



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

Let's talk race:
a guide on how to
conduct a conversation
about racism

June 2019

RACISM. IT STOPS WITH ME

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Introduction

Racism is an ongoing problem in Australia. It directly affects significant numbers of Australians. In annual surveys, about one in five Australians report having experienced racial discrimination during the previous 12 months.¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and certain migrant communities (such as African Australian communities) are much more likely to experience racism than other people.²

Racism continues to take place in organisational settings. In a 2017 study, about one-third of surveyed Australians reported they had experienced racism in the workplace.³ Racism has severe health and economic consequences for its targets and is damaging to Australia's social cohesion.

But talking about racism can be difficult. Many organisations do not discuss racism until they are faced with an incident of racism, such as a derogatory comment made by one person to another, or an instance of offensive behaviour. In the aftermath of a racist incident, organisations may not be well prepared to navigate the issues arising with the appropriate level of care. An overt incident may also be seen as an isolated occurrence rather than an indication of a more systemic problem. This may lead those who have experienced racism to feel unsupported, and risk more incidents happening in the future.

A new approach is needed. Australian organisations would benefit from dealing with racism in a proactive, rather than a reactive, way. This will make organisations more inclusive and resilient. It will have important social and cultural impacts outside of the organisation too.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has developed this guide to assist Australian organisations in conducting meaningful and productive conversations about racism. It can be used in conventional workplaces, community groups, faith organisations, sporting clubs as well as other organisations. While it is designed to be useful as a 'proactive' document, it can also be used to assist in facilitating conversations about racism after an incident has occurred.

The guide is designed to support the start of a conversation about racism in your organisation. Having a proactive, open discussion about racism demonstrates a commitment to tackling racism when it occurs and preventing it in the future. A sensitive and mature approach to discussing racism strengthens organisational culture and makes an organisation better prepared to handle racist incidents if or when they happen. For the development of more advanced racial awareness in your organisation, a formal training package is recommended.

A note on anti-racism, 'diversity and inclusion', and Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs)

In recent years, training on diversity and inclusion has become increasingly popular in Australian organisations. This can include cultural diversity or cultural competence training, which may consider bias and discrimination with respect to race, ethnicity and cultural background.

While their goals may be similar, conversations about racism are not substitutes for cultural diversity or cultural competence training. Similarly, these conversations should not replace work associated with Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs). They are, instead, additional tools for organisations in promoting more sophisticated and meaningful racial awareness.

Various organisations deliver anti-racism—as opposed to cultural diversity—training. The Australian Human Rights Commission is currently developing its own anti-racism training package, which will explore race and racism in Australia in-depth, and be run by an experienced facilitator. Please contact the Commission if you would like to know more about this.

This guide is divided into three parts.

PART 1 provides information on cultural diversity in Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as information on the prevalence and experience of racist attitudes in Australia.

PART 2 contains detailed guidance on how to conduct a conversation about racism in your organisation, and contains links to relevant resources for facilitators and a Participant Information Sheet.

PART 3 is a guide on how to keep a conversation about racism on track. It contains common statements that people may make to try to 'derail' a conversation about racism and provides suggestions on how to respond respectfully.

P A R T
01

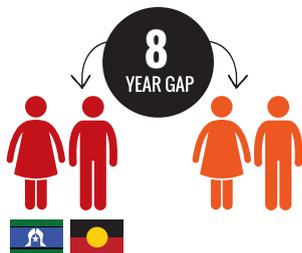
Cultural diversity in Australia

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATION¹

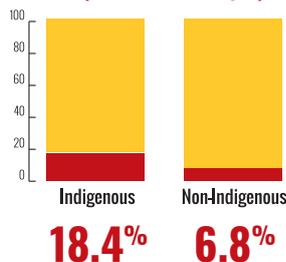


In 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accounted for over one third (37%) of children in out-of-home care.³

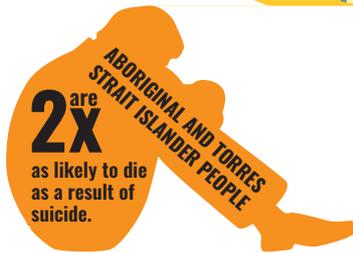


In 2015-2017, the average life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was **EIGHT YEARS LESS** than that of non-Indigenous Australians.⁴

