Australian Human Rights Commission

Celebrating 40 years

The struggle to be seen, the power in being heard:

Community insights from the Seen & Heard project

April 2026

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission (the Commission) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land, sea, waterways, and sky throughout Australia and pays respect to First Nations Elders past and present.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the significant emotional toll this period has had on all affected communities in Australia. We recognise the hurt and pain that many have endured and continue to experience. Despite the grief, fear, and concerns about safety and professional consequences, community members generously contributed their time and lived experiences to this project. They shared glimpses of their resilience and strength. We are deeply grateful for their openness, courage, and trust.

We also recognise the support and leadership of the Race Discrimination Commissioner, Giridharan Sivaraman, and the expertise and guidance provided by the Race Discrimination Team. Their commitment to truth telling and supporting affected communities were essential in shaping this work

Cover image: iStock-1306179425

ISBN: 978-1-921449-25-3

About the Australian Human Rights Commission

Our vision is an Australian society where human rights are respected, promoted and protected and where every person is equal in dignity and rights.

The Commission's key functions include:

- Access to justice: We help people to resolve complaints of discrimination and human rights breaches through our investigation and conciliation services.
- Fairer laws, policies and practices: We review existing and proposed laws, policies and practices and provide expert advice on how they can better protect people's human rights. We help organisations to protect human rights in their work. We publish reports on human rights problems and how to fix them.
- Education and understanding: We promote understanding, acceptance and public discussion of human rights. We deliver workplace and community human rights education and training.
- Compliance: We are the regulator for positive duty laws requiring employers and others to address sexual harassment, sex discrimination and other unlawful conduct.

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Contents

Timing of the report

Seen & Heard concluded its community engagement activities in August 2025. It will deliver this insights report to the Australian Government in the aftermath of the horrific antisemitic terror attack at Bondi Beach. The Australian Human Rights Commission extends its condolences to the victims of the attack and their loved ones and acknowledges the profound grief of Jewish communities. The Commission also recognises that such incidents of violence impact on the broader community and are often accompanied by a heightened risk of racism and vilification, including increased hostility towards all communities that experience racism. The Commission reaffirms its commitment to confronting antisemitism and all forms of racism in Australia.

Seen & Heard

Commissioner foreword

Seen & Heard was launched in response to a sharp rise in racism following the events of 7 October 2023. At a time when many communities were experiencing fear, isolation and targeted harm, the project was established to offer support - in principle and in practice. It recognised that communities were not only under pressure, but under attack, and that any meaningful response had to begin with listening: listening to what was happening, how it was being experienced, and what those affected thought was needed to address it.

The violence of the events of 7 October 2023 and its devastating aftermath triggered a terrifying surge of antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism, anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia.

There was a rise in negative sentiment against people of Israeli background. Acknowledging these forms of harm does not equate them, nor does recognising one diminish the significance of another. Each form of racism is shaped by distinct histories, power dynamics and structural realities.

The impact of these events on communities in Australia has been profound - rippling through public life, unsettling private spaces, and forcing individuals and institutions alike to confront questions they might otherwise avoid. It has exposed an absence of nuance in our national discourse, revealing how ill-equipped we are to navigate difficult topics.

Community-led engagement has been at the heart of *Seen & Heard*. I have had the honour of attending gatherings with different communities, listening to their stories and bearing witness to their experiences.

Some occurred when people were trying to just go about their lives: verbal abuse on public transport, racist graffiti scrawled across community spaces, dismissive or hostile behaviour in shopping centres. These incidents of harassment and abuse, or worse, of physical harm and damage to property, can be terrifying to those targeted.

But what stood out was that most of the stories weren't about isolated acts of hate – they were about systems. Public outbursts of racism rarely happen in isolation - they are evidence of visible cracks in a system that has long ignored the fault lines. The sting of every racist slur, every hateful sign, is a reminder that the structures meant to safeguard us are standing still, allowing harm to flourish.

I spoke to a Palestinian woman whose university contract was not renewed because she wore a keffiyeh to work. A mother told me of her anger and hurt when her children's school principal suggested her children would be safer if they didn't mention they were Jewish. And I spoke to many others who described feeling blindsided that the country they were born and raised in now saw them as 'other', their sense of belonging and safety ripped out from under them.

