

# Asian Australians' Experiences of Racism during the COVID-19 Pandemic



**CRIS**  
Centre for Resilient  
and Inclusive Societies

## Policy Evidence Summary

*Based on the Research Report: Asian Australians' Experiences of Racism during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

### What this research is about

Our research looked at Asian Australians' experiences of racism before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examined how these experiences are associated with their mental health, wellbeing and feelings of belonging. We analysed how targets and witnesses respond to racist incidents, and whether they report these incidents.

### Key Findings

**Asian Australians experienced fewer racist incidents during the pandemic than before, but levels of racism are still very high.**

Almost half (48%) of survey participants experienced racism in the year before the COVID pandemic. This fell to 40% during the pandemic. Despite the decrease, this is still an alarmingly high proportion. There are three potential reasons for a drop in experiences of racist incidents:

**1. There were fewer social interactions during lockdowns and physical distancing requirements.**

"Since COVID we all are mostly working from home, so no use of public transport. The lockdowns restricted the movements and hence public interaction. So naturally any experiences I had before have gone down."

**48%**

experienced racism before the pandemic

**40%**

experienced racism during the pandemic

**2. There was increased avoidance of Asian Australians due to racist discourses linking 'Asians' to COVID-19.**

Respondents perceived that perpetrators of racism were avoiding 'Asian' individuals and communities: 'avoiding communities where there is [an] Asian population' which is arguably another form of racism.

**3. Asian Australians may avoid situations because they anticipate racism, even if they have not directly experienced racism.**

More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) indicated that they avoided specific situations because of racism. More specifically, 92% of participants who experienced racism during the pandemic avoid situations because of racism, while 68% who have not experienced racism during the pandemic also avoid situations because of racism.

*Reasons for decreasing incidents of racism during the pandemic are supported by data from the Victorian sub-sample, which indicate a 10% decrease in racist experiences in the state compared to 8% nationally.*

As Victoria had longer and stricter lockdowns, this suggests that the lack of face-to-face social contact is responsible for the decrease.

## Most racist incidents connected to COVID-19

Across each of the settings in which racism was experienced (e.g. work, education, public transport, shops), the majority of participants (approximately 70% for each setting) said the incidents were COVID-related (including 'sometimes' COVID related where multiple experiences occurred). 'COVID language' most often indicated the connection between the racist experience/incident and COVID.

## The most common settings for racism and groups experiencing racism did not change during the pandemic

Asian Australians reported experiencing racism in all Australian states and territories, across both urban and rural areas. Asian Australians who are males, young adults, Australian-born or migrant who have been in Australia for more than two years, and English-speakers at home were the most likely to experience racism. This pattern of results was consistent with pre-pandemic results.

## Racist incidents likely drive negative mental health and wellbeing

We uncovered worrying poor mental health and wellbeing rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, 36% of Asian Australians 'often' felt that they were not worth much as a person, while 17% 'almost always' felt this way.

There is a clear pattern indicating that people who were targets of racism during the pandemic suffer worse mental health and wellbeing than those who have not experienced racism.

Only 22% of racism targets never felt that they 'can't seem to experience any positive feeling at all', compared to 40% of those who have not experienced racism. Only 30% of racism targets never felt like life was meaningless, compared to 54% of those who have never experienced racism.

**22%**

of racism targets never felt that they 'can't seem to experience any positive feeling at all'

**40%**

of those who have not experienced racism 'can't seem to experience any positive feeling at all'

*Unfortunately, this pattern is statistically significant and consistent across all the stress, anxiety and depression items.*

## Racism related to corrosion of belonging and social cohesion

Asian Australians have a relatively strong sense of belonging, including bonds with family and friends and feeling accepted and included. However, 'non-belonging' (such as not feeling Australian) was more likely for those who experienced racism during the pandemic.

## Asian Australians are likely to underreport racist incidents

### Witnesses are rarely reporting racism

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, 39% of respondents had witnessed racism. However, their most common response to seeing racism was to do nothing (12%).

Only 4% who witnessed racism reported the incident to the police, and the same percentage to an anti-discrimination authority.

### Targets of racism are more likely to do nothing about it than report it to an authority

When asked 'Did you report any of these incidents?' the majority (30-52%) of respondents who experienced racism in each setting did not report it.

Regardless of whether they were targets or witnesses of racism, participants were far more likely to tell their friends and family about the incident (22%) rather than the police (12%) or Human Rights Commission (3%).

This means that the record number of complaints submitted to the Human Rights Commission in February 2020 is likely an underrepresentation.

Without trust in institutions or adequate data on reported incidents, the full extent and impact of racism — and how it undermines social cohesion and social inequities related to individual health and wellbeing — remains hidden. The ability for authorities to act upon racist incidents is also limited without accurate reporting.

**30-52%**

who experienced racism did not report it

# What this research means for policymakers

## **'I don't think the police would do much.'**

The most common reason why those who experienced and/or witnessed racism did not report the incident(s) was '[I] didn't think it would be taken seriously' (63% strongly agreed/agreed). This was followed by '[I] didn't think [the incident] would be dealt with properly' (60% strongly agree/agreed), and '[I] don't trust recipients of report' (40% strongly agreed/agreed).

