

The Rise and Fall of “Visible Minority” in Canada

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Abstract:

This article examines the emergence, institutionalization, persistence, and eventual decline of “visible minority” as a composite category of racialized populations in Canada over the past 50 years. Drawing on extensive archival research and institutional process-tracing, we detail the emergence of the terminology in racial justice activism in the 1970s, its institutionalization as “an ambiguous categorization” by the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment and in the subsequent *Employment Equity Act* in the early 1980s, and its integration in Canada’s statistical infrastructure by the 1990s. We argue that, despite longstanding criticism of its conceptual ambiguity and clear limitations, “visible minority” persisted because of its legislative mandate, administrative uses, and integration into Canada’s centralized statistical system, which together created formidable institutional barriers to change. Its eventual decline was catalyzed by exogenous forces, such as changing political understandings of race and racism and demands for more disaggregated race-based data, which altered the institutional environment in ways that made the continued use of this aggregate category difficult to sustain. Ultimately, the Canadian case demonstrates how racial classifications acquire institutional durability, that some institutional arrangements can insulate contentious classification schemes from changing political demands, and the confluent conditions that made change possible.

Keywords: visible minority; racial classification; Canada; statistics; census

I. Introduction

The term “visible minority” has served as a uniquely Canadian designation for nearly forty years. Initially, it was employed as a way of making the obstacles faced by racialized Canadians visible in a country preoccupied with rising Quebec nationalism in the 1970s and the constitutional debates of the early 1980s. This approach was institutionalized in the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, in which Commissioner (and later Supreme Court Justice) Rosalie Abella defined visible minorities as persons, other than Indigenous peoples, who are “non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour,” noting, however, that it was “an ambiguous categorization” and its deployment was “by no means a definitive approach” (Canada 1984b, 46). In the decades that followed, “visible minority” became a classificatory designation operating at several distinct levels. It is a widely used, state-sanctioned vernacular term in both English and French (*minorité visible*); a “concept” (Statistics Canada 2024) that organizes ideas about populations marked by purportedly visible racial differences; a composite statistical and demographic category comprised of a number of subgroupings, sometimes called “population groups,” (Liebler and Hou 2020) and operationalized in legislation, administrative standards, and statistical instruments; and a social construct that serves as a proxy for non-white groups (Roth 2017) but that is nevertheless imbued with the power relations sutured to the idea of race (Mills 1997; Omi and Winant 2014).¹ Over time, however, “visible minority” has been widely criticized for its avoidance of the terminology of race, its failure to ameliorate the persistence of racial inequality, and its homogenization of the distinct histories and experiences of different racial groups. By the time Statistics Canada began a comprehensive review of the concept in 2022, the societal consensus about the usefulness of visible minority as a concept and a composite category had fractured.

Indeed, Statistics Canada’s review and various initiatives at the provincial level that seek to systematize the collection of race-based data and redefine how race is measured, categorized, and classified in Canada have brought the inadequacy of the visible minority designation into stark relief. Yet, the racial enumeration practices of the state are notoriously “sticky”: once categories become embedded in legislation, administrative practice, and recurring statistical instruments, changing them can disrupt longitudinal comparability and create substantial institutional costs. Statistics Canada has also long resisted pressure from the United Nations, advocacy groups, academics, and racialized people to change

¹ This article is interested in all these facets and, more directly, the processes through which a seemingly innocuous designation acquired such institutional and classificatory force. As such, we use the term “visible minority” carefully, attempting when possible to differentiate between the expression itself (as “visible minority designation” or “the phrase visible minority”/“the terminology of visible minority”), “visible minority category” when referring to its operational use in state classifications, and “visible minority concept” when discussing the dynamism of the construct itself.

the way it categorizes racialized populations in its data collection. Given this predisposition toward staying the course, what explains the rise and fall of “visible minority” in Canada?

Drawing from extensive archival research, this article uses institutional process-tracing to detail the emergence, institutionalization, persistence, delegitimation, and replacement of the visible minority designation. Historical institutionalism provides the analytical framework for explaining this trajectory: institutional arrangements generate self-reinforcing effects that make change difficult, though periods of political disruption can create openings for institutional transformation (Pierson 2004; Mahoney and Thelen 2012; Sheingate 2014; Thelen and Conran 2016). Path dependent effects are particularly relevant to the creation of racial statistics, a notoriously conservative area of state decision-making because racial categories must remain the same from one survey or census to the next to produce statistics that are longitudinally comparable (Boyd et al. 2000; Thompson 2016). The analysis therefore asks not only how and why the visible minority designation emerged, but also why it persisted despite sustained criticism and why change became possible when it did.

We argue that three institutional features are particularly important to this trajectory: the centralization and autonomy of Statistics Canada, the legislative mandate of the *Employment Equity Act*, and the interdepartmental structures through which employment equity data were produced and administered. These features operated in complementary ways. The *Employment Equity Act* gave the visible minority designation a durable legislative purpose; Statistics Canada provided the authoritative and centralized statistical infrastructure through which the visible minority composite category and its associated subgroups were defined, measured, and periodically enumerated; the interdepartmental arrangements surrounding employment equity within the federal government translated the visible minority designation into administrative practice as departments relied on the common definitions and data produced by Statistics Canada to meet their reporting and policy responsibilities. Together, these arrangements gave the visible minority concept both institutional authority and practical durability.