> 'I'm walking down the street on a Friday night with my son... a car slows down... screaming starts at you "Baby killer".'
> **(Jewish community member)**

These stories left me feeling humbled – that people were sharing these deeply personal, traumatic stories with me. After each story I felt a sense of responsibility, because in telling me these stories they were entrusting me with them, entrusting me to listen and to act.

In listening to these stories, I felt disheartened, frustrated - and angry. If we're not angry about racism, we risk accepting it as a fact of life. And that is something we should never accept.

When gross acts of racism take place in the public sphere - whether it's the destruction of places of worship, threats against community members, or targeted abuse -

well-intentioned politicians often remind us that "this is not who we are." But in bearing witness to the stories shared through *Seen & Heard*, I've come to understand that, to a degree, this is who we are. And unless we're willing to acknowledge that, to reflect on it honestly, and to take proactive steps to change it, this is who we will continue to be.

Projects like *Seen & Heard* act as a window, giving us essential insights into the experiences of affected communities. Yet from our consultations it's become clear that what is needed is not just a window. It's a mirror.

> 'With anti-Palestinian racism, it's structural in this country... You can't talk about that Palestinian narrative because it's seen as violent and a threat to others.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Racism is rooted in the structures and systems that shape institutions. These institutions include workplaces, schools, universities, the media and government. Racism doesn't always show up as overt behaviour - it's also embedded in policies, practices and cultures that produce unequal outcomes.

From our consultations, it's clear that what is needed now is real change.

Communities told us that the racism they experience is often minimised, ignored or deflected, especially when it's structural.

Reporting mechanisms place the burden of proof on the person or community who is the target of racism. Institutions that silence discussion think they're avoiding racism. But silence is not the same as safety.

Some leaders may not recognise that racism is present in their organisations. If no one is raising complaints because they don't feel safe to do so, or if the harm is normalised, it can seem like there's no problem to fix. Putting racism in the 'too hard' basket leaves communities and individuals to deal with it alone.

Racism is not just a social issue. For organisations and institutions, it's a strategic risk. It undermines trust, damages reputations, and creates unsafe environments for staff and communities. It limits talent, stifles innovation and increases exposure to legal and public scrutiny.

We don't just want to call out racism - we want to support institutions to do better. In late 2024, the Australian Human Rights Commission released the National Anti-Racism Framework, a first-of-its-kind roadmap for government and institutions to eliminate racist practices, processes and policies.

It contains 63 recommendations for a whole-of-society approach, with proposed reforms across our legal, justice, health, education, media and arts sectors, as well as workplaces and data collection. This approach is designed to address the harms and impact of ongoing structural racism. Leaders across government, industry, and civil society must prioritise eliminating racism, and build long-lasting solutions - together - to effect real change.

Failing to bring key groups together for whole-of-society solutions means that siloed, piecemeal efforts will continue. This risks pitting communities against each other, one of the key concerns raised by communities who spoke to us for this project.

Experiences of structural racism are interconnected. An intersectional and nuanced approach that recognises distinct experiences of racism but addresses their root causes holistically will benefit all communities in the long-term.

This report stands on the strength and courage of hundreds of people across Australia who chose to participate, knowing that doing so would mean revisiting painful, often traumatic experiences.

They came forward not for recognition, but because they understood the stakes. They spoke clearly, bravely and with purpose.

But they did not come simply to be heard; they came because they believed that their voices could drive change. Their resilience and resistance to racism needs to be supported. We thank them for their courage and their trust in the Australian Human Rights Commission. This report is a commitment to honour that trust. We have seen them. We have heard them. Now is the time for us to act – not with words, but with systemic change that upholds human rights. An anti-racist Australia is one where dignity and respect are not negotiable – because this is who we are.

Giridharan Sivaraman
Race Discrimination Commissioner

Executive summary

The insights shared throughout the *Seen & Heard* project reveal the profound pain and distress caused by increased racism toward Jewish, Palestinian, Muslim and Arab communities in Australia since 7 October 2023. They also reveal how racism has escalated in these communities.