PROPORTION OF UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE (between 15-64 yrs), 2016⁷

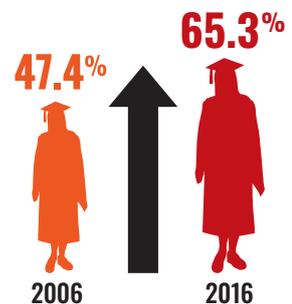
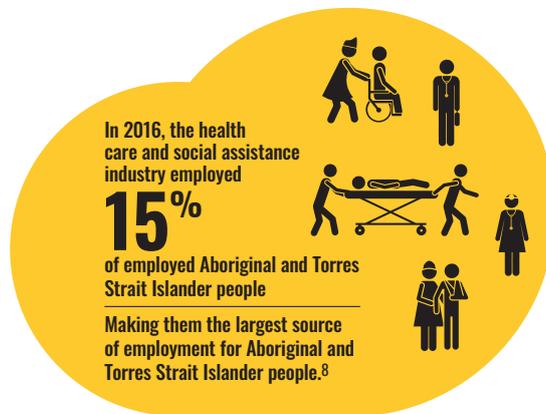


WHERE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE LIVE²



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (aged 5-17 yrs) are **5 times** more likely to die as a result of suicide than non-Indigenous Australians.⁵

National rate of imprisonment



Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20-24 yrs that had attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.⁹

2. Cultural diversity

 **AUSTRALIA IS HOME TO THE WORLD'S OLDEST CONTINUOUS CULTURES.¹** 



Australians identify with more than **300** ancestries.²



In 2018 more than **1 in 4** AUSTRALIANS WERE BORN OVERSEAS.³

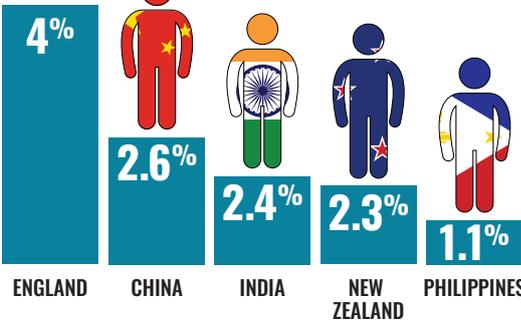


More than **1 in 5 (26%)** speak a language other than English at home.⁴



1 in 5 HAVE ONE OR BOTH PARENTS BORN OVERSEAS.⁵

2018
OVERSEAS MIGRATION REPRESENTED 60.8% OF AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION GROWTH.⁶



Top migrants to Australia, 2018.⁷

Migrants that arrived in 2014-15 are projected to contribute **\$9.7 billion** to the Australian economy over 50 years.

This includes Permanent Migration Program, the Humanitarian Program and the 457 temporary skilled visa program.⁸



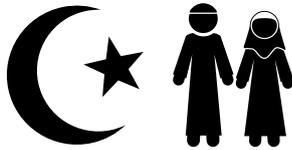
EVERY SINGLE COUNTRY FROM AROUND THE WORLD WAS REPRESENTED IN AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION IN 2018.⁹



3. Racist attitudes in Australia

1 in 5

surveyed Australians in 2018 have experienced racism in the past 12 months.¹



15%

of surveyed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were prevented from renting or buying a property.²

32%

of surveyed Australians in 2018 reported holding negative attitudes towards Muslims.³



In 2016 **77%** of surveyed Australians supported anti-racism initiatives and the need to challenge racism.⁵

85%

of surveyed Australians in 2018 consistently say **multiculturalism** has been good for Australia.⁴

In 2006 **86%** of surveyed Australians supported the need to reduce or fight racism in Australia.⁶

34%
experience racism on public transport or on the street



Surveyed participants in 2015-2016 reported that everyday racism is more prevalent than racism in institutional settings.⁷

#standup

33%
experienced racism at work



33%
experienced racism in an institutional setting



1 in 3

surveyed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2018 have experienced verbal racial abuse in the past 6 months.⁸