The period of political disruption that ultimately opened the way for institutional change emerged gradually after the election of Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party in 2015, which brought a renewed emphasis on anti-racism initiatives and other progressive policies. This development, combined with new approaches to the collection of racial data in some provinces, created an increasingly receptive institutional environment for reconsidering the visible minority concept. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 then served as focusing events that intensified public and governmental attention to racial inequality and the need for better and disaggregated race-based data. By 2021, this changing political environment had begun to translate into consequential formal institutional processes, including the federal review of the *Employment Equity Act* and Statistics Canada’s review of the visible minority concept.

We begin by tracing the emergence and institutionalization of the visible minority designation, from its origins in racial justice activism in the 1970s to its institutionalization in employment equity law and related data collection efforts. Part III details the institutional mechanisms that helped sustain the visible minority concept, which had widely, though inconsistently, diffused throughout Canadian government and society by the early 2000s, despite mounting criticism. Finally, the last section examines the changing political and institutional conditions after 2015 that eventually made its replacement possible.

II. Origins and Institutionalization

The origins of “visible minority” in the 1970s reflected a striking demographic and political paradox: Canada was avowedly multicultural yet remained overwhelmingly white. Even as the country entered a new era of the recognition of two official languages, a race-neutral immigration points system, and official multiculturalism, the racially exclusive immigration policies that had been in place for decades meant that non-white populations of Canada were relatively tiny. According to the 1961 Census, racialized minority groups and Indigenous people were approximately two percent of the total population.² In 1971, racialized minority groups and Indigenous people were each 1.5 percent of the total population, respectively. The Census of 1981 – a full decade after changes to immigration policy and the introduction of multiculturalism – recorded numbers that had increased but were still quite small: racialized minorities had grown to just under four percent of the total population, while Indigenous people were 1.7 percent (Canada 1984c).

The primacy of language and culture, and not race, was reflected in census classifications. Though “racial origins” data were diligently collected during the first half of the twentieth century, the Dominion Bureau of Statistics³ shifted its terminology and classification rules after the second world war to focus on the collection of data on the ethnic origins of the population (Thompson 2020). During the same time period, Indigenous populations were counted by both the census and additional complex forms of classification invoked in the 1951 amendments to the *Indian Act*, which created the position of an Indian Registrar to determine who could claim Indian status under the legislation, solidified sex-based criteria that caused women who “married out” to lose their status, and otherwise made Indian status more or less synonymous with band membership (CIRNAC 2018).

² This increases to 3.2 percent if “other and not stated” category is included. “Asiatic” origins 121,753; Native Indian and Eskimo: 220,121; Negro 32,127; Other and non stated 210,382. Total population 18,238,247 (Statistics Canada, 2009).

³ Renamed to Statistics Canada in 1971 following the passage of the *Statistics Act*.

The original conceptualization of “visible minority,” a term often attributed to Black activist Kay Livingstone, was brought into being in this context. Livingstone, a founder of the Canadian Negro Women’s Association (CNWA), used the phrase while travelling the country speaking to women from diverse backgrounds as part of her work for the International Year of Women Committee in 1975. According to oral histories of Black women activists of the era, Livingstone and others in CNWA used visible minority as an organizing tool to challenge discriminatory practices in education, policing, and immigration (Wharton-Zaretsky 2000). Her use of the phrase in the 1970s was both radical and strategic. Livingstone noted that racialized groups in Canada were often overlooked (Wharton-Zaretsky 2000, 68) and the emphasis on visibility was, perhaps, a way of bringing more attention to those groups often left out of Canadian narratives and policy directions, while forging solidarity among different racialized groups in the struggle for racial equality.

The use of the term diffused throughout civil society networks long before it infiltrated the lexicon of the state. In a 1971 report to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, sociologist Frederick Elkin defined visible minority groups as “the Blacks, Asian, and Canadian Indian,” noting they are identifiable by their “distinctive cultural characteristics,” “visible differences,” “distinctive physical features,” “names,” “religions,” and/or “still different characteristics.”⁴ In 1973 the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission published a summary of activities that declared “paramount emphasis on the social and economic factors of jobs, housing, education, and family life for visible minorities,” which it defined as Blacks, Asians, and Indians.⁵ Archival research reveals that “visible minority” was far from hegemonic; a number of reports from local and provincial governments used other aggregate concepts such as “cultural communities” and “coloured people,” or featured a random and fluctuating assortment of non-white racial categories.⁶ Though the *Canadian Human Rights Act* (1977), provincial human rights codes, and eventually section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) confirm race as a protected ground, none of these instruments use the term “visible minority” or define particular racial groups.

Notably, the phrase appeared in the June 1983 mandate of a House of Commons Special Committee on Participation of Visible Minorities in Canadian Society. Therein, visible minority is defined as “non-whites who are not participating fully in Canadian society...[including] aboriginal people, Canadians with origins in Africa, Arab countries, China, India, Pakistan, Japan, Korea, South East Asia, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, the West Indies and the Philippines.” White groups that are “identifiable because of their name, language, mode of dress, or because historically they were victims”

⁴ National Archives of Canada, *The Employment of Visible Minority Groups in Mass Media Advertising. A Report to the Ontario Human Rights Commission*, by Frederick Elkin, (1971).

