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‘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

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“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

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Abstract

This report amplifies the voices and priorities of multicultural young people with respect to racism and its impacts. Drawing on qualitative focus group data collected in Victoria, Australia in 2021, the report documents both the contemporary manifestations of racism as experienced by young people of migrant backgrounds and their perspectives on pathways toward meaningful change.

Participants' priorities reflect a dual imperative: first, the need for whole-of-society approaches that recognise and dismantle racism as a fundamentally systemic phenomenon; and second, the urgent need to address the immediate harms of racism in the everyday lives of racialised young people — including social isolation, subtle othering, hypervigilance, and experiences of unsafety and unbelonging. Critically, participants emphasised that support for those experiencing racism must not be deferred pending long-term structural transformation; the needs of racialised young people require immediate action.

The report's recommendations call upon those in positions of power and privilege to meaningfully engage with — and act upon — the knowledge and priorities of young people who experience racism. Specific recommendations include dedicated education on racism and its harms, resourcing of community-led safe spaces, and reform of institutional policies and reporting mechanisms to centre the needs of those targeted by racism and to strengthen institutional accountability. The report is explicitly not oriented toward the prosecution of individual perpetrators, but toward systemic and institutional change.

Situated within a broader scholarly and policy discourse, these findings challenge the enduring expectation that racialised communities bear the primary burden of anti-racism labour. In alignment with emerging literature (Fleming et al., 2023; Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025a), anti-racism efforts should be reoriented — from calling on marginalised populations to speak out, toward calling on those with structural privilege and institutional power to listen, act, and assume meaningful responsibility for anti-racist change.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge and recognise the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nations, Traditional Owners of the unceded lands on which this research was conducted. We pay our respect to their Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples today.

We would like to thank all the young people who participated in this project, whose stories, knowledge, and visions we hope can be met with meaningful responses from our readers of this report. We would also like to acknowledge the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and their Explore Program, which supports partnerships between researchers and young people, providing an opportunity for peer researchers to be involved in research that impacts them, including the three peer researcher authors in this project.

This project was funded by UNICEF Australia.

Acronyms

ANU Australian National University

BIPOC Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

CALD Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

CARM Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised

CMY Centre for Multicultural Youth

POC People of Colour

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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, 2006b; 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 — 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, you know, workers from different cultural backgrounds.”*
- The above two priorities are fundamentally intertwined, in the overarching imperative that efforts to address racism should **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.

Report structure

The report provides an introduction and background to racism in Australia, followed by the study aims, methods, and findings. Study findings are presented in four parts. Part 1, *Young People's Understandings of Racism*. This section covers core themes of young people's understandings of racism as injustice, racism as systemic and socially embedded, the COVID-19 context, and whiteness. Part 2, *Experiences of racism*, discusses young people's covert and overt encounters with racism, alongside ambiguity and denial of their experiences (including from institutional reporting systems). Part 3, *Impacts and Responses to Racism*, details the impacts of racism that were revealed in focus group discussions, including hypervigilance, loneliness and isolation, as well as discussion of young people's responses to racism. Part 4, *Key Priorities for Action*, puts forward young people's suggestions and recommendations for how governments and organisations can better support young people who experience racism (outlined below).

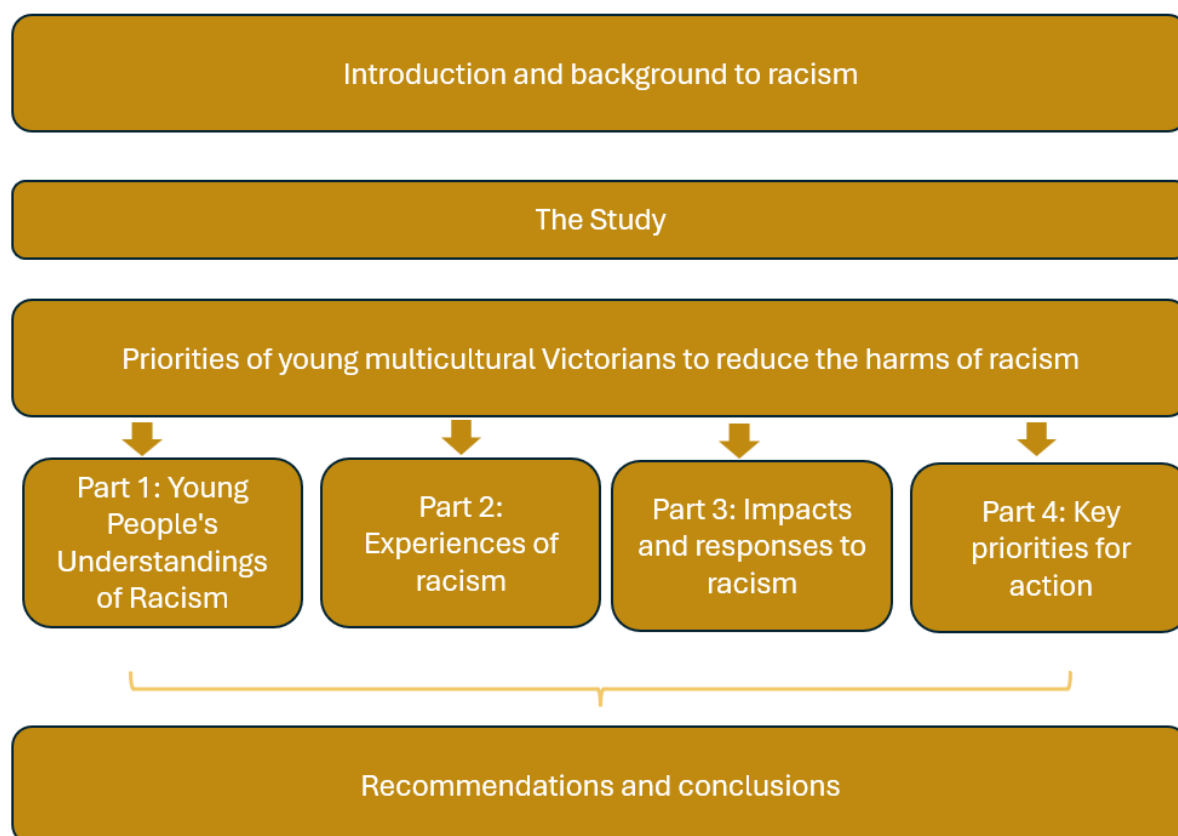


Figure 1. Structure of the report

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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 the attempted erasure of Aboriginal 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 of institutional racism include the targeting of racialised groups by the justice system and policing, particularly amongst racialised youth (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 or organisations to acknowledge the presence of racism in their organisation, and organisational 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).

Racism and Multicultural Youth in Australia

According to The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2021 (by the Australia Institute of Family Studies), 31% of teenagers who spoke a language other than English at home and 34% of Indigenous teens reported racial discrimination between the ages of 12 and 17 (compared to 19% of all teens) (Evans-Whipp, 2021). Other studies have found higher rates; in Mansouri et al.'s (2009, p. 44) survey of secondary students, 80% of non-Anglo young people reported experiences of racial discrimination. A 2020 survey of 363 Victorian young people aged 16-24 by the Australian National University (ANU) and Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), similarly found that 85% of this cohort had at least one experience of direct racial discrimination, 93% had experienced vicarious racial discrimination, 93% experienced heightened vigilance because of racism and 87% had expressed worries about experiencing racism (Doery et al., 2020). Qualitative and ethnographic studies provide evidence of the experience of racism in Australia for migrant and refugee young people in everyday environments (Molla, 2021; Pittaway & Dantas, 2024; Uptin, 2021).

Despite these high rates of racism, multicultural young people also report that they do not or cannot access support. Rates of support seeking or talking about experiences are markedly low in this group. A survey of Victorian young multicultural people found that only 6% reported their experiences of racism, 29% told friends or family and 7% told a teacher, health professional or other worker (Doery et al., 2020). It has been argued that low reporting rates partially reflect ineffective and harmful racism reporting systems in Australian institutions which can lead to 'double victimisation' for reporters of racism (Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025b). However, further investigation is needed to understand the implications of racism for young multicultural people in Australia.

Racism and COVID-19 in Australia

The COVID-19 pandemic, which was at its height at the time of data collection in 2021, brought attention to racism against migrants and refugees in Australia. An overall xenophobic and racist climate was fuelled by border closures (Elias, Ben, et al., 2021), with Indian Australians (Khorana, 2021), and temporary visa holders including international students especially targeted (Ang & Mansouri, 2023). Highly publicised incidences of racist abuse further added to this heightened environment of racism (Kamp et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2023), accompanied by racist media reporting (Sun, 2021) and discriminatory 'over-policing' targeting migrant communities (O'Keeffe & Daley, 2023; Victorian Ombudsman, 2020). Regarding health outcomes, people born overseas died of COVID-19-related causes at three times the rate of the Australian-born population (Renzaho, 2023), reflecting higher global death rates amongst People of Colour (Elias et al., 2021). The harms of racism were further intensified by wider social harms of isolation imposed by 'lockdown' restrictions which saw school, childcare and workplace closures and residents allowed outside for 'essential' reasons only (Victorian Government, 2021). These policies had profound impacts upon young people (UNICEF Australia, 2020), with lasting health and wellbeing

impacts including constrained educational and employment trajectories (Churchill, 2021; Walsh et al., 2021), social isolation, and associated negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing (Lim et al., 2023).

Globally, COVID-19 intersected with a growing volume of white-supremacist discourses, xenophobia and hostility towards racialised migrant and refugee communities (Elias, Ben, et al., 2021; Jones & Sengul, 2025; Muller, 2025; Fekete, 2024; Lentin, 2020; Sian). Against this backdrop, racism has received renewed recognition as a serious threat to social cohesion and public health (Devakumar et al., 2020; Walensky, 2021). The globalised Black Lives Matter movement and Blak Lives Matter movement in 2020-2021, alongside widespread media attention in Australia and around the world to 'anti-Asian' racism and the Stop Asian Hate anti-racism movement in response (Chia et al., 2023; Kamp, Denson, Sharples, & Atie, 2022; Teo & Chew, 2025; Zhou et al., 2021), have increased attention to racism as a systemic issue. In response, Australian policy initiatives have begun to address the health and social impacts of racism, including through the National Anti-Racism Framework (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024) and the Victorian Anti-Racism Taskforce and Strategy (Victoria State Government, 2024). Eliminating racism is also listed as one of the key priorities of the 2021-2031 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan (Department of Health, 2021).

While Australian research and policy have increasingly recognised the harms of racism on young people's lives, there remains a gap in knowledge and policy commitments around how multicultural young people's health and wellbeing can be best supported in the context of ongoing racism. Amidst policies focused on preventing or punishing the perpetration of racism, there remains a crucial need to support those who are living with the harms of racism here and now, alongside efforts towards preventing racism in the future (Watego, 2021). This is crucial to developing practical understandings of the needs of multicultural youth, in the wider context of worsening youth mental health and wellbeing in Australia in general (Luu et al., 2024; Minas, 2021).

The Study

This project sought to examine how young people of migrant backgrounds perceive, navigate, and respond to racism in their everyday lives, with particular attention to their existing capacities and practices, as well as the structural and interpersonal challenges they encounter. The project was designed to address two intersecting gaps in the existing literature: the relative scarcity of data on the wellbeing needs of multicultural young people, and the limited body of knowledge concerning the support needs of those who are subjected to racism. In response to these gaps, the project created a structured platform through which young people could articulate their own priorities for addressing the harms of racism in their lives.

The insights and recommendations generated through this process are intended to be of direct relevance to a broad range of stakeholders — including policymakers, youth and multicultural services, community organisations, and institutions such as schools — seeking to develop and implement approaches to racism that are meaningfully responsive to the needs and priorities of multicultural young people.

This project was funded by UNICEF Australia and implemented a participatory approach, working with community-based peer researchers from CMY's Explore team.

This report focuses on young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds, who comprise approximately half of the Australian youth population (ABS, 2022a; Khan, 2022)¹. The term ‘multicultural’, to describe people of migrant and refugee backgrounds, has been critiqued as terminology that evades discussion of racism (including by young people themselves: CMY, 2023a; Wright & Xiao, 2023; see also: Abdi et al., 2025). We employ the term ‘multicultural youth’ to reflect the term’s ongoing usage as a broad umbrella term inclusive of diverse cultural, ethnic, and generational migrant identities, particularly in the Australian youth sector (Khan, 2022) as well as the ways in which young people’s identities were discussed in the project. However, throughout the quotes contained in this report, young people used a variety of additional labels to talk about their identities and experiences of racialisation, including ‘People of Colour’ or ‘POC’, ‘Black’, ‘Asian’, and others; reflecting the multiplicity of terms used in Australia (Prentice, 2023).

