



Research Summary

Let it not be a fight of the minority:

Priorities of young multicultural Victorians to reduce the harms of racism and its impact on their lives

Doery, K.*, Lee, A.*, Ravalji, K., Nguyen, P., Olsen, A., Stonnill, M. and Priest, N.



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**Joint first authors*

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Authors:

Kate Doery
Alexandra Lee
Krushnadevsinh Ravalji
Anna Olsen
Phuong Nguyen
Meg Stonnill
Naomi Priest

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POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research
Research School of Social Sciences
College of Arts & Social Sciences
The Australian National University

RSSS Building | 146 Ellery Crescent
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600 Australia



**Australian
National
University**

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Recommendations

1. Believe, and support young people who experience racism

Among the most harmful experiences described by participants were institutional and interpersonal responses that denied, minimised, or dismissed their experiences of racism. Participants emphasised the need for meaningful support systems that offer listening, validation, and practical assistance to those who experience racism.

2. Remove the unjust burden upon People of Colour to address racism

Participants were strongly critical of the expectation that People of Colour bear the primary burden of addressing racism and educating others. They called for this responsibility to be redistributed across society as a whole, with particular accountability placed on those who have historically benefited from racism — including white Australians and the government. This encompasses both individuals and institutions taking proactive responsibility for self-education, rather than relying on racialised people to perform this labour.

3. Pursue whole-of-society change to challenge systemic racism

Participants articulated a vision of a world free from racism, and emphasised the importance of pursuing this through ambitious, systemic change. Participants identified government and media as having particular responsibility for leading change and cooperation at a systemic level. They also identified a need to dismantle institutional racism in schools, workplaces, and highlighted the need for greater representation of racialised people in leadership positions across these sectors.

4. Prioritise meaningful education about racism and foster informed conversation

Participants noted that conversations about racism are largely absent from current educational curricula and emphasised that this gap must be addressed as a matter of priority. They called for dedicated, curriculum-embedded education on racism at both secondary and tertiary levels. Education could focus on what racism means at a personal and societal level, as well as conceptual understandings and consequences of racism. Young people advocated for structured opportunities for open discussion and critical engagement with key concepts — including systemic and institutional racism, intersectionality, and privilege — facilitated by skilled and knowledgeable educators.

5. Build the capacity of community services to respond to the impacts of racism

Participants identified a pressing need to strengthen the capacity of the health and welfare sectors to respond effectively to the impacts of racism. Recommendations in this area include increasing the proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), migrant, and People of Colour professionals within various workforces; expanding and improving training in culturally responsive practice; and developing dedicated practitioner training focused specifically on the impacts of racism on young people's everyday lives and wellbeing.

6. Resource community-led safe spaces

Young people called for dedicated, community-led spaces to be established (and existing spaces supported) to provide support and connection for racialised young people. Young people currently rely on trusted friends and family for support, and highlighted the importance of spaces for connection and community, particularly with People of Colour. They also recommended that these spaces could provide connections to other services, including health and wellbeing services.

7. Reform institutional reporting processes

Participants called for institutional responses to centre the needs of those targeted by racism. They recommended the reform of existing reporting mechanisms, and the development of additional accessible reporting pathways, prioritising confidentiality, safety, and institutional accountability, rather than focusing narrowly on prosecuting individual perpetrators.

8. Listen to young people who experience racism

Participants emphasised that initiatives to support young people experiencing racism should be designed and led by young People of Colour.

Executive Summary

The mental and physical health impacts of racism are well-documented and pervasive, with effects persisting across the life course from childhood into adulthood (Fang et al., 2025; Paradies, 2006; Paradies et al., 2015; Priest et al., 2024). Racism in Australia has deep historical roots. Rooted in colonisation and the White Australia Policy, racism persists in Australia today with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds experiencing systemic disadvantage (Hage, 1998; Moreon-Robinson, 2015). The negative impacts of racism were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing multicultural people in Australia to heightened racism and social exclusion. Despite this, multicultural young people remain significantly underrepresented in research, policy and service provision (Luu et al., 2024). This report seeks to address that gap by centring the voices and priorities of multicultural young people of migrant backgrounds from Victoria, Australia. It presents findings from focus group discussions exploring their understandings, experiences, and responses to racism, as well as their recommendations for change.