⁵ National Archives of Canada, *Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission. Summary of Activities*, MG31-H179 vol. 9 (1973).

⁶ National Archives of Canada, *Report by the Owen Sound Human Rights Committee*, MG31-H145 vol2 (1970,); National Archives of Canada, *League for Human Rights Applications for Federal Government Grants for Multicultural Programming*, MG28-V133 vol90 (1972-1973); National Archives of Canada, *Multicultural Broadcasters and the CRTC: Government and Private Industry Released*, MG28-V133 vol90 (1978).

were not included in this early conceptualization of visible minority (Canada 1984a, 2). The Committee also made the first public national call for accurate data on visible minorities, noting it was “struck by the absence of hard data or official statistics on the work force profile of visible minorities.” The Committee argued that “the importance of compiling such data should not be minimized” and recommended that Statistics Canada include requisite additional questions on the 1986 and 1991 censuses (Canada 1984a, 54).

The most important institutionalization of “visible minority” occurred in the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment. By the time Justice Rosalie Abella was appointed to lead the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, which was also commissioned in June 1983, the use of the term visible minority was “common usage,” which, according to Abella, is why she included it in her terms of reference.⁷

During its work, the Commission initially employed the category “non-white” in a questionnaire requesting data from crown corporations. Noting that it would also be possible to define visible minorities by reference to country of origin, race, or some other criteria, the point was “to attempt to ascertain the extent to which people who were *visibly* non-white were excluded thereby from employment opportunities available to whites” (Canada 1984b, 46, italics added). The Commission also noted that nuance was necessary, and as such, an emphasis on a composite category such as “non-white” or “visible minority” could actually obscure the realities of racial discrimination: “Some non-whites face more serious employment barriers than others. Although it is unquestionably true that many non-whites face employment discrimination, the degree to which different minorities suffer employment and economic disadvantages varies significantly by group and by region. To combine all non-whites together as visible minorities for the purpose of devising systems to improve their equitable participation, without making distinctions to assist those groups in particular need, may deflect attention from where the problems are greatest” (1984b, 46).

In the Royal Commission’s final report of October 1984, Abella famously proposed that the federal government should put forward employment equity legislation. Like “visible minority,” “employment equity” is a uniquely Canadian term developed to avoid some of the ambiguity, controversy, intellectual resistance and backlash of American affirmative action programs (Canada 1984b). Abella recommended that employment equity legislation focus on the elimination of discriminatory barriers to equitable opportunities in employment for four designated groups: women, native people, visible minorities, and disabled persons. The Abella Commission also institutionalized the distinction between visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples as separate population groups with different relationships to the Canadian state.

⁷ Personal communication, August 2024.

The lack of race-based data was immediately flagged as an issue. The Commission noted that “Statistics Canada does not have sufficiently refined data to make determinative judgements about where intervention on behalf of a particular visible minority groups would not be needed” and recommended that the mini-census in 1986 and the decennial census in 1991 be adjusted to collect more detailed data on race (Canada 1984b). At the same time, an internal Statistics Canada report concluded that using the ethnic origin question in the census to enumerate racial minorities was an ineffective and potentially inaccurate approach. People of Haitian descent, for example, may have identified their ethnic origin as French while Jamaicans may have identified as British. And given the new calls for more accurate racial data from the parliamentary committee and the Royal Commission, Statistics Canada’s standard approach to assign racial identity using proxies such as ethnicity, language, place of birth, and surname, was increasingly recognized as inadequate (Boxhill, 1984).

The 1986 census, however, did not include a direct question on race. Budget and time constraints created a “no-change scenario” despite a growing need for racial statistics (Boxhill 1990, 9). Instead, the category “Black” was added to the closed-option list of the fifteen most populous groups based on previous census counts in order to improve the accuracy of data on the Black population. Better data were also required to properly implement the *Employment Equity Act*, which was passed in August 1986 and, for the first time, clearly defined visible minorities as persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are “non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” According to the Employment Equity Technical Reference Papers, designed by the Employment Equity Branch of the Department of Employment and Immigration to assist employers in complying with their obligations under the *Employment Equity Act*, ten official groups, including persons born in Canada or elsewhere, were recognized as belonging to the aggregate visible minority classification: Black, Indo-Pakistani, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Southeast Asian, Filipino, Other Pacific Islanders, West Asian and Arab, and Latin American (Canada 1986).

