

Blueprint Institute

# Antisemitism in Australian schools

An examination



# Contents

- 1 Executive summary**
- 3 Introduction**
- 4 Antisemitism in schools**
  - 4 Poll results**
  - 8 Anti-Jewish sentiment persists as an issue within schools**
- 8 Factors at work**
  - 8 Conflation of the political and the personal**
  - 9 Apathy towards antisemitism amongst some members of the teaching workforce**
  - 10 Cultural factors**
  - 10 Poor pedagogical practices**
  - 11 Social media is not helping**
  - 12 Gender appears to play a role**
- 13 Recommendations**
  - 13 Use a local approach**
  - 13 Do things that actually work**
  - 15 Stay vigilant on disinformation**

# About Blueprint Institute

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For more information on the institute please visit our website: [blueprintinstitute.org.au](https://blueprintinstitute.org.au)

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# Attribution

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# Executive summary

This report centres on a recent survey, designed by Blueprint Institute and conducted by YouGov, aimed at measuring the prevalence and types of antisemitism manifesting within Australian public schools.

It is important to note that a rise in antisemitism—or indeed the vilification or dehumanisation of any minority group—have been shown to be leading indicators of democratic backsliding, and deteriorating levels of social cohesion. These are issues of critical importance to all Australians, regardless of race, background, or religion.

We have chosen to focus our analysis on public schools for pragmatic reasons, however there is evidence to suggest that unacceptably high levels of antisemitism also exist within independent schools.

The design of this paper and poll was finalised prior to the Hamas attacks of October 7th, however fieldwork for the poll itself was conducted throughout November 2023, during the aftermath of the attack, and the ongoing substantial loss of life in the Middle East.

The heightened political tensions and resulting expressions of hate motivated by the conflict have by no means been limited to the region, nor to Israeli citizens. The Executive Council of Australian Jewry have provisionally reported a 738% increase in reported antisemitic incidents in October and November of 2023 relative to the prior year.

Our poll, consisting of a nationally representative sample of 510 employees in the Australian public school workforce, has uncovered widespread reports of antisemitism in Australian primary and secondary schools.

61 of 510—or 12%—of educators said that they had witnessed, but had not been a direct victim of antisemitism. 103 respondents—or 20%—reported they had been informed by others of antisemitic incidents. One percent (five educators) indicated that they had been a direct victim of antisemitism. Our survey also asked about the frequency of antisemitic incidents, and our results suggest an average of approximately 75,000 incidents per year in government schools across the country.

The latest data from the 2021 census reports that the Australian Jewish community totals roughly 100,000 people, or just under 0.4% of the Australian population.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, Jewish students constituted well under one percent of the nationwide public school student population.

Our research indicates that there are a multitude of factors which may be influencing the levels of antisemitism in public schools, including—conflating the political with the personal, apathy towards antisemitism amongst some members of the teaching workforce, cultural factors, poor pedagogical approaches to teaching the Holocaust, and the influence of social media in spreading and normalising antisemitic content.

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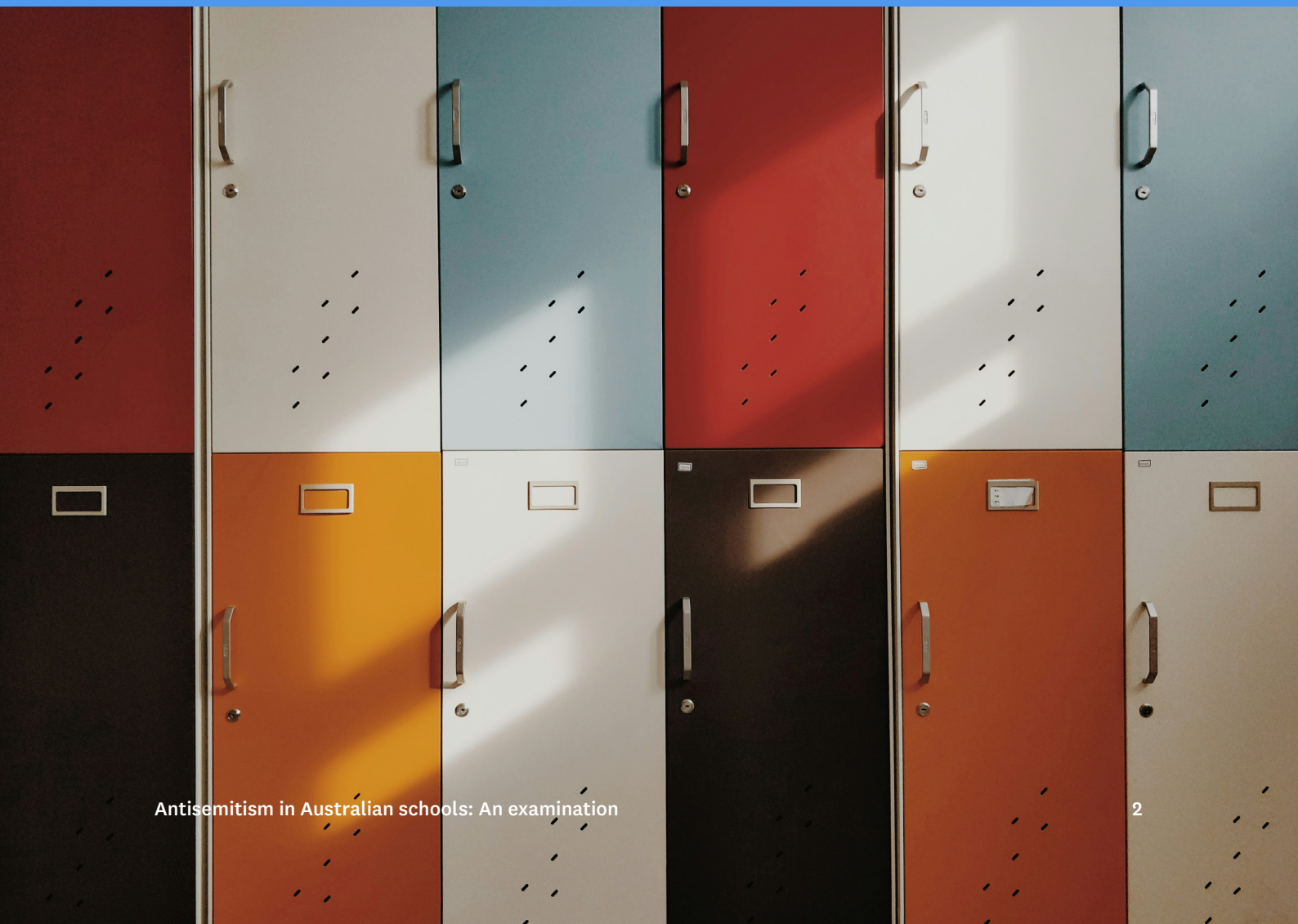
<sup>1</sup> As the current census question inquiring about one's religion does not include a dedicated box labelled Judaism, meaning people must write "Jewish" on the census document." Demographers believe that there is a level of undercounting and estimate that the true size of the community may be closer to 120,000.

