

Can do better: mapping ordinary anti-racism and pro-sociality in Victoria

What this research is about

The research addresses the relatively neglected subject of anti-racism in Australia. Forms of day-to-day anti-racism action and prosocial intercultural interaction already exist, often in public and semi-public places. Yet they have received little attention in anti-racism research and practice, programs and policymaking. To our knowledge, this is the first global survey to examine everyday anti-racism practices on such a large scale, and the first to quantitatively measure 'transversal enabler' practices, for creating connections between people from different cultural backgrounds who inhabit the same locality.

The research maps the frequencies and forms of everyday anti-racism and prosocial attitudes and interaction in Victoria; identifies the factors and social variations that underlie everyday action; and explores transversal enabler practices quantitatively, including their prevalence. It indicates a gap between positive dispositions towards cultural diversity and actual involvement in practices that foster social transformation. We suggest that Victorians can do better on everyday pro-sociality and make a series of recommendations on strategies to inform anti-racism practice, program and policies for more meaningful and deeper intercultural engagement.

Key Findings

This research is based on a Victoria-wide online survey (n: 4516) on dispositions and actions towards intercultural relations and pro-sociality.

Our findings highlight five key areas that are significant for furthering anti-racism action.

1. Prosocial attitudes, interactions, and trust

- A considerable majority of the respondents (80%) reported enjoying cross-cultural contact, readiness to meet people from different cultural backgrounds, comfort and confidence in socialising interculturally, and were ready to meet people from different cultures.
- Only half of the respondents (49.6%) reported interacting with Indigenous people.
- A majority of respondents (68.1%) had trust in people of different cultural backgrounds, with slightly less trust (62.8%) reported for people of different religious beliefs.

2. Transversal enablers

- While there was a high-level of readiness for transversal enabling (TVE) (85%), there was a lesser likelihood to make an effort to do so (45-60%). There was even fewer respondents reported that they had served as a bridge between people of different cultures (34%).
- Most respondents (64%) said they get upset when hearing racist comments and would take action in family and social settings if they witnessed racism. However, only half reported being prepared to act in public settings (e.g. workplaces) and to defend strangers from racism, with a third unsure about taking action.
- About two thirds (65.7%) of respondents said they interrupt racist conversations when they hear them in their family, and 60.8% do so with their friends. Fewer respondents (52.6%) reported interrupting such conversations at their workplace.
- Preparedness to participate in collective anti-racist action was found in only one-third of respondents.
- Religious non-Christians were more committed to intercultural interaction and anti-racist practices compared to Christians and the non-religious.

3. Experiences of racism

- Antipathy towards out-groups in Victoria follows national trends, with Islamophobia being the strongest manifestation of targeted intolerance. Rates of intolerance towards African, Jewish and Aboriginal Australians were higher in Victoria, relative to national trends.

4. Concerns about intermarriage

- Only 57.9% felt they could develop a romantic relationship with someone from a different cultural group. Large portions reported concerns about intermarriage to out-groups, especially to a Muslim person at 61.3%.

5. Demographic variations

- Prosocial anti-racist attitudes, cross-cultural interaction and everyday anti-racism were consistently higher among people residing in metropolitan areas, women, younger people, people born overseas, and people who hold higher education, are employed, and earn a higher income (with more mixed findings based on age and indigeneity).
- Women were more likely to agree with statements about prosocial attitudes and reported consistently more involvement in anti-racism, while engagement in transversal enabling practices varied between women and men.

What this research means for policymakers

We recommend five strategies to inform anti-racism practice, programs and policies.

1. Challenge stereotypes and misinformation

Develop an action plan to lift the scope for all Victorians to hear from Indigenous Australians on colonialism and dispossession and their ongoing effects.

2. Disrupt misinformation

Reduce widespread intolerance towards Muslim, African, Jewish and Aboriginal Australians as an urgent anti-racism imperative.

3. Encourage prosocial action

Lift the expectation that ordinary people will take prosocial action to assist people not from their immediate orbit of relations. Enhance awareness of the extraordinary benefits of prosocial action against racism. This includes transversal enabling and everyday anti-racism, which bear dividends in terms of a sense of belonging and citizenship.

4. Learn from transversal enablers

Examine why religious non-Christians are more prepared for cross-cultural interaction than Christians and the non-religious, including the motivations and tactics behind this difference, in order to lift anti-racism among Christians and the non-religious.

5. Target particular groups and localities

The potential structural effects of anti-racist action need to be emphasised and celebrated. Demonstrate how, if a sufficient number of people in a given locality or setting speak up against racism, it is possible to affect norms in those settings.

Why is this important

The anti-racist capacities of everyday Australians are critical to confronting racism and the successful stewardship of diversity and thriving intercultural relationships. In the face of racism, we see instances of inter-personal prosocial action, support and mutual care. Everyday pro-sociality, expressed in practices such as helping, learning, sharing and other forms of exchange, can enhance belonging and reduce prejudice and conflict between groups.

The context of this research

Racism in Australia has derived initially from colonialism, exploitation, expropriation, and competition with Indigenous peoples, and later extended into discrimination and exclusion of different immigrant populations. Victoria has increasingly recognised and condemned racism. The Victorian Government established an Anti-Racism Taskforce and has had ambitions to develop a state-wide Anti-Racism Strategy. Efforts at the national level have included the development of an Anti-Racism Framework by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Anti-racism initiatives must rely on robust scholarly evidence and high-quality data. The data in this policy brief provide direction on how policies and strategies can aim to lift anti-racism capacity and action among everyday Victorians.

Methodology

An online survey of 4,516 Victorians, aged 18 years of age or older, was conducted between 16 November 2020 and 20 January 2021, several weeks after Victoria's 112 days of lockdown due to COVID-19.

The survey asked respondents about their prosocial attitudes and interaction, experiences of racism and discrimination, concerns about intergroup marriage, and everyday anti-racism.

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) is an independent think-tank, researching some of the trickiest challenges that our society is facing – racism, societal division, systemic bias and disadvantage, economic inequities, extremism and discrimination.

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Further readings

Dunn, K., Ben, J., Sharples, R., Denson, N., Elias, A., Mansouri, F., McGarty, C., Paradies, Y., Şahin, Ö. (2024). 'Can do better': Mapping Ordinary Anti-racism and Pro-sociality in Victoria. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies.

Ben, J., Elias, A., Sharples, R., Dunn, K., McGarty, C., Truong, M., Mansouri, F., Denson, N., Walton, J., & Paradies, Y. (2022). Identifying and filling racism data gaps in Victoria: A stocktake review. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. <https://doi.org/10.56311/MQVN2911>

Dunn, K., Sharples, R., Mansouri, F., Paradies, Y., Vergani, M., McGarty, C., & Elias, A. (2021). *Countering Islamophobia in the Victorian Population*. Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. <https://doi.org/10.56311/CEMO4002>