

# WHITTLESEA ANTI-RACISM COMMUNITY PROJECT



## Speaking out against racism: an Anti-Racism Roadmap for Whittlesea

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A collaborative project of Victoria University and Whittlesea Community Connections

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Published by Victoria University, Melbourne

Report design: I.D.Yours

ISBN: 978-1-86272-848-6

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## Acknowledgment of Country

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge and recognise the Traditional Owners of the Kulin Nation lands and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

## Acknowledgements

This project was a truly collaborative effort and we are indebted to all those who contributed to it. We would like to thank Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) for taking the initiative and funding this project. The project would not have been possible without WCC's commitment from the leadership to the many WCC staff who actively supported the work in many ways. We also acknowledge the crucial contributions of the peer facilitators of the community focus group. We extend our gratitude to the various organisations, community groups and service providers who contributed to project; these include, among many others, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) and local police. We also gratefully acknowledge the support by the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon. Andrew Giles MP. Mostly importantly, we would like to express our deep appreciation and gratitude to the many people from Whittlesea's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities who have put their trust in us and this project, sharing their experiences and knowledge.

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## STATEMENT FROM Whittlesea Community Connections

Established by local community members, Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is a place-based not-for-profit organisation that has been providing information and support to the community of Whittlesea for 50 years. Community and volunteer involvement are integral to the organisation's values and approach.

For people and communities to feel safe, connected and have a sense of belonging there is no place for racism. Yet there is plenty of evidence to show that people experience racism every day. At WCC we see this when people are not able to access essential services, not able to get work they are qualified for or when people are actively excluded.

In 2020 WCC engaged Victoria University (VU) in response to their work with the City of Wyndham. The project's aim of listening and developing a community led response resonated with us. Since then we have been working with VU, community members and organisations to understand what supports people need in response to experiences of racism and discrimination in Whittlesea.

We acknowledge that there is still a lot for us to learn but creating safe spaces and open dialogue with community has been a first step. Informed by the community's lived experience, this project provides meaningful actions to continue this work to ensure people living in and connected to Whittlesea are able to access the information and support they need to live without racism and its' negative impacts.

### Alex Haynes

CEO, Whittlesea Community Connections

### Emma Antonetti

Manager Equity and Impact

## STATEMENT FROM Sharna Brown

Proud Gunditjmara woman from Whittlesea

Aboriginal Engagement and caseworker at Whittlesea Community Connections

Projects like this are important because racism and discrimination are very real and still happen on a daily basis. It is disheartening to know that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are still one of the most highly discriminated groups in our Australian society.

Projects to reduce racism are always a benefit to our people. They are just as important as raising awareness and understanding, preventing and ending racism in places where our mob frequent such as sporting stadiums, shopping centres, banks, hospitals, businesses and many more – building an environment that is fair, welcoming and inclusive, free from any form of racism.

One message that has been clear throughout these discussions with community is that we as Aboriginal people have been conditioned to accept a lot of the discriminatory behaviours and systems of the past and present. We have found because of the condition mindset to racial discrimination, often incidents are not reported and community are reluctant to report as the assumption that no outcome will eventuate. I hope projects like this can create change for our mob, so they don't have to accept racism anymore.

## STATEMENT FROM Our Community Members

On behalf of a small multicultural group among Mernda community members, we are writing to express our support for the Whittlesea Anti-Racism Project, conducted through a collaboration between Whittlesea Community Connection (WCC) and Victoria University.

Given the continuous growth in community with people of different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds it is vital for us to be involved in the Whittlesea Anti-Racism Project to share our experiences with racism against ourselves, family members and friends. Having been involved in this project and providing our insights into how and where racism affects us will definitely benefit the community.

We have learned how to better identify types of racism and where to report them. Additionally, we found out that there are multiple areas where racism could exist and what and how we can distinguish between various kinds.

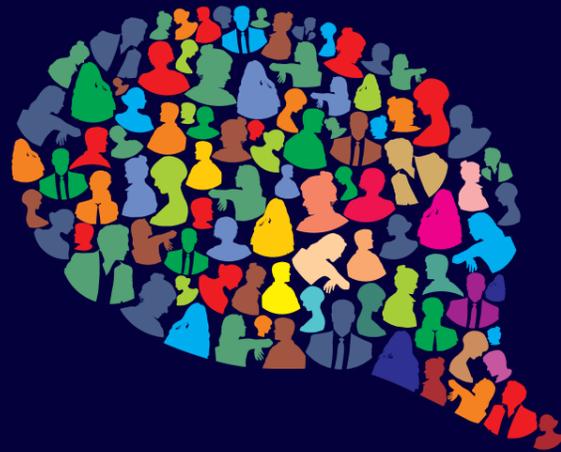
However, we also realised that many of our community members were unaware or did not have sufficient knowledge about racism, what to do if they experience racism, what government institutions or relevant organisations to ask for help, or what procedures to take. Unfortunately, some of our community members were not sure (and also sceptical) whether reporting a case to police or elsewhere would help them in the future.

This project work is very important for the community as this provides awareness of racism, gives us the confidence to raise our concerns and be able to report them at appropriate places.

We strongly support this project and would like to contribute as much as we can to raise the awareness of racism. Awareness of racism and confidence in people to report will minimise racism in the long-term.

We think that the government or relevant organisations should provide more information and educational services to improve knowledge and better understanding of racism. This may include promoting awareness nationally to support those who speak out against racism.

**Muhamad Abduh  
& Shabbir Shaik**  
September 2022



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The persistence of racism has never been more widely acknowledged in Australia than today. This increased public awareness can help create new opportunities to speak about racism and ways to tackle it. These conversations are necessary, and they need to occur across all segments of society. They are not always easy as they revolve around personal prejudice or unconscious bias, privileges and structural and systemic barriers that are often built into our institutions.

For communities impacted by racism speaking out about it is often challenging. Breaking through the silencing effects of racism can be an empowering experience, and reporting is also often a crucial step towards accessing support. But reporting also requires time and effort, along with the emotional labour of having to relive one's distressing encounters with racism. And often the benefits are far from certain: what can people who report gain to make up for the personal costs of reporting? What are the outcomes for them personally and collectively? Do these outcomes and the reporting experience itself align with their needs and expectations?

In this report we present the key findings from a place-based research and community engagement project, Speaking out against racism: an Anti-Racism Roadmap for Whittlesea, conducted in 2021-2022 by Victoria University (VU) in partnership with, and funded by, Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC). We engaged with local service providers and community organisations and deeply listened to the experiences and knowledge of Whittlesea's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities to understand their experiences of racism and how to improve reporting pathways and support services for those impacted by racism.

We conducted a community survey and a series of community focus groups, held several community forums and had countless conversations with people from the local communities. The findings and learnings from this research and community engagement process informed the development of a Roadmap, a set of recommendations on how to improve reporting and support services for those in Whittlesea impacted by racism.

## Key findings

- Racism is part of life for many participants in our survey and focus groups; 59% of survey respondents stated they (or a member of their household) had **experienced racism** in the previous 12 months. Women and younger people were more likely to experience racism.
- Racism ranges from subtle – but frequently experienced – **microaggressions** and discrimination to more overt forms of racism, including verbal and physical threats. It happens across all areas of life, in particular in **public places** such as shopping centres (51%) and on public transport (36%) as well as in employment (49%), education setting (45%) and on social media online (28%).
- Experiences of racism often remain **unreported**. Only 17% of survey respondents stated they had reported the incident to an organisation – in many cases, to organisations that are not specialised and resourced to respond to reports of racism. Most of those who report their experience of racism felt better after reporting it but they also state that the response and support they received 'could have been better'.
- **Reasons for not-reporting** are manifold and interconnected. A key deterrent was the sentiment that 'nothing would happen or change' as a result of reporting; half of all survey respondents expressed such a sense of resignation as the main reason for not-reporting. The second most common barrier (32%) was the lack of awareness where and how to report and seek support. Other important reasons for not reporting included concerns about negative consequences or a lack of trust in the organisation they could report to. In the focus groups, participants also explained that they don't report because they could not provide sufficient evidence that racism had occurred.
- Participants highlighted various **reasons for reporting**. The most frequently mentioned motive was to help raise awareness of the scope of racism (69%), followed by the need to get emotional or psychological support (58%) and to ensure the incident was recorded (46%). Around 44% see access to legal support as an important reason; the least common reason was to seek mediation (30%).
- Participants were divided over the question as to whether there are **enough appropriate reporting and support services** for people in Whittlesea. Around 42% considered existing services insufficient and 37% thought there were enough services, the remaining 20% were unsure. Those who had recently experienced racism were more likely to be critical of the existing support service landscape than those who had not experienced racism in the previous 12 months.
- What do people from Whittlesea's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities suggest to **improve existing anti-racism support services**? The most common responses were that (1) services need to be (more) culturally sensitive, (2) made more widely known, (3) be better qualified to respond to reports of racism, and (4) provided locally by trusted organisations. In the focus groups similar suggestions were articulated, highlighting in particular the issue of trust. 'It's about having some faith in the system that you're reporting to', as one participant in an Aboriginal yarn stated.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CONTINUED

## Roadmap

The proposed **Whittlesea Anti-Racism Roadmap** is meant to support a flexible, open-ended collaborative process that brings together various communities, organisations and service providers with the common goal to tackle racism, empower communities and improve the support for those in the community who experience racism.

The community input underscores the need for greater acknowledgment of the persistence of racism and for more concerted efforts to raise awareness and develop effective responses to racism. This also includes developing more accessible reporting pathways and support services for those impacted by racism.

Local anti-racism work needs to encompass a range of actions and involve multiple stakeholders. Based on the project learnings, we recommend establishing a **network of local organisations and community groups** that jointly explore how to create more safe spaces to speak about racism, raise awareness and advance local measures to prevent and respond to racism. This collaborative process should be community-led and centring the views of those impacted by racism, without putting the responsibility for 'fixing' racism on these communities.

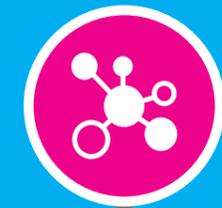
This project focussed in particular on how to strengthen local support services for those who have experienced racism. Many in the community called for improved reporting pathways and better support. We therefore propose that this local network could draw on the findings in this report to jointly work towards improving support services for those who experienced racism. Such local support services, provided by the community organisations and service providers in this network, should develop or strengthen their **capacity to respond in a culturally sensitive way** to reports of racism.

### We suggest that this local anti-racism support network should

- establish culturally appropriate and locally accessible reporting pathways;
- be able to provide initial support and suggest referral options to more specialised services;
- be centrally coordinated by a trusted community organisation;
- be connected to specialised service providers and agencies such as mental health and legal services, local police, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, and the Australian eSafety Commissioner;
- engage with local 'conduit stakeholders' who may refer people who have experienced racism to the support network, such as security companies in large shopping centres, medical clinics, public transport services, and local schools; and
- promote its anti-racism support services among Whittlesea's communities.

The work of this anti-racism support network should be guided by advocacy and empathetic listening, acknowledging the subjective experiences of those who report racism and taking action to raise awareness of racism. This also includes systematically recording each reported incident of racism; these recorded cases should be collated centrally, creating a local evidence base that can facilitate community advocacy and the development of targeted prevention and intervention measures.

## OVERVIEW OF WHITTLESEA ROADMAP



### Establishing a local network of community organisations and service providers committed to anti-racism

- Common purpose
- Specifying roles and responsibilities
- Community of practice
- Capacity building

### Exploring how to better prevent and respond to racism

- Collaborative
- Community-led
- Centering community voices

### Creating safe spaces to speak about racism

### Awareness raising, dialogue and education

### Improving local reporting pathways and support services for those who have experienced racism

Community-led support network of trusted community groups and service providers

- Offering accessible and culturally appropriate reporting options, initial support and referral options
- connected with specialised services
- recording reports of racism
- centrally coordinated
- engaging in anti-racism advocacy



## INTRODUCTION

Experiences of exclusion, stigmatisation and discrimination have been part of the lives of First Nations peoples and many in Australia's multicultural and multifaith communities for a very long time.

This persistence of racism has never been more widely recognised in our country than today. According to the 2021 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) survey 'Australia Talks', three out of four Australians agreed 'there is still a lot of racism in Australia these days.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the 2021 Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion report found that 60 per cent of respondents believed that racism was a 'very big' or 'fairly big problem in Australia' – a very significant increase from the 40 per cent who expressed such views in 2020.<sup>2</sup>



**Racism manifests in prejudiced or biased attitudes, discriminatory behaviour and institutional and systemic forms. It targets people and communities because of their (real or perceived) racial, ethnic or cultural background, religion, skin colour or any associated characteristics.**

The rise in recorded and reported cases of racist abuse, scapegoating, harassment and vilification during the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed, among other factors, to bringing the issue of racism more prominently into the public consciousness. At the same time, the global racial justice protests of the Black Lives Matter movement seem to have raised public awareness of structural and systemic racism.