The project is based in Victoria, where CMY is located. This state focus was also important considering the specific conditions that Victorian young people faced during COVID-19 restrictions, which were harsher and longer than in other states and territories, dominated Victorian media headlines, and disproportionately affected migrant and culturally linguistic communities (Victorian Ombudsman, 2020). While participants were not asked specifically about their experiences of the restrictions, this significantly shapes the larger context in which their feelings and experiences of racism took shape.

Participatory approach

The study employed a participatory research framework. The term participatory research is used here to foreground the project’s practical orientation toward identifying priorities that can inform the design of services and policies. In this project, participatory research is understood as collaboration and partnership between career researchers and young people with lived experience of the research topic — in this case, racism. This partnership involved researchers bringing a project to the community, followed by shared decision-making and meaningful contribution across all stages of the research process, underpinned by a commitment to listening to young people rather than presuming to represent or speak on their behalf. This entailed acting on participants’ recommendations, incorporating their perspectives into the research design, and consciously working to build trust and reciprocity, mitigate unequal power dynamics, and foster young people’s sense of safety and confidence within the research space (CMY, 2023b; Lee, 2024). The approach also supported capacity building, opportunities for leadership (Vella-Brodrick et al., 2023), and a commitment to recognising youth researcher knowledge (Nelson Ferguson et al., 2025).

The participatory process was grounded in the relationship between university researchers and three young multicultural peer researchers (AL, PN, KR). The peer researchers were recruited through the CMY Explore Program (CMY, 2022). CMY is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation that provides support and advocacy for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The Explore Program facilitates partnerships between academic researchers and young people from multicultural backgrounds, providing peer researchers with training in facilitation, research methods, and participatory practice. The peer researchers were embedded within a supported network of youth researchers, with ongoing guidance provided by CMY staff (CMY, 2022).

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.

The research was conducted as a participatory collaboration between ANU researchers and peer researchers across all stages of the project — including the refinement of aims, data collection, coding and analysis, and the writing and dissemination of findings — with the exception of the initial conceptualisation and funding arrangements, which had been established prior to the peer researchers' involvement. Peer researchers also shaped the team's ways of working, including decisions about meeting times, frequency, and duration, the degree of leadership they wished to assume at different stages (for example, in leading or observing focus groups), and aspects of project timelines such as the scheduling of analysis and coding phases. The team also worked together on emotional and cultural safety, regularly discussing the emotional toll of conducting research on racism, identifying any challenges or additional supports that might be needed.

In the initial phase, the ANU research team held five one-hour planning meetings with peer researchers (conducted via Zoom) to refine the research aims and project design, and to establish the approach to focus group facilitation and data collection. During this process, peer researchers played a central role in shaping the project's focus — moving from the broad mandated area of multicultural youth and racism toward a more specific emphasis on how young people can be better supported and protected from the harms of racism in their everyday lives. In doing so, peer researchers explicitly articulated a desire to avoid placing the burden of 'solving' or eliminating racism onto multicultural young people or increasing their emotional load. Instead, they sought to create a meaningful and supportive space in which young people could reflect on their experiences and consider what might support their wellbeing amid the compounding challenges of racism and social isolation during the COVID-19 lockdowns in which the project was conducted.

Over the course of the project, the three peer researchers (AL, PN, KR) and the ANU research team — particularly KD, who worked most closely with the peer researchers — developed a strong collaborative working relationship, which formed the basis for the joint coding and analysis of focus group data on which this report draws. KD received ongoing support and supervision from NP throughout the project, and NP was also available to provide additional support to peer researchers as required.

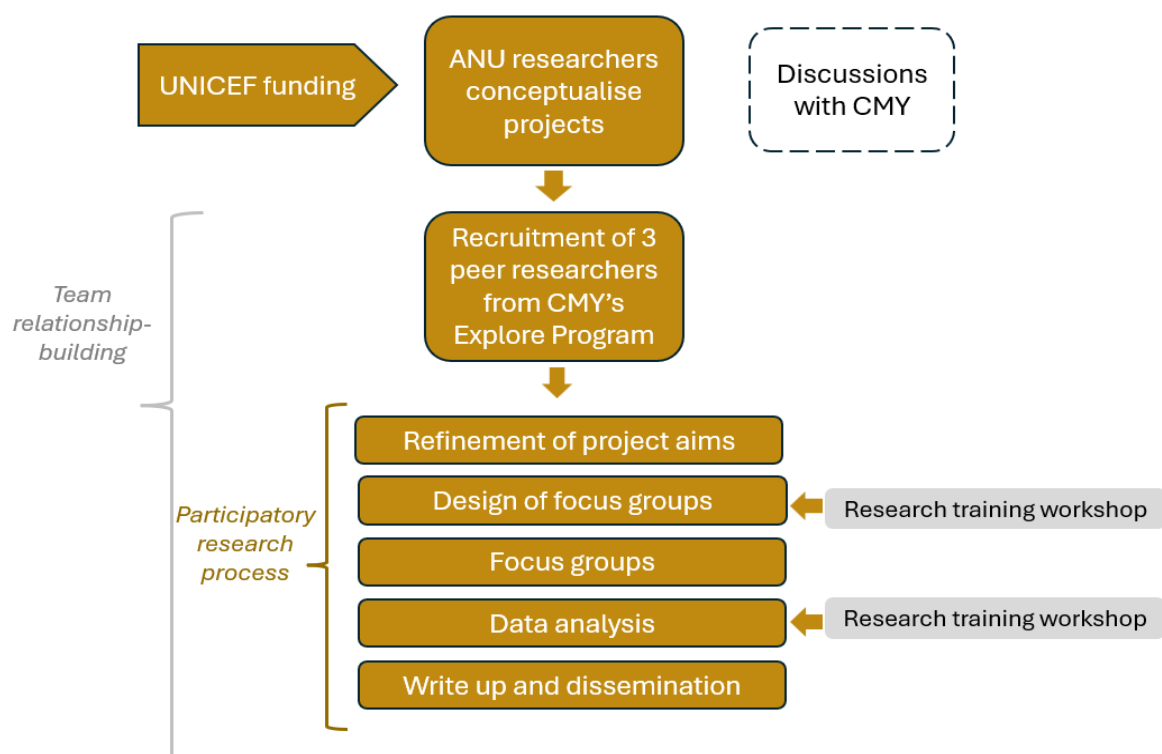


Figure 2. Participatory process throughout the project

Focus groups and participants

After obtaining ethical approval from the Australian National University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 2021/336), participants were recruited via CMY's communications channels including a monthly newsletter and social media posts. Advertisements invited young people who self-identified as being from a multicultural background living in Victoria, Australia, to take part in a one-hour focus group. Prospective participants were sent a study information sheet and provided their personal and contact information, including their first name, age, gender, and self-identified cultural background on an online form. At the beginning of each of the focus groups, all participants provided verbal consent that they were eligible and willing to participate.

A total of 56 young people participated in focus groups between November and December 2021. Thirteen focus groups were conducted, with three to eight participants per focus group. Participants were aged 17-27, and self-identified as being from a multicultural background. Key demographics are presented in Appendix A.

Focus groups were conducted online on Zoom and lasted one hour. Many participants attended on mobile phones; others used laptops if they had access to them. Participants were not required to share their video; some participants left cameras off for portions of the focus group (sometimes due to internet connectivity), and occasionally, participants did not turn cameras on at all. The research team had cameras on for all focus groups and facilitated the discussion across both the audio and the chat functions.

Following discussion with peer researchers, each focus group was co-facilitated by KD and one peer researcher (AL, KR, or PN), except for Focus Group 1, which was co-led by KD and two peer

researchers (AL and PN). In later focus groups, peer researchers led the facilitation, with KD taking on a supporting role. All sessions were recorded, with only the audio file and chat messages retained for transcription and analysis. Focus group recordings were transcribed using Artificial Intelligence transcribing service Trint, with completed transcripts checked and cleaned by KD.

Focus group design was guided by peer researchers in the initial project design meetings, following their completion of an initial qualitative methods training session with the extended ANU research team. Focus groups were intended to be a safe environment and welcoming for all young people to share their experiences however they felt most comfortable, and proceeded through 3 stages: 'opening' the discussion space (introductions from everyone including transparent and reflexive positioning of the co-facilitators, and aims of the focus group), an exploration or expansion of the discussion (the main questions and responses), and a 'closing' of the space (reflections). This flow was informed by both qualitative research methodology (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008), and practice-based approaches to facilitation with young people, which the peer researchers were trained in through CMY.

The main discussion was based on a set of 5 open-ended questions collaboratively developed by the research team, in a semi-structured approach which incorporated flexibility for the discussion to flow and develop in line with the interests and contributions of the participants. This included three questions about participants' perceptions of racism and discrimination, and two questions about support and solutions:

1. What comes to mind when you think of racism and discrimination?
2. Can you tell us a bit about racism and discrimination and how it's been over the last few years? (last few years being COVID-19)
3. Following your experiences of racism and discrimination, did you take any actions? And if you didn't, why was that the case?
4. In an ideal world, how would you like to be supported? (in relation to experiences of racism)
5. What are some of the day-to-day things that people could do to support you?

To reduce the risk of emotional toll and re-traumatisation (Vaughan & Ravi, 2025), focus group facilitators emphasised that participants did not need to talk about their own personal experiences of racism, or anything that they were not comfortable with. Some participants did disclose personal experiences of racist encounters and challenges including mental health, however none expressed distress and participants frequently gave feedback that the focus group had been a positive and supportive experience for them.

Data analysis

The data analysis stage began with a second qualitative methods training session for all team members on the principles and application of thematic analysis. This session also initiated group discussion about the initial key themes from the dataset. From here, descriptive thematic analysis was conducted, with peer researchers contributing to all stages: data familiarisation, generating and refining codes, constructing and naming themes, and writing up (Byrne, 2022). The analysis process incorporated researcher reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Following the training session, transcripts were analysed and coded by members of the research team individually using Microsoft Word and by hand on hard copy, depending on each researcher's preference. Each transcript was initially coded by two team members individually, with KD analysing all 13 transcripts, and peer researchers AL, KR, and PN allocated 4-5 transcripts each.

Once initial data familiarisation and analysis were completed, the team met to review and refine the key themes prior to the writing up phase. Team members brought their own perspectives and experiences to this session, and the discussion incorporated critical reflections about how each researcher's positionality shaped how they interpreted the data, bringing their 'own histories, values, assumptions, perspectives, politics, and mannerisms into research' (Trainor & Bundon, 2021, p. 36).

The data interpretation and analysis process was shaped and enriched by the peer researchers' multifaceted positionings and experiences, including varied personal experiences of racism and racialisation—informed in turn by intersectional factors including gender, age, ethnic, linguistic, and migration background—and their capacities to relate to the study participants as young people. Their positionings were also shaped by knowledge and expertise developed through varied study and professional experiences including in social work, in grassroots multicultural youth and community work, sociology and academic research, and educational backgrounds with and without formal completion of university. As a whole, the research team shared a highly personal investment and passion for countering the harms of racism in young people's lives, which animated the discussion.

These interpretations were further shaped by the relationships between the core analysis team (KD, AL, KR, PN). Our emphasis on the value of personal experiences and perspectives in our overall co-research approach, combined with the team's generally informal and transparent mode of communication, enabled discussion to take on informal and subjective shapes, similar to a discussion between friends or peers. One of the peer researchers described this in a written reflection: 'racism is connected to our lived experiences and relationships. Reflecting on these connections and embracing the overlaps between reflections on the "academic" data and personal experience is what made the discussion so rich'.

The research team reflected on the ways that their unique perspectives shaped how themes were conceptualised, developed and refined, as well as broader framings and approaches to the language used in the report. For instance, a discussion of each peer researcher's perspective on the terminology associated with 'multicultural youth' led to our adoption of this overarching term in this report. Other terms discussed included 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse', which was favoured by KR (who migrated to Australia with his family aged 7) for its attention to other less visible aspects of identity beyond race, and criticised by AL (who grew up in predominantly white environments in regional Victoria) for its elision of race and racism (see: Berman & Paradies, 2010; Jakubowicz & Ho, 2014). Inversely, 'BIPOC' (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) and 'POC' (People of Colour) were critiqued by KR for what he viewed as their surface-level attention to skin colour, and their failure to attend to more personally meaningful aspects of identity and experience such as culture or language (e.g. Crump, 2014; Riley, 2007). The team also broadly acknowledged that these terms had developed largely from US contexts, but recognised their increasing uptake in Australia, particularly in advocacy discourses. Ultimately, 'multicultural youth' was settled upon for its broad, inclusive nature, its recognition of cultural identity, its

established usage in the Australian youth sector, and by participants — while acknowledging its limitations (Riley, 2007). In addition to ‘multicultural’, participants used a variety of labels to describe themselves or others from diverse ethnic, racial, or cultural backgrounds who experience racism, including ‘People of Colour’, ‘Multicultural’, or ‘CALD’ (culturally and linguistically diverse), ‘migrant’, in addition to more specific labels of ‘Black’, ‘African’, ‘Asian’, ‘Chinese’, amongst others. Consistent with team discussions during the project’s development and data collection stages, KD reflected critically on her positioning as a white researcher without lived experience of racism, and her role was to provide space for peer researchers to lead the discussion, providing guidance or input where invited.