Young people's understandings of racism

- Young people described racism as a form of **injustice**, and a violation of equality and human rights, grounded in the belief that *"everyone should be treated equally"*.
- Young people shared complex understandings of racism as **socially and historically constructed**, and perpetuated through social institutions including media, family, and wider cultural influences:
"People are not born racist... people learn to be racist as they grow up"
"it becomes, so, part of the social fabric that it's just normal"
- Young people articulated racism as fundamentally **systemic**, as *"a system of power inequality"* shaped by global forces including histories of apartheid and colonialism. They were critical of the ways in which racism's systemic nature may often be overlooked, including in media and public discourses:
"I feel like it's very episodic now there are episodes, and then that's when there is an outcry of racism and then anti-racism protests. But there's still that systemic thing going on."

Young people's experiences of racism

- Young people did not focus on racism in terms of discrete incidents or events. Rather, they articulated racism as a **chronic, systemic form of harm** characterised by feelings of unsafety, othering and unbelonging. This extended to a constant and exhausting demand of hypervigilance against the ever-present possibility of racism:
"whenever she goes to the supermarket out there, people look at her differently. It's like they are shocked to see her."
"like it's your own kind of hyper awareness of not being white and then having to leave the house [...] you don't know what they're thinking, but...You kind of just go through the world in that way."
- Young people emphasised the profound impacts of **"subtle"** and pervasive forms of racism which could be difficult to characterise and explain:
"...you don't really get the overt racism like, you know, the violence and all that stuff, but much more subtle things."
"...oftentimes you feel gaslit... you're not really sure."
- Young people also recounted **institutional racism** and discrimination in healthcare, workplaces, and commonly in schools—perpetuated by both teachers and peers:
"I wish that they could have considered me as an intelligent person. At least at the same with the Whites, when at school."

Young people's responses to racism

- Young people considered **existing institutional responses to racism to be largely inadequate**. At best, these mechanisms failed to centre the needs of racialised young people or to address the systemic nature of racism; at worst, they actively perpetuated racism and compounded its harms, in what one participant called a “double tragedy”:
“What if you report and then the people the authority also discriminate against you? So it would be like double tragedy.”
“I took an action of reporting my classmates to the lecturer since I was at school of Whites, but they thought I was just lying.”
- Young people often chose not to report racism. Instead, they mobilised **personal protective strategies** to mitigate racism’s harms, including efforts to “not internalise” racism or victim-blaming:
“I guess I sort of recognised that there wasn't anything I could do about it, so I didn't really. I just I decided that it was just best not to internalise guilt.”
- **Talking to trusted friends, family, or partners** was a crucial strategy providing emotional support and connection in the face of racism, helping young people to “feel better”:
“My partner and I...we're kind of like just laugh it off, to make ourselves feel better,”

Young people's recommendations

- Young people emphasised a **whole-of-society imperative to recognise and dismantle racism** through sustained change in institutions including government and media. In particular, shifting the burden of responsibility from racialised people to everyone’s —especially those in positions of privilege and power:
“It's not just, you know, People of Colour or it's not...just their fight—it's everyone's fight. So...not all the responsibility is on you to speak up. It's also on society.”
- Young people also articulated an immediate need to **support racialised young people facing racism’s harms**. This included resourcing of community-led “safe spaces”, building the capacity of wellbeing and mental health support services to engage with different culture and the reform of institutional reporting processes to support targets of racism.
“You'd have someone to reassure you that what you just experienced and your reaction to your experience [of racism] is valid”;
“More bi-cultural workers, more bilingual workers, workers from different cultural backgrounds.”
- Young people were clear that to address racism now, and into the future, responses must **centre the needs and voices of racialised communities**, including multicultural young people.

As young people in this report recognised, racism represents a fundamentally systemic and structural issue that requires whole-of-society responses to address over time. Simultaneously, however, this report identifies a crucial imperative to support young people experiencing the harms of racism here and now. Spanning multiple levels of intervention and varying timescales, the recommendations contained in this report reflect both the urgent, present reality of racism as a determinant of young people’s wellbeing, and the longer-term commitment to the structural dismantling of racism in Australian society.