Designing an effective set of interventions that reduces antisemitic incidents in public schools necessitates state and territory government action in schools and federal government action on social media. We recommend,

1. State education departments and schools analyse existing data—including incident reports and larger scale student surveys than the one we have been able to undertake—to identify geographic hotspots—areas with high rates of reported antisemitic behaviour. The results of this analysis will then allow the relevant state body to stage its response, focusing on the most urgent needs, and addressing the potentially idiosyncratic drivers behind local antisemitic incidents.
2. Once an understanding of the most urgent needs and their contributing factors has been developed, we recommend the deployment of evidence-based interventions designed to reduce antisemitism—examples

of which include updates to existing anti-racism frameworks, specialised professional development courses to identify and address contemporary manifestations of antisemitism, reforms to improve Holocaust education and pedagogy and targeted racial and religious anti-bullying campaigns. While senior leaders must ultimately be held accountable for reducing antisemitism in schools, we advocate for a bottom-up approach that empowers individual schools and the communities they serve to decide which interventions best suit their unique circumstances.

3. The federal government should prioritise the continued tracking and prevention of inflammatory international and domestic disinformation campaigns, particularly given that recent technological advances continue to lower the cost of creating and disseminating convincing disinformation at scale.



# Introduction

Antisemitism nurtures ideologies rooted in hate and prejudice, [threatening democratic principles](#) and the social stability of all countries in which it takes root. Antisemitism can exist and proliferate irrespective of the presence or size of a Jewish population. Throughout history, antisemitism has frequently been used as a tool by different entities as a means of furthering their own political agenda and continues to be perpetuated through myth, conspiracy and popular culture.

For the purposes of this report we have opted to define antisemitism in accordance with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s [working definition](#) of antisemitism, which is “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities”.

The most recent manifestation of antisemitism—termed ‘[new antisemitism](#)’—is inextricably linked with the politicisation of the Israel-Palestine conflict and occurs “[when legitimate criticism of Israel morphs into irrational hatred of Jews.](#)” As such, it frequently involves the application of antisemitic tropes being superimposed on the state of Israel. To this point, [some scholars](#) posit that as overt expressions of antisemitism have become socially unacceptable, criticism of Israel has become a proxy to express those same ideas.

Antisemitic bullying in schools results in negative educational outcomes for its victims. Students who are bullied have been shown to [perform worse](#) academically than their peers.



# Antisemitism in schools

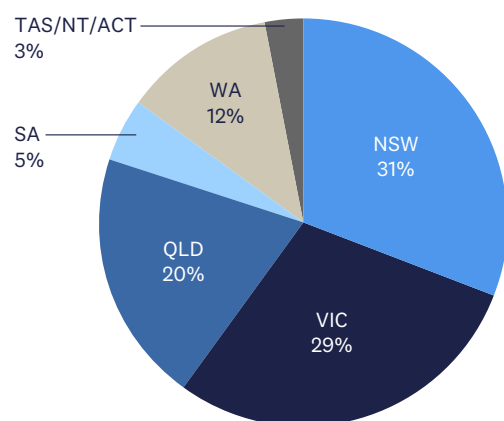
## Poll results

Blueprint Institute commissioned [YouGov](#) to conduct a poll with a nationwide sample of 510 Australian public school teachers and administrators. The primary intention of the poll was to measure the prevalence and types of antisemitism transpiring within Australian public schools.

It is important to note that while our polling is limited to reporting on antisemitism in public schools, for pragmatic reasons to do with sample availability, our broader research highlighted [clear evidence](#) that antisemitism is also a challenge in independent schools.

The sample population surveyed balanced demographic measures such as age, state of residence, and teaching level to ensure a sample broadly reflective of the overall population of employees in Australian public schools.

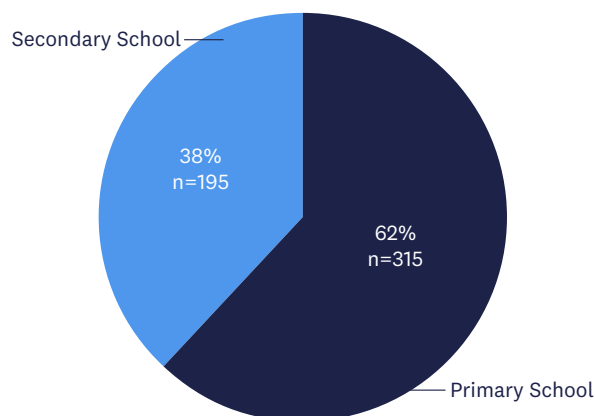
31% of those polled were employed in New South Wales, 29% in Victoria, 20% in Queensland, 12% in Western Australia, 5% in South Australia, and 3% in Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory combined. (**Figure 1a**).