17. To which ethnic or cultural group(s) do you or did your ancestors belong? (See Guide)

Mark or specify as many as applicable

25 ☐ French

26 ☐ English

27 ☐ Irish

28 ☐ Scottish

29 ☐ German

30 ☐ Italian

31 ☐ Ukrainian

32 ☐ Dutch (Netherlands)

33 ☐ Chinese

34 ☐ Jewish

35 ☐ Polish

36 ☐ Black

37 ☐ Inuit

38 ☐ North American Indian

39 ☐ Métis

Other ethnic or cultural group(s). For example, Portuguese, Greek, Indian (India), Pakistani, Filipino, Japanese, Vietnamese. (specify below)

40

Other (specify)

41

Other (specify)

42

Other (specify)

Figure 1: 1986 census questionnaire

That year, Statistics Canada concurrently established the Employment Equity Data Program (EEDP), funded by the Treasury Board, to coordinate all quantitative and qualitative data issues pertaining to employment equity with the federal departments responsible for the program – Employment and Immigration Canada, the Public Service Commission, Treasury Board Secretariat, and the Canadian Human Rights Commission. These departments and Statistics Canada also formed an 18-member Interdepartmental Working Group, and a 7-member Interdepartmental Steering Committee on Employment Equity. The horizontal nature of this work led to an important interdepartmental letter of agreement between Statistics Canada and Employment and Immigration Canada that detailed arrangements for the dissemination of employment equity availability data, later serving as a precedent-setting model for other programs seeking similar interdepartmental arrangements (Statistics Canada 1991, 1-2).

Guided by the Interdepartmental Working Group, Statistics Canada tested different approaches to measuring visible minority status in four Census pretest instruments between 1986 and 1988, as well as in the 1987 Labour Market Activity Survey (LMAS). The 1986 Census Overcoverage Survey asked respondents “do you consider yourself to belong to Canada’s visible or racial minority population” and revealed “considerable confusion as to what was meant by the term ‘visible minority’ even though the term ‘racial’ minority was also part of the question (Boyd et al. 2000, 48). For example, in the “other (specify)” option and free-text field, answers included “Québécois” and “seniors”. Wally Boxhill, a long-time employee of Statistics Canada, also notes that the use of the phrase “consider yourself” in the question indicates a perceptual measurement that was misaligned with the *Employment Equity Act*, which

understands respondents to be visible minorities whether they consider themselves to be or not (Boxhill 1990, 9). Focus group testing conducted by Statistics Canada in Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, Winnipeg and Vancouver concluded that there wasn't a widespread awareness of the federal Employment Equity program and "visible minority" was not a term well understood by the general public (Cardillo 1993; Boyd et al. 2000, 48).

In 1988 the National Census Test separated the questions on ethnic/cultural origins from a new question on race or colour, which included only three designations (White, Asian, Black) and a free-text field for "other race or colour." A second National Census Test combined the questions on visible minority and Aboriginal identifiers and included the designations White, Asian, North American Indian, Métis, Eskimo/Inuit, Black, Other (specify). Both questions tested well, with low levels of non-response and few backlash or nonsensical responses. However, there was confusion about the responses of Arab, Latin American, and West Asian populations, which largely identified themselves as white. One analysis of the LMAS and NCT suggested a revision of the groups considered to be visible minority might be needed, arguing "there appears to be no reason to include Arabs, Latin Americans and West Asians as visible minorities. The vast majority of people of these ethnic origins clearly consider themselves to be white" (Mohan 1990, 6). Statistics Canada analysts, however, argued that these groups were considered part of the designated visible minority groups for Employment Equity purposes, even if their self-assignment as white makes sense in the context of phenotypical self-description (Boyd et al. 2000, 49).

17. Which of the following best describes this person's race or colour?
Persons of mixed race should mark or print the applicable groups.

1 ☐ White
2 ☐ Asian
3 ☐ Black
4 ☐ Other race or colour - Specify

☐ ☐ ☐

Figure 2: National Census Test 1 1988

When a direct question on race eventually appeared on the 1996 Canadian census, the wording carefully avoided using the terms "visible minority," "race," and "colour." Statistics Canada refers to the question as the "population group" question, thereby avoiding the terminology of race, which was considered controversial and divisive at the time (Thompson 2016, 162-165). A separate question on Indigenous identity instructed respondents who identified as North American Indian, Métis, or Inuit to skip the population group question altogether.

including the Ethnic Diversity Survey in 2002 and Canada's first Action Plan Against Racism in 2005. It became pervasive in academic literatures, both in the way that researchers described analyses pertaining to visible minority groups (Hou and Balakrishnan 1996; Pendakur and Pendakur 1998) as well as some criticisms of the concept and its implied construction of an unmarked white demographic standard against which racialized populations inevitably deviate (Abu-Laban 1998; Bauder 2001; Ontario Human Rights Commission 2009). As we shall see, however, criticism alone proved insufficient to dislodge the visible minority concept from Canadian statistical practices. This section identifies two additional mechanisms of the institutional reproduction of "visible minority" that operated alongside the legislative entrenchment of the designation in the *Employment Equity Act*: the institutional arrangements of the Canadian statistical system and the broader political environment in which racial data collection was not a government priority. Together, these mechanisms privileged an institutional inertia that ultimately retained the status quo.

By the early 2000s, the terminology was widespread, but neither consistent nor standardized. A 2011 United Nations report on Canada's progress towards its commitments to the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination noted several incongruities. The term "visible minorities" did not appear in Ontario statutes or regulations, or publications or forms of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (United Nations 2011, 60), though the provincial government, as well as the Government of British Columbia, used "visible minority" as a demographic description (United Nations 2011, 83). In the Ontario Human Rights Commission's 2009 guide for collecting human rights data, however, it noted that while there are benefits to using Statistics Canada's predetermined categories, "when it is necessary to describe people collectively...the term 'racialized person' or 'racialized group' is preferred over terms like 'racial minority,' 'visible minority,' 'person of colour,' or 'non-White' as it expresses race as a social construct rather than a description based on perceived biological traits" (OHRC 2009, 7). The Government of Manitoba used "visible minorities" as one of the designated groups of its provincial employment equity policy, but the Manitoba Human Rights Commission had begun to use the term "racialized communities" instead (United Nations 2011, 56).