This report joins a growing body of scholarship and advocacy challenging the longstanding expectation that racialised communities bear the primary responsibility for anti-racism labour (Fleming et al., 2023; Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025a). Responsibility for dismantling racism must be assumed by the whole of society, and in particular by those with structural privilege and institutional power. The recommendations presented in this report — gathered from young people who shared their knowledge and experiences while navigating everyday racism, isolation, and the disproportionate impacts of pandemic lockdowns (ABS, 2022b; Doery et al., 2023) — offer a concrete and community-grounded starting point for this work.

The study

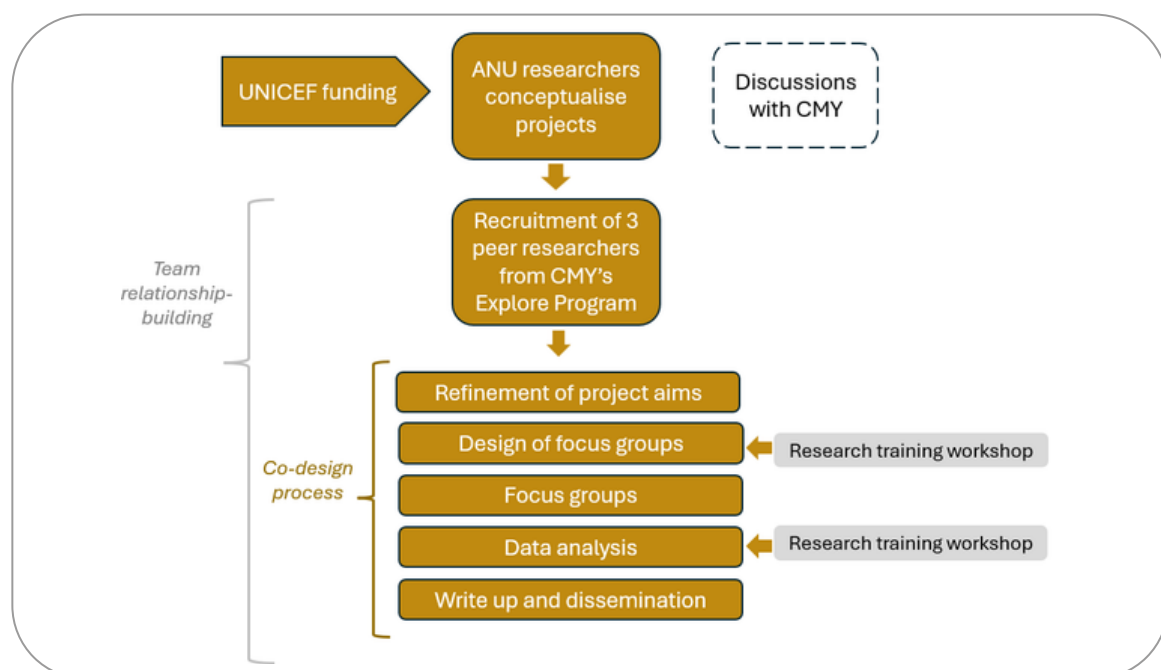
This project aimed to understand how multicultural young people navigate racism, and to provide a platform for them to share their priorities for addressing the harms of racism in their everyday lives. The project focuses on ‘multicultural’ young people who self-identified as being of migrant and refugee backgrounds (ABS, 2022a; Khan, 2022)[1]. While acknowledging critiques of ‘multicultural’ terminology (including by young people themselves: CMY, 2023a; Wright & Xiao, 2023; Abdi et al., 2025), we use this term to reflect young people’s language in focus groups, as well as the term’s ongoing usage as broad umbrella term inclusive of diverse cultural, ethnic, and generational migrant identities, particularly in the Australian youth sector (Khan, 2022).

The project was based in Victoria, where participants were recruited with the help of the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY). Focus groups were conducted in late 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak. This period saw a climate of heightened

racism in Australia (Ang & Mansouri, 2023), involving highly publicised racist incidents, institutional racism in government responses and inequitable health outcomes, and Global movements including Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate.

A total of 56 multicultural young people (aged 17-27) participated in online focus groups, conducted between November and December 2021. Focus groups were co-designed to be a safe environment and welcoming for all young people to share their experiences in ways they felt comfortable.

