British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power

By Desmond Cole

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out the Book Club How-to resource.

Author Bio

Desmond Cole is a journalist, radio host and activist. His debut book, The Skin We're In, won the Toronto Book Award and was a finalist for the Forest of Reading Evergreen Award and the Rakuten Kobo Emerging Writer Prize. It was also named a best book of 2020 by The Globe and Mail, NOW Magazine, CBC, Quill & Quire and Indigo. Cole's writing has appeared in the Toronto Star, Toronto Life, The Walrus and the Ottawa Citizen, among others. He lives in Toronto.[1]

Summary

The Skin We're In is Desmond Cole's nonfiction account of anti-Black racism in Canada, told through events and activism in 2017. A Black Canadian journalist

[1] "Desmond Cole," Writers Trust of Canada, accessed October 2026, https://www.writerstrust.com/authors/desmond-cole.

and activist, Cole draws on personal experiences, interviews and community organizing to document racism in policing, education, immigration and other public institutions, and the community advocates and organizing taking place to challenge it.

The book follows campaigns against police carding, racial profiling, police violence and police officers in schools. Cole recounts the deaths and mistreatment of Black people during encounters with police, and the difficulties families and communities face in seeking justice and accountability. He also explores Black Canadian history, solidarity between Black and Indigenous communities and tensions between his work as a journalist and his growing public profile in activism. Through the stories of individuals and grassroots movements, Cole challenges Canada's tendency to treat anti-Black racism as primarily an American problem rather than confronting our own histories and contemporary realities.

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Under the B.C. *Human Rights Code*, people are protected from discrimination based on race, colour, ancestry, place of origin and other protected characteristics, in areas such as employment, housing and services available to the public—including education. Discrimination can be systemic, occurring through policies, practices and institutional cultures that disadvantage particular groups. The Skin We're In illustrates how anti-Black racism can operate across multiple institutions, shaping people's experiences of public services, policing, their safety and their opportunities.

In B.C., the Human Rights Commissioner has identified systemic racism in policing as a significant human rights concern. The Commissioner's Equity is Safer report documented racial disparities in policing and recommended reforms to improve equity and public safety.[2] Building on this work, the Commissioner's Inquiry into police use of force examines how police use of force disproportionately affects racialized people, particularly Black and Indigenous people, and people experiencing mental-health crises.[3] The work also highlights the importance of collecting and analyzing disaggregated

[2] BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, *Equity is Safer*, (BCOHRC, 2021), https://bchumanrights.ca/resources/publications/publication/scorpa/.
[3] "Inquiry into Police Use of Force," Inquiries, BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, updated 2026, https://bchumanrights.ca/inquiries-and-cases/inquiries/inquiry/use-of-force/.

demographic data to identify systemic inequalities and hold institutions accountable.[4]

The Commissioner has raised concerns about the School Liaison Officer program in B.C., following from her recommendations in Equity is Safer.[5] In 2022, the Commissioner recommended that school districts end these programs unless they could demonstrate an evidence-based need that could not be met through civilian alternatives, citing concerns about the criminalization and surveillance of Indigenous, Black and other marginalized students. Her recommendations called for independent research that centres students' experiences and examines whether these programs can improve safety without causing disproportionate harm.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Black Canadian history, identity and belonging

Cole challenges Canada's tendency to understand racism primarily as an American problem, while minimizing its own history of slavery, segregation and discrimination against Black communities. Reflecting on these comparisons, he writes:

> This idea that Canada's racial injustices are not as bad as they could be—this notion of slavery lite, of racism lite, of what my friend calls the "toy version of racism"—is a very Canadian way of saying: remember what we could do to you if we wanted to.

How might comparing Canada favourably to the United States shape our understanding of racism in this country? What happens when we measure

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[4] BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, *Disaggregated Demographic Data Collection in British Columbia: The Grandmother Perspective*, (BCOHRC, 2020), https://bchumanrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/BCOHRC_Sept2020_Disaggregated-Data-Report-FINAL.pdf.

[5] "Letter to School Trustees on Human Rights Concerns with the Use of School Liaison Officers in B.C. Schools," News, BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, published November 2022, https://bchumanrights.ca/news-and-events/news/letter-to-school-trustees-on-use-of-school-liaison-officers/.

progress against how much worse things could be, rather than against principles of equality, dignity and human rights?

- Comparing Canada to countries perceived as having worse records on racism can minimize the discrimination experienced by Black Canadians and obscure Canada's own history of slavery, segregation and systemic exclusion. It can also reinforce a national identity built around tolerance and multiculturalism, making it harder to acknowledge ongoing injustices.
- Measuring progress against worse alternatives can lower expectations of governments and public institutions, while encouraging marginalized communities to be grateful for the rights and freedoms they have, rather than demanding full equality. A human rights approach asks whether everyone can enjoy their rights and freedoms equally, not simply whether their circumstances could be worse.

2. Professionalism, neutrality and speaking out

Cole's growing involvement in Black Lives Matter–Toronto brings him into conflict with expectations that journalists remain neutral observers. He increasingly questions whether maintaining professional credibility requires distancing himself from the racism he personally experiences or witnesses in his communities, and if that is a trade-off he could live with.

