

DCA submission to inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

To: Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this inquiry.

As the nation's leading independent peak body for diversity and inclusion, Diversity Council Australia (DCA) is a member-based, not-for-profit, with a strong network of over 1,250 members, including many of Australia's largest employers.

For 40 years DCA has worked to advance more equitable workplaces, supporting a stronger economy and fairer society. DCA's evidence-led approach is centred on lived experience, and our research consistently shows that inclusive organisations are more innovative, productive, and resilient in changing environments.

Founded as a joint initiative of the Business Council of Australia and what would become the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, DCA's original mission was to support equal opportunity for women through industry-led programs. Our founding members included ANZ, AMP, BHP, Coles, IBM, Myer, Rio Tinto, and Westpac. Today, we champion a spectrum of workforce diversity and inclusion dimensions and hold strong convening power, engaging directly with CEOs and senior leaders across a range of sectors from ASX-listed companies to not-for-profits.

Through research, practical tools, events, advocacy, education, and training, we provide expert guidance to support employers, leaders, and policymakers, and advance our charitable purpose to foster inclusive workplaces for the benefit of individuals, organisations, and society.

Yours sincerely,

Diversity Council Australia

A note on language

Diversity Council Australia (DCA) recognises that a diversity of terms is used to describe people's lived experience. We recognise and respect individuals' right to identify with terms with which they feel most comfortable. We also recognise the limitations of binary language. Sometimes binary categories have very real effects on peoples' experiences and may be necessary to convey the gendered nature and dynamics of our society.

Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion (or exclusion) at work. The way we speak to each other creates a culture in which everyone – including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples – can feel valued, respected, and one of the team (included), rather than undervalued, disrespected, and out of place (excluded).

We use the terms 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,' 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' (where the 'and/or' recognises that some individuals belong to both groups) and 'First Nations.' However, we recognise that this approach is not without contention. These terms do not reflect the diversity of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Moreover, many prefer to be known by their specific group or clan names. We only use the term 'Indigenous' when citing work that has used it.

DCA recognises that language is socially constructed and constantly evolving and our intention is always to be inclusive and to be open to change.

A note on intersectionality

DCA adopts and recommends an intersectional approach to policy, systems, and program design. Intersectionality recognises that people may experience overlapping and compounding forms of marginalisation based on race, gender, disability, socio-economic status, sexuality, geographic location, and other social identities.

Applying an intersectional lens enables organisations and policymakers to better identify and dismantle structural barriers that restrict participation, progression, and safety for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Without this lens, interventions risk addressing only surface-level issues while reproducing systemic inequity.

Introduction

This submission draws on evidence from nationally significant research conducted by DCA, including:

- [Racism at Work: How Organisations Can Stand Up to and End Workplace Racism \(2022\)](#)
- [Inclusion@Work Index 2025–2026: The Case for Inclusion](#)

Together, these reports provide robust, Australia-specific evidence demonstrating that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers experience the highest levels of racism, discrimination, and exclusion of any demographic group in Australian workplaces. The findings point to racism that is persistent, systemic, and inadequately addressed by current workplace, regulatory and reporting frameworks.¹

The nature, prevalence, and impact of workplace racism

Prevalence of workplace racism

Racism directed at Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia is systemic, pervasive, and persistent, manifesting at interpersonal, organisational, and societal levels. DCA's [Inclusion@Work Index](#) has consistently found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers experience disproportionately higher rates of workplace discrimination and harassment.

The [2025-2026 Inclusion@Work Index](#) found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers were 2 times more likely to experience workplace discrimination and/or harassment than non-Indigenous workers, specifically:

- 47% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported experiencing discrimination or harassment at work in the previous 12 months, compared with 24% of non-Indigenous workers.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers also experience the highest rates of everyday exclusion, including being ignored, stereotyped, or excluded from informal work networks and team activities.

DCA's [Racism at Work](#) report shows that 50% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported workplace harassment and/or discrimination - the highest of any group measured.