The project implemented a participatory approach based on ongoing collaboration between ANU researchers and three community-based peer researchers from CMY’s Explore program. The peer researchers were involved throughout all stages of the project, with the exception of funding agreement and initial conceptualisation, which had already been instigated by ANU researchers and CMY. Further methodological details may be found in the full report.



[1] While the Australian Census does not collect data on race, this is based on the widely used category of people from ‘migrant and refugee backgrounds’, referring to people who were either born overseas or have a parent who was.

Summary of detailed findings

1. Young people's understandings of racism: Systemic, global, and historical

Racism was a topic that participants engaged with thoughtfully and with evident investment. Their understandings of racism were grounded in a fundamental belief in the equality of all people and the right to just and equal treatment. When asked what comes to mind when they think of racism and discrimination, participants offered a rich and nuanced range of responses — identifying racism as complex, historically and socially constructed, and operating across multiple levels of society.

Part 1 Summary: Young people's understanding of racism

Racism as injustice- committed belief that all people are fundamentally equal and deserving of the same rights and opportunities.

Racism as socially and historically constructed- racism is not an intrinsic or natural way of being, but rather a learned mindset.

Racism as a global issue- racism and discrimination is a fundamentally systemic issue.

The media is an integral dimension of systemic racism- power is monopolised by a small number of individuals, homogeneity of media and a lack of diverse views creates bias.

COVID-19 heightened racial inequalities- providing 'an excuse' for people to stop hiding racism that had always been there and highlighting racism in healthcare settings.

Avoidance of 'race talk'- avoided mentioning whiteness and discussed racism in abstracted terms. Reflective of the social reality of white backlash against those speaking about racism.

2. Young people's experiences of racism: Chronic, subtle, and denied

Participants drew on a wide range of experiences in their discussion of racism, including their own firsthand encounters, vicarious experiences, and awareness of high-profile racist incidents in Australian and global media. Their experiences spanned multiple settings including education, healthcare, employment, and online spaces and encompassed overt forms of racism such as verbal and physical abuse, as well as subtler everyday manifestations including microaggressions, stereotyping, and being stared at or avoided. Ineffective responses to racism, including institutional responses, were highlighted as particularly harmful. Critically, rather than isolated incidents, young people understood racism as expressions of systemic racism shaping the texture of their daily lives.

Part 2 Summary: Experiences of racism

Overt racism and stereotypes- most commonly verbal abuse in public spaces and schools.

Social media- overarchingly considered unsafe and characterised by racism. Racism is embedded in the 'everyday' through social media.

Intersectionality- young people have a diverse range of experiences, shaped by skin colour and racial identity, ethnicity, religion and gender, among others beyond scope of this report.

Institutional discrimination- differential treatment and opportunities, often in school settings

Everyday racism and subtle othering- pervasive and ongoing experiences of being 'looked at' differently, questioned, Othered, and excluded from everyday environments, with profound impacts on young people's lives.

Denial, ambiguity, and gaslighting- everyday racism was difficult to articulate and experiences were often denied or 'gaslit'. This reflects systemic denial as part of systemic racism (Lentin, 2021).

Institutional denial- Institutional responses to racism (often, at schools) were inadequate and often harmful, constituting racism in their own rights.

3. Impacts of and responses to racism

Racism had a significant and sustained negative impact on participants' mental health and wellbeing. Participants described experiences of sadness, depression, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of unbelonging, alongside worry for themselves and those close to them. The harms of racism in young people's lives extended beyond discrete incidents, to experiences of hypervigilance; being constantly on the lookout for racism as an ever-present threat. In response, young people mobilised protective strategies including not 'internalising' racism, and speaking to friends or family to counter racism's isolating impacts.

Part 3 Summary: Impacts of and responses to racism

Talking to friends and family- was a key strategy for young people to 'feel better'. However, there are barriers to accessing this support, including barriers to open conversations about racism in Australia, and limited support networks amongst recently arrived young people.

Hypervigilance and avoidance- racism is experienced as a constant threat and possibility in everyday life, with profound impacts including sense of unsafety, mistrust isolation, and changes to behaviour.

Protective strategies- including efforts not to 'internalise' racism were enacted as practical responses to mitigate the harms of racism in everyday life. While strategic, these responses were limited by a lack of other viable options

Choosing not to report- young people found reporting systems unhelpful, and tended to 'let it slide'. Sources of support were removed from, or opposed to, reporting mechanisms.