The acknowledgment of racism and the realisation that more concerted efforts are necessary to tackle it in all its forms have not only increased among the Australian public – policymakers, governments and statutory agencies in Australia, and particularly in Victoria, have also demonstrated unprecedented commitment to anti-racism. On the national level, the Australian Human Rights Commission has embarked on consultations to develop a new national anti-racism framework. In Victoria, the state government recently conducted an inquiry into enhancing the state's anti-vilification protections, set up a funding scheme dedicated to support community-led anti-racism projects, and established an anti-racism taskforce commissioned to provide advice for the state's future anti-racism strategy. The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) has also expanded its Reducing Racism work<sup>3</sup> and community outreach, and Victoria Police<sup>4</sup> has developed new multilingual resources on prejudice-motivated incidents and crimes and how to report racism.

Combating racism requires a long-term commitment and a multi-pronged whole-of-community approach. Prevention is always better than intervention, of course. This highlights the importance of education in and beyond schools and creating more opportunities for prejudice-reducing intergroup contact—notably in education, leisure and sport settings, employment and various public spaces. However, this report, and the project it refers to, focus primarily on responses to racism: how we can jointly find culturally sensitive and safe ways to speak about racism and speak out against it—ways that centre community voices and strengthen community agency, while recognising that tackling racism is not the responsibility of those who have to face it.

<sup>1</sup> Crabb, A. (2021) Australia Talks shows we agree there's a lot of racism here, but less than half say white supremacy is ingrained in our society. ABC, 31 May 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-31/annabel-crabb-analysis-racism-australia-talks/100172288>

<sup>2</sup> Markus, A (2021) *Mapping Social Cohesion 2021*. Monash University [https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/Mapping\\_Social\\_Cohesion\\_2021\\_Report\\_0.pdf](https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/Mapping_Social_Cohesion_2021_Report_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/education/reducing-racism-hub/reducing-racism-project/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.police.vic.gov.au/prejudice-motivated-crime>

## 1. INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

The willingness and capacity to speak about racism, and speak out against it, is central to reporting personal experiences of exclusion, prejudice or discrimination. Breaking through the often-silencing effects of racism can be an empowering experience for the individual and the community. Reporting is also often a crucial step towards accessing support. However, reporting requires more than the knowledge of where and how to report. People also need resilience and confidence in the reporting process as they share personally hurtful, sometimes traumatising experiences with others beyond their personal circle of trust. Reporting may often come with personal costs. It typically means investing time and effort, along with the emotional labour of having to relive one's distressing encounters with racism. And often the benefits are far from certain: what can people who do report gain to make up for the personal costs of reporting? What are the outcomes for them personally and collectively? Do these outcomes and the reporting experience itself align with their needs and expectations?

Various stakeholders, from governments and human rights commissions to police, community organisations and academic researchers, have been calling on people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities to report their experiences of racism. These calls are well intended and important. The widely acknowledged problem of under-reporting makes it more difficult to obtain a better understanding of how racism affects people's lives. Such a 'data gap' can also hamper the development of more targeted and effective measures for prevention and intervention. However, such calls can also cause a conundrum for those who are supposed to benefit from anti-racism work – the people who experience racism – if the reporting procedures carry high personal costs, feel disempowering or may even re-traumatise the person who reports.

This report presents key findings from a place-based community engagement project, *Speaking out against racism: an Anti-Racism Roadmap for Whittlesea*, conducted in 2021-2022 by Victoria University (VU) in partnership with Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC). WCC is a well-established community-based organisation in Whittlesea, providing a range of services for people from all different backgrounds. WCC initiated and funded this project after VU had conducted a similar community-led anti-racism project in Melbourne's outer southwest.<sup>5</sup>

The Whittlesea project deployed traditional research methods, including surveys and focus groups, but it was also – and primarily – characterised by extensive engagement with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities in the local government area of Whittlesea. The main goals of this project were:

- To explore jointly with the local communities how people in Whittlesea experience, think and speak about racism;
- To understand local community views about existing reporting pathways and support services—including what kind of support they would need or desire after experiences of racism, and how and by whom this support should be provided.

The project also worked closely with local service providers and organisational stakeholders to help assess their capacity to respond to reports of racism from their clients. Together with community views, this input guided the development of a Roadmap (discussed in Section 5) towards establishing improved reporting pathways and anti-racism support services that are responsive to the specific needs and expectations of people in Whittlesea who experience racism.

The report begins with a snapshot demographic overview on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities in Whittlesea (Section 2). Next, we briefly outline the approach this project pursued to gain research insights and to engage with local communities (Section 3). Section 4 presents the findings from a community survey and the focus groups that we conducted. These findings inform the recommendations on how to improve reporting pathways and support services for those experiencing racism—those recommendations are the Roadmap set out in Section 5. The conclusion draws on some of the project learnings discussing the complexities of speaking about racism, which can be part of reporting racism and accessing support. These conversations – within the wider community and within communities directly affected by racism and between all of us – are crucial for the advancement and deepening of anti-racism.

<sup>5</sup> Peucker, M., Clark, T. and Claridge, H. (2021) All in this together: A community-led response to racism in the City of Wyndham. Victoria University. <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/vu-wyndham-anti-racism-project.pdf>



## 2. WHITTLESEA COMMUNITIES: A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT CONTINUED

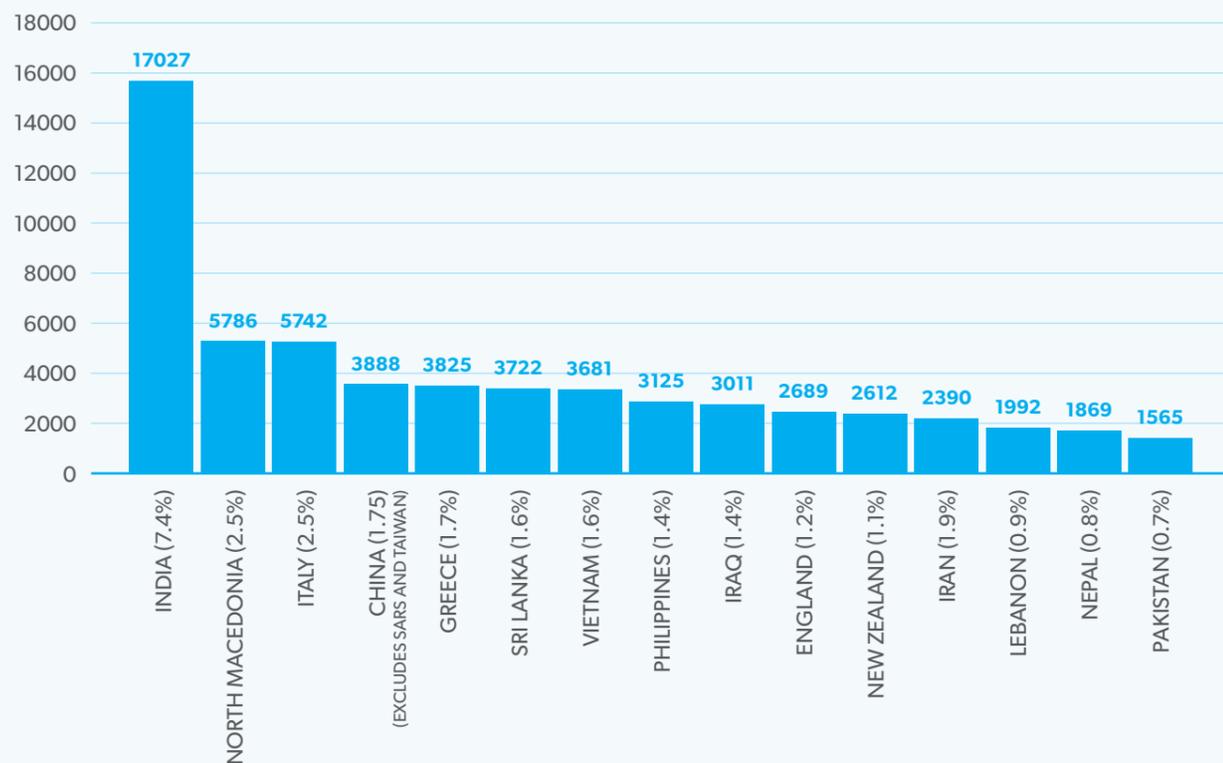
The municipality of Whittlesea is located in the northern growth corridor of Melbourne. It covers a large geographical area of 489 square kilometres; the majority is rural, mostly in the north, while the southern parts of the municipality are urban (around 30%).

According to the 2021 ABS census,<sup>6</sup> the population is 229,396, up by 16.15% since the previous census was conducted in 2016. The number of people in Whittlesea who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders has increased slightly faster than the total population with currently 2,270 residents identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; this constitutes 0.99% of the total population compared to 0.83% in the previous census data (2016).

Whittlesea’s population growth is substantially attributed to the growing number and proportion of residents who were born overseas. As of August 2021, 37.6% of Whittlesea residents were born overseas (2016: 35.5%). This shows that, despite the abrupt slowdown of immigration in 2020 and 2021 as a result of COVID-19 related border closures, Whittlesea’s population is not only growing but also continues to become more diverse.

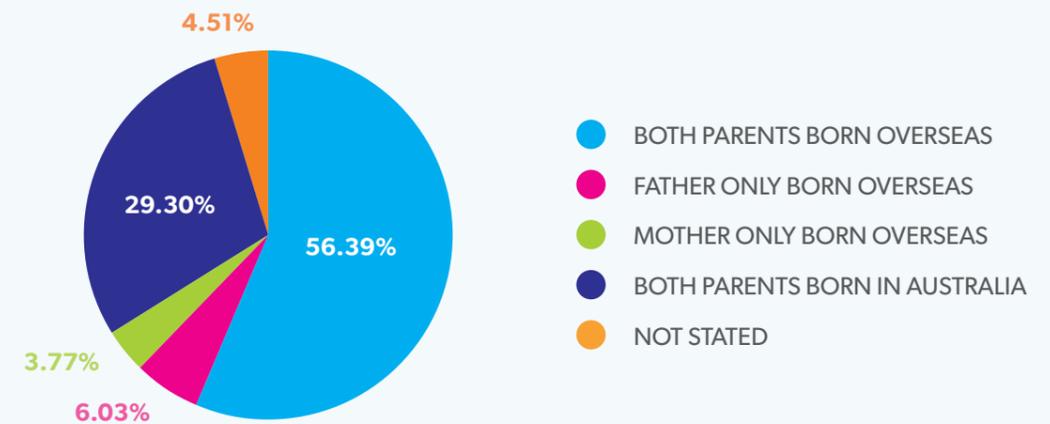
The most prominent overseas country of birth among Whittlesea residents is India (7.4% of the total population), followed by North Macedonia and Italy (both 2.5%), China and Greece (both 1.7%), and Sri Lanka and Vietnam (both 1.6%). Other important countries of birth are presented in the Figure 1. Compared to the 2016 census data, the figures show that the Indian-born population has kept growing significantly and more than most other overseas-born cohorts (2016: 5.6% of total population).

Figure 1.: Countries of birth (Whittlesea population, 2021): absolute numbers and percentage



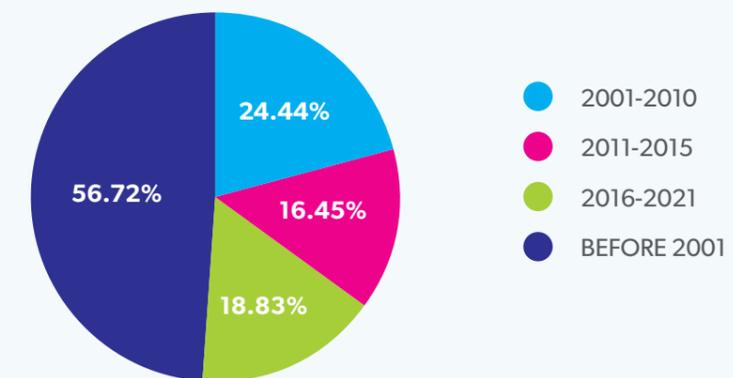
Two thirds of Whittlesea residents have at least one parent born overseas, which means that a significant majority have either migrated themselves or were born to at least one migrant parent. 56.4% of residents stated that both their parents were born overseas (Figure 2), up from 53.6% in 2016.