In 2016 almost **40%** of surveyed participants had experienced race-hate talk.⁹

Infographic References

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (page 8)

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2. Cultural diversity (page 9)

- 1 Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Chapter 1: Celebrating Indigenous Cultures, Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2019* (2019) 18.
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cultural Diversity Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia – Stories from the Census, 2016* (27 March 2018), Cat no. 2071.0, ABS Canberra.
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- 7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration, Australia, 2017-2018* (3 April 2019), Cat no. 3412.0, ABS Canberra.
- 8 Australian Government The Treasury, Department of Home Affairs, *Shaping a Nation: Population growth and immigration over time* (2018), 35.
- 9 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Migration, Australia, 2017-2018* (3 April 2019), Cat no. 3412.0, ABS Canberra.
- 10 Kathleen Blair et al, *Challenging Racism Project 2015-16 National Survey Report* (2017) 9.

3. Racist attitudes in Australia (page 10)

- 1 Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation surveys 2018* (2018) 67.
- 2 Reconciliation Australia, *2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer* (2019, Full Report) 51.
- 3 Kathleen Blair et al, *Challenging Racism Project 2015-16 National Survey Report* (2017) 4.
- 4 Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation surveys 2018* (2018) 64.
- 5 Kathleen Blair et al, *Challenging Racism Project 2015-16 National Survey Report* (2017) 9.
- 6 University of Western Sydney, *Challenging Racism Project: National level findings* (2008), p 3.
- 7 Kathleen Blair et al, *Challenging Racism Project 2015-16 National Survey Report* (2017) 10.
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P A R T

02

How to have a conversation
about racism

How to have a conversation about racism

To challenge racism, organisations should conduct conversations about racism that allow for open and honest discussion about experiences and potential anti-racism strategies. Sessions should focus on racism as it relates to participants' experiences within the organisation but, should also consider the broader context and external experiences (participants will raise examples from the 'outside world' of their own accord, even if facilitators do not).

The tips and conversation questions in this guide have been developed based on consideration of Australian and international research on anti-racism strategies, current Australian Human Rights Commission education resources and training guides, and human rights education principles and pedagogies. The six principles of human rights education are that it is:

- Relevant to participants
- Collaborative
- Participatory
- Probing
- Encourages thoughtful action
- Empowering.⁴

While this guide is not intended to be a formal education resource, principles of human rights education remain relevant to setting up an introductory conversation on racism.

Inclusive and respectful language should be demonstrated and consistently used by all participants when discussing race and racism. Resources on facilitating culturally safe and inclusive discussions can be found on [page 22](#).

Purpose and goals

What does a 'productive' conversation look like? What are we trying to achieve?

To encourage participation, organisers should frame the conversation in a positive and constructive way: that the organisation is bringing people together to learn about racism and devise ways of challenging or counteracting it.

The purpose and goals of the conversation should also be made clear from the outset. Aligning with human rights education principles, goals for participants and facilitators should be to:

- discuss their views and experiences relating to racism in a safe, non-judgmental environment
- learn from each other's experiences, bearing in mind that racism is often experienced in vastly different ways by different people
- reflect on individual behaviours, and how people can intentionally or unintentionally cause racial harm to others
- identify practices and systems within an organisation that could be developed or improved to better challenge and mitigate racism
- collate suggestions for an organisational plan to tackle racism.

Who should attend?

Depending on the goals of the discussion, the discussion should be open to all within your organisation who want to learn about and discuss racism. Organisers and/or facilitators should try to involve a diverse range of people, including people who have different racial backgrounds, genders, ages, abilities and positions within your organisation. However, also consider the effect of having people who hold leadership positions in your organisation in the room if there is a chance that their presence may inhibit honest conversation.

It is generally recommended that no more than ten people (in addition to the facilitator/s) should participate in any one conversation. Otherwise, some participants may not have the opportunity to contribute, and meaningful dialogue might be lost. For a larger group (of up to 20 people), consider formal anti-racism training with an experienced facilitator.

Who should facilitate?