'Unbelongingness' and isolation- ongoing experiences of systemic racism and interpersonal racism (such as at school) results in feelings of unbelonging.

4. Young People's Recommendations

Young people's responses remained underpinned by the need to counter and ultimately end racism. For them, supporting people who experience racism entails systemic and whole-of-society commitments to ending racism; anything less would mean failing to address or take seriously the harms that these young people face. Recommendations here included: dismantling racism in institutions including government, media, schools and workplaces; prioritising meaningful education about racism; and responsibility-taking from those in positions of privilege and power. Young people also articulated a more immediate need to support young people experiencing racism in their everyday lives. This included recommendations for capacity-building of health and welfare services, the resourcing of community-led 'safe spaces', and reform of institutional reporting processes. Young people were clear that to address racism now, and into the future, responses must centre the voices and needs of racialised people.

Part 4 Summary: Young people's recommendations and future hopes

Equality- young people view an ideal world as one free of racism. Maintaining this vision is crucial to resisting racism as the status quo.

Victim-centred reporting systems- should prioritise victims' safety, confidentiality, and control over processes. They should be independent of the police.

Making racism everyone's fight- the burden of addressing racism (including educating others), must not fall on victims of racism. Everyone, including white people, takes responsibility in a whole-of-society approach.

Systemic approaches to addressing racism- governments must lead whole-of-society responses to racism. Institutional actions are crucial to addressing systemic racism and supporting communities to talk about racism.

Safe spaces- of recognition, safety, and connection are crucial to addressing racism's harms in young people's lives. These spaces should be created by and for communities who experience racism.

Prioritise education on racism- in school curriculum. Provide space for students to learn, discuss and explore topics (racism, intersectionality, and colonialism), and unpack key terms.

Conclusions

“What I think is I hope the information that we have shared, the things we've said just before is not just for writing, we need to see it in action.”

There is already extensive evidence of the profound harms of racism upon young people's health and wellbeing. Rather than providing more numbers, this report has sought to make sense of what these harms mean, in the context of young people's own lives, in their own voices. We have offered an insight into how the harms of racism manifest in young people's everyday lives as an ongoing and continuous experience of hypervigilance and anticipation of racist harms. We have also asked young people themselves what they think can be done. If anti-racism work is truly to serve targets of racism in its process, as well as its aims, it is crucial that this 'smaller' goal of validating and attending to the harms of racism in young people's everyday lives is recognised as just as legitimate, urgent, and indeed fundamentally part of the larger goal of dismantling racism itself.

We urge readers of this report to listen to the knowledge and priorities of young people, and more importantly act, to ensure that the burden of addressing racism does not fall solely on the shoulders of racialised communities. Racism, and the responsibility of addressing it, must be everyone's business.

Supplementary Material: Racism in Australia

Racism is a system of oppression entwined with colonialism in Australia, based on the historical and ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, 2015). 'Australia', as a settler colonial nation, has been built on (false) claims to white land ownership, and white national identity, through attempted erasure of Aboriginal and cultures in the myth of terra nullius. These exclusionary claims have extended to the exclusion of perceived non-white migrants by white 'owners' of the land (Hage, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Racism is based on 'racialisation': the ongoing process through which people are positioned as outsiders and categorised into racial groups. While racial groups have no basis in biological reality, the idea of race has been used to label certain groups as inferior, in systems of white supremacy designed to oppress certain peoples while privileging whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). In Australia today, this historical process continues through racialised migration policies and discourses which privilege migrants from Western countries while Othering those from elsewhere (Hage, 1998); and through the continued attempted erasure and genocide of First Nations knowledges (Moreton-Robinson, 2011), culture and identity including ongoing child removal policies and displacement (Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Van Krieken, 2004).

This project recognises the broader context of colonialism as foundational to racism in Australia, and the ongoing need to recognise First Nations sovereignty as part of wider efforts to dismantle racism. We focus on racism experienced by young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, as a manifestation of racist norms and institutions in Australia, but which should not be interpreted as the same as or equivalent to First Nations experiences. We further acknowledge that migrant subjects in Australia are also ultimately settler subjects, complicit in the ongoing colonisation of Australia (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We provide the following explanation to detail how we understand racism in the context of the current project.