An important criticism of the concept came from the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which reported in 2007 that the use of visible minority "may not be in accordance with the aims and objectives of the Convention" (United Nations 2007a,17). The Canadian representative, Diane Fulford, an Assistant Deputy Minister in the Department of Canadian Heritage, defended the term's use, noting that "visible minority was a term that was used in a very positive light in Canada, to provide targets for ethnocultural communities to participate in every aspect of Canadian society" (United Nations 2007b). Patrick Thornberry, the Committee's Rapporteur for Canada, then reiterated the Committee's concern that "the use of the term visible minorities seemed to somehow indicate that 'whiteness' was the standard, all others differing from that being visible" (United Nations 2007b).

In 2009, the United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, further explained the problem with the concept. “While the category called ‘visible minority,’ as used in the *Employment Equity Act*, was at one time a positive step to acknowledge minority communities,” she argued, “it is now too broad to give a realistic picture of the achievements of or problems faced by distinct communities” (United Nations 2009). McDougall noted that the concept was too broad and outdated, that African-Canadians in particular felt strongly that their specific identities and situations were neglected, and that even government officials were never certain about which groups they were referring to when using the catch-all category. These officials “talked about ‘immigrants,’ ‘visible minorities’ and ‘cultural communities’ in ways that often seemed inter-changeable and overlapping. Many of the most positive policies appear targeted towards ‘immigrants’ and new arrivals, while few seem to speak directly to the experiences of those long-standing and established minority communities” (United Nations 2009). She pointed out the failure of universalist approaches to social policy, especially in poverty alleviation, a problem that disproportionately affects African Canadian and specific Asian Canadian communities. In line with the criticisms that visible minority is a way for Canadian governments to avoid naming race and racism, McDougall added, “the word ‘race’ was almost never used; almost as if it was being deliberately avoided. Yet, I came to understand that issues of race still have salience in this society” (United Nations 2009).

These criticisms were reiterated in the 2012 Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, as well as a subsequent report in 2017. In both, the concerns remained the same: ‘visible minority’ blurred important distinctions between the different types of racial discrimination minorities experienced; Canada needed to improve its collection of racially disaggregated data; the use of ‘visible minority’ avoided naming both race and racism (United Nations 2012; United Nations 2017a). The official report of the working group of experts on people of African descent in 2017 also echoed these concerns and went as far as to recommend the adoption of “a nation-wide mandatory policy on the collection of data disaggregated by race, colour, ethnic background, national origin and other identities be implemented to determine where and if racial disparities exist for African Canadians so as to address them accordingly” (United Nations 2017b, 17).

Meanwhile, academics and other social actors began to call for better race-based data in several policy areas. In criminal justice, the Auditor General of Canada’s 2002 report identified significant gaps in data infrastructure, including information on Indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system, diversion programs, plea bargains, and young offenders (Canada 2002). In the following years, harsher criticisms highlighted not just data gaps, but data obfuscation. Landmark *Toronto Star* reporting in 2002 and 2012 revealed severe racial disparities in police stops. At the same time, sociologists argued that police-reported data on the race of victims and accused persons was inconsistent, unreliable, or worse,

collected but actively suppressed from public scrutiny (Gabor 1994; Kong and Beattie 2005; Mosher and Haft 2010; Owusu-Bempah and Wortley 2014). For example, using data obtained through freedom of information requests, Millar and Owusu-Bempah (2011) find that while the overall reporting of crime has increased, the reporting of race has decreased: “As of 2009, almost 20% of Canadian police services refuse, as an official policy, to report Aboriginal status for either victims or accused persons. Furthermore, most police services now fail to report race—even the simple category of Aboriginal—so often that this value is missing for more than 80% of cases” (2011, 657). There were similar calls for better racial data in health (Khan et al. 2015; Munroe 2022) and education (Henry et al. 2017; Mayor and Suarez 2019; George et al. 2020) sectors.

The persistence of “visible minority” can be explained through three mutually reinforcing institutional mechanisms. First, the legislative purpose of the concept is embedded in the *Employment Equity Act*, first passed in 1986 and revised in 1995, which included a definition of visible minority that was replicated in the departmental standard that Statistics Canada used in all of its work. This departmental standard remained relatively unmodified from 1998 to 2015,⁸ derived from the information on the population group and Aboriginal group questions on the census (Statistics Canada 2021a).