**Figure 1a** Demographic representation of sample group (by location)

**Source** YouGov

62% of respondents worked in primary schools, and the remaining 38% in secondary schools. (**Figure 1b**).



**Figure 1b** Demographic representation of sample group (by teaching level)

**Source** YouGov

The vast majority—91%—of those surveyed were classroom teachers. The remaining 9% were either department heads or vice principals.

Out of 510 poll participants, 61—or 12%—of respondents reported that they had witnessed, but not been a direct victim of antisemitism. 103 educators—or 20%—said they had been informed by others of antisemitic incidents. Finally, five participants—or one percent—reported that they had been a direct victim of antisemitism.

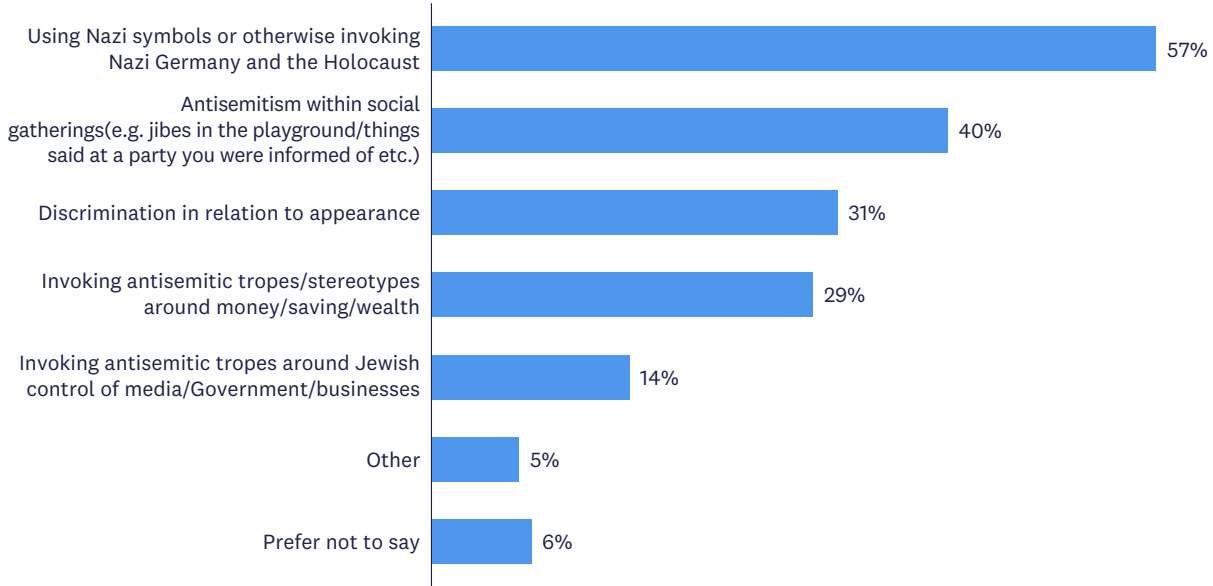
It is important to note the three aforementioned questions are not mutually exclusive—that is to say, some of the 61 who reported witnessing antisemitic incidents may also be included in the sample of 103 respondents who said they were informed by others of antisemitic incidents.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It would thus be inaccurate to add up 12%, 20%, and 1% and conclude that 33% of our sample had some encounter with antisemitism.

In total, 24% of our sample answered yes to one or more of the three questions asking if they had witnessed, been informed by others, and/or been a direct victim of antisemitism. This portion of our sample reported a mean rate of 1.64 antisemitic incidents per academic year. Given that there are approximately [193,000 teachers](#) employed in government schools nationwide, this data set suggests that there are roughly 75,000 antisemitic incidents each year.

[Prior studies](#), which have evaluated antisemitic bullying in schools, indicated that students were reluctant to report the behaviour for fear of experiencing further social alienation, suggesting the potential for our data to understate the incidence of antisemitism.

The most prevalent form of antisemitism reported included the use of Nazi symbols, or otherwise invoked Nazi Germany or the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> A significant proportion of incidents were of a less overt form, including the use of antisemitic jibes specifically in the playground or other social setting, and the use of antisemitic stereotypes (see [Figure 2](#)).

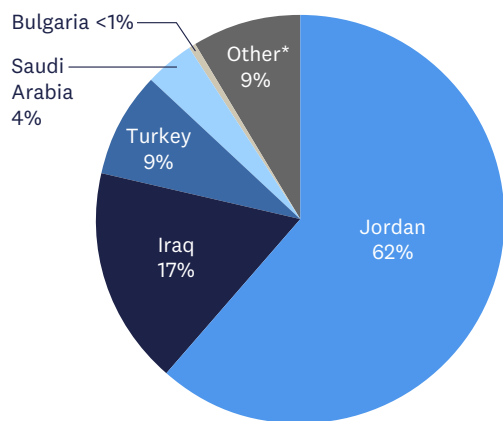


**Figure 2** Categories of antisemitism that public school teachers have either witnessed, been informed of, and/or directly experienced (Total respondents, n=120)

**Source** YouGov

<sup>3</sup> A 2021 [study](#) similarly found that Jewish students often faced verbal abuse referencing the Holocaust. Australia “has the highest percentage of [Jewish Holocaust survivors](#) on a pro-rata population basis after Israel.” The effects of [intergenerational trauma](#) on second and third generation Holocaust survivors have been well-documented. Therefore, taunts referencing the Holocaust or gas chambers have the potential to cause significant emotional distress for Jewish students.