> 'But I think what's scarier is that discrimination is kind of being legitimised. And I think that's the shift that I've noticed...you know, pre-7 October and post-7 October. Back then it was racism, and it was called that: racism. But after the attacks, it was OK (to be racist) and people can sympathise with it and get behind it and support it, which is a little bit of an ugly beast that's growing.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

> 'I think what was different prior to October 7th versus post-October 7th is that, prior to October 7th...it wasn't OK to be openly racist.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Participants from all communities described the enormous impact this has had on their wellbeing, personal and professional relationships, and sense of safety and belonging.

> 'I think everyone – and I'm sure this extends to the Arab, Muslim, Palestinian communities in Australia – everyone feels on edge about talking about where they come from, talking about or being open about where they come from. I certainly know for myself, I'm very selective about who I speak to about not only my work, but my background.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'The question then becomes: is Australia home still for us, right? Is it home for our children or our grandchildren?'
> **(Muslim community member)**

The stories told by community members reveal diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Community members who spoke to the Commission were at pains to reinforce this. They also told us how vital it is to understand that the experiences of affected communities are not the same. The harms of racism documented in this report vary across people and groups. Across and within communities, this harm has unique features that demand customised solutions.

While each person's and each community's experience is unique, common themes emerged in relation to how racism operates and the impact it has on lives. It operates by homogenising and diminishing communities, by silencing them and their members and by dismissing and denying peoples' experiences. Racism dehumanises, it is isolating, it has profound impacts on physical and mental wellbeing, it makes people feel unsafe, it destroys trust and it damages feelings of belonging.

> 'We kind of constantly have to justify – not only justify, but we have to keep making the case for our humanity. Nobody should have to do that. We are human, and we shouldn't have to keep reinforcing the fact that Muslims should be considered humans and looked at equally, or Palestinians or Arab or anyone – anyone.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

> ‘This massive dehumanisation… anecdotally and in stories, you see the dehumanisation of Jews in history, now we see a lot of dehumanisations and demonising … a lot of black and white perspectives, a lot of simplification, et cetera. I haven’t experienced it before. I see it in really common places now amongst my friends and extended network.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Although we heard about instances of interpersonal discrimination and harms, many of the stories shared with us highlighted the ways racism is embedded in social norms, institutional policies and practices, and broader systems.

> ‘But I also want to say that it’s important we talk about the structures because already we see institutions who are more afraid of a complaint coming through and will silence someone… you see people’s reputation destroyed on false allegations and then people lose work or lose grants because of a fake allegation.’
> **(Palestinian community member)**

> ‘To be honest… I wouldn’t go to the higher-ups anymore. I’ve tried to deal with them; they were useless. They don’t really care … So, I just deal with it myself. That’s what it’s got to. I just have to deal with it myself with my friends, with the people around me, my family.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

The findings in this report are specific to this moment, but they sit within the history of racial injustice in Australia, one that First People have long named and challenged. Many who spoke to us, across all communities, recognised the systemic nature of racism and its long history here.

We also heard that the systems that are supposed to protect people often fail, and at times cause and compound harm. Across communities, the education system and workplaces were consistently identified as places where people experience the harm of racism.

In workplaces, people experienced discrimination in recruitment, retaliation for speaking out about racism and loss of jobs or professional opportunities because of their identity or perceived political views. In universities, students and staff faced harassment, exclusion and censorship. In both settings complaints processes were described as punitive and ineffective, and culturally safe supports were limited. Many described how the failure of leaders to meaningfully address racism and the inability or unwillingness to recognise and act against it, even when formal mechanisms existed, added to the pain and distress communities are experiencing.

The stories gathered by this project, reflect how current responses to racism remain largely reactive. While reactive interventions are sometimes necessary, they cannot address the root causes of racism nor protect communities from harm. Across communities, participants told us that in Australia we are poorly equipped at both a macro and a micro level to deal with racism.

We heard again of the need for coordinated action to address racism. This reinforces the findings and recommendations in the National Anti-Racism Framework, underscoring the urgent need for a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to anti-racism; one that changes systems, shifts culture, and addresses structural inequalities. The Framework was released over a year ago. It sets out the steps for coordinated anti-racism efforts across governments, institutions and communities to address entrenched racism and prevent its further harm in Australia. Many of the Framework's recommendations were again identified as solutions by communities affected by the rise in racism since 7 October 2023. The insights included in this report also echo many of the findings included in the *Respect@Uni: Study into Antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism and the experience of First Nations people (Racism@Uni)* report.