Secondly, Statistics Canada is responsible for providing statistical information and analysis pertaining to Canada’s social and economic health and promoting statistical standards and practices, but it is not a policy-making agency. *The Statistics Act* (1985) identifies its role as one of collaboration and coordination with other government departments. Canada’s statistical system is centralized, meaning responsibility for the collection, management, and dissemination of social, economic, and other forms of data within and on behalf of the federal government is the singular responsibility of Statistics Canada, and autonomous, meaning that Statistics Canada operates independently, without the undue influence of external parties, including political elites and civil society. Statistics Canada also operates through a cost-recovery model, providing custom survey and analytical services to government departments and other clients that pay for the direct and indirect costs of doing the work (Morris 2018; Canadian Statistics Advisory Council 2020, 22). In practice, this cost-recovery operational model means that funding for surveys that are not typically part of ongoing surveys and statistical programs comes from other departments and is therefore closely linked to government priorities.⁹ In addition, regulatory oversight for the *Employment Equity Act* is shared between the Minister of Labour,¹⁰ the Treasury Board Secretariat, which oversees the administration of employment equity within the federal public service, and the

⁸ The departmental standard changed slightly in June 2009, separating the Arab and West Asian categories that were previously combined. Importantly, respondents who identify as Aboriginal are included in the category “not a visible minority,” which also includes respondents who identify as White.

⁹ For example, the 2002 Ethnic Diversity was jointly funded by Statistics Canada and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

¹⁰ Employment Equity was under the portfolio of the Department of Employment and Immigration (1986-1996), Human Resources Development Canada (1993-2003), Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2003-2006), and Employment and Social Development Canada (2006-present).

Canadian Human Rights Commission, which has responsibility to ensure compliance with the non-reporting requirements of the Act. Amending the concept would therefore require a legislative change and significant interdepartmental consultation and coordination in advance. The interdepartmental nature of the operationalization of “visible minority,” combined with Statistics Canada’s carefully guarded autonomy and independence, gave the concept a degree of insulation from its critics.

Finally, government priorities during this period of criticism were not oriented toward improving the collection of racial data. The Conservative Party formed a minority government in 2006, ending more than a decade of Liberal control. Prime Minister Stephen Harper strengthened his minority government in the 2008 election and then won a majority government in 2011. Canada’s Action Plan Against Racism, the first horizontal federal approach to combatting racism with a five-year, \$56 million budget, was put in place in 2005 by Paul Martin’s previous Liberal government and was quietly abandoned as the Harper Conservatives focused more on social cohesion and equal access to economic opportunity instead of anti-racism (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2010). More importantly, the Harper government declared its skepticism of mandatory data collection, announcing suddenly in June 2010 that it was eliminating the mandatory long form of the census, which contained the “population group” question, in the name of protecting the privacy rights of Canadians (Thompson 2016, 233). Institutional inertia was therefore reinforced by the absence of political demand for reform.

Taken together, these mechanisms help explain the durability of “visible minority” despite mounting criticism. A legislative mandate that kept the term alive, its administrative distribution across government made revision challenging while Statistics Canada’s cost-recovery operational model limited its policy influence, and the Harper government’s particular framing of race, social cohesion, and privacy insulated the concept from review. Combined, these factors made change unlikely, though as we shall see, not impossible.

IV. Challenge and Change

The institutional arrangements that had sustained “visible minority” began to weaken when political priorities surrounding race and racism changed with the election of Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government in 2015 and other exogenous events shifted political, institutional, and ideational orientations surrounding the acknowledgement of systemic racism in Canada.¹¹ For example, whereas Canadian representatives to

¹¹ The day after the 2015 election, in fact, Statistics Canada’s departmental standard for “visible minority of a person” included category derivations in the classification note for the first time, revealing that: (1) Aboriginal people are classified as “not a visible minority; (2) Latin American, Arab, and West Asian respondents that identify as these categories and “White” or a European write-in response are classified as “not a visible minority,” and (3) the “not a visible minority” category also includes White respondents. Statistics Canada, *Visible Minority of a Person. Departmental Standard October 19, 2015 to August 24, 2021*, (2021), <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Var.pl?Function=DECI&Id=257515>

the United Nations had previously defended the use of visible minority, in 2016 Canadian representatives now stated that Statistics Canada “planned to assess the relevance of the current classification of visible minority groups as a tool to measure inequality in relation to indicators, such as employment rate, low-income incidence and over qualification. That project would examine questions, such as whether the groups currently identified were those most likely to suffer discrimination and whether information for some groups would be more useful if it were disaggregated.” (United Nations 2017b). Neither this project nor any concurrent efforts to produce disaggregated data for the population group question, however, appear in any of the departmental plans until 2021. The lag is revealing; the recognition of the limitations of the concept once again proved insufficient to produce institutional change.

Several ancillary initiatives in 2017 and 2018 confirmed the need for more, better, and disaggregated race-based data, demonstrating that pressure for change was beginning to move from critique toward institutional experimentation. After widespread criticism following reports of discriminatory carding practices of the Toronto police, the Government of Ontario, controlled by the Liberal Party under the leadership of Premier Kathleen Wynne, passed the *Anti-Racism Act* in 2017. The act provides a legislative framework for the reporting requirements of Ontario’s Anti-Racism Strategy, which develops a disaggregated race data collection framework, standards, and guidelines, piloting the collection of these data in key policy sectors such as justice, K-12 education, health, and child welfare (Ontario 2017). *Ontario’s Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism* (2018) provides complete standards and guidelines for race-based data collection, management, and use for government and other public sector organizations and includes important distinctions from Statistics Canada’s approach to the way race is framed and categorized.¹² Visible minority is replaced by “racialized (person or group),” noting that this broader term “includes but is not necessarily limited to people classified as ‘visible minorities’ under the Canadian census and may include people impacted by antisemitism and Islamophobia.” At the federal level, shifting terminology emerged in Canada’s 2018 anti-racism strategy, which dedicated \$6.2 million “to increase reliable, usable and comparable data and evidence regarding racism and discrimination,” including “enhancing the collection of disaggregated data that can be broken down by meaningful categories of race and/or ethno-cultural origins, and the analysis of this data” (Canada 2019, 19). This strategy also uses the term “racialized communities” instead of “visible minorities,” which appears only in a definitional sense.