In order to further investigate the relationship between the Israel-Palestine conflict and antisemitism, our poll first sought to determine the basic level of knowledge the participants had in relation to Israel. To explore this, we designed a question where participants were asked to identify—out of six options—the country which Israel shares a border with (see **Figure 3a**).



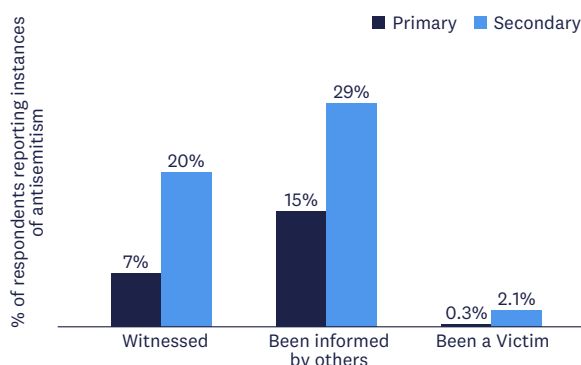
**Figure 3a** 62% of respondents were able to correctly identify Jordan as a country bordering Israel.<sup>4</sup> (Other\* denotes the percentage of those polled who answered ‘None of the above’)

**Source** YouGov

38% of poll respondents were unable to correctly identify Jordan as a country which borders

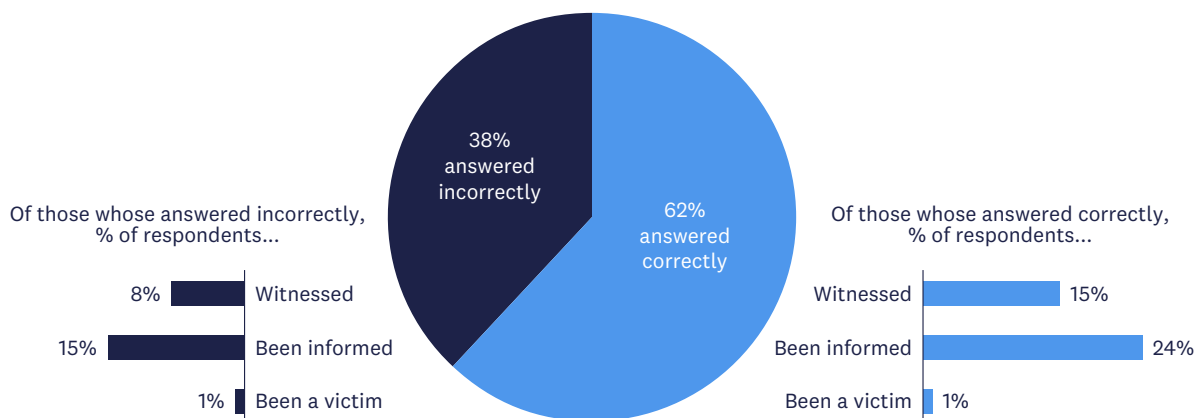
Israel. We found that the remaining 62% of poll respondents reported witnessing, being informed of, or directly experiencing antisemitism at a significantly higher rate—27%—relative to the respondents who answered the question incorrectly—18%. (see **Figure 3b**)

Incidents of antisemitism were reported as more prevalent in secondary school settings, with 35% of secondary school teachers and administrators compared to 16% of primary school teachers and administrators surveyed reporting they had directly experienced, witnessed, or been informed by others of antisemitism. (see **Figure 4**).



**Figure 4** Share of teachers who have witnessed antisemitism as a percentage of their respective teaching level.

**Source** YouGov



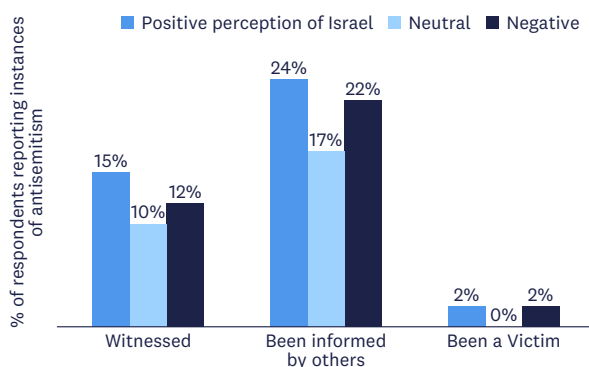
**Figure 3b** Share of teachers who have (in)correctly located Israel and have either witnessed, been informed of, and/or directly experienced antisemitism.

**Source** YouGov

<sup>4</sup> There are, of course, three other countries which also share a border with Israel, including Lebanon in the north, Syria in the northeast and Egypt in the southwest.

Our poll also asked respondents to rank their perception of Israel on a five-point scale from very negative to very positive. Neutral views were the most commonly reported at 45%. Thirty percent held a net negative perception of Israel and 25% of respondents reported a net positive perception of Israel (see **Figure 5**).<sup>5</sup>

Those who held net negative perceptions of Israel were marginally less likely to report incidents of antisemitism than those who held a net positive perception of Israel. Those who held neutral views were the least likely of all to report incidents of antisemitism (see **Figure 6**).



**Figure 6** Share of teachers who reported antisemitism, broken down by their reported attitudes towards Israel.

**Source** YouGov

Respondents who reported an emotive attitude toward Israel, whether negative or positive, were significantly more likely to correctly identify Jordan as the country bordering Israel relative to those who reported neutrality—65% to 57%, respectively.