Implementing the Framework as the foundation of all anti-racism work in Australia is an approach supported by the Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism in Australia and the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia in Australia. The Framework recommendations have the capacity to tailor solutions to suit the needs of affected communities including those experiencing antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian racism and anti-Arab racism.

Throughout the *Seen & Heard* project, members of affected communities identified priorities for action that run parallel with the recommendations of the Framework. Some identified the implementation of the Framework as a first and important step to addressing the harm of racism in Australia.

Reforms in workplaces, education settings, the legal system, within police forces and across government to improve understanding of racism and build capacity to identify and effectively address it were consistently flagged as urgent priorities. Addressing gaps in legal protections and enforcement including reform to the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)* was seen as crucial to the fuller protection of affected communities and religious minorities. Many told us of a lack of meaningful consequences for those who commit racist harm. The role of political leaders in shaping national discussions around race and racism was seen as central to change with communities calling for politicians to undertake anti-racism training. Improvement in the way media reports on communities with lived experience of racism was also seen as vital and communities consistently called for digital platforms to develop and implement clear and transparent processes for reporting, reviewing and removing racist content, including mis- and disinformation.

Across communities, participants identified a need for people to learn how to talk about the complex and difficult issues that surround race and racism in Australia. In almost every session, participants suggested that governments should resource community organisations in affected communities to develop and implement programs and workshops to help local communities safely navigate conversations about Israel and Gaza. The creation of evidence-based and trauma-informed training for workplaces and institutions to support safe and constructive engagement around these issues was also identified as a key solution that governments could fund and support.

This report bears witness to the stories we heard and ensures they are not lost or forgotten. It serves as a reminder of how current systems are failing people affected by racism and of the collective work that remains to address it in Australia. The Commission reiterates its call for the Australian Government to implement the National Anti-Racism Framework as a priority.

1. Setting the scene

Key points

The *Seen & Heard* project aimed to understand and document the experiences of antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism, since 7 October 2023. In Phase 1, we met with 167 people from 78 different organisations. In Phase 2, 27 trauma-informed community-led sessions, were held engaging with 476 participants across 6 states. Through these sessions, we heard from affected communities that racism has increased and intensified, with experiences shaped by intersecting identities such as gender, religion, and culture. Participants also told us that their experiences of racism are systemic and embedded in policy, practice and institutional culture, with many recognising their experiences as being rooted in broader histories of discrimination and the impact of colonisation on this continent's First Peoples.

1.1 Understanding the *Seen & Heard* project

Moments of crisis have repeatedly exposed and intensified racism in Australia. After the September 11 attacks, Muslim and Arab communities were vilified. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Australians were targeted. The referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament led to a surge in racism directed at First Peoples. More recently, recent rallies and commentary are blaming migrants for a range of issues, from the cost of living to housing supply. There has been a particular focus on Indian Australian communities in relation to these issues.

Likewise, the events of 7 October 2023 brought racism into sharp focus for Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, Jewish and Israeli communities. Since then, reports of racism and discrimination from these affected communities and others who associate with them have surged across Australia. Racism that had long been downplayed or ignored came into public view, showing its severity and emotional impact. For many, this was not a new burden but an added weight on communities that have carried these experiences for generations.

In 2024, the *Seen & Heard* project (the project) was created as part of a broader Australian Government initiative to support communities impacted by the events of 7 October 2023. The Department of Home Affairs funded the Australian Human Rights Commission (the Commission) through a grant process to respond to the rise in racism experienced by affected communities. The project's objectives were to ensure these experiences are recognised and shared with the broader public to highlight the harm caused by racism and to use them to inform and design initiatives to support communities experiencing heightened discrimination.

The way this national initiative was framed by the grant process was problematic. It grouped affected communities together, suggesting that diverse communities are the same and overlooking the complexity of their identities and experiences.

> 'The Government keeps lumping us together.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

It also positioned communities against each other, reinforcing the idea that racism is a conflict between communities rather than a systemic issue rooted in systems and institutions. It created division and causes harm. Participants consistently raised this during engagement and consultations with the Commission. They expressed frustration and anger about this framing and were highly critical of it.