The writing up process was initially led by KD with contributions from peer researchers. Following a prolonged pause resulting from institutional and funding interruptions, it was then passed to former peer researcher AL, who has moved more formally into academic research (and who now calls herself a ‘researcher’ rather than peer researcher).

FINDINGS

Part 1. Understandings of racism

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. The following section presents their perspectives.

Part 1 Summary: Young people's understanding of racism



Figure 2. Summary of young people's understanding of racism

Racism as injustice: 'everyone should be treated equally'

Participants' discussion of racism and discrimination was grounded in their committed belief that all people are fundamentally equal and deserving of the same rights, opportunities, and equal treatment. Here, the discussion was framed broadly in universalist framings of equality and human rights, in which racism represented an 'inequality' and a violation of these rights.

Racism brings in a lot of injustice, unfairness and misjudgments! (Focus Group 13-chat)

I was thinking, is there a way where we could see everyone in an equal way? Like you see someone is like your brother or your sister. It would be perfect. (Focus Group 4)

They also understood racism as something that was perpetrated by other people, including by individual people and institutions. Young people's explanations of racism often included references to institutional racism, reflecting young people's awareness of racism as a structural issue. It is possible this was also influenced by the timing of the focus groups in 2021, near the height of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and following the murder of George Floyd in the US in 2020.

When somebody talks about racism... what comes to my mind that this is a discrimination or hatred by an individual community or an institution. (Focus Group 5)

Further, participants frequently framed racism as being based on skin colour and other visible differences such as skin colour and dress (e.g. the hijab). While other dimensions of identity including language, religion, or migrant status were acknowledged to an extent, skin colour and visible difference were most highlighted as the targets of unfair treatment and inequality. This surface-level, 'judging' involved in racism (Macaulay, 2023) speaks to Black Studies and critical scholarship of racialisation as an experience of objectification and 'flattening' (where complex, diverse, and distinct racial experiences are reduced to a single, oversimplified, and often harmful, stereotype) e.g. Al-Saji, 2013; Fanon, 1970).

I do believe that racism is treating people badly based on their skin, background, and their origin, just treating other people badly because they have different characteristics compared to yourself. (Focus Group 7)

[Racism is] judging or thinking less of someone based on their ethnicity or the colour of their skin. (Focus Group 8)

It's time that we all grew up because we've learnt scientifically it has been proven that we are equal despite the colour of our skin. Why, then, should we see other people as less of humans? ...everyone should be treated equally. (Focus Group 2)

Participants recognised that while racism was commonly based on perceived visual differences, racial difference was ultimately socially constructed. Maintaining that 'we are all equal', they emphasised that racist ideas of fundamental difference in worth, capability or inferiority/superiority were ultimately false; the result of biased and inaccurate social 'perceptions' of racial inferiority in our minds', rather than any 'real' or biological differences. Yet they understood that 'race' and racism represents a crucial social reality, in the form of a socially and culturally perpetuated system that had become 'part of the social fabric' and even 'normal'. Indeed, they recognised that while socially constructed, racism could feel like a natural or 'ingrained' way of thinking passed down from one generation to the next:

It's all about perception because I don't think there is any difference in people based on race. The difference is only a perception in our minds. (Focus Group 13)

Assumption that a certain colour or a certain physical trait is superior to the other variations that exist in human race...And that is then used to sort of have a system of power inequality. And then it becomes, so, so, part of the social fabric that it's just normal (Focus Group 6)

This discussion can be understood in relation to the continuous overt and 'subtle othering' that young people were subjected to in everyday places. In these contexts where participants recalled being stared at, physically avoided, or people being 'shocked' at their presence or existence in a space, their experience was one of being treated as sub-human, and preventing this meant getting others to treat them with the same respect and humanity as anyone else. Understanding that participants' emphasis on sameness is informed by their experience of profound alienation, we suggest that these aspirations of equality should be understood in terms of being treated as equal and human, reflecting the human rights framing of anti-discrimination.

'People learn to be racist': Racism as socially and historically constructed

Young people widely shared the sentiment that 'racism is taught'; maintaining that racism is not an intrinsic or natural way of being, but rather a learned mindset. They emphasised the role of social environments including media, institutions, family and wider social influences in perpetuating cycles of racialised thinking from one generation to the next. As part of this, they viewed racism as part of the 'social fabric' (rather than an individual problem) and an issue of collective social responsibility:

People are not born racist. People are born not knowing races, not knowing they are different from one another. But then their worldly perception... People are born and then their parents, people they know, mass media, people who are spreading racism. From what we know of the human brain we adapt to our environment. So, people learn to be racist as they grow up, we are not born with it. (Focus group 9)

Sometimes it's just ingrained. And that's the sad part. (Focus Group 6)

While young people recognised that racism is systemic and perpetrated by a range of different people, they noted the complexity of talking about racism with people who are White. They felt that White people in particular 'feel uncomfortable having that discussion'. This represented a key barrier to open conversations around racism in Australia, which they felt remained 'limited':

It is a strange culture as well; I think the conversations around racism in Australia are very limited and I think sometimes a lot of White people feel uncomfortable having that discussion ... I think potentially maybe everything that's happened [in 2021-COVID-19, BLM, Stop Asian Hate, etc.] has kind of put it to the forefront. And I think maybe it's good that we can have these discussions about it now because this kind of still growing. (Focus Group 1)

Detailing how racism is learned in the contexts in which people grow up—from influences including parents and people around them, media, alongside overt racism—young people understood racism as fundamentally historically situated and constructed, as well as socially constructed. They contextualised racism as a product of much larger (global) histories of racism and oppression, as well as intergenerational histories, mentioning examples including colonialism, religious and ethnic persecution in global conflicts, slavery, and the South African Apartheid, which they understood as shaping the present day.

The fight on racism and colour has been going on for several ... years, for instance, the Apartheid in South Africa, where we had people fighting for Colour the Whites over the Blacks, we've had the world wars where the Blacks began to fight for Whites. And for the current society we have had issues with Black Lives Matter and the fights, and the fight goes on... (Focus Group 4)

Despite these discussions of racism as systemic and historical, the Australian context rarely featured in participants' examples. In particular, there was little discussion by participants of racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. While 'colonialism' was mentioned in broad (often global) terms, only two participants mentioned racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There may have been a lack of familiarity or comfort in speaking about the topic, as one participant tentatively articulated how they thought 'a lot of people talk about the racism against Indigenous Australians'; seeming to place themselves largely outside of this discussion.

As the three peer researchers discussed, this could be explained by the possibility that multicultural young people may not feel like it is their place to speak about racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and may prefer to speak about racism closer to their own experiences, such as racism experienced by migrant communities or their own specific cultural or linguistic communities. Further, it is likely many participants did not grow up in Australia or attend school here for all or some of their childhoods, so their education on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians might have been limited. Additionally, recruitment occurred through CMY networks, which likely shaped participant perceptions of the study as being focused on 'migrant and refugee youth' (a term used interchangeably with 'multicultural' in CMY's work), and participants may have presumed we were interested in hearing about their own experiences of racism and the perspectives on racism faced by 'multicultural youth'. Lastly, this pattern reflects a larger historical and ongoing divide between migrant and Indigenous agendas in multicultural settler states including Australia (Smits, 2025).

Racism as a global issue

In addition to historical connections, participants frequently drew connections between global issues relating to racism in contemporary contexts. This included high-profile racism events and anti-racism movements topical during COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia (at the time focus groups were conducted) such as BLM and Stop Asian Hate, alongside discussion of Brexit. Moreover, young people seemed to understand racism as an inherently global issue:

I think some things are really top of mind at the moment would be the Black Lives Matter movement. There's also the Stop Asian Hate one. (Focus Group 1)

As you can see in our televisions, the news all over the world. Even the Black Lives Matter campaign. (Focus Group 3)

This global framing of racism reflected participants' understanding of racism and discrimination as a fundamentally systemic issue. Here, racism was understood as fundamentally embedded in 'institutions of power' including the justice system, the education system, and leadership, perhaps more than in any particular national context.

There will be many forms of racism, but generally speaking two distinctions is enough: that is overt racism when someone overtly like racially abused you. Yeah, and the other is systemic racism and institutions of power, not promoting people of colour. (Focus Group 1)

In education, we also faced racism whereby we find that the whites are more considered to be more intelligent than the blacks. Of course. And it has gone down for years and centuries, and decades. (Focus Group 3)

In discussions of systemic racism, the justice system and police brutality emerged as focal points, perhaps influenced by the close timing of the BLM movement, the murder of George Floyd and the focus groups. Here, participants' framings of racism against 'minority groups' by those in authority further illustrates their understanding of racism as a systemic issue grounded in power relations. That is, they perceive racism as the manifestation of systematic power imbalances, rather than individual, isolated events.

I remember the case of George Floyd in United States, which made protest in the country, but seeing [it] represents, the police and the police who murdered George Floyd had many cases about racism and discrimination. So, I believe that if it continues until now, even though that just one video leaked, it goes on every day, every time. (Focus Group 2)

Global power inequalities were also understood as cross-national. Participants, including migrants from African countries, spoke to the ways that racism against groups of people (including Black Africans) is connected to the global economy and distribution of resources. Here, they emphasised how inequitable global economies not only create unequal opportunities for people from different countries but are related to cultural and classed forms of racism and stereotyping (for instance, in the presumption that products or expertise from Africa would be inferior to that of the US).

We can produce farms in Africa, and even the US can produce the rice, but when we go to the market, the African farms are being considered more inferior... (Focus Group 4)

I think is concerning on the [COVID-19] vaccine, we had some countries being banned from producing that vaccine because they are maybe African or they were from poor countries, maybe and they are being thought as being less intelligent or less innovative. So, it's really an issue here. (Focus Group 8)

Racism in the media: 'The media in general has played a factor in putting this propaganda in pushing this racism'

Young people's discussion of systemic racism was intertwined with their views of racism in the media. Young people perceived Australian media as homogenous, with a lack of diverse views and a focus on sensationalising matters. They recognised that these patterns were both a cause and result of systemic racism in the media, monopolised by a small number of powerful (and white, male) individuals.

I think, like, since a lot of the media is monopolised by, how do you even call him again, the Murdoch dude? It can be hard to find sources that deviate from this lens as well.
(Focus Group 13)

These perspectives are well-supported by evidence. Research documents a range of racialised narratives within the Australian mediascape, including the prominent 'African Gangs' discourse perpetuated in Victoria (Majavu, 2020), and broader tendencies to frame racial difference negatively — in content produced almost exclusively by people from Anglo-European backgrounds (97%, according to one study; All Together Now, 2019).

Participants also critiqued the limitations of media and public discourse in recognising racism's systemic nature. Reflecting on the 'episodic' nature of public discourses of racism, participants stated that they felt the media and the general public only tended to give 'attention' to one group experiencing racism at any time, giving the illusion that each instance is a separate event.

It's kind of interesting that we talk about racism is like only one race can be the victim of racism at any given time. (Focus Group 1)

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. (Focus Group 6)

Like one second, there will be attacks on two Asian students at the Queen Victoria market, and one second, it's about the public housing lockdown and all the different multicultural communities living in public housing. All of the attention shifts from cohort to cohort. But it's this feels like it's one, it's a single subject. (Focus Group 1)

Given the proximity of the pandemic to the focus groups, participants also commented on how racism and negative attitudes towards Chinese and Asian communities as the cause of COVID-19 were propagated by the media.

