies, programs, and legislation. It recognizes that everyone has multiple intersecting identity factors that shape their experiences (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age). Applying a GBA Plus lens ensures we move beyond a focus on a single one of these to avoid making incorrect assumptions which can lead to unintended and unequal impacts on particular groups of people (Government of Canada, 2025).

Attributing health and well-being outcomes to race has been used to promote the incorrect assumption that these disparities are due to biological differences, and to ignore the reality that these differences are caused

by systemic factors like racism, discrimination, and unequal access to resources. It is also well documented that biological differences due to genetic variation are much more common within racial groups than between groups (e.g., Lujan & DiCarlo, 2024). Lujan and DiCarlo (2024) note that *'comparing racial groups is a flawed practice built on a misconception of human biology. It fuels prejudice, obscures the true causes of inequality, and hinders genuine progress toward a more equitable society.'*

Race is often used as a proxy for racism. However, studies have repeatedly shown the harm that can be done when health and well-being disparities are attributed to race rather than racism, and reinforce incorrect assumptions of biological differences. This has led to calls for studies that go beyond this proxy use and directly measure racism and its impacts (Lett et al., 2022; Swilley-Martinez et al., 2023).

Finally, it is worth noting that racial and ethnic categories can be politically influenced and change over time. For example, French and English Canadians were once considered separate races, and Irish and Italian immigrants have previously been excluded from Canadian definitions of 'white' (Scott, 2015).

McCreary data

The majority of data access requests McCreary receives which focus on racial and/or ethnic comparisons are for studies using the population-level BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS). Presenting quantitative data that stratifies by race or ethnicity can be particularly open to misinterpretation and to perpetuating *'stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice'* when that data is provided without interpretation and discussion (Ross et al., 2020). Even when racial comparisons of large-scale survey data (such as the BC AHS) are presented with such discussion, the emphasis remains on race rather than racism unless measures are included on those surveys which directly ask about experiences of racism (Wu, 2023). Wu and colleagues argue that moving from racial comparisons to analyzing experiences of racism shifts the focus from *'people to dynamics and processes such as White supremacy and White supremacy culture that people are subjected to and shaped by'* (Wu, 2023).

The Society therefore wishes to ensure that any request to use the BC AHS and other McCreary data sources to focus on differences between racial or ethnic groups does not divert attention away from the real problems of systemic racism, inequity, and injustice, and distract from the root causes of inequity.

There are also some considerations specific to the items used on the BC AHS and similar surveys.

For example:

- The BC AHS includes broad racial categories such as 'Asian.' This can include people from countries with histories, policies, and cultural practices as diverse as Hong Kong, North Korea, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. Presenting data using this item can also mask important health and social disparities, and does not account for the number of generations people may have lived in Canada, as well as the impact of gender, age, culture, and other factors.
- Similarly, the BC AHS family background category of 'West Asian' includes Israeli, Palestinian, and Iranian young people, masking the unique cultural, religious, and political identities of those countries. Erasing the individuality of these experiences can promote harmful generalizations and stereotypes and ignore the complexity of relationships and diversity within the region. The item may provide a useful geographical descriptor but should not be viewed as a homogeneous grouping for comparative analysis.
- Youth of apparently similar backgrounds may choose to identify in different ways. For example, when youth were asked to identify their racial background on the 2023 BC AHS, 2% skipped the question, 4% did not identify with any of the recognized racial categories on the survey, 10% identified with at least two racial identities, and 4% identified exclusively as mixed race (i.e., did not endorse any of the specific racial categories).

Frequently asked questions

I want to consider the impact of racism within my study. What should I do?

The BC AHS has contained a question about racial discrimination since 2013. Using this item is the most appropriate measure to use to understand the prevalence and correlations of experiencing racism on affected youth.

Similarly, the BC AHS has questions which allow researchers to consider the impact of immigration; refugee status; cultural pride, food, and engagement; and language spoken at home, without the need to compare racial or ethnic groups. The 2023 BC AHS also included items about the locations where youth experienced racial or ethnic discrimination, as well as the frequency of such experience.

I am not comparing different groups to each other, but I do want to know how a single racial or ethnic group I am part of are doing, and how they are doing in comparison to youth who are not from this racial or ethnic group. How can I do this?