Our poll included an optional open-ended question asking if “you have any thoughts about antisemitism in public schools”.

Four respondents provided comments that related not to a student’s experience of antisemitism, but explicitly conflated global political events with the question at hand, thus demonstrating the type of ‘new antisemitism’, discussed earlier. For example, one educator responded,

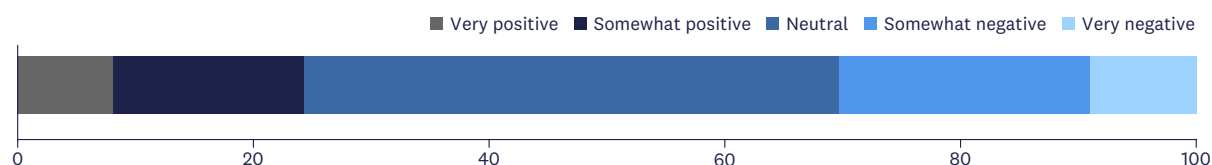
**“Israel is not a country FREE PALESTINE [sic].”**

A further 48 recognised some level of antisemitism in their school and offered various explanations for its prevalence, ranging from social media, to parents passing down their prejudices, to world events, and finally, a general ignorance to what Nazi symbology represents.

Eighty-four respondents said they had not experienced antisemitism, with one respondent noting:

**“I don’t know whether it is because of the demographic of the areas that I teach in or maybe it is because some people keep their Jewish connections private, but I don’t know of any Jewish people in the school communities I have worked in, which has meant I have not experienced antisemitism.”**

The notion that antisemitism is a narrow issue, only present in the few schools that have a Jewish community, is refuted by the data. By way of example, in New South Wales, 17% of respondents from a broad, representative sample of public schools reported witnessing antisemitism. That stands in stark contrast to the [three percent of schools](#) in New South Wales that have at least one Jewish student.



**Figure 5** Australian public school teachers’ attitude towards Israel (Total respondents, n=510)

**Source** YouGov

<sup>5</sup> [The Crossroads21](#) survey, found that more Australians reported their sympathies lay with Palestinians than Israelis—19% to 11%—respectively, but similarly found 61% expressed neutrality, the remainder did not know, or refused to answer the question.

# Anti-Jewish sentiment persists as an issue within schools

A decade ago, Rutland and Gross’ [ethnographic study of public schools](#) in Sydney and Melbourne found high levels of antisemitic bullying. Our research suggests little has improved.

Recent media reports from both the independent and public school sector provide insight into the antisemitism students continue to experience.

In Sydney, students at [Knox Grammar](#) praised Hitler in a private Discord server called ‘Gang Gang.’ At the prestigious [Cranbrook School](#), Jewish students were subject to antisemitic slurs and Nazi salutes. At the nearby [Rose Bay Secondary College](#), a student was told by another student that he would go back in time and become Hitler to “hunt down his family and stop the bloodline.” Jewish students and teachers at Waverley College reportedly felt it necessary to [transfer](#) to escape the school’s “[strong culture of antisemitism](#).” These are just a few examples of this broader phenomenon.

## Factors at work

Our research indicates a range of possible factors influencing antisemitism in public schools including—conflation of the political with the personal, apathy towards antisemitism amongst some members of the teaching workforce, cultural factors, poor pedagogical approaches, and the effect of social media in spreading and reinforcing bias. Gender also appears to play a role.

### Conflation of the political and the personal

A [2021 survey](#) examining Australian attitudes to Jewish people, antisemitism, and Israel, found that Greens and Labor voters were far more likely to express sympathy with Palestinians than Coalition voters. When hostility towards Israel has become a feature of someone’s political identity, they may replicate antisemitic tropes without conscious understanding of the implications. This suggests those on the left may struggle to recognise antisemitism when it appears within its own ranks.

In New South Wales, Education Minister Prue Car recently [expressed disappointment](#) with the actions of the New South Wales Teachers Federation after they allegedly encouraged their members to wear Keffiyehs (Palestinian scarves) and take protest signs into the workplace as a

show of solidarity with the people of Gaza, noting, “it is inappropriate to be encouraging teachers to express political views in schools in either overt or clandestine ways... We have Jewish children in public schools. We have Palestinian children in public schools. ...we must make sure that political views that make people feel uncomfortable and unsafe are not being expressed...during school time.”

Members of the Jewish community, including Monash based academic Phillip Mendes, also expressed dismay at the response of the New South Wales Teachers Federation in the wake of the October 7 attacks, reporting that the Teachers Federation “did not consult with their Jewish members about their well-being, nor did they inquire about the well-being of Jewish students.” The Teachers Federation did however, on October 17, ten days after the attack, issue a statement, in which they attributed the root cause of the conflict to “[the unjust, and illegal occupation of Palestine](#).” The promotion of inflammatory rhetoric has the potential to incite vilification of Jewish students and teachers, and does little to shield vulnerable groups from discrimination.

Indeed, Arnold and Taylor argue that antisemitism has become something of an “[invisible prejudice](#)”, observing that well-meaning individuals, typically interested in social justice and cognisant of power structures, can minimise or deflect discussion of antisemitism by reverting to criticism of Israel.

One survey participant exemplified this attitude by responding to the question, "Do you have any thoughts you'd like to share about antisemitism in public schools in Australia?" with the following comment:

**"If the Isrealis stopped treating neighbouring countries and their people so bad people might not hate them so much [sic]."**

The implications of this for students are deeply troubling. Australian students are experiencing vilification and physical aggression, rationalised by disdain for the actions of a foreign government.