Figure 2: Overseas born and parents overseas born (Whittlesea population %, 2021)



Of those born overseas, a majority of 56.72% arrived in Australia before 2001, which means that 43.28% of Whittlesea’s overseas born population has been in Australia for less than two decades (as of 2021). Close to one in five residents (18.83%) migrated to Australia only within the previous five years (2016 – August 2021) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Year of arrival in Australia (Whittlesea population %, 2021)



The statistical category ‘overseas born’ may give an indication of first- and second-generation immigrants but these figures do not accurately reflect how people self-identify culturally. Here, the census question around people’s **ancestry** can provide some useful insights. Responses to the question of ancestry are by nature subjective as they refer to people’s identity. This is one of the reasons why the largest response category was ‘other’—more than 50,000 in Whittlesea. Additionally, over 46% identified with an Anglo-Celtic ancestry: Australian (19.70%), English (17.57%), Irish (4.88%) or Scottish (4.01%). Other European ancestries include Italian, Macedonian, Greek, Maltese and German. The largest non-European ancestry group was Indian, followed by Chinese, Lebanese, Vietnamese, Filipino and Sri Lankan (Figure 4).

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *Census of Population and Housing 2021* (Whittlesea, LGA27070)

2. WHITTLESEA COMMUNITIES: A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT CONTINUED

Figure 4: Ancestry (Whittlesea population %, 2021)

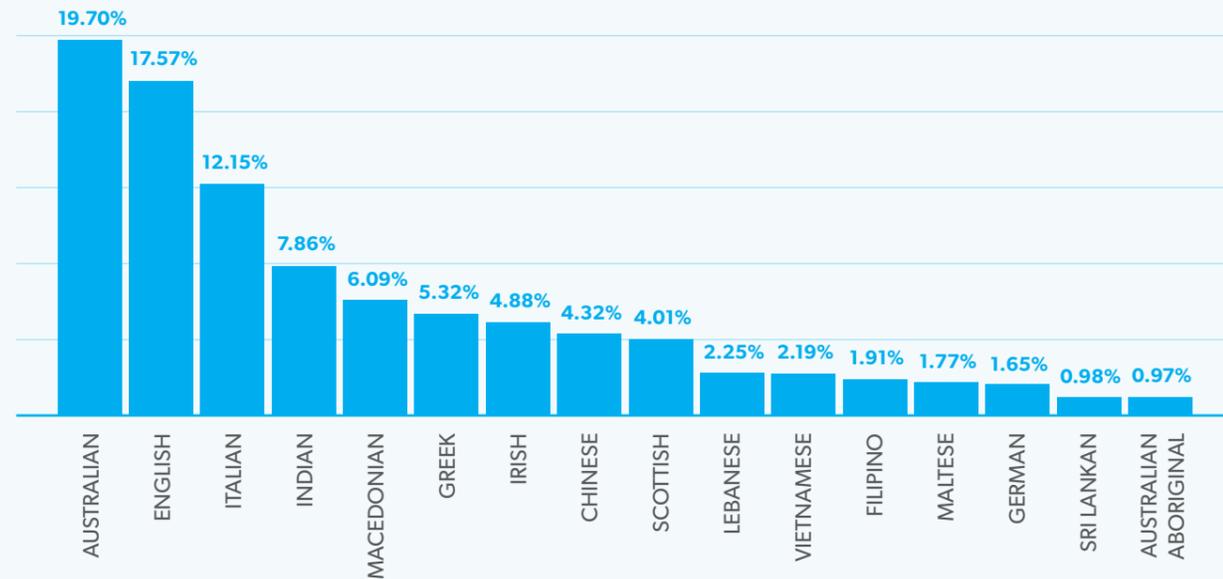
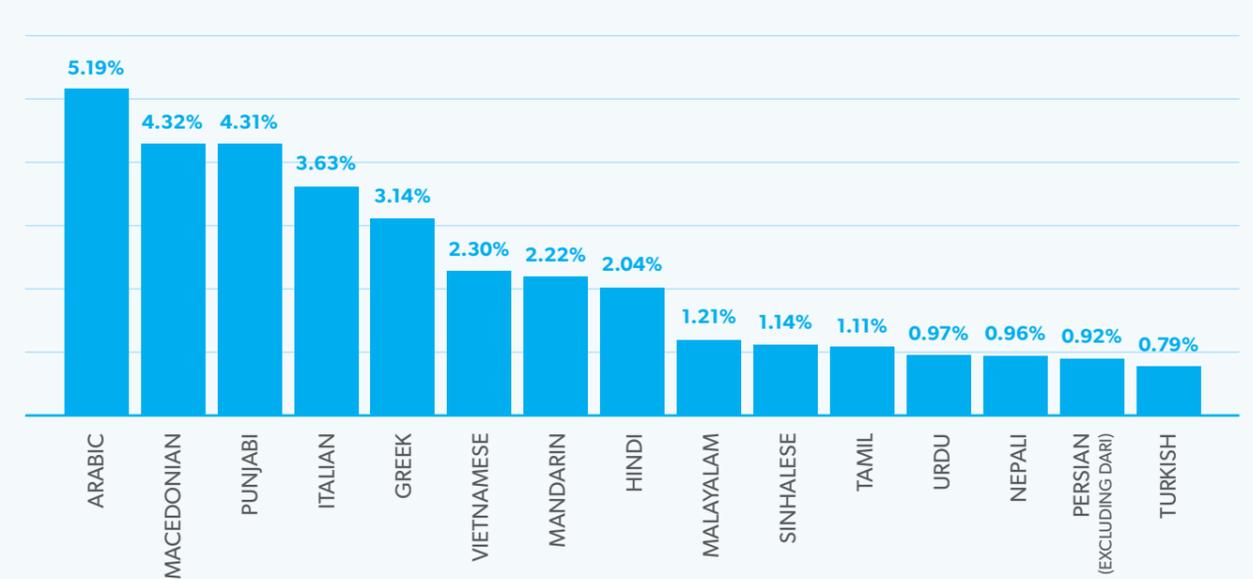


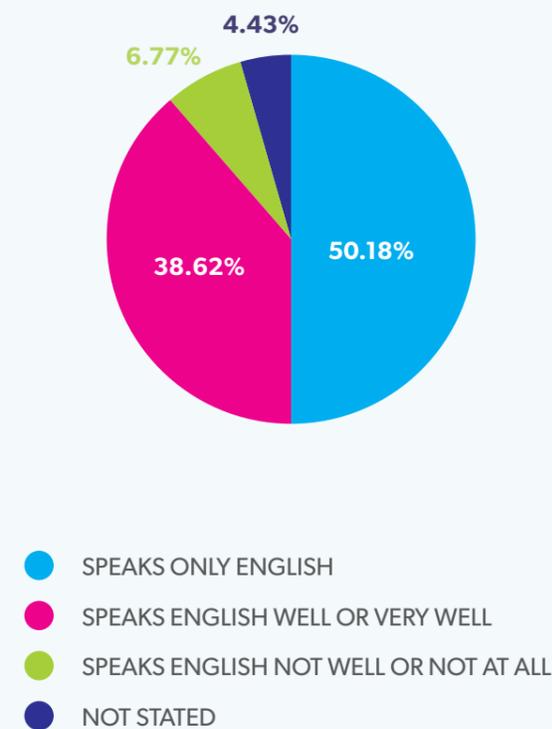
Figure 6: Languages other than English spoken at home (Whittlesea population %, 2021)



Languages spoken at home is another indicator that reflects the scope of diversity; it is also important for the delivery of local services to be aware of this linguistic diversity and levels of English proficiency in the community. The vast majority of Whittlesea residents speak either only English (50.18%) or have a high proficiency in English (speak well or very well, 38.62%) while also speaking another language. Less than 7% speak English not well or not at all (Figure 5).

Just over 45% of Whittlesea’s residents speak a language other than English at home. The most common non-English languages spoken are Arabic (5.19%), Macedonian (4.32%) and Punjabi (4.31%), followed by Italian and Greek and a number of other non-European mostly Asian languages (Figure 6). Arabic is the most commonly used language (other than English) spoken at home in Whittlesea (2016: 5.0%), as proportionally less people now speak Macedonian (2016: 5.1%) or Italian (2016: 5.0%) at home. Punjabi has increased particularly significantly since 2016 as language spoken at home (2016: 3.2%).

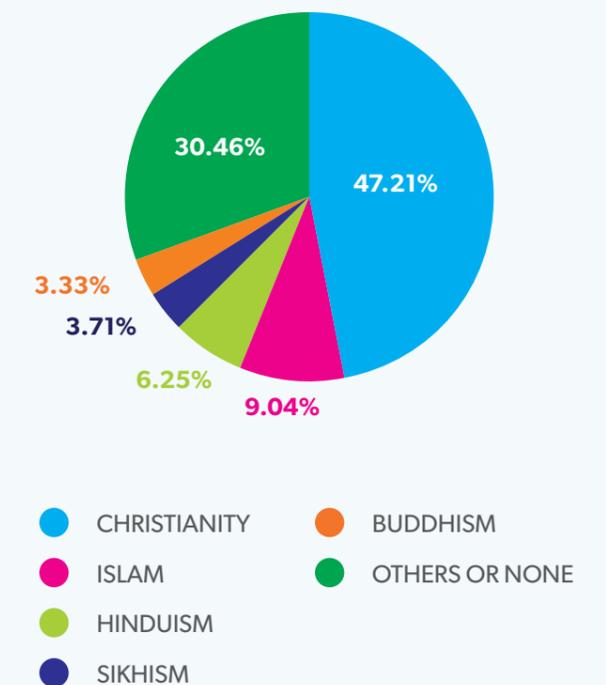
Figure 5: English proficiency (Whittlesea population %, 2021)



Less than half of the local population identify with a Christian religion, most of them are either Catholic (24.66% of all and 52.23% of all Christians) or Eastern Orthodox (19.60% of all and 9.25% of all Christians). The biggest non-Christian faith group is Islam with just over 9% of all Whittlesea residents; 6.25% identify with Hinduism, 3.71% with Sikhism and 3.33% with Buddhism (Figure 7). These figures illustrate the ongoing decrease in the number of people who identify as Christians (2016: 53.8%), and an increase in those without religious affiliation (2016: 20.2%) and those of a non-Christian faith, notably Islam (2016: 7.4%), Hinduism (2016: 4.2%) and Sikhism (2016: 2.9%).

The demographic snapshot illustrates that the municipality of Whittlesea has become increasingly diverse with regard to its population’s ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic background. That diversification has continued in recent years despite the immigration restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a noticeable slowing-down of local diversification processes. Communities of non-Anglo-Saxon ancestry and non-English-speaking background have grown significantly. These are often from the Indian subcontinent and other parts of Asia, while established communities such as Macedonian, Italian and Greek grow less or proportionally decrease.

Figure 7: Religious affiliation (Whittlesea population %, 2021)





## LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY: OUR RESEARCH APPROACH

Working in consultation with local community organisations and service providers, the project team developed a program of research that combined collective and individual perspectives, team-initiated and participant-initiated research instruments, survey questionnaires and community focus groups. The research received ethics approval from VU.

Research was not a goal of this project in its own right, but it was a critical feature of the project design. In order for local community members in Whittlesea to engage beyond their own direct encounters with prejudice and racism, both about community experiences of racism and about their needs and aspirations when responding to them, it was vital to explore a breadth of local knowledge and perspectives. This encompassed individual and collective experiences.

The research approach had four main elements: organisation survey, community survey, focus groups and open community engagement.

### Organisation Survey

The first stage involved an online survey among local organisations and community groups that provide support services for Whittlesea's diverse communities. The main goal was to explore their experiences with, and capacity to respond to, clients or community members reporting incidents of racism. The responses came from 16 representatives of local organisations and community groups; they informed the project's development of the community survey and focus group stages, as well as helping to identify local needs for community information sessions.

### Community Survey

The next stage involved inviting individuals from Whittlesea's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities to complete a survey (either online or in pen-and-paper form). This was an efficient opportunity for community members to share their views on and experiences with racism in general (not only in Whittlesea), on existing support and reporting services, and on reasons for reporting and reporting barriers, as well as their suggestions on how support services could be improved. The survey was also translated and made available in Arabic.

The survey was open to all those aged 18 or older who work, live or spend a lot of time in Whittlesea and are from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, multicultural or multifaith community. It was promoted locally in close collaboration with various local community groups and service providers. After a systematic in-scope check, there were 97 valid responses from local community members from Aboriginal, multicultural or multifaith backgrounds. The survey was not meant to be representative but allow quantitative yet explorative insights.