I guess it's also the way the media is being portraying it as well. I think the way that it started; it was like coming out of China. So that kind of puts the target on Chinese people, people from Asian backgrounds as well. So that kind of plays into the mentality of Asian people as they go out like thinking [about] the anger that White people are feeling. (Focus Group 1)

[...] But then when the outbreak started, a lot of those cases were coming from America, which I would assume [is from] the White people as well. So, I feel like that then kind of plays into the rhetoric that a lot of Asian young people feel like, we're the ones that need to be on edge about it because, yeah, because we look like the people, [that] the media thinks are bringing it here. (Focus Group 1)

‘[it] was an excuse to just be like straight up racist’: Understandings of racism in Covid-19

In addition to the BLM movement, the COVID-19 pandemic formed one of the most widely discussed contexts of racism in focus groups. Here, young people spoke about the unfair treatment and negative assumptions made of multicultural communities throughout pandemic responses in Australia, particularly in Victoria where participants were living under Australia’s longest and strictest COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Discussing government responses, young people described feeling that COVID-19 was being framed by the government as a ‘multicultural community issue’, based on unfounded assumptions that multicultural communities would be noncompliant with the COVID-19 restrictions resulting in high levels of transmission.

COVID was framed as a multicultural community issue, and [as if] it was perpetuated by people who couldn’t speak and understand English very well and stuff like that as. Yeah, just the language they use, the rhetoric they use and the way they frame issues can be very problematic. (Focus Group 13)

Government or the higher association, feel like People of Colour or people of other cultures aren’t going to be as compliant. I’m from the Indian community and we were I live in the West and there was like, oh, they weren’t because they don’t speak English. They’re not going to know the rules or, COVID is spreading because of multicultural communities. (Focus Group 2- Peer Researcher)

The actions of the Australian and Victorian governments were contextualised, for participants, in a wider global climate of racism and discrimination, fuelled by public leaders including President Trump. They recognised that while the overt racism and negative sentiments towards Asian and multicultural communities was particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately this was not a new issue. Rather, it heightened racial inequalities and provided ‘an excuse’ for people to stop hiding racism that had always been there, but which they had ‘just never verbalised’.

I think like there has always been so much like racial tension and even way before COVID, like I always thought, people like a lot of people were just racist and then they just never verbalised it. And then once when COVID came out was an excuse to just be like straight up racist... (Focus Group 1)

Young people perceived that systemic racism was also heightened in healthcare systems, in Australia and globally, during the pandemic. Reflecting on the Australian COVID-19 vaccine rollout, as well as instances of racism in healthcare experienced by people they knew, they described that white patients had received better and more urgent care than others, in the pandemic context. They emphasised that COVID-19 had not created racial inequalities but simply ‘worsened the situation’, with heightened discrimination in healthcare perceived to have resulted in worse health outcomes and higher mortality rates amongst People of Colour. This is supported by growing evidence from Australian and international research, which has found significant systemic racism in healthcare provision in the context of COVID-19 (Devakumar et al., 2020), and large disparities in health outcomes (Kirby, 2020). This includes the statistic that people born overseas were over twice as likely to die from COVID-19 related causes than those born in Australia (ABS, 2022b).

Racism has changed because of denied access of some of People of Colour to the emergency help due to COVID 19. (Focus Group 10- chat)

Racism has really played a key role where we find that in the US, for instance, we have heard about ... Blacks dying. Because of COVID, this because the Whites are being served first, they get some high health opportunities and when it does, really, it’s really affecting all of the Blacks. (Focus Group 6)

...even after the vaccines came out, priorities were assigned to people higher social class than people of lower social class. So, I feel like that was a bit of discrimination out there. (Focus Group 2)

Whiteness and 'race talk'

Despite discussions of visible difference and skin colour as key aspects of racism, focus group members often avoided mentioning whiteness. Indeed, they frequently discussed racism in abstracted terms free from mention of any racial or ethnic group, particularly at the start of discussion where participants initially described racism as: 'treating other people badly because they have different characteristics compared to yourself', or with reference to 'a certain colour or a certain physical trait', as we saw earlier. Young people articulated power dynamics involved in racialisation with references to being part of the 'minority', to being treated as 'less' or being treated 'differently'. While many of these statements are implicitly framed as being treated as lesser than white people, whiteness was mentioned explicitly only a handful of times:

...it's just like it's your own kind of hyper awareness of not being white. (Focus Group 1)

Whiteness appeared to be a particularly uncomfortable dimension of race talk for young people, and even where they named whiteness, young people often demonstrated extreme caution around appearing to call out whiteness or white people as benefiting from systemic racism. This was evident in participants' frequent tentativeness and hesitation when speaking about whiteness, a topic which often did not arise until later in focus group discussions. This included one instance where a participant actually apologised for naming whiteness, while recounting his experience of subtle everyday racism:

I have experienced some racism discrimination alone. I was headed to the movies. The cinema hall. Then I sat between some two-- I'm sorry, but white girls, I think they are Caucasian or so. Yeah. So then I realised they were quite uncomfortable. And later I realised it was because of my skin colour. (Focus Group 13)

Participants' caution around mentioning whiteness may reflect what anti-racism scholars have observed as powerful colourblind discourses in Australia (Walton et al., 2014). Describing a desire for a society that does not "see" colour, these well-meaning discourses aspire towards equality but may also risk reinforcing whiteness as invisible and universal, while skipping over realities of racism and structural inequalities. These patterns reflect wider cultural patterns of the avoidance of 'race talk' in Australia. The cautiousness displayed by participants may also reflect wider social realities of white backlash and victimisation in Australia (Nelson et al., 2018) and globally (Yancy, 2018). People of Colour are often punished for speaking about racism and particularly about whiteness, in what has been theorised as a form of 'double victimisation' (Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025b). More immediately to the social context of the study, this caution may have also been shaped by the environment of focus group discussion as an unknown setting (despite our efforts to create a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere), and the presence of a white researcher.

Part 2. Experiences of racism

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. Critically, these interpersonal experiences were understood by participants not as isolated incidents, but as expressions of systemic racism shaping the texture of their daily lives. The following section explores these experiences in detail.

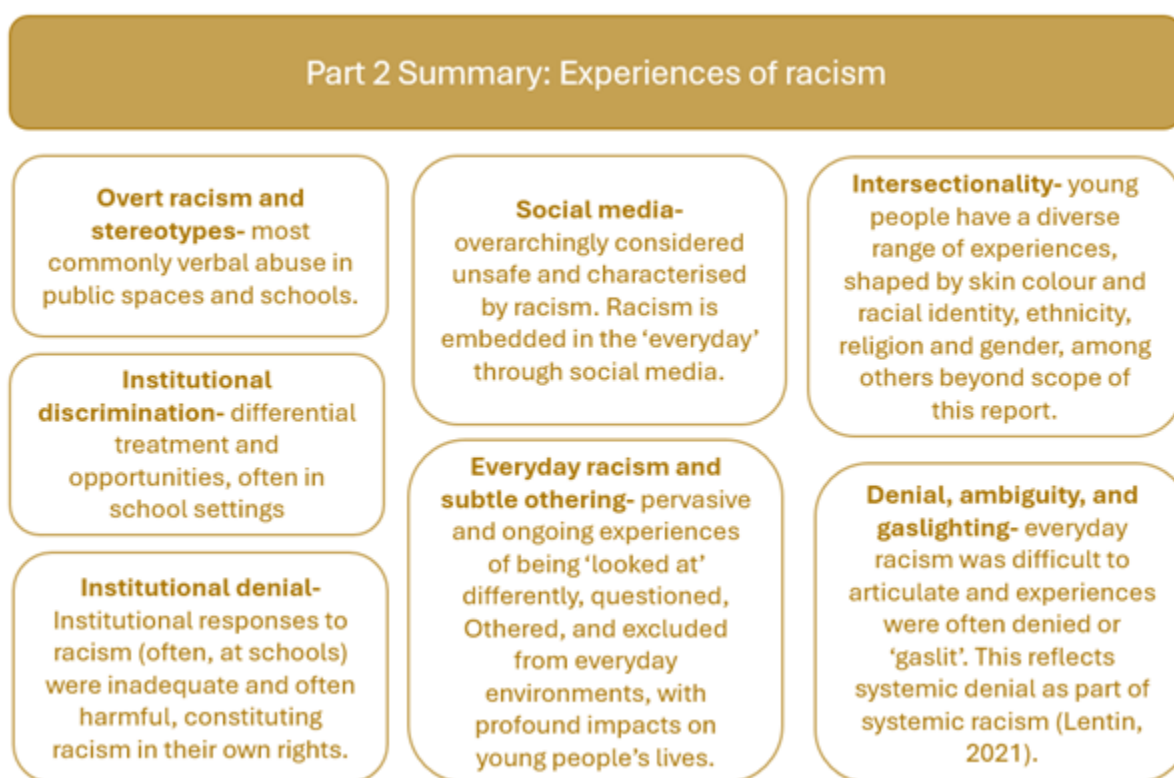


Figure 3. Summary of young people's experiences of racism

'Hate comments' and 'funny names': Overt racism and stereotypes

When asked about experiences of racism, young people initially gave examples of more obvious, overt experiences whereby they or someone they knew were racially abused. This included instances of being called racist names, verbally abused or receiving 'hate comments', or hateful gestures in public. These examples were also often discussed in connection with media stories of racist attacks or incidents, including Anti-Asian racist attacks, and police brutality and Anti-Black racist violence connected to BLM. While examples of overt racism tended to centre verbal harassment and abuse, these verbal attacks were at times highly aggressive and even physical in nature (e.g. involving 'screaming').

It was at QV in the city during the day and this one white person was screaming out loud to no particular person. Like all these like word for word, he was like 'all these fuckin chinks walking around'. (Focus Group 1)

A good example of discrimination I once saw this kid doing a thing with their fingers while touching their eyes mocking a Chinese kid. (Focus Group 11- chat)

So, I've had a lot of sort of hate comments directed at that, being Muslim, being Indian, curry, just any sort of racial slurs... (Focus Group 6)

On public transport, I was harassed. (Focus Group 9- chat)

'Hey, hey, Black' ... hey, you N***, you get that. 'Hey, you have a big nose'. (Focus Group 4)

Alongside public spaces such as shopping centres and public transport, schools emerged as one of the most frequently cited settings for experiences of racism — consistent with findings from other Australian studies (Elias, Mansouri, et al., 2021; Peucker et al., 2021; Peucker et al., 2022; Yared et al., 2020). Racism in school settings took both subtle and overt forms. Subtler manifestations included systemic assumptions and stereotypes, most notably the recurring presumption that Black students were less academically capable. More overt forms encompassed harassment, name-calling, bullying, and racist 'jokes' from peers, collectively contributing to school environments experienced as unsafe and hostile. Among the most explicit accounts were those shared by young people who identified as Black African, who described incidents of verbal abuse and mockery rooted in dehumanising stereotypes — including comparisons to monkeys — that positioned them as intellectually and even humanly inferior to white peers.

I have been racially discriminated as well at school, my friends could call me some funny names, jokingly basing on my skin colour, for example, they could call me an African baboon only because I was an African. (Focus Group 7)

My classmates used to tell me that I was so dark that I seemed not to have any bright ideas! (Focus Group 13)

As the above excerpts illustrate, this theme of overt racism and verbal abuse was closely connected to the concept of stereotypes. Young people were aware that the harassment they were subjected to formed part of larger patterns of racist stereotyping and assumptions, including the historically ingrained stereotype that Black people are less 'intelligent' than White people and that 'Asians are nerdy or good at maths'.

I wish that they could have considered me as an intelligent person. At least at the same with the Whites, when at school. (Focus Group 4)

I think as like part of like when I was growing up, so I think maybe stereotypes like saying that all Asians can't drive or stereotypes such as Asians are nerdy ... they carry on till you're an adult. And sometimes those stereotypes can be true, or they cannot be true. (Focus Group 7)

I guess the first thing that comes to mind, even though that's not that common, would be racial slurs, because racial slurs nowadays can be both good and bad in that sense, because like some, I don't know, stereotypical statements like the Asians are good at maths and stuff like that. (Focus Group 5)

In contrast to the Black African young people's accounts of having their intelligence dismissed or undermined in educational contexts, the kinds of racialised stereotyping raised in relation to 'Asian' experiences emerge as perhaps a less obvious, but by no means less harmful, experience of racism (Cheng, 2024; Hong, 2021). Overarching however, young people's reflections on the ongoing experience and impacts of racial stereotyping, particularly as experienced by young people in school as 'part of...growing up', highlight the enduring harms of racism as which 'carry on till you're an adult' (Coyne-Beasley et al., 2024; Trent, Dooley, Dougé, et al., 2019).