## Apathy towards antisemitism amongst some members of the teaching workforce

Our poll reported the existence of apathy amongst a subset of school communities and leaders apparently unwilling to treat antisemitic behaviour with the same level of concern as other forms of discrimination. One participant told us:

**"All I know is that there is a policy and code of conduct that states we are to report it (antisemitism). I have done this and it has had a negative impact on me. I have learnt to keep my head down and mouth shut, or risk losing my job."**

More than a third of those who participated in our poll (38%) could not correctly identify Israel's geographic neighbours, suggesting a potential lack of interest in or understanding of historical and geopolitical context, that may further contribute to apathy.

An example of this kind of apathy in context is provided by the events at [Brighton Secondary College](#) (BSC). In 2023, five Jewish men levied legal action against their former high school in a federal court case, *Kaplan v State of Victoria* (no. 8), claiming they were subjected to repeated antisemitic bullying during their time at the school from 2013 to 2020. The bullying included verbal abuse and taunts referencing their Jewish identity, prolific use of Nazi graffiti and, in the

case of one of the plaintiffs, physical assault.

The Court found that the principal and his staff had behaved negligently in failing to protect the former students from racial discrimination, and awarded damages to the victims. In the [judgement](#) Justice Mortimer expressed shock at the apparent indifference of Mr Minack and other staff at BSC to repeated antisemitic behaviour, commenting:

**"Mr Minack was not prepared to be empathetic or sympathetic towards Jewish students, their families, or issues dealing with Jewish people. He stubbornly refused to confront the extreme level of antisemitism at BSC in any real or systemic way."**

Justice Mortimer noted that even though the school had implemented other anti-bullying campaigns, there was no equivalent effort when it came to confronting antisemitism, despite its frequency.

In 2019 a five-year-old child at Hawthorn West Public School reportedly faced a barrage of antisemitic taunts including being labelled a ["Jewish cockroach."](#) Another 12-year-old Melbourne student was physically assaulted and forced to kiss the feet of another student in an incident that was filmed and later posted to social media. In both instances, the parents of the victims described the response from senior school leadership as ["dismissive"](#) and claimed that the school refused to recognise the antisemitic nature of the bullying.

[Rutland and Gross](#) have spent a decade interviewing students to research antisemitism and other forms of religious bullying in Australian schools. They noted that a common response from principals and senior leadership when confronted with instances of antisemitism is denial. Rutland argues that teachers themselves can also be perpetrators of religious bullying through reference to hurtful stereotypes. The clear imbalance of power between the teacher and student renders this form of bullying particularly harmful.

It is our proposition that when the use of antisemitic tropes or symbols go unchallenged by school leaders, such behaviour will likely proliferate.

## Cultural factors

Prejudicial views, including antisemitism, can be transmitted from one generation to the next. Indeed, our poll reported the existence of antisemitism in primary schools. 16% of primary school teachers and administrators surveyed reported they had directly experienced, witnessed, or been informed by others of antisemitism.

The influence of the family is central to shaping children's worldview. We postulate that primary school children exhibiting antisemitic behaviour may be echoing sentiments they have heard at home, and if such views are not sufficiently challenged will likely be carried into adolescence.

Two separate research projects in [Canberra](#) and [Sydney](#), uncovered high levels of [anti-Jewish sentiment](#) in specific schools with concentrations of Christian and Muslim populations respectively. Rutland, looking at schools in Western Sydney, found that many students had been “indoctrinated with myths and misconceptions about Jews.” Given that [research](#) shows that group norms are a key factor in individual bias, we believe it is reasonable to infer that cultural and religious factors contribute towards antisemitic behaviour. In the school context, this also means that if racist behaviour is left unchecked, there is a real risk that other students may further mimic the sentiments expressed by their peers.

## Poor pedagogical practices

Two pedagogical issues have emerged from our research—a potential over-reliance on narrowly defined Holocaust education and issues around the choice and sequence of some literature texts.

When it comes to combating antisemitism, the go-to response is often to emphasise the importance of Holocaust education. Indeed, teaching the Holocaust is part of Australia's national curriculum. But little else is specified—including how long should be spent teaching it. In effect, this means delivery can vary widely.

[Several studies](#) have indicated that Holocaust education does not in of itself inoculate students from uncritically perpetuating antisemitic tropes.

Indeed, some evidence even suggests that poorly designed Holocaust education can actually [make antisemitism worse](#). Europe is currently experiencing rising levels of antisemitism alongside [growth in Holocaust education](#).

[Evidence from Australia](#) has also found that discussions about the Holocaust can be a trigger for antisemitic behaviour. Some of our survey participants also provided evidence to this effect, noting that antisemitic incidents tended to arise “*usually in response to teaching about Judaism or Jewish history.*” Another respondent similarly noted that antisemitic

**“comments tend to arise when teaching topics that are directly related to Jewish people such as World War II and the Holocaust.”**

In the Brighton Secondary College case, for example, applicants alleged that the teaching of the graphic novel *Maus* resulted in an increase in antisemitic instances that went unchallenged by staff.

[Research](#) has stressed the need to round out Holocaust education with a broader study of Jewish history and culture to mitigate the risk of reducing Jewish identity to victimhood status. [Earlier studies](#) have also argued that Holocaust education should include an emphasis on pre- and post-war Jewish life and Jewish resistance.

The choice of and sequence of literature also seems to have a role to play.

John Boyne's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, adopts a perpetrator narrative, told from the perspective of a nine-year-old German boy Bruno, the son of an Auschwitz commandant, the story follows his friendship with Schmul, a young Jewish prisoner. However, [recent research](#) conducted by the Centre for Holocaust Education in the UK found that the book and film were responsible for perpetuating substantial misconceptions about the Holocaust.

