



FOUNDATION FOR  
Young Australians



# The Impact of Racism upon the Health and Wellbeing of Young Australians

**AT A GLANCE**

A Research Project undertaken by Professor Fethi Mansouri,  
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## Acknowledgements

The research team for this report would like to acknowledge the support of many key individuals and organisations without which this research project would not have been completed successfully. Firstly, we would like to acknowledge our partner organisation The Foundation for Young Australians and in particular Dr Lucas Walsh and his team, most notably Brigid Anderson, Jen Sainsbury and Dr Barbara Lemon, for their input and ongoing support in getting this off the ground and into implementation and completion. We would also like to acknowledge the input of the project's steering committee, in particular Dr Yin Paradies, A/Prof David Mellor, Ms Kim Webster, Kavitha Chandra-Shekeran, Dr Steve Francis, Ms Sarah Hardy, Ms Rivkah Nissim, Ms Soo-Lin Quek and Ms Rosalyn Black.

The research project involved a large cohort of students (823 participants) from across Australia, which was made possible by the respective education departments in the states of Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory. We also acknowledge the support of the Catholic Education Office, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian for facilitating access and on-site visits. The project was implemented in fifteen different schools across the four states and territories and this relied heavily on the leadership and teaching staff of these schools to ensure the successful completion of the surveys and follow-up interviews. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to these school communities, in particular the students and their parents for their support and collaboration. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of Deakin University's Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation and its research staff, in particular Dr Louise Jenkins, whose dedication, organisation skills, hard work and determination ensured the project was completed on time and with minimum changes to the original plan. My thanks also to Dr Les Morgan for his contribution to fieldwork in the Northern Territory and Queensland and Ms Mona Taouk for her excellent work on the quantitative aspect of the data analysis. I would also like to acknowledge the support of Dr Michael Leach at the initial phase of the project and Dr Kevin Brown in the quantitative data analysis and in particular the implementation of multiple regression analyses. Our thanks also go to Gill Gartlan for her excellent editorial support.

Professor Fethi Mansouri  
Project leader  
Melbourne, October 2009

This report was commissioned by The Foundation for Young Australians and prepared by Professor Fethi Mansouri, Dr Louise Jenkins, Dr Les Morgan and Ms Mona Taouk from the Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University.

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### Purpose of the report

- to examine experiences of racism among young people in Australia of mainstream (English-speaking), Indigenous, migrant and refugee backgrounds;
- to investigate how young people in Australia report and respond to racism; and
- to explore the attitudes of mainstream youth when it comes to race relations.

### Finding the answers

A total of 823 students from eighteen Australian secondary schools were involved in this study: 125 were interviewed one-on-one and 698 completed a survey based upon experiences of racism that ranged from verbal abuse to cultural stereotyping and discrimination within and beyond the school grounds.

### Results

This study showed that the impact of racism on health and wellbeing is influenced by **gender**, **age**, and the **type of school** that students attend.

- The group most at risk are female migrants in the senior years of school (years 11 and 12).

*“If I wasn’t being tormented, if I wasn’t being pressured, if I wasn’t hearing bad things about myself, I wouldn’t think ‘oh, I’m a bad person, I can’t do this, I am not going to do it’. Whereas if no one said anything bad about me I would push myself harder into doing things and knowing that I can do it, no matter what happens I will do it, but I just can’t...”* – Ekta, 15, born in India

*“It makes me feel excluded a little bit... I feel that I should just look away and ignore it, but I can’t ignore it because they are still saying it, I can still hear it, it is still going through my head. I get a headache after that... I don’t like it and I really want it to stop.”* – Dragoslavia, born in Serbia

- Students who attended a catholic school were **1.7 times less likely** to report experiences of racism than students attending government schools.
- Schools that had a compulsory in-classroom program about racism, stereotyping and cultural issues were less likely to have participants in the research who displayed ignorance about cultural issues or racist attitudes towards people from diverse backgrounds.
- Participants from migrant backgrounds are experiencing the highest levels of racism\*:
  - A migrant who has been in Australia for less than five years was **six** times more likely to report a racist incident than other participants.
  - A migrant who has been in Australia for more than five years was **five** times more likely to report a racist incident.
  - A second- or third-generation migrant was **more than four times** more likely to report a racist incident.

*\*NB: while the survey data found that Indigenous youth experience less racism than refugee and migrant youth, interviews with some Indigenous youth point to an all-pervasive experience of racism (as opposed to one-off racist incidents) that impacts upon their daily lives. Several Indigenous interview participants reported that they were subjected to racism equally at school and in community settings.*

### **Several trends emerged from the survey material:**

- **Experience of racism:** 70.1% of participants reported experiencing at least one of eleven specified racist scenarios, and school was the major setting for these experiences.
- **Reporting of racism:** Most students who experienced racism took no action in response to it. Those who reported their experiences were most likely to report to a teacher (52%), while 31.7% reported to a school counsellor, 12% to the police and 4.2% to a health professional.

*“If the students don’t like me I just stay away from them, or they try to argue with me, I still go to speak to them without using violence. If that doesn’t work I see my teachers.” – Naradha, 18, born in Sri Lanka*

- **Impacts of racism:** While some students said they felt stronger and more resilient after experiencing racism, the most common reaction was anger and frustration, and a feeling of not belonging to the local community.