Identifying suitable facilitators within the organisation is critical for having a productive and meaningful conversation. A good facilitator will:

- be impartial and objective
- model the use of respectful and inclusive language and terminology
- listen actively
- acknowledge, and be responsive to, the diverse experiences of people in the room
- summarise contributions and draw out similarities and differences between ideas
- sensitively manage participants during the discussion to ensure everyone engages respectfully and has an opportunity to contribute
- manage time and re-focus the discussion if it goes 'off-topic'.

If possible, the conversation should be facilitated or co-facilitated with at least one person who has lived experience of racism. If there are multiple facilitators, they should ideally have different cultural backgrounds, so they can model comfortable and authentic inter-cultural dialogue.

Furthermore, participants who have experienced racism may only feel comfortable talking honestly if at least one of the facilitators has experienced racism themselves. Establishing trust between participants and facilitators is vital when setting up the conversation.

Facilitators should read this guide, and have a look through the Facilitator Resource List, before the session. If there are multiple facilitators, they should meet at least one day before the session to coordinate and plan.

Time allowed

It is recommended that three hours be set aside for a conversation to be valuable. A half-day (four hours, including a break) is generally preferred. The questions provided in this guide will cover most of the essential ground, including considering how racism manifests itself and what can be done to stop it. A short (approximately 20 minute) break is recommended, as discussion might become quite sensitive and draining.

Set-up

To encourage the sharing of ideas we suggest arranging the room with chairs in a circle. If possible, keep the space clear in the middle of the circle. Make sure it is quiet, that there is little chance for outside disturbance, and that water is available. If you plan to show the optional videos, make sure the relevant technology is set up and functioning in advance. Place one Participant Information Sheet on each chair at the start.

Materials needed

- Participant Information Sheets – for each person
- Case Study sheets (to be circulated after Question 2 discussion) – for each person
- Post-it notes and pens – for each person
- Whiteboard
- AV

Conducting the conversation

Introductions

First, welcome everyone, and invite participants to introduce themselves (if they don't already know each other). Then establish some ground rules. It is important to set these up before any subject-matter conversation begins. Ground rules should include:

- Be respectful of, and actively listen to, others' experiences and views.
- Be patient and engaged, and don't assume you have all the answers.
- Respect the sensitivity of the conversation by following the 'Chatham House' rule (i.e., when discussing the conversation with others afterwards, do not attribute comments to identified individuals).
- Accept that a single conversation is unlikely to holistically or sustainably 'solve' racism in your organisation; rather, it is an important part of a longer process to stamp out discrimination.
- Keep all phones switched off or put away throughout the conversation.

Also consider asking participants to suggest additional ground rules for the group to make them feel comfortable and accountable to each other.

Next, invite participants to share with the group what they are hoping to get out of the discussion.

Facilitators should then:

- Review the agreed goals and ground rules of the conversation.
- Affirm that the session is not intended to be about making people feel guilty or ashamed. However, recognise that it may make people uncomfortable. This is perfectly natural, and it is usually a part of any productive conversation about race and racism. The important thing is that participants actively listen to each other and are open to each other's ideas.
- Set up a process for managing uncomfortable responses. Tell participants it is ok to leave the conversation if they need to.
- Ask that those who express that they haven't experienced racism in their lives to critically consider their own position, what contributions they can usefully make, and what is best left to others, before contributing.
- Note that while honest dialogue is encouraged, openly offensive or hurtful interactions will not be tolerated, and participants may be asked to leave if they do not show the appropriate level of respect for others in the room.
- Provide details about internal processes for dealing with specific allegations of racist behaviour, as well as information about the Australian Human Rights Commission's complaint-handling function.

Next, ask participants to introduce themselves (if they don't already know each other) and briefly share with the group what they are hoping to get out of the discussion.



The conversation

Facilitators may wish to show a short video to get people thinking about what racism and racial dialogue involves. Video 1 is provided in the Facilitator Resource List. After the video is complete, ask for people's brief reflections on it, and move onto the conversation questions.

These conversation questions are designed to cover a conversation starting from a big-picture discussion about race and racism in Australian society, through individual experiences, to anti-racism strategies and plans for action.

Conversation Question 1: How does race shape our lives?