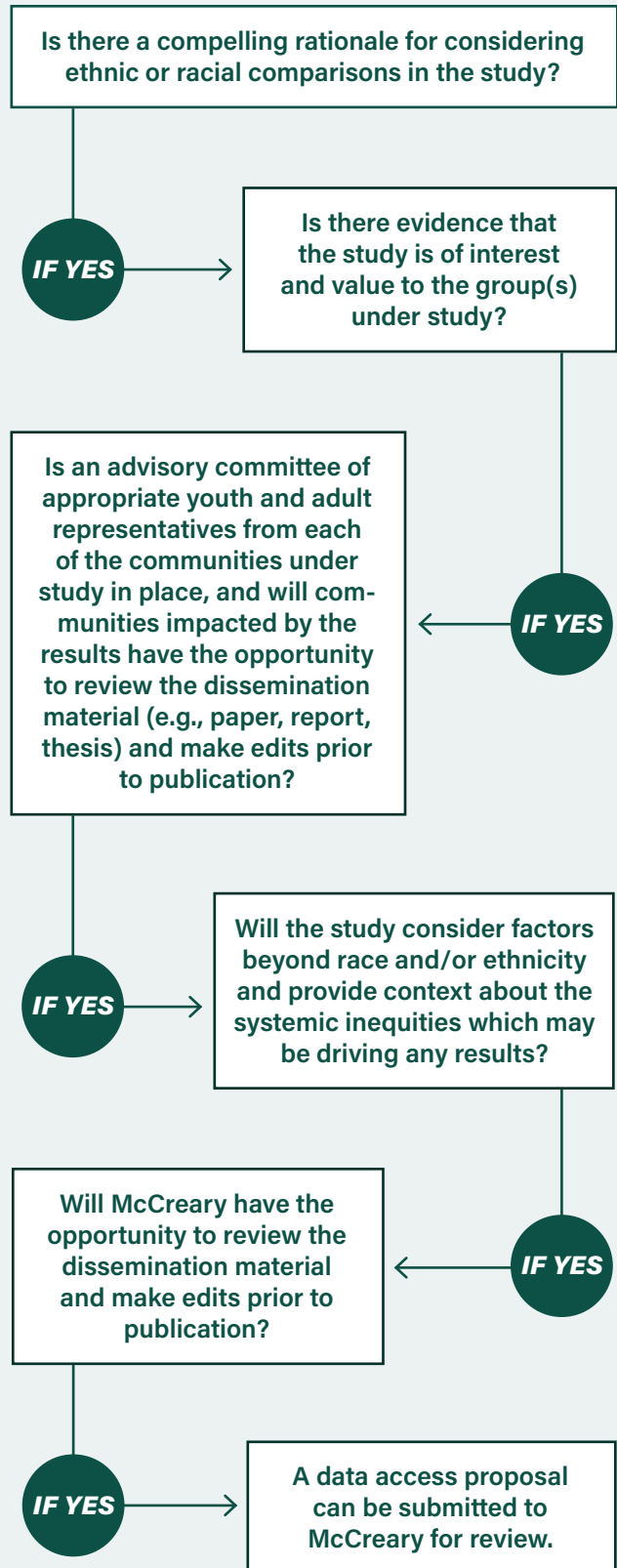
Studies of a single ethnic racial group can be immensely valuable in identifying specific trends, challenges, strengths, and priorities for that group. Researchers who are members of the racial or ethnic group they wish to study are welcome to submit a data access proposal if they are able to answer 'yes' to the questions in the decision tree to the right.

How does McCreary's approach to race-based data align with Indigenous data sovereignty principles?

The Society acknowledges Canada's shameful history of research on Indigenous peoples and aims to ensure McCreary's stewardship of any data provided by Indigenous youth aligns with Indigenous data sovereignty principles (including the principles of UNDRIP, OCAP FAIR, CARE, and FPIC).

Research conducted using data provided by Indigenous youth is carried out by Indigenous researchers and is approved by the Society's Indigenous Advisory Circle. McCreary also operates a Young Indigenous Research Team who conduct analyses for Indigenous communities.

DECISION TREE



References

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Application to access McCreary data

Researchers from academic institutions and other partner agencies are encouraged to contact mccreary@mcs.bc.ca if they would like to apply to access BC AHS or other McCreary data, or to commission McCreary to conduct additional research projects with the data.

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