



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

### Inquiry into Racial Vilification

**Submission Number: 03**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 30 March 2022**



## **SUBMISSION TO THE EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION COMMITTEE'S INQUIRY INTO RACIAL VILIFICATION IN THE ACT MARCH 2022**

### **ROLE OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMISSIONER (CYPC)**

The Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) is one of eight independent statutory roles that together make up the ACT Human Rights Commission. Together these roles promote the human rights and welfare of all people living in the ACT and have legislative responsibility for protecting some of Canberra's most vulnerable citizens.

The role of CYPC includes:

- promoting the rights of children and young people,
- consulting and talking with children and young people and promoting their participation in decision-making,
- ensuring that stakeholders listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people, and
- providing advice to government and community agencies about how to improve services for children and young people.

The CYPC is also the ACT Public Advocate.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This not only includes decisions relating directly to their individual circumstances, but also policies, frameworks and legislation that affect children and young people as a cohort and as citizens.

Racism significantly impacts children and young people, making their experiences a key element of the overall social context of racism in the ACT. It is essential that children and young people's perspectives and experiences are actively sought to inform any investigation of, or initiatives to address, racism. Failing to recognise, understand and incorporate their experiences and perspectives will result in responses to racism that are, at best, partially effective.

In reviewing the adequacy of legal frameworks and reporting mechanisms, and the possibility of an anti-racism framework for the ACT, I strongly advocate for the Committee's inquiry to encompass the unique experiences and perspectives of children and young people. To this end, the CYPC's submission centres on the following three key areas, which I encourage the Committee to further explore through its inquiry:

1. Addressing current gaps in understanding the impact of racism on children and young people
2. Incorporating the findings from the CYPC's direct consultation with children and young people regarding their experiences and perspectives of racism in the ACT (currently underway)
3. Taking active steps to ensure the inquiry is accessible to children and young people and that recommendations are relevant to the breadth of experiences of racial vilification in the ACT, including by directly seeking the views of children and young people and establishing mechanisms by which to 'test' recommendations with a representative sample of children and young people.

While the Committee's inquiry references 'racial vilification', this submission uses the term 'racism' to reflect the broader context within which children and young people experience race-based discrimination and abuse in the ACT. To this end, it is important to recognise that children and young people's experiences of racism are not confined to single, reportable incidents, but to patterns of behaviour and exclusion that have long term impacts and outcomes.

## **ADDRESSING GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF RACISM ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **The social context of racism experienced by children and young people in the ACT is not well understood.**

Notably, the CYPC has found through our own research that:

- despite the prevalence of racism in Australia, there is limited research focused on children and young people's experiences of racism
- the deleterious impact on children and young people's physical health, mental health and education outcomes is well established, but there are gaps in understanding how children and young people understand and experience racism
- research suggests all forms of discrimination are experienced at higher rates by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- there is a tendency to silence conversations about racism with young children.

The following brief overview of these key points, which have emerged from the CYPC's research, is not intended to diminish the complexity and multidimensionality of racism that affects children and young people but provides a starting point for further investigation of the issues.

#### ***❖ Despite the prevalence of racism in Australia, there is limited research focused on children and young people's experiences of racism***

Not enough is understood about the ongoing impact of racism on children and young people in Australia (Shepherd et al: 2017). Vicarious racism, racism within friendship groups and neighbourhoods, and racism online are among the least understood aspects of racism in Australia (Ben et al 2021).

Although it is difficult to establish the true prevalence of racism, due to differences between studies and a reluctance among those who experience ambiguous actions to attribute these to racism (Bodkin-Andrews et al: 2017), several studies demonstrate that it is a significant stressor for children and young people in Australia (Hunter, et al: 2020; Priest, et al: 2017; Fahd, et al: 2019).

The Speak Out Against Racism study (Priest, et al:2017), which interviewed 4,600 primary and secondary students in New South Wales and Victoria, found that:

- 31 per cent of all students reported racism from peers
- 12 per cent reported racism by teachers (with much higher rates among some population groups, including 30 per cent of African students and 22 per cent of Middle Eastern and South Asian students reporting racism by teachers)
- 60 per cent of students reported seeing racism against peers.