¹² See Tables 2 and 3 from Ontario, *Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism*, (2018), <https://www.ontario.ca/document/data-standards-identification-and-monitoring-systemic-racism>.

In particular, Ontario’s approach uses different mandatory racial categories (Black, East/Southeast Asian, Indigenous, Latino, Middle Eastern, South Asian, White, Another), names race as a social category in the question framing (“Which race category best describes you?” instead of Statistics Canada’s approach, “Are you ...?”) and allows Indigenous respondents to self-report “Indigenous” as a racial category, separate and distinct from the question about Indigenous identity.

In 2020, two major focusing events intensified political attention to racial inequality and strengthened demand for more meaningful racial data, setting the demise of the visible minority concept in motion. First, the COVID-19 pandemic wrought a sharp increase in hate crimes against people of East Asian descent, as well as increased awareness that the “essential work” in the healthcare and agricultural sectors was done largely by racialized workers, uneven vaccine availability and take-up in marginalized communities, and the disparate racial effects of the virus itself. Secondly, the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 brought a harsh spotlight on circumstances of systemic and anti-Black racism in Canadian social and economic life, and especially in criminal justice (CSAC 2020; BHEWG 2021; ESPC 2021; Thompson et al. 2021; Etowa et al. 2021; BNFIN 2022; CIHI 2022; BCCAT 2023; United Nations 2023).

By 2021, the federal government had launched the Supporting Black Canadian Communities Initiative, directed the Department of Justice to create a Black Justice Strategy, and dedicated \$172 million over five years for Statistics Canada to implement a new Disaggregated Data Action Plan¹³, which specifically sought to collect and analyze disaggregated and intersectional data on the four designated employment equity groups, including racialized populations (Ajadi et al. 2025). At the provincial level, British Columbia’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner released the report, *Disaggregated demographic data collection in British Columbia: The grandmother perspective* in September 2020, which informed the *Anti-Racism Data Act* of 2022. In the report, visible minority appears only in a footnote that notes the term “reflects the language used in the Census, which is now an outdated descriptor” (BCOHRC 2020, 17) and does not appear at all in the 2022 Act. Similarly, Nova Scotia’s 2022 *Dismantling Racism and Hate Act* uses “marginalized and racialized communities” and does not contain “visible minority” at all.

Most importantly, in his January 2021 mandate letter to the then-Minister of Labour, Filomena Tassi, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau instructed her to launch a review of the *Employment Equity Act*.¹⁴ In its scope of work, the *Employment Equity Act* Review Task Force, chaired by McGill University law professor Adelle Blackett, was specifically tasked with ascertaining what changes should be made to the designated group names and definitions, including “visible minorities,” and “Aboriginal,” and to the Act itself in order to reflect the various labour market experiences of populations within the broader visible minority classification, such as Black Canadians (Canada 2021). In its final report, the task force dedicates the second chapter to “data justice.” It references the work of the British Columbia Human Rights Commissioner (2020) mentioned above, which “calls for the data collection to be relevant, to be collected

¹³ Statistics Canada, *Disaggregated Data Action Plan*, (2025), <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/trust/modernization/disaggregated-data>

¹⁴ Office of the Prime Minister, *Minister of Labour Supplementary Mandate Letter*, (2021), <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2021/01/15/archived-minister-labour-supplementary-mandate-letter>

through data stewardship and respect for Indigenous data sovereignty that shows responsibility and reciprocity with communities, and to illustrate reflexivity – that is, a deep, continual examination of barriers and biases (Canada 2023, 55), and emphasizes the need for disaggregated and intersectional data, collected in alignment with human rights purposes that balance privacy concerns.

In the third chapter, the task force directly engages with the viability of the visible minority concept, recommending that “the term visible minority should be replaced with the term racialized workers” (Canada 2023, 160). The report notes that “the language of ‘visible minority’ has been almost universally criticized, and the task force received substantial requests to have it changed” (161). The language of racialization, it argues, is “active,” capturing the idea that race is constructed through historical and contemporary practices, including Canadian employment and immigration policy, that recreate forms of social stratification (161-162). The report also recommends extracting “Black” from the larger category of racialized workers for inclusion as a separate category under the *Employment Equity Act*.

Amid this shifting political landscape and these institutional drivers, Statistics Canada began a concurrent review of the visible minority concept in 2022. The report of stakeholder consultations conducted between October 2022 and November 2023 confirmed that “visible minority” needed to be replaced but revealed no consensus on which terminology should be used moving forward. “Racialized” was both the most preferred and most controversial option:

Many participants were offended when they were described as belonging to a racialized group. Furthermore, most francophone participants did not think that Statistics Canada should adopt race-based terminology because it is more generally considered to be offensive in French. Regardless of their official language, many participants felt that labelling all non-White people as “racialized” reinforces the White population as the dominant group. Finally, participants also noted the various definitions of “racialization” related to skin colour, culture, religion, ethnicity, language, etc. currently in use (Statistics Canada 2024).