The majority of respondents were women (69). The survey respondents identified with a range of cultural or ethnic backgrounds or religions. While a significant proportion describe themselves as belonging to a certain non-Christian faith group (mostly Islam, but also Hindu and Sikh), the vast majority referred to their national, cultural or ethnic background, ranging from South European to African to Pacific Islander; four people identified as Aboriginal.

Most respondents were residents of the Whittlesea municipality (note that we also received responses from people who work and study locally, but whose homes are elsewhere). The local residents had lived in the area for varying periods with around half of them having lived in Whittlesea for more than five years; around 8% had moved to Whittlesea only within the past two years. Almost half of the respondents conducted paid work in Whittlesea, while 22% reported they undertake unpaid work there. The remaining 38% reported neither paid nor unpaid work in the area (this category might include both work and study outside the area, as well as people who did not identify as working).

### 3. LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY: OUR RESEARCH APPROACH CONTINUED

#### Community Focus Groups

In addition to the community survey, we sought to provide an opportunity for people from Whittlesea's diverse communities to discuss and share their views on the issues covered in the community survey (see above) in greater depth. We implemented this through a series of community-led and peer-facilitated focus groups. Assisted by WCC, the project team worked closely with various local community groups to identify individuals who would be willing to facilitate a focus group with members of their respective community. After attending a specifically designed training, each facilitator invited up to eight participants from their community to take part in a focus group and subsequently led these focus group discussions (which were held either in-person or via Zoom). Facilitators were paid and received a certificate of appreciation for their role as trained peer facilitators. Focus group participants were given vouchers to recognise their time and contributions.

Six focus groups were conducted in early 2022, involving the following communities: Aboriginal people (two yarns); multicultural youth; Muslim men, Muslim women, and newly migrated and recently arrived women. All six focus groups were recorded, selectively transcribed and analysed. They offered deep insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of the participants (n=30). They also offered valuable suggestions on how support and reporting services can and should be enhanced to respond more adequately to the specific needs of Whittlesea's diverse communities.

#### Open community engagement

While the community survey and the focus groups were the primary methodological tools for collecting empirical evidence, i.e. capturing the community experiences, expertise and input, we acknowledge that some community members may be hesitant to complete a survey and may not have capacity to share their views by taking part in a focus group. We therefore established other more informal ways to listen to community voices. This included extensive informal conversations via phone, Zoom and in person as well as holding several community forums and online meetings where members from the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities were encouraged to share their insights and experiences.

Some key events were an online community forum in September 2021, a community event at the Lalor Living & Learning Centre in March 2022, an anti-racism yarn with people from the local Aboriginal community (online) in May 2022 as well as a community information session in June 2022 with representatives from the local police station, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission and the new Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon. Andrew Giles MP.



# 4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

#### 4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED

This section presents key findings from our community survey and the analysis of the six focus groups. They reflect the diverse voices and experiences of participants from Whittlesea’s Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities.

### 4.1 Experiences of racism

Racism is part of life for many participants in our survey and focus groups. Six out of ten survey respondents (59%) stated that they (or a member of their household) had **experienced racism** in the previous 12 months. **Women** were strongly represented in our survey sample (71% of all respondents), and they are also more likely to have experienced racism in the past 12 months (at 62%, compared to 50% of male respondents).

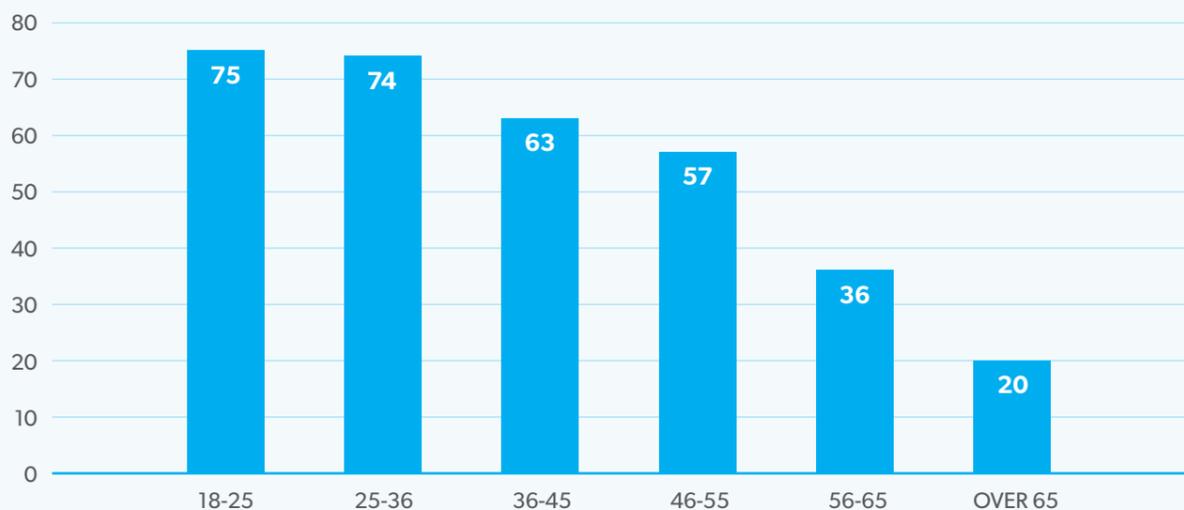
While the sample size is too small to draw statistically significant correlations, our analysis suggests that people in the older age brackets express experiences of racism proportionally less than younger survey respondents (Figure 8). These differences may be attributed to a combination of factors, for example, recognition of racism, subjective notions of what constitutes racism or different levels of exposure to social environments where racism may occur (e.g. employment or education).<sup>7</sup>



*Almost 60% of survey respondents (or someone from their household) had experienced racism in the previous 12 months. More than half of them said it has happened ‘sometimes’ or ‘frequently’.*

Of those who stated they had experienced racism in the past 12 months, about half had faced racism ‘frequently’ (21%) or ‘sometimes’ (31%) and just over one third ‘once or twice’ during this time period. Female respondents experience racism **more frequently** than men, according to the survey responses. In the written responses of the survey, a female respondent who identifies as Aboriginal noted she faced ‘frequent casual racism in conversations, jokes, stereotypes to my Aboriginal culture’.

**Figure 8: Experiences of racism in the previous 12 months (percentage in respective age brackets)**



<sup>7</sup> A local survey in 2018 also found that young people in Whittlesea witness and experience discrimination more often than older; see City of Whittlesea (2018) *Community Attitudes and Liveability Survey. Highlights Bulletin*, August 2018.

Similarly, a participant in one of the Aboriginal yarns said, ‘Racism is an everyday thing. You jump in your car and you’re scared of racism... I’m scared for my kids.’ Another survey respondent, a woman of Indo-Chinese background, wrote: ‘I’m struggling to state the frequency because most of the racism I’ve experienced in the past 12 months are microaggressions’.

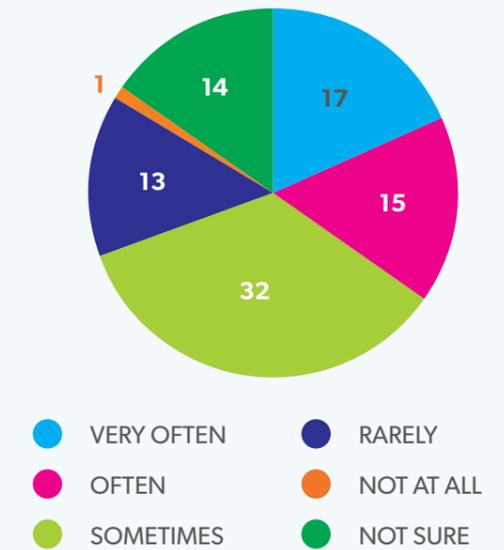
Three quarters of those who have experienced racism (personally and/or through the experiences of household members) stated in the survey that these encounters with racism have (also) occurred **within the municipality of Whittlesea**, in particular, in the suburbs of Epping, but also Thomastown, Mill Park, Lalor, Bundoora and South Morang and others.

Overall, only a small minority of survey respondents (around 15%) believed that incidents of racism happen only rarely or not at all in Whittlesea, while one third believe they happen ‘often’ or ‘very often’ and another third thought racism occurs ‘sometimes.’ The other respondents stated they were not sure (Figure 9).

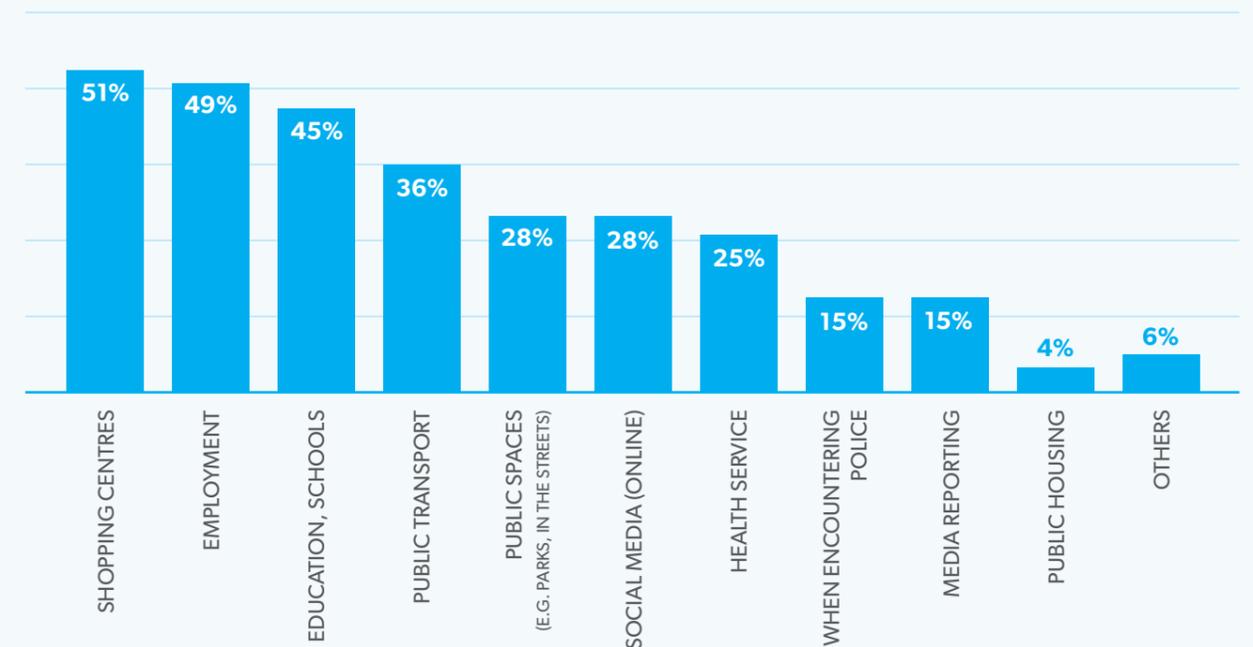
### AREAS OF RACISM

According to the survey findings, the most frequent locations where respondents have faced racism are shopping centres (51% of those who have experienced racism), employment (49%) and education/schools (45%) as well as on public transport (36%) and other public spaces, including in the street (28%), on social media (28%) and in health services (25%) (Figure 10).

**Figure 9: Perception of prevalence of racism in Whittlesea (in %)**



**Figure 10: Area of racism (% of those who experienced racism in last 12 months)**



#### 4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED

Participants in the focus groups also discussed at length various experiences of racism and where they occurred, including employment, shopping centres, public transport, school settings or online. This may manifest in more or less subtle forms, as microaggressions, differential treatment and overt racist abuse.

Participants from different focus groups recalled racism in **shopping centres**. A Muslim woman noted that she is often ignored by the staff when she wears her headscarf: *‘Sometimes I don’t notice it and sometimes I do. When I go into shopping centres or retail shops, I will go in there first ... when someone comes in behind me the [staff] ask ‘Hi, how are you? How was your day?’ and they’ll totally dismiss that I’m there... At times when I’m not scarfed, people will say ‘Hi, how are you? How can I help you?’ I think it’s the perception that because I’m scarfed I don’t speak English.’*

Others reported being followed around or ‘checked’ by staff: ‘You do your shopping and there’s somebody following you... it’s not right’, one participant in the new and recently arrived women’s group said. An Aboriginal participant referred to security checks at [the supermarket] when her brother walks in: ‘It just makes me sick to my stomach... Privilege is the colour of your skin.’

One young person in the multicultural youth focus group shared how a man said to him on the **train**, ‘why are you here? Go back to your country’. In the new/recently arrived women’s group, a participant said that ‘sometimes’ when her children wait for the bus, the bus driver would not pick them up at the bus stop and ‘will only stop if they see white people.’

**Social media** was also mentioned in the Muslim women’s group: ‘Social media is a whole different issue altogether’, she said, ‘the comments that are being made there, it’s just very blatant racism...very Islamophobic.’