It should also be noted that a proportion of the research in Australia is critiqued for prioritising the perspectives of the white majority, thereby further silencing those who experience racism on a daily basis (Bodkin-Andrews et al: 2017). This leads to racism often being framed as an interpersonal experience without exploring the complex dynamics of community-wide experiences, intergenerational disadvantage, and systemic racism that act at both societal and individual levels.

All aspects of racism, both relational and structural, should be relevant to the Committee's inquiry.

❖ ***The deleterious impact on children and young people's physical health, mental health and education outcomes is well established, but there are still gaps in understanding***

Studies in Australia show that children and young people who experience racism are more likely to experience poor mental health (anxiety, depression, suicide risk and low self-esteem), sleep problems, and asthma (Shepherd et al:2017). There is also growing evidence of a greater likelihood of feelings of alienation and disengagement from school, and lower test results, among children and young people experiencing racism (Cave, et al: 2019).

Further, evidence indicates that racism is often experienced alongside others forms of discrimination and there is increasing understanding that the cumulative effect of multiple forms of discrimination has more devastating impacts, with indications that children and young people who experience two or more forms of discrimination are significantly more likely to evidence harmful mental health outcomes than their peers (Evans-Whipp; 2021).

Interestingly, however, a clear understanding about how other forms of discrimination intersect with racism was not reflected in the studies reviewed by the CYPC.

While acknowledging that this inquiry is focused on racial vilification, I respectfully encourage the Committee to recognise that intersectionality is an important consideration underpinning the experience of racism for children and young people.

❖ ***Research suggests all forms of discrimination are experienced at higher rates by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people***

It is widely recognised that systemic racism continues to underpin the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from their families, and that this reflects both historical and contemporary racism (Hunter, et al: 2020). Given the ACT has the highest rate of removals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the country (despite efforts in recent years to address this), it is important to ensure a continuing focus on this within the context of this inquiry.

A previous literature search on discrimination also suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experience discrimination based on body appearance (Evans-Whipp; 2021), sexual and gender identity, and disability, at higher rates than other children and young people.

Although difficult to quantify due to the intersectionality of different forms of discrimination, this trend should be highlighted. That is, racism and race-based vilification needs to be understood not in isolation, but as a contributing factor to other forms of discrimination.

Of further note is that health inequities in Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are linked to historic and contemporary racism, colonialism, and oppression to the extent that racism is recognised as a public health issue (Paradies et al: 2008).

❖ ***There is a tendency to silence conversations about racism with young children***

Children are often assumed not to notice racial differences and therefore not to enact prejudice (Walton, et al: 2014), with a prevailing narrative about children's innocence and blind acceptance of others. Associated with this, there is a tendency by parents and teachers to silence discussions of racism, in part due to the belief that to point out difference will create prejudice where it is not present (Priest, et al: 2014).

However, studies show children as young as five can recognise racial prejudice and begin to enact prejudice, and that this discriminatory behaviour often peaks between five and seven years old (Cave et al: 2019; Priest et al: 2014). It is also clear that when more subtle forms of racism, which are more difficult for children to identify, are left unchallenged or undiscussed by adults, prejudice and inequality are reinforced (Priest, et al: 2014).

## INCORPORATING FINDINGS FROM THE CYPC CONSULTATION WITH ACT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

**For racism to be addressed effectively children and young people must be listened to.** The decision to focus my office's major consultation this year on racism was driven in part by the lack of child-centric evidence and practice regarding children and young people's experiences, as outlined above.

As part of the preparation for this consultation, my office undertook a literature review that illustrated the gaps in understanding about the impact of racism on children and young people. There is little information about experiences of racism nationally (Ben et al, 2021:2), and even less focused on the ACT. There are also specific gaps in understanding the experiences and attitudes of children and adolescents (Priest et al, 2020:3; Runions, et al 2011; Carrington et al, 2017).

It is clear through our work to date that hearing from children and young people on this topic will be of benefit to government and community sectors, as well as to children and young people themselves.

The aims of our consultation are therefore to:

1. Enable children and young people to tell their own truth about racism in the ACT, through reflection and storytelling, both individually and within groups.
2. Investigate how children and young people identify themselves in terms of racial or cultural diversity (including the terms they prefer to use).
3. Find out who is speaking to children and young people about race, racism, and anti-racism; and where these conversations are taking place.
4. Explore their ideas on anti-racism in ACT, including their views on the strengths of children and young people to contribute to anti-racism.