Institutional discrimination

Young people recognised that racist stereotypes were often institutionalised in the contexts of the school and university. Some young people recounted instances of racism and differential treatment from teachers and sports coaches:

I remember I once had a coach who ... was biased in was very biased in the team selection. Administering, let's say, punishments one would later if the team underperformed, and he was quite biased. He always ruled in favour of the Whites, which was it something that he had gotten used to. But it's something that really affected us. (Focus Group 6)

When I was in 10th grade, I was at a football competition at our school. I am a very good footballer. Back then, I was segregated from the team because of my race. (Focus Group 9)

The prevalence of racism in school settings — including from teachers and school staff — is consistent with evidence from New South Wales and Victoria, where 13 per cent of children aged 10 to 15 report experiencing racial discrimination from school staff (Priest, Chong, et al., 2020). The experiences of Black African young people's accounts are similarly reflected in the broader literature, which identifies participants of African backgrounds as reporting the highest rates of school-based racial discrimination at 32 per cent (Priest, Chong, et al., 2020). Additionally, the prominence of sporting contexts in participants' accounts aligns with well-documented cultures of racism in Australian sport (Farquharson et al., 2019).

Young people's experiences of racism in school were shaped by the specific context and demographics of school environments. Participants perceived that there was heightened 'harassment' in environments that had whiter demographics, including for young people at private schools.

I went to a private school and majority of students are White. So, I received a lot of criticism and harassment, which affected me. (Focus Group 11)

These experiences of discrimination extended from school environments to employment. Young people emphasised that racial stereotypes impacted their job opportunities. In the words of one young man, the colour of their skin positioned them as a particular (racialised) kind of worker with limited skills and abilities, expected or 'considered' only for menial 'handy work':

Yeah, that is some kind of discrimination or. In terms of skills and abilities, the Black man can be considered as someone who can do the handy work and the White man can do the White fella jobs like working in offices, working computers. (Focus Group 4)

These experiences formed part of broader discussions of discrimination in hiring and recruitment in Australia. Participants described how job opportunities are frequently denied to multicultural people — and more broadly, to those who are not white or do not have white-sounding names — reflecting patterns well-documented in the existing literature (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023; Booth et al., 2012). Participants also recognised that even when people from culturally or racially marginalised backgrounds do secure employment, their position often remains precarious; they are disproportionately likely to be the first to lose their jobs, reflecting an 'Australia-first' mentality that was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cooney-O'Donoghue et al., 2022).

I feel bad that people are not getting the same opportunities as whites, when they go looking for jobs, they are denied the opportunity because of their race. (Focus Group 9)

During the COVID my mother was fired along with the other Black friends...to minimise the number of workers... it was on a short notice and she was not the only one fired...

no other race was fired... There was nothing my [sic] could have done. (Focus Group 12-chat)

Shops and cafes were also sites of discrimination. Young people shared experiences of being targeted both as workers and customers, including being denied entry into shops and being mistreated as shop attendants.

So, I have a friend who [works in] sales at a certain store. He is Black. So, when some White people come at some point, they just they don't want to be attended by the guy. They tell the store owner that they should be attended by a White person because they think they understand each other better. (Focus Group 12)

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, originally theorised by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), refers to the way in which multiple social identities — such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and religion — overlap and interact to produce distinct and compounding forms of discrimination and disadvantage. The intersection of race and religion was particularly salient for Muslim young people. One participant emphasised how this tendency to conflate 'brown' communities with 'Muslim' communities represents a form of racism and dismissal of intersectional experiences of discrimination, with the perception that 'any brown coloured person...must be Muslim'.

Yeah, so I identify as Bangladeshi. I was raised Muslim as well, so a lot of my family members still wear the hijab, and they look Muslim, so to speak, and I feel like a lot of the times I've had hatred, which is not racism. But then it gets clumped into that because any brown coloured brown person you feel like... 'Ah, you must be Muslim' and go back to like, you know, Saudi Arabia or India, like those are the two apparently places you could come from if you're brown. (Focus Group 6)

The wider relevance of religious and ethnic discrimination also appeared in other examples of hate they had seen online or in the media. This included a highly publicised incident where the Victorian Jewish community was blamed for the spread of COVID-19.

...there was that Jewish engagement party, and then when that came out in the media was all over it, people were saying like, 'Oh, bring back the gas chambers', and stuff like that, like, I feel like that's just typical behaviour of people. (Focus Group 1)

Similarly, other participants reflected on the relevance of class, alongside migrant and visa status, which fundamentally shaped how they were racialised and treated by people and institutions:

... you kind of have to factor in the power dynamics as well. I think for myself because I'm privileged and educated, and I have a job, so it didn't affect me as much. Whereas I imagined, for international students, that would be a lot different experience. Yeah, so I think for myself personally, I'm aware of it [racism], but I think I've grown up with it, so I kind of understand it as well. (Focus Group 13)

While focus groups contained little direct discussion of other intersectional factors, such as gender, we suggest that this reflects methodological limitations of mixed online focus groups rather than a lack of relevance. In particular, young women may have felt uncomfortable disclosing experiences of gendered racism reported by gender-specific studies (Ang et al., 2024; Moran & Mappedzahama, 2023; Young, 2020).

Social media

Social media represents a distinctive and increasingly significant site of racism for young people. While digital platforms offer spaces for connection and community, they also expose young people to racism, including racist commentary and harassment. For multicultural young people, online racism frequently mirrors and reinforces offline experiences, while also introducing unique harms such as anonymity-enabled abuse and the viral spread of dehumanising content.

Reflecting their wider observation that ‘when COVID came out was an excuse to just be like straight up racist’ (seen in Part 1), participants described the ‘disheartening’ experience of seeing racism online from not only strangers but people they knew.

I think a lot of the racism that I experienced during the pandemic was things I saw on social media or old high school friends posting racist comments, just like what [participant] said about Chinese people eating bats and how inhumane that was and how they triggered this whole world crisis, stuff like that. (Focus Group 13)

In the context of COVID-19 lockdowns, many young people were spending increased hours online (Kamp, Denson, Sharples, & Ati, 2022) and the boundaryless nature of social media means that racism encountered online cannot easily be avoided or left behind, intensifying its impact and contributing to a persistent sense of unsafety and hypervigilance. Young people described a sense of ‘depression’ resulting from constant exposure to racist content against other people and groups. They expressed a sense of social media as a space that was overarchingly characterised by racism, unsafety and unease. This is reflected in studies of online and offline racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, which linked these experiences to negative mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Doery et al., 2023; Kamp, Denson, Sharples, & Ati, 2022).

But I think something that was also distressing, but I didn't realise it at the time, was reading all these articles about increased racial, racially motivated attacks all across the world (Focus Group 13)

When you see, when you post even a photo, me being a Black, Asian person, when you receive the comments. It's hurtful. It becomes very depressing. So, when you see videos of people being discriminated in the social media. We tend to have depression. (Focus Group 8)

Indeed, because of the ubiquity of social media in young people's everyday lives, the racism they experienced online and offline was often linked, particularly in school contexts in ‘a generation of phones’ where participants ‘[experienced racism] at school and also at home because of phones’ (Focus Group 13).

‘You kind of just go through the world in that way’: Everyday racism and ‘subtle otherness’

Central to young people's experience of ‘everyday’ racism was their recognition that it was the subtle, pervasive dimensions of racism — rather than overt incidents — that had the greatest impact on their daily lives. Participants highlighted the significance of ongoing ‘careless remarks’ and microaggressions encountered as a routine part of their social world, describing a generalised feeling of discomfort or feeling ‘bad’ as part of simply moving through spaces and interacting with others.

I think of just like microaggressions, you know, in the careless remarks that people make. I was at university a few weeks ago...and I was talking with one of the other people that I was working with. And they made the presumption that I wasn't born here,

you know, so that's just sort of really subtle otherness. So, you don't really get the overt racism like, you know, the violence and all that stuff, but much more subtle things. (Focus Group 13)

So, like, say, if I'm a Coloured person in majority White country scene, is there all these like examples of microaggression or like, you know, someone makes the racist comments. (Focus Group 6)

This 'subtle otherness' extended to non-verbal experiences — the ways that people 'look at you different or do things differently' — particularly in public spaces such as shopping centres. Participants described being stared at, treated with suspicion, or making others appear visibly 'shocked' by their presence. These accounts speak to the experience of racism as members of visible minorities who are routinely positioned as displaced and 'out of place' (Ahmed, 2007; Puwar, 2004), within social environments that continue to imagine themselves as white space (Hage, 1998; Uptin, 2021)

...my skin is a bit darker than other people's. And when I am passing, where they are, they look at me, I don't feel nice. (Focus Group 9)

So, my sister...I'm of Somali origin, so find that, you know, how Muslim dress in the hijab and all that. So, she told me that whenever she goes to the supermarket out there, people look at her differently. It's like they are shocked to see her. (Focus Group 2)

Personally, yes, there's a man that was looking at me in the store the other day and asking weird questions. I felt very bad. (Focus Group 11- chat)

...when I visit a shop or something and I might notice that, you know, I that I'm being treated differently and I look just like on the phone. But I kind of... Yeah. It's not like... for me. I don't think it's... I don't. Take it like too personally, I guess... (Focus Group 3)

In this sense, racism was experienced not only as discrete encounters or incidents, but as a generalised internal awareness — a hypervigilance around 'not being white' and what that means whenever leaving the house. This pervasive, internalised experience of racism as a condition of moving through the world points to the overarching reality of systemic racism and reflects theorisations of racism among young people as being constantly positioned in the wrong place and time (Mahadeo, 2024). This was particularly salient in Black African young people's accounts of racial profiling in shopping centres and encounters with police (Boal & Epstein, 1990; Macaulay, 2023; Mahadeo, 2024). For many participants, however, these experiences remained highly ambiguous and difficult to articulate — leaving them uncertain whether what they had experienced could, or should, be named as racism at all.

I guess all the definitions of talking about like racism and discrimination is kind of like other people treat you differently. But like, I feel like over the past few years, a lot of it has been like experienced internally. It's like you think to yourself...like you, it's just like it's your own kind of hyper awareness of not being white and then having to leave the house, and then like you can't read other people's mind so you don't know what they're thinking, but...You kind of just, I don't know, go through the world in that way. If that makes sense. (Focus Group 1)

‘You feel gaslit, you’re not really sure’: Denial and ambiguity

Despite their broad recognition that racism could be ‘careless’ (and not intentional) elsewhere in the discussion, young people appeared reluctant to label ambiguous encounters as ‘racism’, particularly for frequent everyday and non-verbal encounters.

I don't know how to put it into words; people would look at you weirdly. And I feel like there's some sort of racial undertones [but]... Obviously it could be for a completely different reason... I never know why people do what they do. (Focus Group 1)

This ambiguity was experienced negatively by participants, as something that made them doubt and second-guess their sense of reality. Two participants referred to this as feeling 'gaslit'. This reflects evidence that 'attributional ambiguity' is associated with specific harms to mental and, further, physical health, in addition to the wider harms of racism itself (Cuevas et al., 2024).

...oftentimes you feel gaslit...you're not really sure. (Focus Group 1)

And I think that whole experience is an issue for People of Colour, just like we're usually gaslighted for it. (Focus Group 1)

Similar to their caution around 'race talk' mentioned in Part 1, young people were initially reluctant to raise these ambiguous experiences at all, and many of these reflections did not surface until later in the discussion when a sense of solidarity and support had been established. Further, even when participants did raise these ambiguous experiences, they did so in ways that at times seemed to minimise their experiences.

I don't know if it's exactly racism, but I'll bring it up anyway... I've seen like posts on Facebook say, like, saying or kind of degrading these people wearing masks, saying, 'oh, you guys are pressuring us to wear masks, you shouldn't do that. We don't like wearing masks'. But I guess it could also be because of the whole like virus thing. I'm not sure if it's exactly racism, but I think that might be that, and I'm pretty sure my friend has been... He told me that he's been like, kind of made fun of wearing a mask by someone on the bus. (Focus Group 3)

The difficulty that participants experienced talking freely about their experiences of ambiguous and everyday racism, can be understood as a fundamental part of racism itself (Lentin, 2021). Whether it is related to feeling that they will be punished for speaking about racism (Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025a; Yancy, 2018), or have their experiences of racism denied (Lentin, 2021), many participants found their experience of racism to be complicated by its lack of overtness.

This silencing dimension of racism is particularly concerning, considering that, as Part 4 details, talking to others about experiences of racism emerged as a key support strategy, and in many cases, the only support strategy that participants had available.

'Double tragedy': Institutional denial

Participants highlighted the significant additional harm caused by inadequate responses to racism from bystanders and institutions. Inaction or harmful responses were understood not merely as failures to address racism, but as constituting a form of racism in their own right — at times experienced as more damaging than the original incident itself. For instance, reporting inappropriate posts on social media was considered an ineffective strategy that would 'help nothing'.