*We need continued strong messaging encouraging people to report hate incidents and racism, and assurance that the incident will be taken seriously.*

Transparency and dissemination of information detailing what happens to the report once it is lodged and how it will be used by authorities will strengthen trust in reporting bodies. This will also reinforce the importance of reporting racism and hate crimes.

## **We need to remove barriers to reporting**

1 in 4 people who experienced and/or witnessed racism agreed or strongly agreed that barriers (like language or physical barriers) prevented them from reporting. Access to reporting should be a priority, with resources available across multiple platforms/technologies (e.g. phone, online, in person reporting), and in multiple languages with trained interpreters available.

Lack of knowledge of reporting tools and human rights was another important barrier to reporting: 56% of the respondents did not know who to report to and how to report, and 48% did not know they could report the incident. Educational resources/messaging about individual rights and available reporting tools are essential to lift rates of reporting. Examples of existing educational resources are [www.hatecrime.com.au](http://www.hatecrime.com.au) and [www.tacklinghate.org](http://www.tacklinghate.org). Messaging and resources from individual authorities such as VIC Police and VEOHRC are a priority.

Feelings of hopelessness, shame or disempowerment were other important barriers to reporting among respondents, with 63% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that reporting would not help, 54% feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed, and half wanting to forget about the incident. Recipients of reports should be aware of these emotions and sensitive to them in the reporting process. Community responders (e.g. police, support staff) require culturally sensitive responder training to offer genuine support in the moment, to raise provider / community awareness, and to decrease shame of target / witness as this validates the experience.

Embedding support services in reporting processes will also counter emotional barriers and provide much-needed mental health support to targets and witnesses of racism. Support in the form of individual counselling and facilitated support groups should be provided by culturally and linguistically trained counsellors. Provision of support via primary care service delivery and community-based locations will avoid stigmatising mental health support.

## **We need new reporting tools**

There is an urgent need for government and non-government agencies to develop tools that allow the reporting of incidents without negative repercussions for those reporting, such as third-party reporting systems (the [Hate Crime Network](#) also advocates this). In Australia, examples include the Victorian Equal Opportunity Human Rights Commission's community reporting tool and the Islamophobia Support Service of the [Islamic Council of Victoria](#).

# Why is this important

Racism and stigmatisation of vulnerable groups is detrimental to their mental and physical health and wellbeing; feelings of safety and mobility; education and employment; and access to housing, healthcare and other essential services. On a broader level, racism exacerbates social inequities, harms inter-group relations, social cohesion, multicultural agendas and international relationships.

## The context of this research

### International Context

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian racism and hate crimes specifically targeting East Asian communities (and later South Asian communities as the Delta/B.1.617/ 'Indian' variant emerged) were widely reported internationally, particularly in White settler nations such as the [US](#) and [Canada](#). In [Europe](#), anti-Asian racism and hate crimes linked to the racialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic have also been reported.

### Australian Context

In January and February 2020, one in four people who reported racial discrimination to the Australian Human Rights Commission linked the prejudice to the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner, Chin Tan, championed a national response to racism, which included a call for research on Asian Australians' experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research conducted prior to the pandemic found that Australians born in Asia are twice as likely to experience racism as other Australians (Blair et al 2017). Reports of anti-Asian racism in Australia during the pandemic is therefore of serious concern.

## Methodology

We conducted an online survey of over 2000 self-identified Asian Australians between November 2020 and February 2021. Nearly 40% of respondents lived in Victoria. We used closed and open response questions about:

- Experiences of racism (type, frequency, changes over time, and settings)
- Actions of bystanders/witnesses
- Responses to racist incidents and reporting
- Mental and physical health effects

We analysed the data from the survey using quantitative and qualitative methods. This included the analysis of frequencies and cross-tabulations of quantitative data to investigate statistically significant relationships between variables, particularly demographic variables and experiences. Thematic coding of open (qualitative) responses was also conducted.

### CRIS Consortium Partners

Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, Resilience Research Centre—Dalhousie University (Canada), Australian Multicultural Foundation, Centre for Multicultural Youth, RAND Australia and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (UK).

Deakin University CRICOS Provider Code: 00113B, Victoria University CRICOS Provider No. 00124K (Melbourne). Western Sydney University CRICOS Provider Code: No: 00917

### Project Researchers & Institutions

Alanna Kamp (Western Sydney University)  
Nida Denson (Western Sydney University)  
Rosalie Atie (Western Sydney University)  
Kevin Dunn (Western Sydney University)  
Rachel Sharples (Western Sydney University)  
Matteo Vergani (Deakin University)  
Jessica Walton (Deakin University)  
Susan Sisko (Western Sydney University)

### Further reading

[Concept Paper for a National Anti-Racism Framework, Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

[Read and cite the full research report at the CRIS Website](#)

[crisconsortium.org](http://crisconsortium.org)

[info@crisconsortium.org](mailto:info@crisconsortium.org)