This question sets up the whole substantive discussion. Participants may be quiet at first (this is normal at the start of any discussion of this nature). One way of handling this is to ask participants to write down any initial thoughts that come to mind on a post-it note and stick it up on the whiteboard or wall. Give participants a few minutes to do this. The notes can act as prompts for discussion.

Feel comfortable to use additional prompts, and consider asking individual participants to share their thoughts if you sense they might have something to contribute. Participants may wish to focus more on their personal lives and society at large rather than the organisational context, but this is fine for Question 1.

Possible prompts:

- How much do you think about race in your day to day life? What do you think prompts this thinking?
- How has the racial or cultural composition of Australia changed over time?
- How has the racial or cultural composition of our organisation/industry changed over time? What are the benefits of cultural diversity in any organisation?
- Do we have a racially or culturally diverse organisation? Why or why not?

Conversation Question 2:

What does racism look like?

This question is designed to introduce participants to conceptual understandings of racism. Consider it **optional** for facilitators who feel comfortable introducing the topic of racism in a conceptual way before asking about participants' personal experiences.

Ask participants to quietly read the 'Defining racism' section of their Participant Information Sheet. Consider asking the following questions:

- How would you personally define 'racism', and why?
- What strikes you about these varying definitions of 'racism' described in the 'Defining racism' section of your Participant Information Sheet?
- Are there particular aspects that resonate, and why?
- Is there anything that doesn't align with your personal understanding of racism, and why?

Allow participants a few minutes to discuss these questions in small groups, and report back to the wider group.

Then, consider showing the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2017 Community Service Announcement videos 'Taxi' and 'Elevator', or the New Zealand Human Rights Commission's video 'Give Nothing to Racism' to continue the discussion (see the Facilitator Resource List for **Videos 2, 3 and 4**).

Invite participants to share their reflections on these videos. Do they align with what participants consider to be 'racism'?

Suggested points for discussion:

- Racism can play out in subtle and non-obvious ways.
- Racism can involve prejudices and stereotypes about criminality and antisocial behaviour—and lead to decisions that involve discrimination.
- Racism can involve acts of exclusion, which may seem innocuous to some, but if they are rehearsed and repeated over time, can have harmful effects.

Conversation Question 3:

What does racism 'feel' like? Have you experienced racism, or witnessed someone else experience racism?

This question moves the discussion from the big picture to the specific. Facilitators may need to remind participants of the Chatham House rule, and the set of ground rules that the group agreed to before to the discussion. Bear in mind that if people are willing to share their experiences, they may become emotional while telling their stories. Facilitators should comfort the person and remind the rest of the group that some level of discomfort is to be expected in these conversations. Those in the room who may not have experienced racism might, for the first time, be witnessing its impacts on people they know. This can be confronting, but it is valuable.

Ensure that if people do become emotional they have the option of withdrawing from the conversation or taking some time out in a separate, safe space without judgement.

Possible prompts:

- You may wish to consider events or experiences that have happened in this organisation or elsewhere.
- Please feel free to share as much or as little of the details as you like.
- How often do you think such events or experiences have happened, or continue to happen? Why?
- Who do you think is more likely to experience racism? Why?
- Do you think experiences of racism have to be based on direct, interpersonal interactions? Can there be systemic or cultural forces at work?
- Do you think interpersonal interactions reflect broader social attitudes? How and why?

Case Study Discussion *(if time allows)*

Read out loud and/or print and circulate:

An Australian study was conducted that involved sending several thousand identical fake job applications in response to real job listings. The only thing that distinguished each application was that the name at the top was different: there were various Anglo-Saxon, Middle Eastern, Chinese, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Italian-sounding names. The study received substantially more positive responses in response to applications with Anglo-Saxon-sounding names, even though the applications had identical experiences listed.

Study co-author Andrew Leigh wrote: "To get the same number of interviews as an applicant with an Anglo-Saxon name, a Chinese applicant must submit 68% more applications, a Middle Eastern applicant must submit 64% more applications, an Indigenous applicant must submit 35% more applications.

Are you surprised by this? What do you think explains this effect?