> 'This is pitting Jews and Muslims against each other.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'I believe the scope of *Seen & Heard* is racist and puts blame on communities rather than the systems.'
> **(Arab community member)**

The project was designed by the Commission within these pre-existing parameters. The Commission undertook the project despite the problematic framing on the basis that it provided a unique opportunity for communities to be seen and heard. The challenge with the project framing shaped how people chose to engage with the project. Some declined to participate, citing a lack of trust in institutions that was reinforced by the way the project had been initially created. Their absence was itself a form of testimony. Others chose to take part despite hesitation, sharing painful experiences in the hope that their honesty might lead to change.

While we could not always speak directly to every context or experience, we recognised that our role was to amplify voices and perspectives. Community insights revealed how deeply institutional racism shapes daily life. Workplaces stood out as the setting where this was most visible, with participants consistently describing racism and a lack of safety at work. Workplaces are part of most people's lives, reflect broader systemic dynamics and are critical for societal participation. They were identified by participants and the Commission as a practical setting for driving meaningful change.

As a national institution, the Commission has access to government and policy spaces that many communities do not. This project is a way to carry community voices into those spaces, offering another pathway for them to be heard, one that is grounded in human rights and informed by lived experience.

The Commission also notes that the Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism in Australia and the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia in Australia undertook community consultations during a similar time period as this project. The findings of each of the Special Envoys have some important alignments with those included in this report. *Seen & Heard* also had regard to the work of the Commission to progress the National Anti-Racism Framework and, more recently, the Racism@Uni Study as well as important, legal and policy initiatives being undertaken by states and territories.

1.2 Understanding affected communities

From the outset of this report, it is imperative we acknowledge that each of the communities the Commission engaged with for this project is diverse. Each community holds diverse perspectives and lived experiences. When engaging with the Commission, community members were at pains to reinforce this. They emphasised that this diversity is little understood and that homogeny is a fallacy.

> 'It's homogenisation, everyone in the Arab, Muslim, Palestinian communities treated as if one of you speaks up or does something, it affects everyone in the same way.'
> **(Arab community member)**

> 'We are a diverse community...and I'm sure everyone in the community would say that.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

They told the Commission of the harm that occurs when communities are reduced to a single, simplified identity. Understanding and acknowledging the complex and rich identity of affected communities was identified as imperative in addressing the harm of racism.

Many who took part in *Seen & Heard* reinforced the complexities of ethnic, ancestral and national identity in their communities. For example: some Jews are also Israelis; many Australian Palestinians are Christian while others are Muslim; some participants described themselves as having Arab backgrounds while others did not identify with this, instead describing themselves by reference to a religion, and/or an ethnicity, and/or a place, and/or a country.

> 'There's many a hue to being a Jew. We're just not religious, we're not a group, we're not just this. You can be atheist, you can be orthodox, reform, there's numerous blends of us. And I think that there's a lack of understanding.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'I am of Palestinian and Iraqi heritage. I was born in Sydney, raised in Perth.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Participants also consistently raised their frustration with the way in which their communities are framed as being 'new' to Australia. They pointed to a lack of knowledge and understanding about the nation's history and their status as citizens in it.

> 'Yes, our kids have grown up … with, "You are Jewish, but how can you be Australian?" They're like, "We were born in Australia."'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'Our kids were born here. Our grandkids have been born here.'
> **(Arab community member)**

Arab, Jewish, Muslim and Palestinian communities have long been part of the fabric of this nation. While some members of every affected community are recent arrivals - migrants, refugees or asylum seekers - many were born here and can trace their histories on this continent back generations. Indonesian Muslim traders engaged with the Yolngu people as early as 1700 and Muslim and Arab people have been settling here at least since colonisation. Jews arrived with the First Fleet, continued to arrive after colonisation and many came as refugees including during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Palestinians – Christian and Muslim - settled here as migrants and many arrived here as refugees after 1948 and 1967.

> 'My uncles grew up in Australia. Alhamdulillah, my grandfather migrated in the 1960s so we have a whole two, three generations here.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

> 'I'd like to say that many of our families migrated to Australia or were born here even, as Jewish people. We've contributed hugely to Australia. Some of us, our grandparents fighting as ANZACs. Our families have been a part of the Australian communities where we live.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Finally, across communities, people told us how vital it is to understand that the experiences of affected communities are not the same. The harms of racism experienced by people and within their communities have unique features.