This is reflected in difference in wages between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people. There was a gap of AUD 227 per week in the median total personal income between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people. Currently, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers have a lower median gross household weekly income than non-Indigenous adults (\$825 compared with \$1,141).²

¹ Diversity Council Australia, [Racism at Work: How Organisations Can Stand Up to and End Workplace Racism](#), Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2022

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-08-income>, accessed 22 April 2026

Nature of workplace racism

Our research confirms that racism against Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers occurs at multiple, reinforcing levels³:

- **Interpersonal racism** which are individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and actions that discriminate, exclude, or disadvantage Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people including racial slurs, jokes, stereotyping and demeaning assumptions and social exclusion.
- **Systemic racism** which is organisations' policies, procedures, and practices that directly or indirectly discriminate, exclude, or disadvantage Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people including recruitment policies and practices, performance evaluation frameworks, promotion practices, tokenism in organisational decision-making, racially unsafe complaint processes and leadership norms that privilege whiteness and Western cultural norms.
- **Institutional silence**, where racism is minimised, denied, or left unchallenged by managers and organisations, further entrenching harm.

DCA's Inclusion@Work Index also consistently shows Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers are more likely to experience everyday exclusion than non-Indigenous workers. The 2025-2026 Inclusion@Work Index showed:

- more than 1 in 2 (52%) Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported sometimes, often, or always having others make assumptions about their abilities, compared with 31% of non-First Nations workers,
- 48% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported sometimes, often, or always being ignored by people at work or treated as if they did not exist, compared to 28% of non-First Nations workers, and
- 48% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported sometimes, often, or always being left out of work social gatherings, compared to 27% of non-First Nations workers.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers experience workplace discrimination and harassment from many sources. In 2025-2026, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported experiencing discrimination and harassment from:

- **Their colleagues:** 16% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers experienced this from a colleague in their team and 14% from a colleague in another team.
- **From their managers:** 10% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers experienced it from their immediate manager, and 11% from another manager.
- **Senior leaders:** 9% experienced discrimination or harassment from a senior leader in their organisation.
- **A third party to their workplace:** 13% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers experienced this from a customer, client, patient, or student.

³ Racism at Work: How Organisations Can Stand Up to and End Workplace Racism (2022)

Impact of workplace racism

Discrimination, harassment, and everyday exclusion take a toll on wellbeing. The 2025-2026 Inclusion@Work Index found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers who experienced discrimination and harassment were three times more likely to say work has had a negative impact on their mental health in the 12 months preceding (i.e. 18% said it had negatively or very negatively impact their mental health, compared to 6% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders who did not experience discrimination and harassment).

Inclusion makes a difference. The 2025-2026 Inclusion@Work Index found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in teams that are inclusive are 2.5 times less likely to experience workplace discrimination and harassment. Specifically, 24% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in inclusive teams experienced discrimination and harassment, compared to 60% of those in non-inclusive teams.

The impacts of racism are severe and well documented in our Racism at Work report:

- **Retention:** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers who experience racism are more than twice as likely to intend to leave their organisation and are significantly less likely to be satisfied with their jobs.
- **Wellbeing:** Racism has significant negative impacts on the well-being of those who experience it. It is linked to sleep problems, higher levels of anxiety and depression, and other trauma-related symptoms. All this not only comes at a high personal cost, but the negative health impact also costs the Australian economy almost \$38 billion per year.⁴
- **Productivity:** 70% of employees exposed to racial discrimination, violence, or harassment take time off work which has an impact on productivity. Greater racial diversity at all levels of organisations is positively associated with financial performance.⁵
- **Reputation:** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers who experience workplace racism are much less likely to recommend their workplace to other Indigenous people. 39% of those who do not experience workplace racism would recommend their employer, compared with just 16% of those who do.⁶ In addition, 60% of consumers indicated they will buy or boycott a brand, depending on how that brand responds to racial injustice protests. This is especially true of the

⁴ Elias, A., Paradies, Y. Estimating the mental health costs of racial discrimination. *BMC Public Health* **16**, 1205 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-3868-1>