What responsibilities do journalists have to remain neutral or impartial, particularly when reporting on injustice? More broadly, how do expectations of professionalism, including pressure to 'remain calm,' shape whose voices are heard and taken seriously?

- Journalistic independence and impartiality can help build public trust, but there are different perspectives on what these principles require, especially from journalists with lived or living experiences of the issue they are covering. Neutrality may not be possible, or desirable, for some. Cole's experience invites us to consider whose perspectives are treated as objective, and whether speaking out against injustice necessarily compromises professional credibility.
- Beyond journalism, expectations to remain calm or professional can be applied unequally. Focusing on someone's tone, anger or behaviour can shift attention away from the injustice being raised. Marginalized people may face greater pressure to remain calm, agreeable or silent, while

those in positions of power are more readily viewed as credible or objective. Speaking out can carry personal and professional consequences, further discouraging people from challenging discrimination.

3. Carding, racial profiling and freedom in public spaces

Cole describes how police carding and street checks disproportionately target Black people, often without any suspicion of criminal wrongdoing. In B.C., the Commissioner's 2021 Equity is Safer report found that Indigenous people represented just two per cent of Vancouver's population but accounted for 16 per cent of police street checks in 2017. Black people represented one per cent of the population, but five per cent of street checks.[6]

How might being repeatedly stopped, questioned or surveilled by police affect someone's sense of freedom, safety and belonging in their own community? What are the broader consequences when some groups experience policing very differently from others?

- Repeated police stops can create fear, humiliation and a sense of being treated as suspicious simply for existing in public spaces. Discriminatory policing can also erose community trust, discourage people from reporting crimes or seeking assistance and create lasting consequences for employment, education and mental health. These harms extend beyond individual encounters, affecting families and communities across generations.

4. Police in schools: safety, trust and belonging

Cole describes how Black students in Toronto experienced disproportionate school discipline, surveillance and criminalization. Following years of community advocacy, the Toronto District School Board ended its School Resource Officer (SRO) program in 2017. In B.C., Commissioner Govender has similarly raised concerns about School Liaison Officer (SLO) programs, recommending that school districts demonstrate an evidence-based need for police in schools, that cannot be met through civilian alternatives.

What does it mean for students to feel genuinely safe, supported and connected at school? What community-based or civilian-led approaches could

[6] BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, *Equity is Safer*, 41.

schools use to build meaningful relationships and support students to feel a sense of belonging?

- Safety and belonging are built through trusted relationships, supportive adults and environments where students feel understood and respected. Civilian alternatives could include community Elders or seniors mentoring students, former students returning as peer mentors and coaches, restorative justice circles, youth workers, counsellors and culturally grounded community partnerships, offering alternative programming and support. These approaches emphasize connection, prevention and care rather than relying primarily on enforcement or discipline.

5. Police oversight and accountability

Cole recounts several incidents of police violence, including the death of Abdirahmin Abdi and the assault of Dafonte Miller, that raise serious concerns about police accountability, institutional loyalty and resistance to independent scrutiny. Why might police organizations respond to demands for oversight and accountability as threats to their authority, legitimacy or ability to do their jobs? How might professional cultures and expectations around loyalty, exercising authority or masculinity influence these responses?

- Police organizations may develop strong cultures of loyalty and solidarity, particularly where officers rely on one another in high-risk situations. While this can support teamwork, it can also discourage questioning colleagues or acknowledging wrongdoing. Expectations around authority, toughness or masculinity may also influence how criticism, vulnerability and accountability are perceived.
- Police have exceptional powers to detain people, use force and restrict individual freedoms. Independent oversight, transparency and meaningful consequences for misconduct are essential to public trust. Other regulated professions, like nursing, teaching and social work, offer useful comparisons, although they too face challenges with institutional accountability and loyalty.

6. Disaggregated data and human rights

Throughout The Skin We're In, Cole describes community advocates repeatedly calling for race-based data to expose disparities in policing and police use of force. BCOHRC's 2020 report, Disaggregated Demographic Data

Collection in B.C.: The Grandmother Perspective, explores both the benefits and risks of collecting this information. It emphasizes that data should serve communities, rather than become another tool for surveillance or discrimination.[7]

Why is disaggregated demographic data important for identifying systemic discrimination and holding institutions accountable? What risks might come with collecting information about people's identities, and how should communities help determine whether and how that data is collected and used?

- Disaggregated data can reveal patterns of unequal treatment that might otherwise remain hidden, helping communities advocate for change and institutions asses their own practices. However, data alone does not create accountability, and communities should not have to continually prove their experiences of discrimination before institutions take action. Collecting demographic information can also reinforce stereotypes, compromise privacy or increase surveillance. The grandmother perspective framework emphasizes collecting data with care, in meaningful partnership with affected communities, and only when it serves a clear purpose. Sometimes, the best course of action may be choosing not to collect certain data at all.

[7] BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, *Disaggregated Demographic Data Collection in British Columbia: The Grandmother Perspective.*