Racism within **school settings** was also discussed. In the Muslim women’s group, for example, two participants spoke about racist, Islamophobic slurs directed at Muslim students during inter-school sport classes, such as ‘you towel heads’, or students being called ‘terrorists.’ A participant of African background in the focus group for new and recently arrived women recalled a racist incident at school involving her son: he was called a ‘monkey’ by other students and told ‘to go back to your country’.



*‘A lot of the experiences of racism have been at school. I don’t think there was a year at school where there was no bullying or racism involved.’*

ABORIGINAL YARN

Another participant shared that her daughter had recently come home from school and told her ‘that in one of her classes there are two boys who are constantly making racist comments towards teacher with Indian background’. She explained this had affected her daughter’s desire to participate in class, as she now ‘prepares herself for comments from these two guys.’

#### TYPES OF RACISM

The most commonly experienced type of racism can be described as **subtle forms of exclusion and microaggression**: Two-thirds of those survey respondents who had experienced racism indicated a sense of ‘being unwelcome or looked down upon’, and one third describe their encounters with racism as a ‘general sense of feeling unsafe in public’. This also resonates with many of the accounts shared during the focus groups. A young Muslim woman in the multicultural youth group stated how others would often turn their back to her and her friends when they were sitting somewhere, an experience that others in the group seemed to be able to relate to. ‘It makes me feel really bad, [as if I’m] not human’, the woman said. Being made ‘invisible’ is also a commonly expressed experience of racism: a participant in the Muslim women’s group recalled, ‘I was in a line at a doctor’s surgery, I was at the front of the line and the receptionist bypassed me and asked the person behind me if she could help them.’

In many instances, racism is experienced in more tangible and less subtle ways: 62% stated they had faced racist verbal abuse and/or insults and 57% stated they had experienced racial or religious discrimination (disadvantaged or unfair treatment). Moreover, one third were exposed to abusive or prejudiced content online or elsewhere not directed at them personally, and further 17% experienced racist personal abuse or threats online (Figure 11). Some respondents had even faced verbal (9%) or physical threats (8%) and physical abuse (8%).

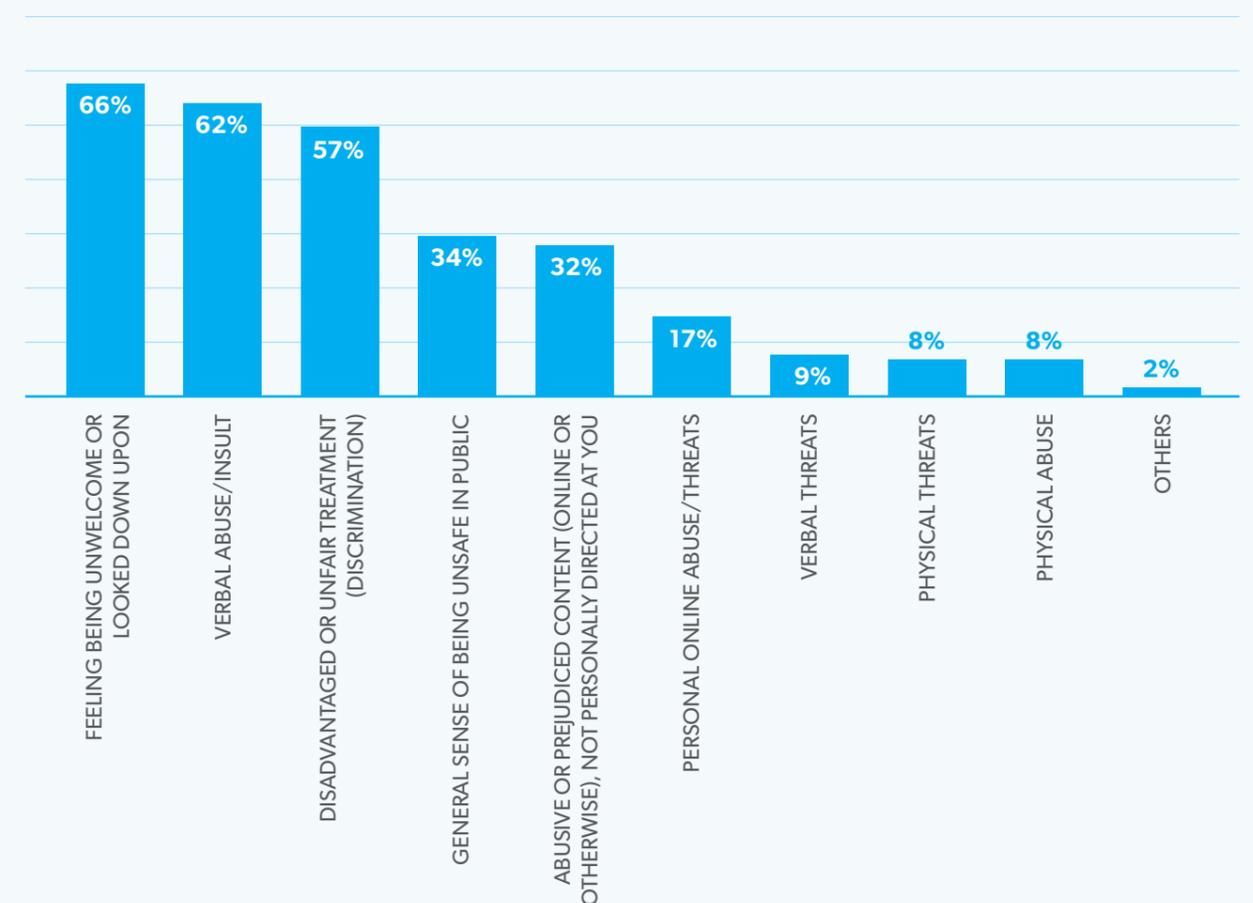
A woman in one of the Muslim women’s focus groups, identifiable as a Muslim by her attire, recalled a dangerous incident she had experienced recently: ‘I was riding my bike and someone drove by very close to me on the road, almost knocking me off, saying something ... I didn’t really pay attention to, but they screamed... it just happened so quickly and I just felt that I was targeted because of the way I was dressed.’

Experiences of racism, including those that do not escalate to physical violence or threats, contribute to a sense of not feeling safe in public spaces. Several focus group participants also highlighted that this sense of not being safe extends to their concerns for their children: ‘For me, safety is a big thing and that plays out in my fears for my children because they are visibly Muslim and they can easily be targeted, simply because of the clothing they wear’, as a participant in the Muslim women’s group stated.

Participants often indicated several personal attributes that may have triggered the incident of racism. The most common survey responses were: one’s ethnic/cultural background (55%), skin colour (40%) and faith/religious background (38%). Language background was indicated by 30%, and some also felt suspected that other, intersecting personal attributes (including age, gender and disability) may have also underpinned the racist incident.

The statement of a person in the focus groups for new and recently arrived women illustrates this intersectionality: ‘Racism happens to everyone... I face racism because of my colour, because of my accent, because of my shape...in many places.’ Muslim women often highlighted that they get targeted because of their Muslim dress or headscarf. Others felt they experience racism and discrimination, in employment for example, because of their accent or ‘because of my name, which is clearly an Arabic name.’

Fig. 11: Types of racism (% of those who experienced racism in last 12 months)

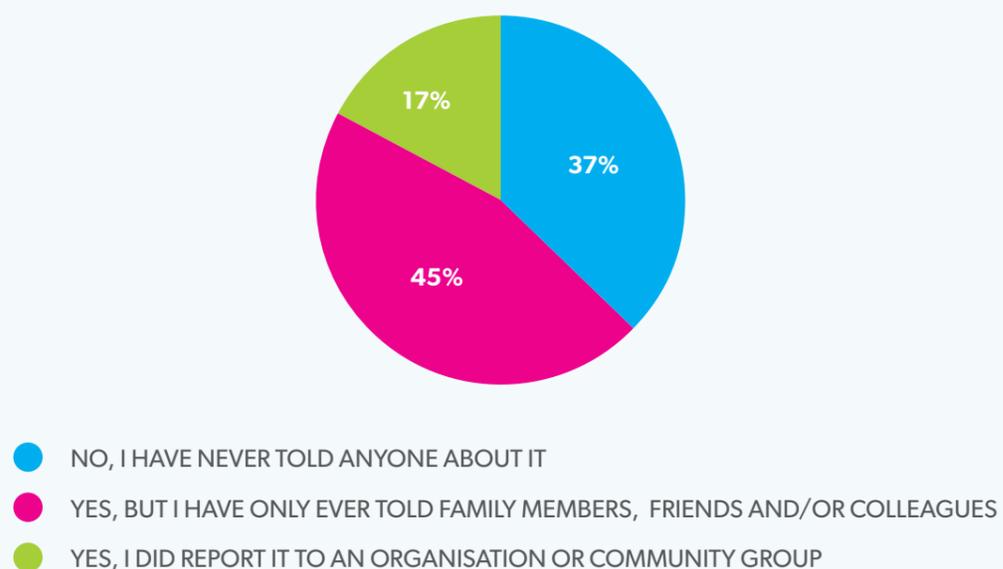


4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED

4.2 Reporting racism

A number of studies, both in Australia and overseas, have repeatedly highlighted that only a small proportion of those who experience racism report the incident.<sup>8</sup> This holds also true for those who participated in the survey and focus groups for this Whittlesea project: Around 37% of all survey respondents never told anyone about the racist incident, and further 45% only ever told family members, friends or colleagues about it. This leaves 17% in the survey who said they reported the incident of racism to an organisation or a community group (Figure 12).

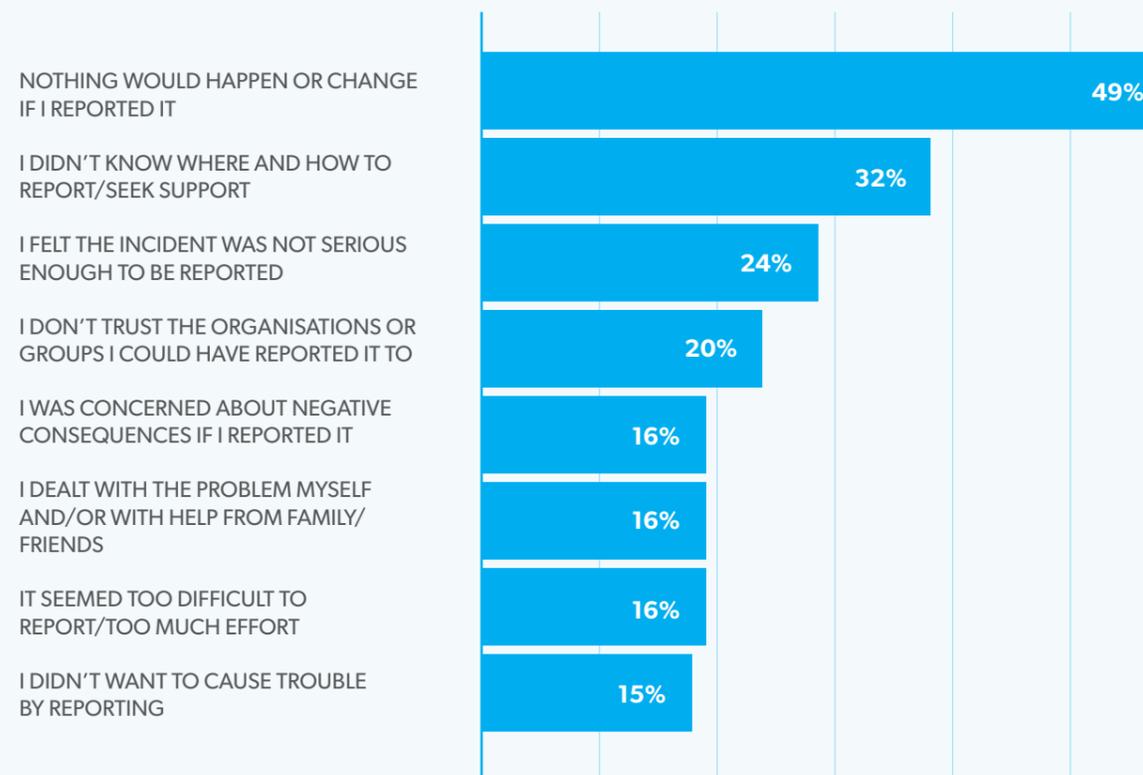
Figure 12 : (Non-)reporting racism (in %)



REPORTING BARRIERS

Reporting or not reporting an experience of racism is influenced by a complex interplay between different factors and considerations (see also the conclusion of this report). Among survey respondents, the most commonly stated reason for not reporting was a sense of resignation or pessimism. This was expressed as a perception that ‘nothing would happen or change’ (49%) (Figure 13). One third also explained they did not report because they did not know where and how to report or seek support; 20% may have been aware of an organisation to report to but felt discouraged because of a lack of trust in the organisation and 16% considered the process of reporting to be too difficult. One quarter of respondents did not report because they thought the incident ‘was not serious enough to be reported’, while one in six felt deterred from reporting by their concerns about negative repercussions (16%), and a similar number ‘didn’t want to cause trouble’ (15%).