*“They don’t want to sit with you, you just seeing their physical reaction... on their face and body actually, trying to squeeze backwards on the seat... I feel bad because I don’t think there is very much difference between a human being. I felt sad because it reflect me back to what happened in Rwanda.”* – Habimana, born in Rwanda

Serious impacts upon health and wellbeing articulated by participants included:

- Ongoing feelings of sadness, anger, depression and exclusion
  - Headaches, increased heart rate, sweating, trembling and muscle tension
  - A constant fear of being attacked verbally and physically
  - Not wanting to attend school
  - Having little or not trust in anybody apart from family members
  - Flashbacks to traumatic events which had occurred in the country of the victim’s birth
- **State by state:** There was no significant difference in the severity of racist experiences state to state.
  - **Variance amongst cultural groups:** Over 80% of participants from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds reported being subjected to some form of racism. Anglo-Australian youth displayed consistent prejudice toward other cultural groups, and particularly toward darker-skinned students from a variety of backgrounds including African, Afghani, Indian, Pacific Islander and Indigenous. Despite this, interviews pointed to a culture of fear and distrust between racial groups more broadly and 55% of Anglo-Australian participants also claimed to have experienced some form of racism.

## Recommendations

### 1) Professional development for school staff

The findings of this report point to an urgent need for well-targeted professional development of teachers, school leaders and administrative staff around the impact of personal and institutional attitudes upon the health and wellbeing of the broader school community. This would include:

- Leadership training for principals around social cohesion and the engagement of CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) communities.

- Developing the capacity of principals and other school leaders to develop whole-school initiatives to combat racism and reduce its impact on the health and wellbeing of students, with the support of a mentoring program.
- Ongoing targeted professional development for teachers to enable them to identify and deal with incidences of racism within the school and within their own classrooms.
- Provision of targeted classroom resources and teaching tools, including curriculum materials that help teachers to engage students with the sensitive issues of culture, race and social inclusion.
- Training for administrative staff around cultural diversity and inclusive practice.

*“Sometimes the names of students are hard and the office staff stop and stutter over them. One time we heard them laugh over the Tannoy system, you could hear them laugh in the background a bit, they can’t pronounce [the names]. Then people in the class start laughing about it too... It happens all the time.”* – Ardita, born in Albania

## **2) Further research about migrant females in years 11 and 12**

Schools and communities must be made aware that female students in year 11 and 12, particularly those from migrant backgrounds, are the most at-risk group when it comes to the impact of racism upon health and wellbeing. Further research should be undertaken to understand this complex gendered aspect of the connection between racism and wellbeing.

## **3) Targeting structural and institutionalised racism**

The ways in which racism might be embedded within the operation of some institutions – including schools, medical centres, community organisations and law enforcement agencies – must be investigated further and addressed, particularly in communities that are home to significant Indigenous, migrant or refugee populations. The investigation should focus on changing attitudes over time. This finding links to another recent report, *Building on our Strengths: A Framework for reducing race-based discrimination and support diversity in Victoria*, which suggests that school-based initiatives to reduce racism must reach the individual *and* the community.

*“On the town buses, when Indigenous kids walk on, they have to pay \$2 or they get asked for student ID with their uniform on. When the white kids come on, the bus driver just sits down and lets anybody on... I had to pay \$2 but it was really only 50c. They didn’t believe I was going to school and I had my uniform on.”* – Susie, 14, Indigenous student

#### **4) Targeting racism in junior sport**

Ongoing education and intervention strategies must be undertaken to address racism at the junior levels of community sport, building upon work already undertaken. Young players must be educated about the concept of racism and appropriate behaviour. Junior sports convenors, umpires and coaches must also be educated about the potential for racism to affect their young players, and trained in dealing with racist incidents and negative impacts upon health and wellbeing. In line with the *Framework* study, this report recommends role-modelling and the introduction of pro-diversity codes of conduct in sporting clubs.

*“They just stereotyped him pretty much. I think he was Lebanese so they started stirring him up about his religion and said stuff that really wasn’t true... He just went into his own little bubble and just took it and then left at the end of the year.”* – George, of Mediterranean background, discusses the impact of racism on a member of his soccer team

#### **5) Further research by multidisciplinary professionals**

Further research should be carried out by multidisciplinary teams – including social scientists and medical professionals – to investigate the impact of racism on vulnerable groups and the implications for school retention, academic results and job prospects among young Australians.

### **Summary of data collection**

Data for this report was gathered during the first half of 2009. Survey participants were recruited from Australian secondary schools as follows:

- Victoria (41.1%)
- New South Wales (39.4%)
- Queensland (14.3%)
- Northern Territory (5.2%).

The breakdown of survey participants was:

- 39.3% (274) males and 55.2% (385) females
- age range: 12–19 years
- average age: 15.37 years.

The majority of survey participants were classified as being in the middle years, levels 9 and 10 (48.9%), while those in the senior years, levels 11 and 12, represented 41.1% of the overall sample. Only 5.4% were from the junior years (year levels 7 and 8). In line with the study's approach and objectives, participants represented a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with 60 different countries being listed as a place of birth. The majority of survey participants, however, were born in Australia (69.9%).

The ethnic and cultural breakdown was:

- 39.1% Anglo-Saxon Australian-born
- 27.7% second and third generation migrants
- 12.2% migrants who have been in Australia for five years or more
- 7.3% migrants who have been in Australia for less than five years
- 3.0% refugees
- 2.9% Indigenous Australians.

The data relating to religious background indicated that:

- 43.8% were Christian
- 25.6% did not identify with a religion
- 10.9% were affiliated with a religion which was not specified in the survey choices
- 8.3% were Muslim
- 5.9% were Buddhist.

These figures reflect broadly the demographic characteristics of the wider population as shown in the 2006 ABS census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

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