Study citation: AL Booth, A Leigh and E Varganova, 'Does racial and ethnic discrimination vary across minority groups? Evidence from a field experiment' (2012) 74(4) Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics 547.

Ask participants to discuss the case study with the person sitting next to them or in small groups. After a few minutes, ask each pair to report back to the wider group. Some relevant points include:

- Racist attitudes about competency, cultural compatibility, and organisational 'fit' do exist in our community.
- Racism can play out in ways that aren't always obvious.
- Racist attitudes can lead to institutional decisions that deny people power or resources.
- Regardless of whether racism is unconscious or conscious, the effect is the same for those on the receiving end if they are treated unfairly.

If you are looking to take a short break during the session, this would generally be an appropriate time.

Before Conversation Question 4, play **Video 5**, if time allows (see Facilitator Resource List).

Conversation Question 4:

What can people do to actively address racism?

This question asks participants to reflect on their own past and prospective behaviour as bystanders of racist behaviour. Some participants may suggest language or other behaviour that can be employed to effectively challenge interpersonal racism, including in an organisational context. Others may reflect on their role in supporting anti-racist causes or campaigns. The discussion that ensues may involve some critical reflection on existing organisational processes, or the organisation's overall approach to racism. Let participants have their say. If appropriate, connect this discussion back to examples raised in response to Question 3 to provide specific examples.

Possible prompts:

- What sort of language can make a difference to tackling racism?
- What do you think stops people from intervening when they see something happen?
- How do you think witnesses of racist behaviour could be appropriately encouraged and empowered to take action against racism?
- Who can people talk to about racism?
- Do you feel comfortable and confident using the existing systems in place to deal with formal complaints of racism? Why or why not?

Conversation Question 5:

What can we do to address racism?

This question should commence the process of wrapping up the conversation, by putting the onus back on the organisation to take action against racism based on people's reflections relating to conversation questions 1-4.

Participants may suggest changes to procedures or processes, or identify organisational cultural issues that may be able to be better addressed, for example:

- more leadership from the 'top' on racism
- involvement in anti-racism campaigning (such as supporting the Australian Human Rights Commission's Racism. It Stops with Me campaign)
- other follow-up meetings or discussions.

Make a note of all suggestions. Consider using the whiteboard to jot them down for everyone to see or ask participants to write them down on post-it notes and place them on the whiteboard.

Possible prompts:

- What are the priorities going forward?
- What should the leaders of this organisation be aware of following this conversation?
- Who wants to be involved in developing an organisational anti-racism plan or a wider Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)?
- Would the organisation benefit from an anti-racism working group, to keep the conversation going and coordinate further planning and action?
- Do you see a difference between non-racism and anti-racism, for our organisation? What might that difference involve?

Wrapping up and following up

When about 15 minutes are left in the session, wrap up the discussion and ask participants to name one thing they found useful or helpful, and one thing they will do or think about now to challenge racism.

If appropriate, mention that the conversation is not the first and last thing your organisation will do about racism; it is the start of a longer process in which the organisation is taking racist behaviour more seriously, and tackling racism more proactively.

Remind participants of the formal processes your organisation has for dealing with complaints, and the Australian Human Rights Commission's complaint-handling function. Each state and territory also has their own equal opportunity or human rights commission with similar complaints handling functions.

Note that you will circulate a short online survey following the session for people to provide further feedback, including comments they may not have felt comfortable sharing with the group during the session. We recommend making all survey responses anonymous to encourage honest and open feedback.

Following the session, circulate the survey and ensure full consideration is given to all comments. If possible, specify who is responsible in your organisation for this. Facilitators and organisers should also catch up to debrief on the session. Evaluation is a crucial part of human rights education.

Facilitator Resources

The resources listed below are available free online.



Optional videos

We suggest several videos for supporting participants to get thinking about meaningful dialogues around racism in Australia. If there is not enough time to show them during the conversation, we still suggest that facilitators watch the videos ahead of the session as part of their preparation.

Video 1:

ABC Life, 'Where are you really from? How to navigate this question of race and identity' (2019)

<https://www.abc.net.au/life/where-are-you-really-from-how-to-better-ask-race-question/10610346>

Question for the group: What does this video tell us about how we talk about race and identity?