However, the pressure from a shift in the legislative driver of the population group question, the *Employment Equity Act*, is a paramount concern; Statistics Canada notes that should the recommendation of the Employment Equity Task Force to replace “visible minorities” with “racialized workers” be adopted in a future amendment to the Act, “Statistics Canada should align its terminology and definitions to provide benchmarking data” (Statistics Canada 2024).

In terms of the specific categories included within the population group question on the Census and other surveys, the consultative engagement sessions offered no clear consensus. Participants recorded

concern about whether greater detail in responses should be permitted, the need for historical continuity in data, and changing the labels of particular categories (e.g. Middle Eastern versus West Asian). The report recommends keeping the categories in the census questionnaire the same until testing can reveal the effects of modifying the “West Asian,” “Arab,” and “Latin American” categories and determine a method for allowing Indigenous respondents to identify with one or more non-Indigenous population groups (Statistics Canada 2024).

At the same time, across the federal government shifting priorities have advanced the collection of disaggregated racial data more rapidly in the past four years than the previous four decades. Canada’s latest Anti-Racism Strategy includes the direction for Statistics Canada to improve racial data collection and dissemination, establish an expert advisory committee on ethno-cultural and immigration statistics, develop analytical portraits of six major racialized groups in Canada, update the social inclusion framework with new indicators and reference years, develop a conceptual framework that defines best practices when researching racism, hate, and discrimination, and continue to implement the Disaggregated Data Action Plan (Canada 2024, 26). The Report of the Steering Group for Canada’s Black Justice Strategy recommended the creation of a unit within Statistics Canada’s Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics that would collect, analyze, and make available race and identity-based data within the criminal justice system, including all police interactions, the entirety of the court process, from pre-trial detentions to trials and sentencing, correctional outcomes, and reintegration outcomes and recidivism rates (Owusu-Bempah and Jones 2024, 22-23). The implementation plan includes a commitment to “collecting disaggregated data by race to better understand how unequal outcomes experienced by Black people in other systems, such as education, health, housing and employment, impact on the risks of criminal justice system involvement, as well as the unequal outcomes of Black people within the criminal justice system” (Canada 2025, 8), including a collaboration between Statistics Canada and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police to collect race and identity-based data of all accused and victims of criminal incidents in the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (38). The RCMP also initiated a Race-Based Data Collection Initiative using officer-perception data, the first national approach to race-based data collection in Canadian policing (RCMP 2024).

V. Conclusion

This account of the emergence, institutionalization, entrenchment, and pending replacement of the visible minority designation reveals the institutional dynamics that have shaped the political development of racial classifications and the collection of race-based data in Canada. The term “visible minority” came into being as a response to racial inequality and was progressively institutionalized into legislation, administrative practice, and the statistical infrastructure of the Canadian state. Its persistence – despite sustained criticism over the years from scholars, community groups, and international bodies – reflected

the self-reinforcing effects of those institutional arrangements. The *Employment Equity Act*, which provided an important catalyst in the institutionalization of “visible minority,” also gave it a durable policy function: identifying and monitoring designated groups within the federal employment equity regime. At the same time, the centralization, autonomy, and cost-recovery operations of Statistics Canada, together with the interdepartmental arrangements through which employment equity data were produced and used, made the existing classifications difficult to revise. Once embedded across legislation, statistical standards, and administrative practices, the concept acquired a durability that exceeded the strength of the consensus behind it.

The decline of the visible minority designation followed a different institutional logic. Criticism of the term had existed for decades, but criticism alone was insufficient to dislodge an established classification. Change became possible when political priorities shifted, when focusing events intensified existing demands for more disaggregated race-based data, and when pressures were taken up by institutions with the authority to reconsider existing arrangements. The review of the *Employment Equity Act* was particularly consequential, providing an institutional path for longstanding criticisms to be translated into a formal reconsideration of the employment equity framework. The trajectory thus illustrates an important feature of institutional change: exogenous political pressures are more consequential when there are already existing cracks in the institutional consensus around the status quo, and powerful institutional mandates that support the call for change. What ultimately enabled the reevaluation of “visible minority” was the convergence of changing political priorities, longstanding criticism, and institutional mechanisms capable of translating both into reform.

The rise and fall of visible minority therefore demonstrate both the durability and contingency of racial classification schemas, revealing that categories that appear natural or administratively inevitable are in fact historically produced, institutionally maintained, and far from immutable. The ongoing review of the visible minority concept and recent efforts by federal and provincial governments to enhance data disaggregation across policy areas signal a tentative shift that could lead to vast improvements in the collection of race-based data in Canada. However, much work remains to be done. What lies ahead is not simply the task of updating terminology, but of building a coherent, transparent, accountable, and responsible data ecosystem capable of illuminating the lived realities of racialized communities and driving meaningful progress toward the original purpose of the institutionalization of “visible minority” – eliminating racial inequality in Canada.

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