Figure 13: Reasons for non-reporting



While the qualitative analysis of some survey open-text responses and of the focus groups echoes many of these findings, it also paints a more differentiated picture of how different factors can discourage people from reporting experiences of racism. Insufficient clarity about reporting options, lack of confidence in the process, resignation and concerns of negative repercussions played a role. For example, one survey respondent wrote: ‘I’m unaware of any organisation that you can report this sort of information to and there is follow up and advocacy etc. Why would people report if there is no follow up and long-term result to curb or end this negative behaviour.’

Many simply didn’t know where to report. In the multicultural youth group, for example, one person said ‘We can’t make a complaint every day. To who should you complain?’ and another one added, ‘To be honest I didn’t know that I can.’

Reasons for not reporting were also linked to the specifics of the experiences. Factors that affect their decision to refrain from reporting were related to, among others, their ability to identify the perpetrator and to prove it was racism; for some concerns of personal safety or worries about their legal residence status also deterred them from reporting.

<sup>8</sup> Peucker, M., Clark, T. and Claridge, H. (2021) *All in this together* (see footnote 4); Doery, K., Guerra, G., Kenny, E., Harriott, L. and Priest, N. (2020) *Hidden Cost: Young multicultural Victorians and COVID-19*. Melbourne: Centre for Multicultural Youth; Vergani, M. and Navarro, C. (2020) *Barriers to Reporting Hate Crime and Hate Incidents in Victoria A mixed-methods study*. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS); Fundamental Rights Agency (2017) *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*. Main results. Vienna: FRA.

4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED



*'My issue was not knowing exactly who to talk to. I was trying to go to different people to find the right track with reporting. Is anything going to happen? Knowing the right people to report it to. That's why when people do encounter this sort of stuff, they just leave it because they feel like nothing is going to happen really.'*

ABORIGINAL YARN

Fears of negative consequences and victimisation as a result of speaking out against racism and reporting it were also mentioned by some. In one of the Aboriginal yarns, a participant stated: 'As soon as you speak up, you're the aggressor. You're the one that's in the wrong... you speak up you're a bad black person for speaking up.' One incident shared in one of the Aboriginal yarns illustrates how this victimisation can play out: A childcare staff said to her child she had 'black feet like an Abo'. The participant did not formally report this but called it out and told the staff 'you can't say that, that's derogatory'. As a consequence, she was then told by the manager of the childcare centre that the childcare worker was 'very upset and has been up all night crying'. The initial racist comment remained unchallenged and without consequences, and the person who made the comment was presented as the victim. 'That's highly manipulative. You've hurt me, so why are you crying? Because you got pulled up on it? It's that white fragility and white tears, so you're meant to feel sorry for them...How does it come to that person needing a debrief but you've completely skipped over the whole issue. That person who's actually affected by it doesn't get an opportunity to debrief.'

In some instances, concerns about potential negative repercussions of reporting racism are linked to people's legal residence status; some seem to fear that speaking out against racism could have negative implications for their visa status or citizenship application: 'If I do these things [reporting]... That may affect my visa or my citizenship', as one person in the multicultural youth group stated.

Discussing racism at work, one participant in the Muslim men's group explained that if the incident is clear and beyond doubt a case of racism, then it is easier to report: 'if the employer comes out and says, sorry we don't employ Muslims. That you can report' but it is more difficult when racism is less overt: 'if they say something or do something about you wearing a hijab and that's a safety issue, that's not right. That to me is racism... it's very hard to prove and it's very hard to report.' And another person added, 'if you're going to report something you have to be able to prove it.'

Similarly, if racism is perpetrated by an anonymous person or occurs in the media or on social media, many focus group participants felt that it was not worth reporting it: 'If it's at a supermarket, the racist slur is coming from someone you have never met or seen, you can't do much about it' (Muslim men's group). Participants in the multicultural youth group discussed their response options in such instances. Taking pictures of the perpetrator or filming them in order to have evidence was considered to be too dangerous – 'that's why keep calm, silent and get out of that place safely.'



*'When it happens on the street... to who should I complain? I don't know the person's name, I don't know his face, I don't know the exact location, where I can go that may help me... what to say, what to do?'*

MULTICULTURAL YOUTH GROUP

REPORTING EXPERIENCES AND REASONS

Most of those few survey respondents **who did report to an organisation** (N=16) turned to a community group or local organisation (for example, Whittlesea Community Connections, local council, youth or women's group, school), although people in these organisations are not typically trained and resourced for recording reports of racism and providing anti-racism support. Importantly, that is not say they fail to respond effectively and appropriately. Only a very small number of participants reported to an organisation or agency that has, at least in principle, a mandate or is tasked to take reports of racism, record them and respond to such individual reports: the police (n=3), the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (n=2), the Australian Human Rights Commission (n=1) or the non-governmental Islamophobia Register (n=3).

Across the focus groups, only very few people seem to have reported an experience of racism. Those who did, usually reported it directly to the organisation in which the incident occurred. One person in the multicultural youth group recalled that a teacher said that the participant's brother had stolen another student's phone who had lost her phone. The family then reported the incident to the principal, and the teacher merely said she was just 'joking'. Other participants discussed possible reporting pathways, include 'university staff', who offered help with 'whatever problem you face' (multicultural youth group). In the Muslim women's group, Muslim-specific reporting and support options were mentioned such as the national reporting platform Islamophobia Register and the Victorian-based Islamophobia Support service, run by the Islamic Council of Victoria.

For most of those few respondents who have reported an experience of racism the main reason for doing so was the desire to speak out and to contribute to change. 'If no one reports, nothing will ever change', was the common personal driver for reporting, followed by the related reason of not wanting the incident to go unrecorded. Moreover, several respondents stated they reported the incident because they needed to talk to someone about their experience. Seeking legal advice or emotional support were only mentioned by one or two respondents (Table 1).

Table 1: Personal reasons for reporting (n=16; multiple responses)

If no one reports, nothing will ever change	11
I just didn't want this incident to go unrecorded	7
I just needed to talk to someone about it	6
I was trying to get emotional support	2
I was seeking legal advice	1
I wanted the person responsible to be punished	0
Other reasons	4

The survey also asked respondents to share their views on the **main reasons for others** in their community to report an experience of racism (Figure 14). The most common motive, according to the respondents' general assessment, was to raise awareness of the persistent problem of racism (69%). Related to this, 46% of the respondents indicated that many people would want to report racism simply to ensure the incident was acknowledged and recorded.

Another important factor that may motivate others to report was to get emotional and/or psychological support (59%) – a reason only rarely mentioned by those who have actually reported a personal experience of racism (see above). Other motives were related to seeking legal advice (45%) or to hold the perpetrator to account (40%); only 30% were of the view that others in their community would report in order to seek mediation or resolve the conflict.

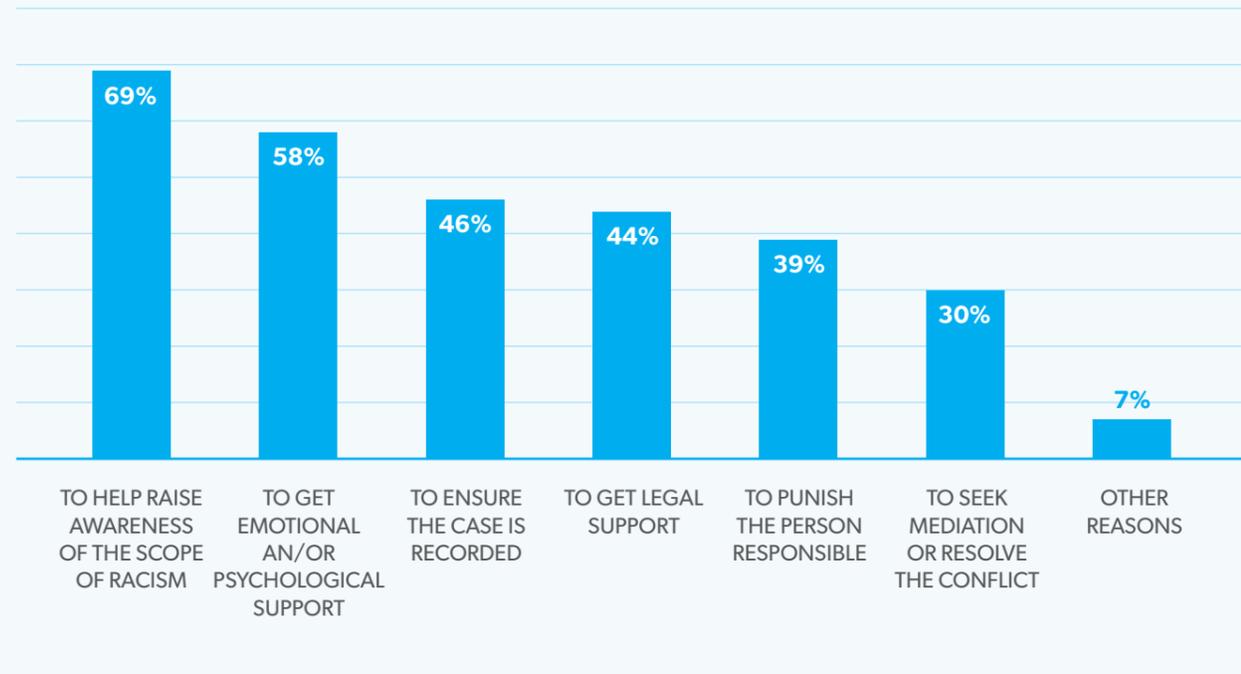


*'Psychologists gas-lit me when I complained about racism and said I had a low self-esteem. Actually my self-esteem is quite high but I wanted an acknowledgement of the existence of racism and strategies for dealing with casual racism and racist overtones.'*

WRITTEN SURVEY RESPONSE

4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED

Figure 14: Views on general reasons (of others) for reporting racism



The number of survey respondents who had previously reported racism was small (n=16). But their **reporting experience** offers important qualitative insights. Most of them felt better after reporting the incident, which may point to the potentially empowering effects of speaking out against racism. Many received the support they were hoping for (n=9) and felt their concerns were listened to and understood (n=10); half of them stated their report was taken seriously. But some of them also felt they had to prove the incident was driven by racism or religious prejudice. Overall, a majority agreed that the support could have been better, and five of the 16 respondents stated that their reporting experience has made it less likely for them to report a similar incident again in the future (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Reporting experience (n=16)



4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED

Only a few participants spoke about reporting racism and how they felt about the process and outcome – and the experiences were mixed. During one of the Aboriginal yarns, a participant was very critical of the process which has diminished her willingness to report again: ‘I don’t know where to start. I don’t report much anymore because I get sick of it and the whole process is just crap, to be quite honest. I get racism all of the time.’



*‘A principal said a racist remark... I did try to follow it up with the school and to get some advice from the City of Whittlesea staff about the best way to follow it up ... [but] there wasn’t an outcome. It sort of just got left.’*

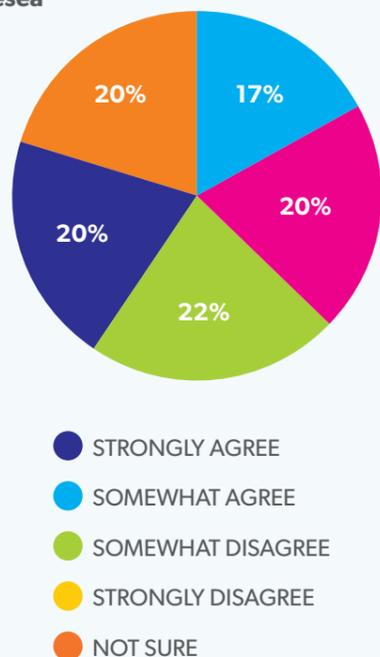
ABORIGINAL YARN

Some recalled also positive outcomes when they **spoke up and complained about racism**. Two cases were mentioned in one of the Aboriginal yarns. One incident occurred when the son of a male participant with priority access to the COVID-19 vaccination program (due to his Aboriginality) sought to get an early dose. The participant described how his son’s identity was questioned by the staff at the health service provider. While the son initially did not intend to complain (‘I’m used to it, so it’s easier to just move on than confront it and take it on’), the parents lodged a complaint to the service provider. With support from the Aboriginal liaison person at the service provider, this process led to additional cultural competence trainings, and an apology letter was sent to his son. A similarly positive outcome was achieved by another participant who complained to a sporting association about being repeatedly called a derogatory name. The sporting league’s response ‘was so swift and so good’: Cultural awareness trainings were delivered, and ‘it’s never been said again.’ The person added: ‘I’ve educated my team...it’s a ripple effect.’