Videos 2, 3 and 4:

Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Taxi' and 'Elevator' (2017), available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNjaLAib83o> (Taxi)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFTjZilAwhM> (Elevator)

New Zealand Human Rights Commission: 'Give Nothing to Racism' (2017), available on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9n_UPyVR5s

Question for the group: How does racism play out in these videos?

Video 5:

North Melbourne Football Club, 'Be Brave, Speak Up' (2018), available on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpE_RfCSydQ

Question for the group: What does this video reveal about racism and responsibility?

Note: If there is a break in the middle of the session, consider playing Video 1 before Question 1, then Video 5 before Question 4 (after participants return from the break).

Understanding racism

NSW Department of Education, 'Understanding Racism' Glossary (2015) <https://www.racismnoway.com.au/about-racism/understanding-racism/glossary/>.

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Participant Information Sheet

What is racism?

'Racism' is a contested term, and can refer to beliefs, behaviours, and systems.

The **Australian Human Rights Commission** has referred to racism as prejudices and acts of discrimination, emerging from unequal power relations, that perpetuate inequitable treatment of members of different racial groups. It can occur at an interpersonal level, through acts such as exclusion, abuse or stereotyping, as well as at a systemic level through policies, conditions and practices.⁵

UNESCO: 'Racism is a theory of races hierarchy which argues that the superior race should be preserved and should dominate the others. Racism can also be an unfair attitude towards another ethnic group. Finally racism can also be defined as a violent hostility against a social group.'⁶

ReachOut.com: 'Discrimination, pre-judgements or hostile behaviours directed at another person on the basis of their race, ethnicity or cultural background ... [which] can come in many different forms, from harsh comments to offensive actions. In more extreme cases, racism occurs in public spaces and comes from strangers, and can escalate to violent hate crimes.'⁷

Finally, the **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission** has said that racism 'can occur systemically, as the result of policies, conditions and practices that affect a broad group of people ... [and] is a tool to gain and maintain power.'⁸

Racism in Australia by the numbers

Experiences of racism:

- **One in five** surveyed Australians report experiencing discrimination on the basis of their race or religion during the past 12 months (2018)⁹
- **One in three** surveyed Indigenous Australians report experiencing verbal racial abuse during the past 6 months (2019)¹⁰
- **15 per cent** of surveyed Indigenous Australians were prevented from renting or buying a property during the past 6 months (2019)¹¹
- **77 per cent** of surveyed South Sudanese Australians report experiencing discrimination on the basis of their race or religion during the past 12 months (2016)¹²

Attitudes towards racism and diversity:

- **85 per cent** of surveyed Australians consistently say that multiculturalism has been good for Australia (2018)¹³
- **77 per cent** of surveyed Australians support anti-racist initiatives and the need to challenge racism (2017)¹⁴

Racist attitudes:

- **23 per cent** of surveyed Australians say that some migrant groups do not belong in, or should not be welcomed to Australia (2017)¹⁵
- **32 per cent** of surveyed Australians report holding negative personal attitudes toward Muslims (2017)¹⁶

Australian Human Rights Commission

The Australian Human Rights Commission is Australia's national human rights institution. The Commission investigates and resolve complaints of discrimination, including racial discrimination, and breaches of human rights. You can make a complaint no matter where you live in Australia.

For more information: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/complaints> | Call 1300 656 419

The Commission also leads the national anti-racism campaign *Racism. It Stops with Me*. The campaign welcomes organisational and individual supporters.

For more information: <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au>



P A R T

03

How to keep the
conversation on track

How to keep the conversation on track

Talking about racism can be uncomfortable for some people. Some may try to ‘derail’ a conversation about racism as a result of this discomfort, even if it is not intentional.

There are many ways of derailing conversations about racism—and also ways of bringing the conversation back on track. While there should remain a focus on allowing the participants to engage with each other, the facilitators should consider steering the conversation in a safe and meaningful direction by putting forward some of the points below, if required.

- **Derailment: We create (or worsen) racism by talking about it**

Suggested response:

The evidence shows that racism exists in Australia. While many people who have experienced racism choose not to discuss it outside of their family or close friendship circles, either because it is painful to talk about, or because they don’t think other people will understand, not calling out racist behaviour means that racism is likely to continue to exist.