Racism is 'the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes' (AHRC, 2025), across all areas of society, including justice, education, the economy, mental and physical wellbeing and quality of life (Elias & Paradies, 2016; Paradies et al., 2015). The experience of racism has been found to cause significant and potentially lasting harm to mental and physical wellbeing, theorised as a form of continuing 'racial trauma' (Fang et al., 2025). This includes subtle 'everyday' racism and microaggressions, which can have a profoundly negative impact upon wellbeing, alongside more obvious or dramatic encounters (Jones et al., 2016; Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Migrant or multicultural communities face significant mental and physical health stressors associated with racism (Doery et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2025; Kamp, Denson, Sharples, & Ati, 2022; Priest et al., 2011; Priest et al., 2013; Priest et al., 2011), including intersectional dimensions (Yeasmeen et al., 2023).

Systemic racism highlights the reality that racism is fundamentally systemic: a system of oppression based on the construction of racialised categories (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Paradies, 2006a). However, the ways in which racism manifests in practice can be broken down into more specific 'types' which highlight different components of this larger system. These include institutional racism, interpersonal racism, internalised racism, and denial of racism.

Institutional racism sometimes called 'structural racism', refers to the ways in which racism is embedded in institutional practices and policies which disadvantage and discriminate against subordinated racialised groups (Bailey et al., 2017; Jones, 2000; Krieger, 2014). Examples include the targeting of racialised groups by the justice system (Majavu, 2020), and the lack of accessible or culturally responsive healthcare for people of culturally, linguistically and racially marginalised cohorts (Luu et al., 2024). Institutional racism is also reflected in the under-representation of racialised groups in leadership positions. Institutionalised racism extends to the refusal of institutions to acknowledge the presence of racism in their organisation, and cultures or policies which may punish people for speaking out against racism (Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025a).

Interpersonal racism is the expression of racism between individuals and includes actions such as racialised exclusion, microaggressions, mockery or racist 'jokes', verbal and physical abuse, and assault (Jones, 2000; Paradies, 2006a). This includes online interactions, as well as in-person (Tynes et al., 2018); and can be intentional or unintentional.

Internalised racism is the phenomenon whereby racialised subjects 'are inculcated with the racist stereotypes, worldviews and behaviours of the dominant group, often viewing themselves and/or their racialised group as relatively inferior' (Seet & Paradies, 2021, p. 1027; see also: Pyke, 2010). This may cause racialised subjects to act in accordance with the racist views directed towards them, perpetuating racist systems and their own subordination.

Denial of racism or refusal to recognise racism, is a crucial part of racism itself. As recently acknowledged by National Anti-Racism Framework, the reluctance to name racism in Australian public discourses has meant that 'terms like "social cohesion", "equality", and "multiculturalism"... work to mask the issue of racism, obfuscate anti-racist aspirations, and as a result, can perpetuate racism' (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 23). These contradictory meanings are reflected in Amnesty International's (2022) human rights barometer, which recorded 55% of Australians believe that Australia has a problem with racism. Yet simultaneously, most Australians in the same survey also held assimilationist views which indicate negative views of racial or cultural difference; with 57% believing that 'some cultures and ethnic groups do not want to fit into the 'Australian' way of life' (Amnesty International, 2022).

Despite growing efforts to reduce the prevalence of racism in Australia and internationally, large numbers of Australians continue to experience the harms of racism in their daily lives. This includes structural health inequality and socioeconomic disadvantage (Priest & Williams, 2021), alongside barriers to service access or quality (Ben et al., 2017; Truong et al., 2022), and marginalisation in health and medical research (Hardeman & Karbeah, 2020; Paradies, 2006a). The lived experience of racism has also been found to have direct harms upon mental and physical wellbeing (Paradies et al., 2015). Children and young people are recognised as a priority population especially vulnerable to these harms (Trent, Dooley, Dougé, Cavanaugh, et al., 2019), which may follow them into adulthood (Fang et al., 2025; Priest, Chong, et al., 2020). This includes young people from migrant and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Australia (Ferdinand et al., 2015), who have remained largely neglected by mental health and wellbeing research and services (Luu et al., 2024; Minas, 2021).

Suggested reading

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