### 4.3 Existing reporting pathways and support services and how to improve them

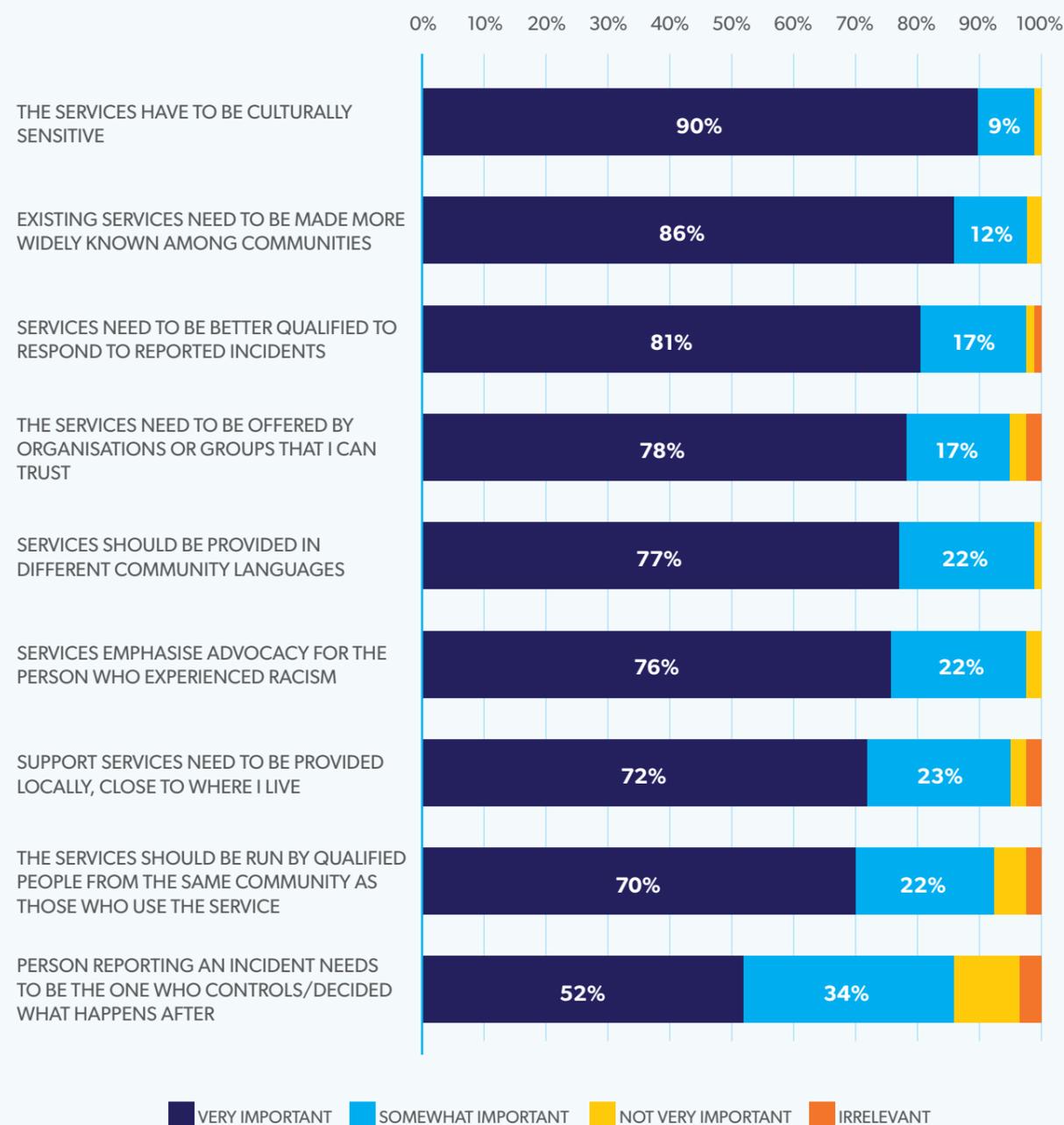
Survey respondents expressed very mixed views on the availability of appropriate reporting pathways and support services for people in the City of Whittlesea. While 42% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement there were enough services offering appropriate support for those who have experienced racism, 37% somewhat or strongly agreed; the remaining 20% were not sure (Figure 16). It is worth noting, however, those who stated they had experienced racism in the previous 12 months were significantly more likely to consider current services as insufficient, and those who had not experienced racism gave a more positive assessment of the current support landscape.

Figure 16: Assessment: Enough services that offer appropriate support to people in Whittlesea



Survey respondents and focus group participants were also asked what would make it more likely for them and others in their community to report racism. These insights can provide some guidance on **how reporting pathways and support services can be improved** (Figure 17). The most common answer in the survey was that anti-racism support services need to be (more) culturally sensitive – an assessment the vast majority of respondents agreed on. An almost equally high proportion were of the view that existing services should be made more widely known and promoted within communities impacted by racism. This was also a widely shared view among focus group participants. ‘I don’t think too many people are aware of where to go or what to do if any unfair treatment happens towards them,’ a Muslim men’s focus group participant said: ‘not many people know what to do.’

Figure 17: Features of support services to make reporting more likely



#### 4. FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS CONTINUED

Another important factor that could make reporting more likely, according to the survey respondents, was that support services need to be better qualified to respond to reported incidents of racism, they should be delivered by organisations that communities trust and be provided in different community languages. Advocacy for those who face racism was also a commonly expressed expectation among respondents, which would make it more likely for them to report and seek support. A significant proportion also called for locally provided anti-racism support services, close to where they live.

These perspectives suggest that the quality and the type of service provision are as important as which organisation should offer the service to communities. Here, a key factor appears to be community trust. Moreover, the survey findings point to widely held views that organisations should prioritise the needs of the person who seeks support and advocate for the community: 'Support services are better provided [by] organisations who are seen as trustworthy in the eyes of the community and who put the community needs first and foremost', as one respondent wrote in the survey.

In the focus groups, participants also emphasised that reporting needs to happen in an environment of trust and psychological-cultural safety. Trust can manifest in different ways, for example, in terms of an organisation's efficacy and capacity to reach a meaningful outcome. A participant in one of the Aboriginal yarns said, 'it's about having some faith in the system that you're reporting to. One, that it's going to be taken seriously, and two, that there's going to be something done with [your report]'.

Several focus group participants expressed the view that people would be more likely to report racism to (local) community centres, which offer support services either specifically for a certain community group or more broadly across different communities: 'There should be some kind of community-organised [service] to have this discussion about racism, the effects, where to go, what actions to take if anything unfair happens. There needs to be somewhere that people [can] go to and try to solve whatever happened to them' (Muslim men's group).

In the Aboriginal yarns the importance of having **Aboriginal staff** in these organisations was particularly highlighted: 'I'm more inclined to complain at organisations where there's Aboriginal staff'. Another participant added, 'you've got someone to follow it up internally, so you're more likely to put in a complaint through an organisation that I know have Aboriginal staff or an Aboriginal team within it because I've got a point to go to if I don't hear anything.'



*'There should be some kind of community-organised [service] to have this discussion about racism, the effects, where to go, what actions to take if anything unfair happens. There needs to be somewhere that people [can] go to and try to solve whatever happened to them.'*

MUSLIM MEN'S GROUP

What are the local organisations that enjoy community trust? According to the survey results, the most trusted local organisation was Whittlesea Community Connections, with two thirds of respondents considering it 'trustworthy within large segments of their community' (68%). Just over four in ten think the local council enjoyed trust in their community (44%), and one third felt there was trust in Brotherhood of St Laurence (33%) and the local police (32%). As expected, it is evident that there is no single institution or community organisation that has the trust across all segments of the local communities in Whittlesea.

Our analysis of the qualitative open text responses in the survey confirms that trust particularly lies with **local community organisations**, including community service providers such as Whittlesea Community Connections, Brotherhood of St Laurence, local libraries and community centres, as well as local religious groups (such as mosques or temples), Aboriginal organisations and other cultural community groups. In addition, a significant proportion of respondents would also like the council and local police to play a more active role in supporting those who have experienced racism, while others expressed mistrust in the police and, to some extent, also the local council.



*'To have a place to go which is solely related to racism, and religious prejudice, that is warm and welcoming, with friendly, helpful staff, who genuinely care, and who follow through with the victim, by staying in contact with them and update them with what has happened with their case, and the changes/result/outcome.'*

WRITTEN SURVEY RESPONSE



## RECOMMENDATIONS: WHITTLESEA ANTI-RACISM ROADMAP

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS: WHITTLESEA ANTI-RACISM ROADMAP CONTINUED

The analysis of the community survey and the focus groups underscores that racism is a reality for many people in Whittlesea, as it is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities across Victoria and Australia.

There is little doubt that the vast majority of experiences of racism remain unreported. Consequently, these incidents are not sufficiently acknowledged, nor do they appear in any statistics or reports, and most people do not access dedicated support services after experiencing racism.

At the centre of this project was our commitment to listening to and learning from local communities about their views and suggestions on how to facilitate open and honest conversations about racism, and related to that, how to improve reporting pathways and support services for people in Whittlesea. Through the survey responses, the focus groups and our open community engagement we gained

insights into the expectations of local communities affected by racism. This community input informed the following considerations on how to advance anti-racism in Whittlesea. The proposed **Whittlesea Anti-Racism Roadmap** is meant to support a flexible, open-ended collaborative process that brings together various communities, organisations and service providers with the common goal to tackle racism, empower communities and improve the support for those in the community who experience racism.

### Strong desire to speak about racism and jointly work towards real-life changes

- There has been a strong message from across the local community that the persistence of racism has not been sufficiently acknowledged and more needs to be done, also locally, to raise awareness and develop effective responses to racism.
- Local anti-racism needs to comprise a variety of measures and approaches and involve a range of **local stakeholders who work together** to explore and develop effective ways to raise awareness, prevent racism and support those who experience racism.
- There are many different ways to put local anti-racism into practice. How this is best done should be explored in a **collaborative process**. It is crucial that this process is community-led and makes space for the views of those impacted by racism – without putting the responsibility for ‘fixing’ racism on these communities.
- To accommodate different expectations across Whittlesea’s communities, we propose working towards establishing a **network** of local community organisations and service providers; this network could then jointly explore how to advance anti-racism in Whittlesea and develop and implement concrete steps.
- The project focussed in particular on how to strengthen local support services for those who have experienced racism. Many in the community called for improved **reporting pathways and support services**. We therefore propose that the local network could draw on the findings from this report to work towards improving support services for those who experienced racism.

In the following we present **issues for consideration** that may assist in this process.



### Organisations to be included in a local anti-racism support network

- Not everyone involved in the project agrees on which agencies, service providers or community organisations should be involved in providing reporting pathways and support. However, a central factor for most people’s suggestions was trust in the organisations – trust in personal and cultural terms as well as trust in the organisation’s capacity to respond effectively. Trust develops through personal encounters and experiences, often in the local context.
- Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) enjoys a particularly high level of trust among various communities in the municipality. There are also other local service providers and community organisations and spaces that have local community trust and are considered potential first points of contacts for those

who experience racism. All these organisations may play a part in a future anti-racism support network in Whittlesea. They include, among others, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Drummond Street Services, local youth services, neighbourhood/community centres and libraries, locally based religious organisations (e.g. mosques, temples) as well as the council and local police.

- These organisations and agencies differ in terms of the services they provide, the levels of community trust in them and their ability to provide culturally sensitive support. This has also been confirmed by the findings of the organisation survey. Depending on these and other factors, different organisations may play different roles within a local anti-racism support network.