This consultation will contribute a new source of information and understanding to help address racism in the ACT, including recommendations that enable:

- strategies to promote anti-racism more effectively as a result of being relevant and responsive to children and young people's own experiences
- improved discussion about racism and anti-racism initiatives with children and young people by grounding them in the concepts and language that resonate with children and young people themselves
- awareness-raising initiatives to target the spaces that children and young people feel safe to speak and learn about race, as well as more effectively targeting and building new narratives into the spaces that are currently silent, or that are blatantly or inadvertently condoning racism.

The consultation is in two parts. The first of these is already underway and involves participatory discussions on racism, children and young people's experiences and the priorities they want us to focus on. The second part, a qualitative survey, will be designed from and through the participatory discussions and distributed widely across the Territory. Alongside these primary consultation methods exists an open option for children and young people to provide input in their own way through the CYPC's [Young Thinker Forum](#). Using a multi-faceted approach will enable us to gain in-depth information from face-to-face conversations, as well as feedback from a wide range of children and young people living in the ACT.

Preliminary findings from both parts of the consultation will be available by September 2022 and I strongly recommend that space be made to incorporate these into your report, which I note will be finalised by the end of September. Without listening to the nuanced perspectives of children and young people, which are often different to those of adults, there is a risk that the initiatives and recommendations stemming from the Inquiry will not be relevant or accessible to this significant population group. I would be pleased to brief the Committee as our consultation unfolds, particularly in view of the overlapping time frames.

## ENSURING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF THE INQUIRY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, AND THAT THEIR VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES ARE APPROPRIATELY CONSIDERED

**Children and young people are the experts in their own lives** and the only ones who truly understand their lived experiences – no one knows what it is like to be a child today better than children themselves. Further, children and young people have the right to have their views heard about issues that impact their lives and to be involved in decisions that affect them.

I am only too aware, through both our current consultation and my everyday work as Children and Young People Commissioner, that racism affects children on a daily basis in the ACT. As one young person recently said when discussing examples of micro aggression and casual racism, “oh yeah, that happens all the time”.

Any efforts to address racism will require children and young people to be actively engaged both by ensuring opportunities for them to meaningfully contribute to our understanding about how it manifests in their experiences of community life, and by empowering them to give effect to the solutions.

Ensuring children and young people can share their knowledge and experiences with the Committee will enable the Inquiry and any resulting recommendations to be more relevant and effective. In particular, hearing from children and young people themselves provides a different perspective to an approach that relies on the voices of adults, even when they genuinely believe themselves to be speaking on behalf of children and young people.

Further, the success of recommendations made by the Committee in respect of initiatives, programs, policies and legislation will only be fully recognised if they are encompassing of the needs of children and young people and, more importantly, considered by children and young people as being relevant to their experiences. To this end, I would encourage the Committee to establish mechanisms so that children and young people can comment on solutions to ensure they are appropriately reflective of, and responsive to, their experiences.

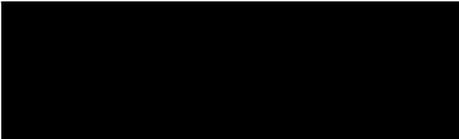
As Children and Young People Commissioner, I am well placed to support the Committee to safely incorporate children and young people’s input through the technical expertise and advice of my office. I invite you to get in touch to discuss the ways the Committee can provide opportunities for children and young people to contribute to this Inquiry and enable their views to be sought about initiatives that may result from it, including a possible anti-racism strategy for the ACT.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to its Inquiry and commend the Legislative Assembly for recognising the importance of this issue in advancing a more inclusive ACT community.

Should the Committee be interested in discussing ways by which to engage the views of children and young people in this Inquiry, I reiterate my invitation for you to contact my office either by phoning 6205 2222 or by emailing [actkids@act.gov.au](mailto:actkids@act.gov.au).

Yours sincerely,



Jodie Griffiths-Cook  
Children and Young People Commissioner  
ACT Human Rights Commission

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