⁵ VicHealth et al (2012) Preventing Race-Based Discrimination and Supporting Cultural Diversity in the Workplace (An Evidence Review); A.L. Pieterse et al. (2012) Perceived Racism and Mental Health among Black American Adults: A Meta-Analytic Review, *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 59, no.1, pp. 1–9; R. Carter et al. (2017) Racial Discrimination and Health Outcomes Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities: A Meta-Analytic Review, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 45, pp. 232–59; A. Elias and Y.C. Paradies (2021) The Costs of Institutional Racism and Its Ethical Implications for Healthcare, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, vol 18, nr.1, pp. 45-58

⁶ Jumbunna Institute (Brown, C., DAlmada-Remedios, R., Gilbert, J. OLeary, J. and Young, N.) Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians, Sydney, Jumbunna Institute, 2020.

younger demographic who seek out companies that act pro-socially or ethically, and boycott those who do not⁷.

- **Economic Outcome:** At a systemic level, workplace racism contributes to ongoing employment and income inequities and reinforces underrepresentation of First Nations peoples in leadership roles, where they make up less than 1% of senior positions nationally.⁸

Importantly, racism is experienced not as isolated incidents but as repeated, everyday harm - often described by participants as “death by a thousand cuts.”⁹ These impacts extend beyond workplaces into families and communities.

Effective initiatives to combat workplace racism

DCA’s extensive research makes it clear that generic diversity initiatives are insufficient. Effective responses require explicit anti-racism action, particularly centred on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander experiences. DCA’s research identifies clear evidence-based approaches that are effective in reducing racism and its harms when they are led by people with lived experience and implemented systemically, not symbolically.

DCA identifies several initiatives that demonstrably reduce harm:

1. **Building racial literacy** across organisations, particularly among leaders and managers, so racism can be recognised, named, and addressed. Racial literacy is the ability to understand what racism is and how it operates in society so we can effectively address it. Organisations and institutions that reduce racism invest in ongoing, evidence-based anti-racism education that:
 - explicitly addresses race and colonisation in Australia
 - is delivered with involvement from people with lived experience
 - equips leaders and bystanders to name and respond to racism
 - develops racial humility, not defensiveness.
2. **Centring lived experience of racism** involving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees in the design, delivery, and evaluation of anti-racism initiatives. Initiatives are most effective when First Nations people are involved as equal partners in diagnosing problems, designing responses, delivering action, and evaluating outcomes. This includes:
 - co-design and co-decision-making
 - creating culturally and psychologically safe spaces
 - recognising and remunerating cultural load

⁷ Edelman, 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Brands and Racial Justice in America, 2020, <https://www.edelman.com/research/universal-demand-change>.

⁸ Minderoo Foundation, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) at Curtin University, and Murawin, 2022, Woort Koorliny - Australian Indigenous Employment Index 2022 National Report. Minderoo Foundation.

⁹ Racism at Work: How Organisations Can Stand Up to and End Workplace Racism (2022), page 25.

- moving beyond consultation to shared authority.

Centring the voices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees starts with the premise that people with lived experiences of racism are subject matter experts meaning their voices are central in racial matters and their experiences of racism are not easily questioned and minimised.¹⁰