The purpose of the conversation is to talk about racism in a safe environment. It will help us better understand and trust each other, consider our own behaviours, and hopefully minimise the risk of racism occurring in the future.

- **Derailment: People see racism where it isn’t occurring**

Suggested response:

There is no evidence of any systemic problem of people ‘making up’ or embellishing claims of racism. In fact, it’s more likely that instances of racism are largely underreported in our society. Research shows that in 2018 approximately 20 per cent of Australians, or about 5 million people, experienced racism during the last 12 months;¹⁷ however, over the 2017–18 financial year, the Australian Human Rights Commission, as the national human rights institution, received only 290 complaints under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth).

Our organisation should aim to operate in good faith and on the assumption that people are being genuine. There is usually no incentive for a person to allege racism where it has not occurred.

Related to this are claims that racism can’t exist because that person has never seen it happen. People from racial majority groups (such as white European-background people in Australia) may not pick up on racism when it occurs, due to their position of relative racial privilege in the community. Learning about privilege is an important part of racial education.

- **Derailment: It’s not racism, it’s just bullying**

Suggested response:

It is true that racism can involve personal attacks and vilification. But (in)direct references to race also involve a person’s family, ancestry and community.

As such, racism can therefore be felt as both a personal and wider socio-cultural attack. Because of this, attacks on the basis of race may have serious impacts. Tackling racism requires dedicated attention, in addition to addressing bullying in organisations.

- **Derailment: Racism can't exist because race is socially constructed or isn't 'real'**

Suggested response:

It is true that race is socially constructed; there are no biological differences in humans that would mean there are different human 'races'. But we live in a social world, and many things that are socially constructed practically affect our lives—such as the economy, the political system, and the courts. People construct race based on physical or personal attributes such as a person's skin colour, or their accent. This affects how we categorise, view and act towards each other. While the concept of race is a socio-cultural construct rather than biological reality, the experience and effects of racism are nevertheless very real.

- **Derailment: Racism may have once been a problem, but it isn't any more**

Suggested response:

There is substantial evidence to suggest that racism and racialised bias or stereotyping continues to exist. For instance, academic studies have shown the existence of 'résumé racism', in which people with European-sounding names are more successful in job applications than people with non-European sounding names. Also, at a systemic or institutional level, groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to face racism in sometimes subtle or indirect but nonetheless injurious ways. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians make up about 3 per cent of the total Australian population, but 28 per cent of the adult prison population.¹⁸

It may also be worth pointing out that the historical legacy of racist government policies is within the lifetimes of many people still alive today. The White Australia Policy was only fully dismantled in the 1970s. Children were taken from families as part of the Stolen Generations up until a similar time period. The effects of these policies continue to be felt today—not only directly by those living survivors of these policies, but also through the impacts of intergenerational trauma. If the group varies in age, consider asking how many people were born in the 1970s or before, to highlight the proximity of institutionally racist policies to their lives.

- **Derailment: Racism is terrible, but people have always been racist and we can't do anything about it**

Suggested response:

Racism is a complex and sometimes uncomfortable problem to address. But we can and must continue to do something about it. Through anti-racism advocacy, racist laws and policies have changed, and so have attitudes. Research shows that attitudes towards race and racism fluctuates over time. Reconciliation Australia's 2018 Barometer report states that 70% of Australians in the general community believe that Australia is better off with many cultural groups, compared to 66% of Australians in 2016.¹⁹ With a commitment of the appropriate time, effort, and education, this work can continue.

- **Derailment: It's not racist to be critical of a religious group**

Suggested response:

The relationship between 'race' and religion is complex. Some expressions of racism are based upon beliefs that some cultures—and the religious philosophies or practices connected to these cultures—are incompatible with a so called 'Australian identity' or way of life. These can be beliefs which draw on racialised stereotypes. On top of this, many members of religious groups feel that they are targeted for racial harassment due to external markers of their cultural identity, for instance, their clothing or what their ethnicity says about what religion they might practice.

Endnotes

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Further Information

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