

SEPTEMBER 20, 2016 AT 5:13 PM

CITYSCAPE

Why Toronto's Law Firms Need To Be More Diverse

Race and racism are at the forefront of issues in the justice system.

BY TORONTOIST STAFF



Courtroom 2 at Osgoode Hall. Photo by [twurdemann](#) from the [Torontoist Flickr Pool](#).

For the past four years, a working group created by the Law Society of Upper Canada has analyzed racism and discrimination in the legal profession.

The Challenges Faced by Racialized Licensees Working Group came together to promote equity, diversity, and inclusiveness among Ontario lawyers and paralegals. It released [its final report this week \[PDF\]](#).

The working group's findings about shortcoming in legal representation are disappointing.

Torontonians are diverse, and lawyers, tasked with representing us, should ideally reflect that diversity.

But the report found that racialized lawyers and paralegals “face widespread barriers within the professions at all stages of their careers,” and called these challenges “longstanding and significant.”

Some examples? Discrimination and stereotyping, and a lack of mentors and role models. The report calls for a culture change, and puts forward 13 recommendations.

Its findings include:

- Racialized licensees were more likely to have struggled to find an articling position or training placement.
- They spoke of assumptions by others members of the legal profession, as well as clients, that racialized lawyers are unskilled employees, interpreters, social workers, students, or clients.
- Some said they were not offered career opportunities because of their “foreign sounding” names.
- They spoke about white privilege, and the need for its existence to be acknowledged in order to address the challenges they face.

“Race and racism are also at the forefront of issues in the justice system—from the overrepresentation of black and Indigenous peoples in federal prisons to police violence to calls for judicial diversity and beyond,” the report further notes.

It’s critical that people of colour not be pushed out of the legal profession due to discrimination, inappropriate comments, and feelings of “otherness” cited in the report.

Since 2001, the proportion of racialized lawyers in the Ontario legal profession has doubled, from 9 per cent to 18 per cent in 2014. But that doesn’t mean they’re well-represented.

According to a 2011 report by the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University, only 6.8 per cent of those in leadership positions at the GTA’s large law offices are visible minorities. That underrepresentation extends to Crown prosecutors; of the 14 senior Crown positions surveyed, none were held by a visible minority.

Lawyers play an important role in society. They stand for equality and fairness, and these qualities should be reflected in their profession. Increased diversity wouldn't only benefit Torontonians; it would also benefit the industry—people from diverse backgrounds can bring different perspectives and opinions to the table.

A lack of diversity leads to narrow-mindedness, and in the legal profession—really, in any profession—that's not good. The city's population should be reflected in its lawyers.