3. **Auditing for racial equity**, including collecting race-based workforce, recruitment, promotion and complaint data. Australian organisations have been slow to measure workforce and leadership racial diversity due to the lack of a nationally legislated mandate. Where workforce analytics have been considered, these have focused on cultural diversity measures (e.g. country of birth, ancestry, or main language spoken at home) and steered away from racial diversity ones (e.g. person of colour, Black, Brown, or white). Racism remains invisible unless it is intentionally measured. Effective initiatives include:
 - ethical, culturally safe collection of race-based data
 - tracking the experiences of racism, not just representation
 - auditing recruitment, promotion, and complaint systems for racial bias
 - publicly reporting progress and outcomes
 - applying a racial lens to existing data points.
4. **Removing racial bias** from recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion systems through structured, transparent processes, including:
 - using structured application forms, evaluating candidates against the same criteria and anonymising job applicant candidates
 - looking past candidates who would be 'cultural fit' and look for applicants who are a 'cultural add' instead
 - utilising AI to eliminate, not amplify, racial bias.
5. **Removing racial bias in recognition and reward**: As with recruitment, racial biases (whether conscious and unconscious) nearly always leak into recognition and reward decisions, influencing ideas about who is (and is not) 'high performing talent' or 'leadership material.' This includes promotion, remuneration, development, client engagement, mentoring and sponsorship, awards and more. In Australia, racial bias in recognition and reward policies and practices favours whiteness and Westernness (specifically, Anglo-Celtic versions of these). Disrupting bias at this stage includes:
 - challenging what the ideal of 'high performing talent' and 'leadership material' looks like
 - reviewing performance evaluation frameworks through a racial lens
 - ensuring active mentorship and sponsorship occurs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander talent.
6. **Creating capacity to call out racism**, through training that equips staff to safely and consistently call out racism when it occurs. For people with lived experiences of racism, calling out racism can be

¹⁰ Diversity Council Australia (Mapedzahama, V., Ojinnaka, A., Deo, S. and O'Leary, J.), *Centring Marginalised Voices at Work: Lessons from DCA's Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) Women in Leadership Research*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2024.

unsafe because it requires emotional and psychological investment and sacrifice. So, while they know what racism looks and feels like, they often make conscious choices about when or if to call it out based on their racial and psychological safety. It is not a coincidence that many racist incidents go unreported – in fact, according to research, only about 16% of racist incidents are reported.¹¹ Many factors contribute to people with lived experiences consciously choosing to not report racism including:

- language barriers
- not being aware of reporting mechanisms and support services
- lack of trust in the organisation
- fear or retribution and victimisation¹²

The current system for reporting workplace racism is failing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers. Evidence indicates that:

- Only 1 in 5 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported being in workplaces with both training and complaint procedures that address racism".¹³
- Fear of retaliation, lack of trust, overly complex procedures, and historical experiences of minimisation lead to significant underreporting.
- Where organisations have both anti-racism training and clear grievance procedures, rates of racial slurs and unfair treatment are substantially lower.

There is little consistency across jurisdictions or sectors, and outcomes are often slow, opaque, and inadequate.

Structural and policy implications

This inquiry presents an opportunity to address long-standing gaps, including:

- the absence of mandatory race-based workforce reporting comparable to gender reporting
- lack of enforceable standards for culturally safe workplaces
- insufficient accountability for senior leaders and boards where racism persists in the workplace.

Without structural reform, responsibility for managing racism will continue to fall disproportionately on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individuals themselves.

¹¹ Peucker, M., Clark, T., & Claridge, H. (2023). *Mapping the journey of (non-)reporting in response to racism*. Journal of Intercultural Studies.

¹² Ibid, Peucker, M., Clark, T., & Claridge, H. (2023)

¹³ Jumbunna Institute (Brown, C., DAlmada-Remedios, R., Gilbert, J. OLeary, J. and Young, N.) Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians, Sydney, Jumbunna Institute, 2020.

Conclusion

The evidence is unequivocal: racism against Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples remains widespread in Australian workplaces, producing profound harm at individual, organisational, and societal levels. Racism, hate, and violence are not accidental - they are the product of systems that continue to privilege some voices and marginalise others.

This inquiry presents a critical opportunity to move beyond awareness to sustainable systemic change, grounded in lived experience, backed by accountability, and embedded in law and policy.

Please feel free to contact us at admin@dca.org.au, should you require any further information about this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Diversity Council Australia

Relevant DCA research and resources

- [Racism at Work](#)
- [Inclusion@Work Index 2025-2026](#)
- [Intersectionality at work](#)
- [Centring Marginalised Voices at Work](#)
- [Culturally and racially marginalised \(CARM\) women in leadership](#)
- [Inclusive Recruitment At Work](#)
- [Class inclusion at work](#)