I actually don't take any action if the racism act actually happens on the social media... I feel like it will really help nothing to report the incident. (Focus Group 1- chat)

I took some actions, I tried to report the matter to admin of Twitter...nothing happened much, so I had to quit the group. (Focus Group 8)

Other experiences of not being taken seriously when raising or reporting racism, or facing backlash for doing so (Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025b; Yancy, 2018) arose most frequently in the context of schools and universities. Here, harmful institutional responses were compounded by unequal

power dynamics between racially marginalised students and predominantly white teachers and institutions.

What if you report and then the people the authority also discriminate against you? So it would be like double tragedy. (Focus Group 3)

Yes, 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. (Focus Group 13)

Yes, I took an action of reporting to the lecturers, but again, they were too against me... I think when you try and report these racism incidents, there are barriers and challenges within it as well. (Focus Group 7)

So, my sister was part of like a group...in the group [someone] made a racist comment... afterwards she spoke to the leader and was like, 'Hey, what that person said was racist. I didn't feel comfortable about that. ... The leader decided to do was make my sister educate the group about how to not be racist. And she was like, 'Well, I told you that in secret'... And now she's the target for calling out racism. (Focus Group 1)

Across these accounts, a consistent pattern emerged: regardless of whether young people reported racism or were believed when they did, they became the primary target of responsibility for the incident. This took the form of being accused of fabricating or exaggerating their experience or being tasked with educating others about racism — effectively placing the burden of resolution on those who had been harmed. These dynamics left young people vulnerable to further racism and re-traumatisation, including additional targeting from peers. This reflects well-established scholarship and community knowledge on the systemic tendency to redirect the burden of racism back onto those who name it — a re-traumatising cycle that is itself a manifestation of institutional racism. As recent research has noted, such experiences can render reporting not only unhelpful but actively harmful, meaning it is simply not a viable option for many young people (Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025b) — a theme explored further in subsequent sections of this report. Young people emphasised the inherent difficulty of reporting racism to the very institution responsible for perpetrating it, particularly when they occupied positions of significantly less power than those they were reporting against.

It always ends badly, the same people you'll report to are of the same race [as the perpetrator]. (Focus Group 10)

At some point, I told him [my friend] to report to the authorities and he told me that he feared reporting it because he feared that it couldn't. It will go bad on him. The situation. The people... to be reported to him. Again, they favour... he has power. He has the resources, the police, the resources to make it work against him. (Focus Group 12)

In school contexts, young people acknowledged the importance of support from individual teachers—generally, those who were racially marginalised themselves. However, overarchingly, this was ultimately insufficient in the face of systemic racism, particularly in institutions, dominated by white teachers and students.

You report something, and it's because of how the school is set up or because of the people in power, that justice hasn't been delivered. (Focus Group 13- Peer Researcher)

When I reported this, I was supported by my fellow Black teachers, but I think I never got any justice because we were still the minority in the school, and we ended up getting called a bad nickname. (Focus Group 13)

In some cases, it seemed like this response, in which young people came face-to-face with systemic racism, was more distressing than the initial incident.

Part 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. This section details how racism has impacted young people and what they do when faced with racism.

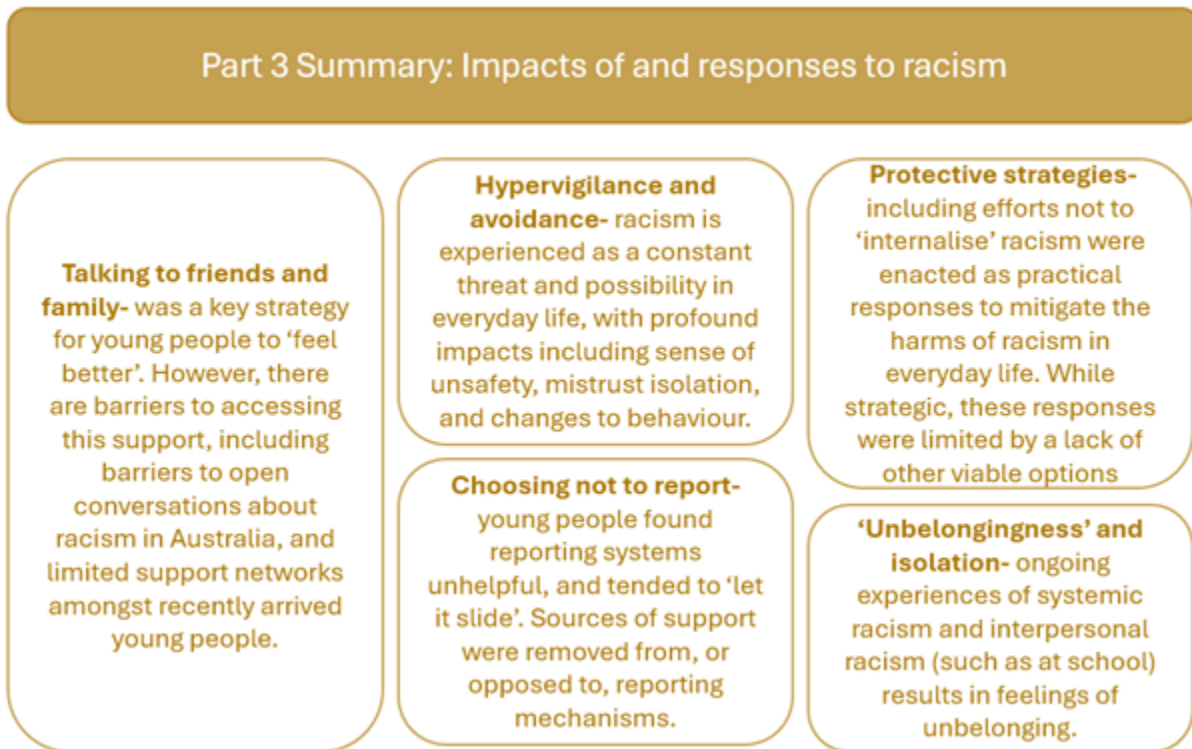


Figure 4. Summary of the impacts of racism and young people's responses to racism

Hypervigilance and avoidance

Many young people described experiencing racism as an ever-present threat. For many, this meant a sense of hypervigilance, or constantly being on the lookout for racism that could happen (again) at any moment.

Prior to COVID, but I always felt safe going out. But in certain instances, during COVID, I had thought in my mind like, 'Holy s***, am I going to get hate crimes today?' Which is. Well, frankly, weird because I, I've always felt safe, but not always throughout COVID. (Focus Group 1)

And I think that's definitely true when you see all these negative things that are happening to you, maybe people from your culture or other people from all its culture backgrounds, it brings, you know, it brings you anxiety, makes you scared to go out and you know, live your day-to-day life. (Focus Group 13- Peer Researcher)

Describing feeling 'scared to go out' and asking themselves, 'am I going to get hate crimes today?' young people attempted to mitigate these dangers by avoiding certain places or not going out at night.

You know, we talked about how because of these experiences, we changed our behaviours, or we got scared or we did things differently. We didn't, you know, we... our

confidence went down. We didn't we didn't want to get involved as much. (Focus Group 12- Peer Researcher)

A friend of mine was interrogated the other day just because he was black and there was a commotion around that area...he still doesn't walk past eight p.m. (Focus Group 12)

There are places I no longer visit. (Focus Group 12- chat)

Young people were not only hyperaware of their own safety, but also of people they cared about, including their families.

At the height of the pandemic where I felt most concerned about was definitely my parents like they can speak English, but it's not amazing. But I also don't feel like they can go out into the world and kind of like back themselves. And I feel like that's something obviously being like first generation migrants...Yeah, I guess it just like makes my heart hurt a little bit for them. (Focus Group 1)

Hypervigilance is known to negatively impact physiological states and has been directly linked to mental health issues (Woody et al., 2022; Bernard & Galán, 2025) and negative impacts on physical health (Brownlow, 2023; Chae et al., 2021). And, while young people reflected that experiences of hypervigilance were heightened at the peak of COVID-19, as we saw in Part 1, they recognised that such forms of racism were 'not new' but systemic.

'I felt like I was not like any other humankind': Unbelonging and isolation

Participants experienced the constant threat of racism through not only a sense of hypervigilance, but also of unbelonging. As one participant described, the pervasive threat of racism undermined their sense of trust in other people and drew out their sense of otherness and unbelonging.

I feel like it does have implications to my sense of belonging because hyper awareness of whether or not people have all these prejudices against me...I feel like it's possible that perhaps contributed to a sense of un-belonging if that's a word. (Focus Group 13)

Related to young people's descriptions of racism as othering in Part 2, participants described feeling 'outcast' from society and even from 'humankind'.

I felt like I was not like any other humankind outside there, and I felt so lonely and embarrassed. (Focus Group 7- chat)

... we all heard that the virus that originated from Wuhan and so it affected me, so people kind of felt like, I'm an outcast. (Focus Group 13)

These isolating impacts of racism were often exacerbated by young people's social environments, particularly for more recently arrived young people. Many did not have anyone to confide in about their experiences of racism, reinforcing feelings of unbelonging and isolation.

Well, my family are not here. So, and back then I didn't have friends. I was still new, so I just had to deal with it by myself, which was very sad. But I had to call some of the few people who are close to me that I do share my support system and I call them. (Focus Group 3)

Honestly, I was very sad... made me miss my home country. (Focus Group 11)

So, I felt, and it felt really sad, especially when you are far away from your place that people, you know. So, it really felt sad, and I think it was because of my skin colour. (Focus Group 3)

Participants described the impact of this isolation on their identity, where discrimination affected their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

It's a really bad thing because it actually kills the self-esteem of an individual. It actually kills the morale of an individual, and the person actually feels really bad. If you're discriminated against. (Focus Group 2)

You, you always feel some stigmatise [d] some kind of kind of what can I say, self-self-identity being destroyed. (Focus Group 4)

The experiences of unbelonging and isolation involved powerful emotional responses including feeling 'angry', 'bad', 'depressed', 'hurt', 'not nice', 'and 'upset'.

I didn't take any actions because I was afraid, you know, anger can make one do something that he or she will live to regret. So, at that moment of being discriminated, I was so angry that I decided to just walk away, and I went and cried later. (Focus Group 8)

'I decided it was best just not to internalise': Protective coping strategies

Young people described pragmatic strategies for dealing with racism in their everyday lives. Instead of reporting or confronting the perpetrator, participants often highlighted that their own emotional response was the most important and impactful thing that they could control. Conscious efforts to avoid 'internalising' racism (e.g. negatively perceiving their own otherness, unbelonging, or skin colour) were common:

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, all things like that. (Focus Group 13)

This was closely related to wider strategies of reminding themselves that their experiences of racism are not due to their own difference but rather enacted by perpetrators.

Anytime it's like a personal aggression like this, we kind of blame the individual, like, oh, that person clearly was drunk or, you know, it's all right, like his opinion or their opinion doesn't matter to you. Your work speaks for yourself. So that's the sort of attitude that me and my family have gone like have had throughout these incidents. (Focus Group 6)

My partner and I got kind of we're kind of like just laugh it off. I suppose, to make ourselves feel better, but because I mean, we laugh at all because we know people who are racist or who display racist behaviour just don't know any better or they're ignorant or they have a different view of the world compared to us. So, I mean, yeah, we don't take it very seriously, or we try not to. (Focus Group 1)

These strategies of 'laughing it off' and focusing on the perpetrator represented a useful and practical protective strategy for dealing with one-off incidents. 1998).

‘I just let it slide’: choosing not to report

In addition to their efforts to avoid ‘internalising’ racism, young people also reported that ‘let[ing] it slide’ was often more comfortable than confronting the situation. Despite often being described as not taking action or not doing ‘anything’, young people’s responses were strategic and agentic choices, based on weighing up the realistic benefits or harms that different possible courses of action might bring.

Personally, I’m not a very confrontational person, so I kind of when it happens to me personally, I just let it slide...something that I guess I did get used to. (Focus Group 3)

It’s completely OK if you didn’t take any actions as well as it can be very difficult. (Focus Group 11- Peer Researcher)

For me, I did not take any action, I just let it go. Yeah, it just wants to make it a big deal out of it. (Focus Group 10)

I think like on social media...the platform doesn’t always respond to it. You know, maybe they say that it doesn’t count as racism, and you can just block the user or whatever. And I guess when I experienced the sort of subtle microaggressions, I just brush it off, I don’t feel like it’s worth confronting a person over if I’m never going to see them again. (Focus Group 13)

More generally, as a systemic issue, young people recognised that it would be unhelpful to report or address perpetrators every time they experienced racism. This reflects our previous research with multicultural youth in Victoria, which found that over a quarter (26%) of young people did not report racism on the basis that ‘[they] didn’t feel confident anything would be done / there is no point’ (Doery et al., 2020); and research conducted by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission in 2013, which found that 41% of Victorians not report racism as they ‘did not think anything would be done about it’ (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, 2013).