### Structure of a local anti-racism network

- All those local stakeholders that enjoy community trust and are committed to joining a local anti-racism support network should be offered the opportunity to take part in **initial capacity building training**, focused on how to respond to and support people who report incidents of racism to their organisations. Each organisation should examine and specify the role they can play within this anti-racism support structure and nominate one or several designated contact person(s) among their staff.
- This process should be **coordinated centrally**, without affecting the autonomy of each of the partaking organisations. WCC appears to be well-placed to lead this coordination and network building process, given the high level of community trust they enjoy in Whittlesea. WCC’s coordinating role could also include exploring, together with communities, what other community spaces or organisations may be invited to join this anti-racism support network in the future, such as the Aboriginal Gathering Place (which is currently being developed in Whittlesea).
- It is recommended that the local anti-racism network comprises a diverse range of locally trusted community organisations and service providers. They should either have or proactively develop the capacity to respond appropriately to clients or community members who report cases of racism. As **first points of contact**, they do not need to provide specialised support services (e.g. professional legal or psychological services), but should offer basic emotional support and active listening. They also need to be able to suggest suitable referral options for more specialised services where appropriate and desired by the individual (e.g. mental health, legal assistance, conciliation pathways). Moreover, they should record the reported (anonymised) cases of racism in a simple recording template.
- It is suggested that the organisations involved in the network jointly develop a basic **recording template and procedures**. The network can then use these to collect and collate anonymised reporting data consistently, as well as making the records publicly available on a regular basis—for example in the form of an annual report.



## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS: WHITTLESEA ANTI-RACISM ROADMAP CONTINUED



### Complementing the anti-racism support network

- There are a number of stakeholders that may not be directly involved in the local anti-racism network but could play an important role as potential conduits, referring individuals who may have experienced racism to the anti-racism network. These **conduit stakeholders** may include security companies in large shopping centres, medical clinics, public transport services, schools and other education institutions in Whittlesea. These organisations should be made aware of the services of an anti-racism support network and encouraged to refer clients who report racism to one of the participating organisations or the coordinating centre.
- The local anti-racism network, and in particular the coordinating centre, should build new and strengthen existing relationships with agencies and various organisations that provide **specialised services for people who experience racism**. These include, among others, local police, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, the Islamophobia Support Service (provided by the Islamic Council of Victoria) and the Australian eSafety Commissioner.
- Responding to racism and supporting those who have experienced it constitutes only one of many puzzle pieces of a **comprehensive anti-racism strategy** locally and beyond. As participants in this project suggested, a local community-led service could be formed, possibly within an existing organisation, that can develop and implement a range of anti-racism measures, including bystander intervention programs, community education, awareness raising and dialogue activities with a broad spectrum of the local community, including young people.



### Culturally sensitive services

- One of the most important features of any reporting and support services is that they are **culturally sensitive and appropriate**. This also applies to the organisations within a future anti-racism support network in Whittlesea. Cultural appropriateness encompasses different aspects and can be achieved in different ways.
- Offering reporting options and anti-racism support in **community languages** can be an important element. Not all organisations will be able to offer that, and no organisation can cater for all different community languages; however, involving a range of community organisations in the local anti-racism support may help ensure that support is available in the main community languages spoken in Whittlesea.
- To enhance the capacity to provide culturally sensitive services, we recommend that organisations within the network should take part in tailored **training workshops**.
- **Cultural representation** also matters. Many participants in this project emphasised the importance of encountering contact persons at the relevant organisations who are from the same cultural or ethnic backgrounds. This not only contributes to higher levels of cultural awareness but also helps create a climate of trust and a sense of being understood—as well as instilling confidence that those who report racism have someone to follow up with directly.



### Advocacy, recording and transparency

- There is a clearly articulated expectation in the community that anti-racism support should take an **advocacy** approach. This can mean different things. As a minimum requirement, any organisation involved in a future local anti-racism support network in Whittlesea needs to **acknowledge the subjective experiences** of those who report racism; empathetic listening and taking all reports seriously are crucial.
- In addition, some organisations may choose to be explicitly partial in supporting the person who has experienced racism and take an active role in **public anti-racism advocacy**.
- This public anti-racism advocacy is linked to the most central reason for people to report racism in the first place: **to raise awareness** of the persistence of racism.
- Closely connected to this motive for reporting is the question of recording the reported incident of racism. Clear **recording procedures** should be part of the response to a report of racism. Recording of personally reported cases may be complemented by additional options of anonymous reporting, for example online, which could be linked to a follow-up support offer.
- Locally recorded cases of racism should be collected and collated centrally (ideally by the coordinating centre). This can subsequently create unprecedented empirical evidence on the locally specific scope and nature of racism, which can increase public awareness, be used for community advocacy and facilitate the development of more tailored prevention and intervention measures. Recording a reported case of racism is also in line with many people's reasons for reporting as it contributes to raising awareness and reflects the experience is acknowledged and taken seriously.
- For reporting processes to be a more positive and empowering experience, they need to be **transparent and outcome-oriented**. While it may not always be possible to achieve the outcome the individual who experienced racism was hoping for, it is crucial that the response to the reported incident is transparent about what can be achieved and under what circumstances. Individuals who have reported an incident should be included in the decision-making process as much as possible – at the very least kept informed about these processes – and they should always have a contact person to follow up with.



### Promotion and evaluation of anti-racism support services

- Once anti-racism support services are operational in Whittlesea, it is crucial to **promote the new services** and make them widely known among local communities affected by racism. This should be done through a public campaign using, among others, social media, flyers and posters in public places and through direct engagement within participating organisations with their clients and/or community members.
- Additionally, it is vital that these services are maintained to operate well, or that they are adjusted, or complemented when other relevant support services become available. The Whittlesea local anti-racism support network should regularly evaluate the quality of these services, constantly refreshing their value and relevance for local communities.



## SPEAKING UP AGAINST RACISM AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF REPORTING

Today, most Australians acknowledge that racism is an ongoing problem in this country. This realisation helps create a promising environment for meaningful conversations within society about racism—how to tackle it effectively and work towards eliminating it in all its forms.

These can be at times difficult discussions about personal prejudice or unconscious bias, lack of representation, privileges and structural and systemic barriers that are often built into our institutions.

Speaking about racism is often challenging for those affected by ethno-religious or cultural exclusion, prejudice and discrimination. During this project we have learned that many communities have a strong desire to talk about their personal or collective experiences with racism, and to be listened to when they do so. In a supportive environment, this can be liberating and empowering—and it is vital to develop more opportunities for this. However, raising one's voice against racism can also be burdensome and disempowering; it can have negative personal consequences and potentially come at a high cost.

Speaking out against racism and reporting it needs to be a safe and empowering experience, which means we need changes to the current reporting pathways. Reporting needs to be linked to support services that are aligned with the needs and expectations of the people who report. In this project we have explored the views and suggestions of Whittlesea's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities on how to improve reporting and support services locally. The recommendations in Section 5 are framed as a Roadmap that can bring together these improvements in a coherent approach.

One of the key insights from our community engagement during this project urged us to take a step back and critically reflect on the process of reporting racism in a more holistic way. Reporting or not reporting is not a singular decision; it is rather a complex journey for an individual at a specific moment in their life, shaped by a series of decisions and hurdles along the way, which may or may not lead to reporting an experience of racism.

### Recognising racism

The first hurdle is whether a person recognises racism when it happens. This process is influenced by a number of factors. Some people, for example, have articulated a rather **narrow understanding of how racism can manifest**. This affects whether a person may consider a certain incident as being a form of racism—for example where only blatant forms of abuse or discrimination are regarded as racism. A significant number of community members involved in this project referred to experiences of ethnic or religious persecution in their country of origin, which for them set the benchmark for what racism means. Unfair treatment or subtle microaggressions in Australia were sometimes not seen as forms of racism.

During an informal meeting with a group of mostly elderly Arabic speaking community members (most of them from a non-Muslim background), a majority initially denied having experienced racism. Once the conversation evolved, it turned out that many of them had been verbally abused and treated unfairly in public because they spoke Arabic. However this was not seen as racism by these community members.

**Racism often occurs covertly**. For example, when someone does not get invited to a job interview for a vacant position, despite having the requested qualifications, it usually remains unknown to the individual whether discrimination has played a role or not. **Racist microaggressions** often occur in an insidious way, often hard for an individual to identify clearly. 'Sometimes I don't notice it,' as one participant in the Muslim women's group said.



*'Sometimes I don't look at it as racism. I look at it as uneducated. But you can tell the difference between uneducated and just plain racism.'*

ABORIGINAL YARN

## 6. SPEAKING UP AGAINST RACISM AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF REPORTING CONTINUED

### Acknowledging racism

One hurdle on the journey towards reporting (or not reporting) revolves around the question as to whether a person internally acknowledges an incident as racism. This can be a complex psychological process. Some may feel a **sense of powerlessness and victimhood** in the face of racism and therefore avoid labelling a certain experience as racist. One survey respondent wrote, for example, that this local project assumes participants are 'victims of racism or discrimination. That is not the case, racism is rare and we are not victims.' Of course, we fully respect the respondent's view that racism is uncommon, but the statement suggests discomfort and a sense of disempowerment related to one's experience with racism. This resonated also with the findings of a recent study among Eritrean migrants in Melbourne.<sup>9</sup>

A reason for not acknowledging a certain experience as being linked to racism is that some multicultural or multifaith community members did **not want to appear ungrateful** towards Australian society, which they see as being overall safe and welcoming. They seemed reluctant to highlight racism as they tried to avoid giving others the impression that they were not appreciative of what 'Australia has given us', as several people indicated.

### Prioritising personal aspiration

A factor that can discourage people from reporting, even where they recognise an incident as racist, is that individuals are concerned that reporting would have **negative consequences for their personal aspirations and life goals**. This appears to be a common hurdle for reporting racism at the workplace but also at school. A participant in the multicultural youth group recalled how she had been subjected to constant, mostly subtle racism at school; after telling her mother, she was told, 'if you want to chase your goals... If you want to be strong, be independent, you have to go through this'—which she achieved, presumably at significant emotional cost, by her sheer strength of resolve.



*'I stepped on every single feeling that I had, put it in my mind that I have to do this, I have to face racism, I have to face people judging me and keep it in my heart as much as I can, until I pass those 2 years, Year 11 and 12, and just get over it. And I did.'*

MULTICULTURAL YOUTH GROUP

### Burden of proof

One consideration that seems to deter some from reporting an experience of racism is their sense that the **burden of proof** lies with them. Even where individuals are sure they have been discriminated against or subjected to racism, whether overtly or subtly, some people consciously weigh up their ability to prove it to the organisation they would consider reporting to. Participants in the Muslim men focus group, for example, stated, 'if you're going to report something, you have to be able to prove it.' This also resonated with several accounts of people in Whittlesea who tried to report an incident of racism but felt they were not believed and could not provide sufficient evidence. The survey findings also support this assessment. It underscores the importance of empathetic listening in support services, which is a leading value of the Roadmap in Section 5 of this report.



*'It's very hard to prove and it's very hard to report.'*

MUSLIM MEN'S GROUP

### Awareness of existing reporting pathways

When all the above hurdles are taken into account, the person may yet reach a point where they consider reporting. This is where the most obvious and commonly expressed obstacle becomes relevant: not knowing where and how to report. It is important to note that we do not see this as a deficit of an individual (it is not their lack of knowledge) but primarily as a result of **insufficient promotion of existing reporting pathways**. Responses such as 'To whom should I report?' or 'I didn't know I can [report]' were recorded in various focus groups; the prevalence of this hurdle is also reflected in the survey findings.

Many participants seemed to regard the police as their only reporting option. A participant in the multicultural youth group said, 'personally I don't know where to report. Without the police station, I don't know other places.' While the police may in some instances be the most appropriate institution to report to, police themselves would agree that other agencies are more relevant to some reporting needs. The widespread lack of awareness of other reporting pathways and support services creates hurdles for reporting many experiences with racism.

Not knowing where to report is related to a broadly disempowering perception that existing services are insufficient, not trustworthy or ineffective in achieving meaningful outcomes. Language and cultural barriers have also been raised as reporting hurdles. These views may be based on previous negative reporting experiences or attributed to a more general hesitancy towards certain organisations and agencies.

These are only some of the factors that influence the highly individual and **complex journey from experiencing racism to reporting it**, according to the findings of this Whittlesea project. They are often connected and mutually reinforcing, creating significant obstacles that people need to navigate and overcome as they weigh up the personal costs and expected gains of reporting an experience of racism. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of this reporting journey and finding ways to reduce the deterrent effects of these hurdles is crucial if we want to encourage more people to report racism.

Establishing improved reporting pathways and support services that are genuinely helpful, accessible, trusted, culturally sensitive and widely promoted across community constitutes an important element in this endeavour to break the often silencing and disempowering effect of racism. But there is also an urgent need for more meaningful and open discussions about racism across society, to explore its multiple, often systemic and insidious manifestations, and to create safe and empowering opportunities to speak out against racism. While these conversations should spread across society, they need to centre the voices and agency of communities affected by racism and be guided by those with lived experience. This needs to happen without putting the responsibility of effectively tackling racism on their shoulders. Instead, the onus is on those who benefit from the institutions and systems which maintain racism, inequality and injustice. Anti-racism needs to be a whole-of-society commitment.