In the Australian context, the book is on the [list of suggested texts](#) for stage 4 English in New South Wales, but students do not receive any Holocaust education until stage 5. Research suggests this sequencing [may result](#) in students rejecting what they have been taught in the history classroom to avoid cognitive dissonance stemming from what they learn in the book.

# Social media is not helping

Antisemitic bullying happens online as well as in person. Disinformation is also spread online, exacerbating and inflaming prejudice and harmful stereotypes. The problem also seems to be getting worse—both in terms of the role of bad actors, seeking to inflate domestic tensions, and because AI is making it [cheaper and easier](#) to spread dis- and misinformation.

Some of our poll participants commented on the potential for social media to reinforce pre-existing prejudices and desensitise students towards antisemitism.

One participant noted,

**“I feel like students don’t understand what actually happened and just copy the talk of adults they hear at home. Plus a lot of influence from social media.”**

Another participant echoed this sentiment. *“Students have access to so many devices and carry their families prejudices, and I believe students make ‘jokes’ about it and say hurtful things without knowing or understanding the full meaning and picture.”*

Given that social media algorithms are designed to reflect our own interests and viewpoints, it is easy for young people to become insulated from ideas which challenge their own. Social media can be a place where antisemitic tropes are perpetuated and thus normalised. Contributing to this risk is the existence of cloaked or coded forms of antisemitism, some of which may use humour to reinforce hurtful and derogatory stereotypes.

[Researchers](#) have found that algorithms employed by social media networks both amplify sensationalist content and aid in the spread of disinformation. YouTube, which [remains popular](#) amongst young Australians, can serve as an example. YouTube’s [algorithm works](#) by suggesting similar content of a more extreme nature. This can lead to the creation of echo chambers, distorted perceptions of reality, and, in some cases, radicalisation.

Evidence indicates that Jewish people are most likely to encounter antisemitism online. [A 2018 study](#) of European Jews found that 89% of those surveyed reported “antisemitism as the most problematic on social media, even before experiences with antisemitism in public places, in the media, and in politics.”

In Australia, a [2023 report](#) found antisemitic content across almost all social platforms investigated, with the highest rates across X (formerly Twitter) The volume of antisemitic content on X exceeded that found on minimally moderated platforms such as Gab, BitChute, and Telegram, “all of which...are known for hosting far-right users including white supremacists”. A high volume of antisemitic content on a mainstream platform such as X is highly concerning as it “may nudge people towards antisemitic views” and serve as a gateway where users may seek out more extreme views on other platforms.

The same researchers found poor removal rates across all platforms, an average of 10%, ranging from TikTok at 15% to YouTube and Gab, 4% and 3% respectively. This removal rate was well below that of the European Commission at 64%.

Indeed, most social media platforms have been complicit in the spread of disinformation and slow to curtail hate speech, often only acting when faced with immense public pressure. It was not until 2020 that Facebook made a concerted effort to crack down on [Holocaust denial](#) on its platform. The same year [analysis](#) of TikTok, one of the fastest growing social media platforms with over a billion users, identified the presence of extreme antisemitic messages in video clips, songs, comments, texts, pictures, and symbols.

Even explicitly vitriolic forms of antisemitism are generally able to escape censure often by changing terminology, for example replacing “Jew” with [“Zionist.”](#) The tendency to harass Jewish people or seek to hold all Jews accountable for the actions of the state of Israel is a disturbingly common practice.

Antisemitic information is not just created by individuals to propagate their own perspectives, but in the case of the current conflict between Israel and Palestine, [can also](#) be created, deployed or amplified by state actors such as [China](#), [Russia](#) and [Iran](#), in ways that may inflame domestic

tensions in Australia and other countries. While each of these countries have differing interests, they often share the common goal of discrediting and weakening the West.

Another challenge is the rapidly increasing ease and affordability of creating convincing fake content. One [study](#) estimates that the Russian entity responsible for [interference in the 2016 United States presidential election](#)—the Internet Research Agency—employed 400-600 staff at a cost of approximately US\$1.25 million per month. Compare this to last year when a [single person](#) used ChatGPT, along with other generative-AI powered software capable of creating photos and illustrations, to create a fully autonomous and relatively sophisticated disinformation tool. The project cost just [\\$400](#).

As governments—including our own—consider their policy towards generative AI, seeking to balance the [opportunities](#) for innovation and growth versus the [risks](#), bad actors have no qualms in adopting the new tools to generate disinformation, and promulgate antisemitism and other harmful stereotypes at scale and at little cost.

## Gender appears to play a role

In many of the detailed cases that have been aired in the media, both the perpetrators and victims of the bullying were male. This is consistent with [broader literature](#) on bullying, which has found males to more frequently be victims of bullying than females, including [racially-motivated bullying](#). One of our poll participants also made explicit reference to antisemitic bullying being a male problem:

**“There are some rare instances of students, overwhelmingly male, who will make use of gestures and phrases related to Nazis, always from a place of ignorance, who stop when the significance is explained to them.”**

# Recommendations

The current approach is clearly not working. Incidents of racism and antisemitism remain concerningly pervasive amongst the student population.

Interventions should be data-driven, reflect local context, engage communities, and deploy methods that have actually been shown to work, not just look good on paper. The federal government must also increase its vigilance around social media, both to reduce incidences of antisemitism and racism more broadly, as well as to shore up Australia's social cohesion and democracy.

## Use a local approach

We have shown that the frequency of antisemitic incidents in schools is disproportionately high relative to the proportion of Jewish students. However, these incidents are not evenly distributed, neither geographically, nor it appears by gender. Particularly given how stretched educators are, we suggest a stage-gated approach that concentrates the first wave of efforts on schools with higher rates of reported antisemitic instances, or 'hotspots', and engaging with local communities to develop targeted responses.