Further, as we saw in Part 2’s discussion of the ‘double tragedy’ of negative experiences of reporting, young people also recognised reporting could be actively harmful—placing them at risk of targeting and retaliation (see also: Peucker, Vaughan, et al., 2025a). This reflects evidence that lack of trust and fear of ‘re-traumatisation’ is a major barrier to reporting (Peucker et al., 2021, p.36; Peucker et al., 2022).

For me, [I] don’t think the reporting is the best way to go about it. Because when you report, you’re going to be a target. (Focus Group 11)

Still, the focus group discussions also extended to more critical reflections on the implications of not ‘doing something’ in response to racism, accepting racism as the status quo by suggesting ‘it’s ok’ to live with:

It’s just very depressing, as personally, you do get affected by these comments. And you’re sort of questioning yourself if you should be doing something, but then we haven’t, like, it’s almost like it’s OK. You’ll live through it. It’s fine. (Focus Group 6)

The above quote highlights participants’ reflective approaches to thinking about racism; critically ‘questioning’ their own actions, responsibilities, and their relation to systemic racism. This extended to their critical reflection on the ways that they had been actively ‘taught’ to ‘shrug [racism] off’ as migrants in Australia. Many of the participants were second-generation migrants who were cognisant of the narratives and power dynamics through which their parents’ immigration to Australia had been structured.

I’ve just been taught by my parents to shrug it off. That’s just the way of life. That’s just what happens in that. We’re lucky to be in Australia and so forth because they are

refugees from Vietnam, and they came from conditions which were much worse...
(Focus Group 13)

This reflects wider scholarly recognition of the subordination of the migrant and particularly the refugee in Australian multiculturalism, who are positioned as indebted to Australia for accepting or 'including' them into its borders, overshadowing and excusing racism within our society (Hage, 1998).

'I usually just talk to my friends about it': Friends and family as an under-recognised support strategy

While focus group questions about how to respond to racism tended to lead to discussions about taking action and reporting, or 'letting it slide' and not reporting, support and connection are also important responses to racism. Young people did not necessarily perceive seeking care from their family and social networks as taking action; however, their stories showed how practices of speaking to friends and family constituted an active and helpful response to racism.

...to feel better, I usually just like to talk to my friends about it. (Focus Group 3)

And thankfully, like, I think I have very supportive understanding friends, and it makes me feel better that I'm also spreading awareness to make sure that my friends don't like to do the oh, like, don't you know, unintentionally even be racist. So like, just yeah, spreading awareness to my friends helps me feel better and also having their, you know, support and understanding helps. (Focus Group 3)

As elaborated in the above excerpts, talking to friends was central to young people's emotional support following experiences of racism. This support may be particularly important considering that a core impact of racism upon participants was a profound feeling of isolation and unbelonging; thus, (re)connecting with loved ones may be central to countering these impacts with a sense of 'support and understanding', particularly where they had shared experiences of racism. Speaking to family was a significant source of support for some participants, including one who described the importance of talking to her family in helping her to avoid the 'depression' she had felt close to before.

I have consulted to my family for comfort. And you know what... I could go into depression, maybe. Maybe that is my thinking. Maybe on my thinking on that track, I just talked to my family. And, I am ok now. (Focus Group 4)

While talking about racism to loved ones generally resulted in feeling 'better', this was not necessarily easy to do. In our previous research with multicultural youth in Victoria, less than one in three (29%) of young people talked with friends or family about their experiences of racism (Doery et al., 2020, p. 4). This is reflected in that the below participant's account of working up the courage to speak to her friends over time.

At first, I didn't. But when I experienced, the second time, I go to my friends and talk about it. But it was hard to talk. So when I talk with my friends, which made me feel safe. (Focus Group 13)

Similarly, young people new to Australia do not always possess these networks. As the participant below reflected, being new to Australia may often mean being without friends or family, leaving few options other than to 'deal with it by myself'. This underscores the importance of social and wellbeing supports for newly arrived young people, including around their experiences of racism.

Well, my family are not here. So. And back then I didn't have friends. I was still new [to Australia], so I just had to deal with it by myself, which was very sad. But I had to call

some of the few people who are close to me that I do share my support system and I call them, and that's when you just have to grow up that [support system], because I will be here for a while. (Focus Group 3)

The data in this section describes how young people find support, as well as how a lack of social networks can limit young people's capacity to respond to racism. Reflecting on support alongside young people's experiences of racism and reflections on current institutional responses to racism raises important questions about how to address racism in the contemporary Australian context. Drawing on the experiences and words of young people in this study, the following section presents participants' recommendations for responding to racism.

Part 4. Young People's Recommendations

Sharing young people's recommendations, this section responds to the question of how multicultural young people's needs can be centred in efforts to address the harms of racism in their lives. These recommendations may be useful for people working in anti-racism or youth sectors, in government, research, policy, and non-government organisations. They may also be useful for young people and communities seeking to build their own support initiatives. **To enable readers to more effectively summarise and refer back to the findings in this section, key sentences have been bolded. A full list of recommendations can be found at the end.**

Focus groups centred on listening to young people's lived experiences and finding ways to support them, rather than necessarily focusing on 'solving' or addressing racism as an external concept. Despite this, 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.



Figure 5. Summary of young people's recommendations and future hopes

Equality: 'that ideal world...that should of existed'

I wish people could treat others equally irregardless [sic] of their skin colour.... we are humans, Black or White; we are all the same. (Focus Group 12- chat)

Emphasising that all people should be treated as equal, human, and worthy of the same treatment and respect, young people's discussion of ending racism centred on equality. Young people

suggested that countering racism should involve shifting perceptions to ensure that everyone is fundamentally of **equal worth and treated with the same respect**.

It's all about perception because I don't think there is any difference in people basing on race. The difference is only a perception in our minds. So, I think it's looking for that thought... looking [for] means of removing that thought. But now for now, I don't know such a means. But it's [about] changing that perception. (Focus Group 13)

I would say that maybe all of the countries in the world, they can put up a system whereby they can start educating kids from it from the moment that they are young on how everyone is equal with this, maybe those those kids who grow up with the mentality, that yeah I'm equal and that, if any from a Person of Colour, I'm equal to [a] person on from another continent, different colour. (Focus Group 2)

In an ideal world we would be far from racism. We should, we should at least try to kick out racism, although it has its roots in our judgments and in most cases when we try to look at someone, we have already judged them because of the colour you already, they had some feelings or have some emotions like, you feel like this man is Black or this man is White. But I mean...that ideal world now, that should of existed. (Focus Group 4)

Young people frequently related this recommendation back to their own personal experiences of friendship with people of different cultural and racial backgrounds. In some cases, participants suggested that having friends of different backgrounds could help to fight racism, or at least **foster interculturalism, through promoting understanding across different cultures** –reflecting popularised contact theory approaches (which remain highly contingent on social conditions and power dynamics (Dixon & McKeown, 2021; Paolini et al., 2021)). Young people also expressed that having friends from different backgrounds was positive and valuable in its own right.

Yeah, I have friends of different colour, they are able to understand and appreciate our culture and also, we were able to understand their culture. This has helped to fight this racism stuff. (Focus Group 10)

Like me personally I have White friends, I have made a step, I have made friends from other races. Having different friends from other races, so. For me, it's a plus. (Focus Group 13)

As well as learning about and embracing difference through friendships, participants felt it was important to celebrate difference. This was discussed primarily in the context of school and university settings, where participants encouraged **educational institutions to create spaces to express, share, and learn about different cultural backgrounds**.

[School name], which is a very diverse group for a whole wide range of Asian races and including other races as well. So that way, our school has been able to, for example, introduce the Chinese Culture Club, the Indian Cultural Club, you know, Vietnamese Cultural Club and so on. And so, through this, we can also get to learn each other's cultures. (Focus Group 5)

Our university is organising for as a cultural event. So, in this cultural day, yeah, we are we are able to share our different cultures. Yeah, and also well sharing other people culture. (Focus Group 10)

Developing meaningful racism education and understanding

I think maybe people could learn and try to understand racism better and understanding words like systemic racism and intersectionality and things like that (Focus Group 13)

In addition to fostering cultural and generational change through interculturalism, young people also called for **education on racism**.

It's hard to change how people perceive these things, how people perceive races. So, I think we should concentrate on the young people... and teach them right from childhood. (Focus Group 13)

I think the young generation, like our children, we should try to talk much on unity and diversity. We should encourage them that everyone is capable of doing one, two and three, and everyone is OK not to [assume based on] colour or anything else. (Focus Group 8)

Participants stressed that children **should be taught not only about equality and diversity, but about racism and how it operates**. They expressed that one of the most significant barriers to addressing racism was a lack of knowledge: as one participant acknowledged, 'a lot of people understand that racism is bad', however, they do not have a deep understanding of how it works, or how they might address it. Participants urged the need for more education around key terms such as 'racism' and 'intersectionality', which may often be used in public discourses, but which people are rarely given time, space, or resources to understand or 'unpack' in-depth. Crucially, young people emphasised that meaningful education about racism cannot occur at a purely abstract or conceptual level. Rather, it should **foster a deeper emotional and human understanding of what racism means and feels like in people's lives**; and further, equip them to act on this knowledge and call out racism in their everyday lives.

I wish I could change places with the people who discriminated me so that they could view the type of spot I was in, how I had no one, and how I still have no one... Yeah, I think that would be important in that they would be able to understand because I have no way to express how I felt... (Focus Group 9)

Young people discussed social media and public campaigns to address racism, such as a 'no room for racism' national campaign to show support, raise awareness and fight racism.

Maybe people could hold campaigns and rallies that can maybe fight against this discrimination. Maybe it could work out. (Focus Group 4)

Campaigns that do support the minorities like the Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ and everything. Let us feel let us make everyone feel included ... Let's make everyone feel like they belong. (Focus Group 3)

Discussions of educational interventions largely focused on the school system as the best place to create change. They pointed to the potential of education to **foster meaningful learning within the Australian school curriculum**, enabling students to unpack and explore the issue with sufficient emotional depth with skilled facilitators.

I think in schools is the best platform to educate people on how discrimination can affect people so. So, awareness can be raised over there too. (Focus Group 11)

... They just don't know more about it because you don't really talk about things like this in high school, in the curriculum. (Focus Group 13)

And I think educating young people when they're kids to be like, Hey, if you see something, call it out. (Focus Group 2)

... there's so much to it and we sort of have that space and time to really unpack it ... We don't really have any dedicated subjects of our allocated opportunities for us to really talk about it. (Focus Group 1)

Young people's calls echo existing evidence that whole-of-school, multi-level interventions are required to address racism; spanning institutional policy and practice, teacher training, curriculum and classroom activities, and parent and community engagement (Priest, Alam, et al., 2020). One-off workshops or sessions, interventions run without a skilled, trained facilitator, and that do not address systemic, institutional policy and practice are largely ineffective and may do harm through either increasing distress among those experiencing racism or reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice. This includes evidence from CMY's *Speak Out Against Racism program (SOAR)* school-based program in Victoria (CMY, 2019), a multi-level, whole-of-school intervention for primary schools that has been pilot tested and evaluated via a quasi-experimental study in NSW and VIC and shown promising results (Priest, Alam, et al., 2020). Critically, anti-racism within schools must engage with local communities impacted by racism and also be grounded in First Nations sovereignty (Priest et al., 2021). There is an urgent need for greater and more systematic planning, sustained implementation, and rigorous evaluation of anti-racism initiatives across educational institutions.

'White people get uncomfortable': Making racism 'everyone's fight'

But if we come together as a whole the general population and condemn it, trust in me, it will end in no time... So that the best way we can do is just come, come together and the fight together, we shall win together. I believe that one day it will be a thing of the past. (Focus Group 2)

Young people emphasised that the burden of providing education and raising conversations about racism must not fall on people who are targeted by racism. **White people (or, people who do not experience racism) should take responsibility in educating themselves and calling out racism** when they see it and recognise that anti-racism is not multicultural young people's 'job'.