> 'I think that's the number one mistake, trying to see the parallel between two lived experiences. Each can be a victim in their own right.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'Basically … they see everybody as the same, or everybody from the Arab countries or the Arab world or Middle East.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

> 'It's not about Islamophobia anymore. There is specifically an anti-Palestinian racism that's not being addressed. Many of the members of the Palestinian community … are Christian and going through the exact same thing.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Understanding and acknowledging this was also identified as imperative to addressing the harm of racism. We heard, in particular, that government responses to racism must recognise that each community experiences racism differently because of distinct histories, identities and intergenerational experiences. Acknowledging these differences is vital and humanises different communities.

> 'I think that antisemitism and other forms of discrimination do share features. At one level, (they) can be tackled together, but I think there are differences. I think each form of discrimination has its own history, its own features. And I think just as important as tackling everything together, I think it's important to recognise that there are some systematic differences between antisemitism and other forms of discrimination or racism or hatred. It's not to prioritise one over the other, but I think to fail to recognise that will be doing a great injustice to this project. I think there are profound differences, and I think that to fail to see them is very problematic.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

1.3 Methodology

Seen & Heard was designed to gather and document the lived experiences, of communities affected by racism after 7 October 2023. The project engaged with community members to listen and learn directly from their stories. These insights are documented in this report. To do this, the team adopted a qualitative, bottom-up and human rights-based approach by reflecting what was presented by the participants without judgement or attempts to verify the accuracy of the stories that were shared.

The Commission partnered with the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) to support this work by facilitating community engagement sessions in Victoria, providing expert advice and guidance, and preparing a Measurement and Evaluation report on the project's consultation approach.

Gather

The consultation process unfolded in 2 phases. Phase 1 focused on speaking with those already working closely with affected communities including community leaders, academics, peak bodies and service providers as well as government departments and subject matter experts. These conversations helped us understand the broader structural and systemic issues at play, while also building trust and laying the groundwork for deeper engagement with affected communities.

Phase 2 prioritised direct engagement with community members. This phase was delivered in partnership with communities. The project team supported the consultations, stepping into an observer role and allowing communities to lead. The Race Discrimination Commissioner and the President of the Commission attended several of these sessions.

The aim of this engagement process was to hear directly from affected communities and provide a platform for participants to contribute to a national conversation about what is needed at a personal, community, institutional and systemic level to support anti-racism work to address their experiences.

Document

The Commission carefully documented meeting notes and transcripts from all engagements and community consultations and organised them to reflect the stories and experiences commonly shared. In preparing this report, we committed to centring lived experience of racism and to be inclusive of the wide range of experiences shared by participants. This included using deidentified quotes from participants across the insights to faithfully reflect experiences and relying on the primary evidence and information in engagement transcripts and recordings, captured during community facilitated open discussion in safe spaces. We grouped experiences shared during consultations to reflect common patterns. While some themes and impacts overlap, experiences are not uniform. As already mentioned, each community is complex with diverse perspectives and lived experiences. In recognising this complexity, we must always remember the experiences of affected communities are not the same and experiences of harm are unique to people and communities.

There were however common and consistent threads in the way people described how these harms affected their lives. The stories gathered in the report highlight how racism operates across various systems and institutions such as the legal and justice systems, at the interface with police services, in education, government and media settings. They also reveal the serious impact of racism on people and communities affecting belonging, safety and identity, and how these experiences intersect with broader questions of justice and recognition. All quotes are reported verbatim with minor grammatical changes made for readability. The quotes in this report are the views of the people quoted and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission.

Evaluate

The evaluation process combined multiple feedback mechanisms to assess the project's effectiveness. During the consultation phase, survey forms were distributed to participants. Community leaders were also invited to provide feedback after hosting consultation sessions. In addition, we considered direct input from people who contacted us via email or shared their views on what they valued and what could be improved.

Our partner VEOHRC consolidated these insights and shaped them into a comprehensive evaluation report. This report serves as a resource to assess what worked well and to guide future projects that will involve community involvement. Some of those evaluation insights are included in this report.