In order to identify these hotspots, and better assess the prevalence of antisemitism within each school and the role of gender than our sample of 510 educators would allow, state education departments should analyse data they already have on hand—including incident reports and large scale [student surveys](#). This should form a clear baseline against which to assess future progress. Schools should ensure they are consistently identifying and quantifying instances of racism in incident reports.

Then, we suggest engaging with school leaders to investigate and diagnose the underlying causes of the reported antisemitism, which should inform the approaches taken to reducing it.

We also believe schools and their leaders should be held to account for improving outcomes for students. All students deserve to feel safe in their school environment. This means both

challenging and empowering schools with the responsibility to diminish antisemitic instances within a defined time-frame, providing them access to effective resources and holding them to account. Apathy should not be an option.

## Do things that actually work

This work is hard. Racism is [rife](#) in Australia, and bullying is a perennial problem in schools. Nevertheless, some programs and approaches have much higher success rates than others, and some work better in specific settings. A one-size-fits all approach is rarely the key to success in driving change in a school context. Schools and their communities are distinct, and we believe there is a need to develop school-specific behavioural and pedagogical strategies to address antisemitic behaviour. We recommend considering:

**Name the problem.** We've seen apathy is an issue, so a critical first step is to explicitly call out antisemitism as a form of prohibited discrimination in relevant education policy documents, supporting tools and training. This should include ensuring that industrial instruments are aligned with updated discrimination policies and being used to genuinely hold staff to account. Specifically, in instances where principals or staff have behaved negligently or inappropriately, Departments should take appropriate disciplinary action. Right now, these approaches are patchy across the country. They shouldn't be.

**Start young.** Anti-bullying programs have been [shown](#) to be most effective with younger children. Our poll shows antisemitism is already a problem in primary school, so programs targeted at students should start in primary school.

**Tailor approaches.** Approaches should be tailored to the specific cohorts where issues are known to exist. For example, where boys are shown to be disproportionate perpetrators of antisemitic behaviour, approaches should be targeted to this population.

**Educate the educators.** [Research](#) shows the benefits of appropriate professional development in helping teachers identify overt and covert incidents of racism, a crucial first step in tackling it. Departments should urgently focus first on schools with higher rates of antisemitism. Programs should illuminate contemporary manifestations of antisemitism and teach bias-recognition, as seen implemented in professional development [abroad](#). Some Australian options include those provided by [Jewish Christian Muslim Association](#), [Yad Vashem](#), [The Sydney Jewish Museum](#), [Jewish Museum of Australia](#), [Melbourne Holocaust Museum](#), [Courage to Care](#) and [Together for Humanity](#).

**Do deep work.** Scientists recognise that individual bias is [often hard to shift](#). Therefore, programs that are effective in addressing bias are typically not one-off in-class programs, but rather take a deeper approach to driving change. An example is [High Resolves](#), which uses an immersive peak experience, reinforced through repeated practice and application in the real world over time to help students build a greater sense of empathy, self awareness, and collective responsibility.

Story-telling has also been shown to be an important factor in shifting perception. The program [Respect Understanding and Acceptance](#) (an initiative run by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies) is designed to facilitate empathy and understanding amongst different faith-based groups and “breaks down barriers between students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds by having them share stories about their culture, demonstrate rituals and discuss multiculturalism and racism.”

**Get communities involved.** Racism can be inherited, and groups who themselves have experienced racism can also be part of the problem. Rutland, who has [extensively researched](#) the challenges and opportunities for dealing with antisemitism directed at Jewish students from some Muslim students, notes the importance of connecting with families of Muslim students. Indeed, [research](#) in social psychology has stressed that changes to individual bias are best achieved through changes in group norms, via larger group experiences.

**Shore up pedagogy.** We’d suggest schools not teach texts that are shown to exacerbate misconceptions or inflame antisemitism (like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*), but if schools insist, then at the very least they should be sequenced and contextualised appropriately.

Holocaust education also tends to be best received when contextualised by teachers who are able to connect the Jewish experience to that of other students. For example, Rutland has [found that](#) Holocaust education is “needed to expose some of the myths...that propagate anti-Jewish feeling. It can be incorporated into an anti-racism curriculum ...provided it is adapted to the particular needs of (the) group”, noting that “the most effective form of anti-racism education occurs when an empathetic teacher integrates it into a broad curriculum area such as History or English.”

**Be explicit about what modern antisemitism is.** Holocaust education, however nuanced in design, may leave students ill-prepared to identify modern manifestations of antisemitism and create the perception that antisemitism is a thing of the past. Understanding the evolving nature of antisemitism and the manner in which it can manifest in different social and political contexts is critical to addressing it in the present day. We therefore recommend that a focus on contemporary forms of antisemitism be included in the syllabus—for example, in the mandatory PDHPE curriculum.

Most importantly, we encourage Ministers and state education heads to hold their teams to account for making a dent in the results.

# Stay vigilant on disinformation

The federal government must take a proactive stance on mis- and dis-information.

We argue that subsequent federal governments have failed to stay ahead of the problem, particularly given, as discussed, the recent advent and growth of AI technologies that are making it cheaper and easier than ever to create and spread convincing disinformation at scale. We're not alone in this view.

In late 2023, the chief scientist at the University of New South Wales's AI institute, Toby Walsh, was [quoted](#) as saying "Australia sadly remains at the back of the pack in terms of responding to the opportunities and risks AI poses."

Education departments should consider comprehensive media literacy programs designed to equip students with critical thinking and source evaluation skills from a young age. Students who display a high level of critical thinking, deductive reasoning and self reflection are more likely to be resilient to the spread of disinformation.