They'll be like, you educate us. Can you tell us about it? I think that's a huge burden as well. Like, I think at the end of the day, the onus rests on us, and I think that's frustrating and annoying to have to deal with... At the end of the day, it's up to us to call it out. It's up to us to make the changes, to tell you what we need to do to fix that kind of thing for us. (Focus Group 1)

If something racist did happen, I'm not going to say go up to someone and be like, 'Hey, like that was racist. Don't do that'. Because at the end of the day, it's not my job to tell you what you've done is wrong...I don't think I should bear that responsibility. (Focus Group 1)

The importance of 'everyone' understanding and supporting efforts to challenge racism, including white people (or those who are not People of Colour or the 'minority'), was further emphasised in discussions of racism as a collective social responsibility. Here, young people argued that the only way to address racism was by treating it as **everyone's business**, rather than the 'fight of the minority'.

I think sometimes we make that it's our fight, but it's actually it's everyone's fight racism. It's not just, you know, People of Colour or it's not...just their fight—it's everyone's fight. So, it's not just always, not all the responsibility is on you to speak up. It's also on society. (Focus Group 2- Peer Researcher)

Young people called for **solidarity and responsibility-taking** from anyone witnessing racism, to help prevent the isolation and otherness that young people described as central to their experiences of racism. Bystander intervention was seen as a particularly powerful response to not only counter and report racism but to increase connection and support for those affected.

Just speak out for them because you see an incident where someone has been racially discriminated against. Speak up against it. (Focus Group 2)

Having people around and having someone to either a note down what they saw or recorded on the phone or a camera like, hey, just talk briefly about it. (Focus Group 7)

Young people's critical reflections also highlighted the need for **caution around concepts like allyship**, to ensure that this does not become white saviourism. They emphasised that racialised people's agency and power should be respected, and that white people should take responsibility for their own education and actions, rather than seeking to speak or act on behalf of racialised people.

I don't think it should take a White person to like step it in in a situation like that. Like, why do you feel like they need to like save us from racism or anything like that? (Focus Group 1)

This reflects wider concerns around the dominance of white voices in anti-racism spaces and calls for anti-racism discourses to centre the voices of racialised people (Lin et al., 2023; Saad, 2020; Vaughan & Ravi, 2025).

‘Much, much more can be done’: Government, institutions, and whole-of-society responsibilities for tackling racism

The government and various agencies trying to tackle racism in various aspects ... I think that still they can do much, much, much more and much more can be done to tackle racism. (Focus Group 6)

Young people underlined the need for systemic approaches to addressing racism as a whole-of-society issue. This included action from key institutions including government, media, and workplaces to condemn and prevent racism. Participants stressed that support from powerful institutions would create the environment for people and communities to talk about and call out racism and foster anti-racism across society at large.

I think we should organise both the government and non-governmental organisations to join hands in implementing or making policies ... that are against racism. (Focus Group 8)

Having some guidelines or telling people, you know companies should do something too. It's like if racism does happen, you know it shouldn't happen in the first place. There's some system that fixes that. (Focus Group 2- Peer Researcher)

Participants called for **institutions to start talking about racism**. They felt that doing so, would help people who experience racism to feel more supported, and to 'raise our voice'. This was particularly the case regarding the police, whose support would help communities to feel more 'confident' or perhaps safer, and more able to ask for support.

Let's say police force actually talk about racism more and how they can support to reduce racism. This will make minority feel confident talking or asking for support from the people. (Focus Group 2-chat)

When we see, you know, big organisations such as, you know, the government or police say, 'Hey, racism's wrong, we'll take a stand for it'. And I agree with you that it makes minorities feel confident to be like the police agree with me. So, you know, I should speak up. But if sometimes the police don't talk, it makes it hard for us to raise our voice. (Focus Group 2- Peer Researcher)

In addition to policies that increase awareness of racism, young people called for institutions to actively counter systemic racism through the **active employment of a diverse workforce**.

... the employers should be encouraged to employ employees from different races different from theirs ... encourage people to employ people from different races, and they'll embrace each other. (Focus Group 12)

Especially in workplaces as well, having those programmes that will be equitable for people coming from minority backgrounds to sort of try breaking the glass ceiling as well to see people in positions of leadership would be good for younger generations as well. (Focus Group 6)

In particular, young people highlighted the importance of efforts to address institutionalised and systemic racism in the media industry. They felt that media bodies needed to address both the need for greater diverse representation within their own institutions and leadership, and to take responsibility for (and stop) its role in perpetuating racism in Australian public discourse.

I guess maybe the media should be more responsible and more aware of the way that it frames things. (Focus Group 13)

Having even Black, or Asian people on magazines, that's a great way because I think most of the time you are only seeing the faces of White or Caucasian people. (Focus Group 9)

Young people called for the media, particularly social media, to take on more active stances towards preventing and countering racism, before waiting for it to be reported. This could take the form of preventative messaging and awareness raising, in addition to automated processes for removing hateful content.

Maybe whenever people are logging into such and such applications, they'd have like an ad promoting equality and all that. Maybe with time, people feel that being supported and they are not on their own. (Focus Group 2)

As well as addressing racism through discourse and policy, young people felt that for racism to be taken seriously, it must be accompanied by serious consequences. This included **legal consequences for racist acts**.

We should also have these policies being implemented and serious action being taken on both people practising racism. (Focus Group 8)

They should put racism as one of the offences, so that when one when one is found doing any act of racism, there is some punishment ... And I thought this would make people maybe to see that they're not supposed to do any activity that entail, that entail any kind of racism. (Focus Group 10)

Participants were aware of the reality that racism can be difficult to prosecute, however they felt that the current legal system fails to adequately reflect the severity of the issue.

I think also, too, that if the bulk of evidence is sufficient to prosecute a person using harsher laws, I think the laws should be harsh on those propagating racism. If there's sufficient evidence, I think the penalties should be tougher, and I think I'm thinking more of jail time... (Focus Group 6)

So more severe, I guess, punishment more severe. Actions, because if you are if you do do something that's racism, that is discrimination, making sure you get equally punished for it. (Focus Group 10- Peer Researcher)

Independent, confidential, and safe: Recommendations for reporting processes

And there is a lack of support and services to help people. (Focus Group 8- Peer Researcher)

Young people called for the improvement and redevelopment of racism support mechanisms. This builds on the discussion above, where young people identified the lack of safety, utility, or practicality of current support options and reporting processes.

Some participants suggested the idea of **helplines or community advocates within community organisations to support to support targets of racism**, before necessarily formally 'reporting' incidents.

I think there needs to be more opportunities for especially racism and discrimination; there needs to be more places where people can share and get some support for that specific topic as well. (Focus Group 13- Peer Researcher)

Well, there should be a help line where one can report and also the psychological help should be set up. (Focus Group 11-chat)

Having training programmes that could then train sort of community champions or community advocates ... Say when people face such racist attacks or whatever and they're not sure should they be going to law enforcement or what—they could always contact this person [who] might be part of their community library or community centres, and they can then escalated to whoever it needs to get escalated to. So, sort of like a support person. But having those conversations out and about that awareness that if you do face something that makes you feel unsafe and unworthy of being where you are right now, then [afterwards] that needs to be reported to the correct agencies because that's not right. (Focus Group 6)

Participants also wanted to see **improvements in reporting systems and more reporting mechanisms than currently exist**. Participants highlighted that there needed to be more awareness of reporting systems so that people impacted by racism know where to seek help.

Creating awareness would be really helpful... actually making everyone aware about where to report and who to call or what I can do when I encounter racist people. (Focus Group 1- chat)

Young people underlined the importance of confidentiality in reporting mechanisms. They wanted to be able to report in ways that gave them privacy and control over their situation, without having to worry about their information being spread or potential retaliation.

I think I think you should open a secure website that can allow one to report any case of racism with no tracking information, of the reporter. (Focus Group 13-chat)

Helpline number that a person can be able to call ... and make sure that the number maintains confidentiality. (Focus Group 7)

Finally, they emphasised that reporting systems should be designed to not only deal with perpetrators but to hold institutions accountable and protect people experiencing racism.

Yes, you can make the complaint now to HR. But what happens after that or what happens at a certain level of that leadership? I don't think there's still much progress in that area. (Focus Group 6)

‘Safe spaces’

You'd have someone to reassure you that what you just experienced and your reaction to your experience is valid. (Focus Group 1)

In line with the recommendation above about helplines and community advocates, young people often focused on creating ‘safe spaces’ when discussing how to tackle racism. To address the profound sense of alienation arising from racism, as well as experiences of being ‘gaslit’, young people called for **support and validation for those experiencing racism**.

[You could have] your reactions or your thoughts acknowledged by another person just as some sort of reassurance that, oh, I'm not overreacting or another way I'm feeling is not weird or inappropriate. (Focus Group 1)

While the choice of further action was acknowledged as important, participants emphasised that there should first be a space purely dedicated to being listened to, to feel validated, and to reconnect with people after the isolating experience of racism—before deciding what, if anything, they wanted to do next. This reflects emerging scholarship on the importance of agency and self-determination, as well as recognition and reconnection, in responding to racism's harms to dignity (Gatwiri, 2025).

Sharing their desires for spaces where they could be reassured that their experiences and reactions were ‘valid’, and simply be ‘acknowledged by another person’, young people's visions of a ‘safe space’ here represent a direct counter to, and almost the exact opposite of, the public spaces that they described experiencing. As such, safe spaces were conceptualised as not just support in response to racism, but spaces that were experienced as ‘safe’ and free from the usual sense of racist threat, hypervigilance and othering.

Areas at which kind of just like a safe space kind of thing where you're reminded that you're worthy and that your, you know, no matter how different you are, you're important. That kind of like a space that kind of encourages that mentality. (Focus Group 3)

The positive impacts of being around other young people with shared experiences and ‘feelings’ of racism was further highlighted by young people's responses to the focus groups. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to connect with other young people who had experienced racism and to be part of a safe, ‘comfortable’ space to talk about their experiences and feel less alone in them.

I actually feel better attending this focus group because it feels really comforting to know that everyone else in this room has felt the same feelings that I felt. (Focus Group 1)

Participants generally agreed that community-led or lived-experience-led facilities should be **run for and by people from multicultural backgrounds, or People of Colour, who had experienced racism.**

I think something I would like would be that they be run by People of Colour who understand our experiences and not White people who want to help? it, just you feel like you can empathise better. Not.... because they have the same experiences as you, it's you can you feel like you can understand them more like you are the same sort of. (Focus Group 13)

Having people from that culture, from those backgrounds running the service can be the frontline workers. (Focus Group 13- Peer Researcher)

The need for community-led or lived-experience-led organisations supporting people who experience racism, has already been recognised by a small but growing number of grassroots organisations working to provide mental health and wellbeing services and community connection for members of specific self-identified racial, ethnic and cultural communities. This includes *Just Shapes and Sounds* provides culturally safe therapy for and by Asian Australians (Shapes and Sounds, 2023), and *Shakti Melbourne* (Shakti Mental Health, 2024), alongside broader community-led initiatives aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing through community connection and talking about racism, including *Let's talk about racism* (Racism. It Stops with Me.). Yet the reality is that these initiatives remain largely volunteer-run and grassroots level in need of policy recognition and sustained funding.

Further, participants called for **access to low-cost or free mental health support provided by practitioners who were People of Colour, who had experienced racism.** Professional health and wellbeing services provided by practitioners who could understand their culture and what they were going through. This points to a significant gap in the availability and relevance of professional support for racism, as a central factor in young people's everyday wellbeing—as acknowledged by international calls to address the 'dearth' of clinician training around racial trauma (Kniffley et al., 2024).

More bi-cultural workers, more bilingual workers, you know, workers from different cultural backgrounds. (Focus Group 11- Peer Researcher)

Employ staff from different races to ensure equality and more comfortable for the victims. (Focus Group 12-chat)

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 and 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 these cultural connections in community spaces where People of Colour with lived experience of racism could provide connections to other services including health and wellbeing services.

7. **Reform institutional reporting processes**

Participants called for institutional responses to racism to centre the needs of those targeted by racism. They recommended the establishment of new, accessible reporting mechanisms 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.

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. (Focus Group 3)

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.

APPENDIX- PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participant Demographics	N
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	38
Female	16
Transgender	1
Prefer not to say	1
<i>Cultural Background</i>	
Aboriginal	1
African	3
African American	5
American	1
Asian	2
Asian Australian	2
Bengali	1
Black	26
Black African	1
Black American	1
Black Australian	1
Chinese	4
Filipino	1
Latin	3
Latin Asian	1
Somali	1

Vietnamese	1
Vietnamese Australian	1
Age	
17	1
19	1
20	1
21	7
22	13
23	10
24	6
25	6
26	4
27	5
Not stated (16-25)	2

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