Limitations

While the project aimed to capture a wide range of lived experiences, several constraints shaped the process and findings. The recruitment approach to engagement with community relied on community leaders. This meant participants were primarily those connected to their respective communities. Engagements were concentrated in Victoria and New South Wales, where most affected community members live, with fewer insights from other states. Although we approached multiple organisations nationwide, sessions only proceeded where community leaders agreed to participate. Participants under the age of 18 were excluded from the scope of the project.

Trauma-informed principles

Many of the people we met carry deep trauma. Some have lived through the horrors of war, fled persecution or experienced profound loss. For others, wounds have been reopened through daily experiences of racism, or by witnessing violence unfold in their communities or in the media. These are just some of the many painful experiences shared with us; there are countless others that are no less significant. These experiences can have a lasting impact, changing how people see themselves, relate to others and interact with the world around them.

A trauma-informed approach was necessary to recognise the impact of these experiences. This approach focuses on emotional safety, choice and collaboration. It also helps avoid causing further harm.

Trusted community leaders played a central role in shaping the consultation process. They made key decisions about how sessions were run, including participant recruitment, facilitation style, and observation of cultural protocols, guiding the process in ways that felt appropriate and empowering.

The project team provided a facilitation guide and planning toolkit, along with consent forms, resource sheets, participant surveys, and feedback templates. These materials were reviewed and adapted by community leaders to ensure they were culturally appropriate and accessible to participants.

Consent was approached as an ongoing and collaborative process. Community leaders actively reviewed and adapted the consent form to ensure it was culturally appropriate and accessible. Participants received the form in advance, allowing time to read, reflect and ask questions. At the beginning of each session, facilitators revisited key concepts and reaffirmed consent, particularly before any recording took place.

Sessions were mostly held in familiar, community-selected venues and facilitated by people nominated by community leaders. This ensured the environment felt safe and the facilitators were familiar with the cultural and political context. Sessions included grounding activities. Participants had full control over how they engaged, including the choice to speak, listen or contribute in ways that felt safe and meaningful. Trusted mental health practitioners were present at almost all of the sessions to offer real-time, emotional support. Follow-up support and referrals were also offered where needed.

> ‘I came away with a gratitude to the AHRC that they were listening and that they did care. I encourage them to continue in this work and find as many ways as possible to reunite people and build trust. This may be the first step, but it must not be the last.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Twice during engagement and consultation, the Commission shared a summary of findings on its website to keep participants informed and offer an opportunity for feedback. After this report was drafted, representatives from affected communities were invited to review it and provide feedback to ensure the sessions and findings were appropriately represented.

This approach reflects an inclusive model of engagement and demonstrates how institutions can work ethically and meaningfully with communities, especially in times of crisis or distress.

> ‘Thank you for the opportunity and safe space to share our pain and anger and grief.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

1.4 Project metrics

Community engagement sessions:

- Sessions ran from 19 February to 15 August 2025
- 27 sessions were conducted
- 476 participants were engaged
- Race Discrimination Commissioner attended 6 sessions
- AHRC President attended 1 session

Community engagement demographics:

- Gender: Approximately equal representation of male and female participants
- Age: Participants were aged from 18 through to their early 80s
- Diversity: Included people from a range of professions and educational backgrounds

Organisational meetings:

- 150+ meetings held
- 167 people engaged
- 78 different organisations were represented

Engagement sessions per state

Population sub-group	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	ACT	Total sessions	Total participants
Jewish	4	4	1	0	1	1	11	151
Muslim, Arab, Palestinian	2	6	1	1	0	1	11	236
Palestinian specific	1	1	0	1	1	1	5	89
Total	**7**	**11**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**3**	**27**	**476**

A note on participant metrics

Deidentified demographic information was collected from community members by the Commission. Provision of this information was, however, voluntary and some participants across all communities chose not to give it, with some citing safety concerns. While total participant numbers are accurate, the Commission is unable to disaggregate demographic information about the participants.

A specific Israeli engagement session was not conducted but following early feedback from the Jewish community, participants were encouraged to volunteer demographic information about their Israeli background to the Commission. Based on the demographic information available, as well as the insights gathered in the sessions, we know that community members who identified as Israeli took part in some consultations. Those who provided demographic information about their Israeli nationality also self-identified as Jewish.

Engagement feedback

Each participant who attended a community engagement session was provided with either a paper or online feedback form. Completion was voluntary, so the total number of respondents to each question does not match the total number of participants of the community engagement sessions.

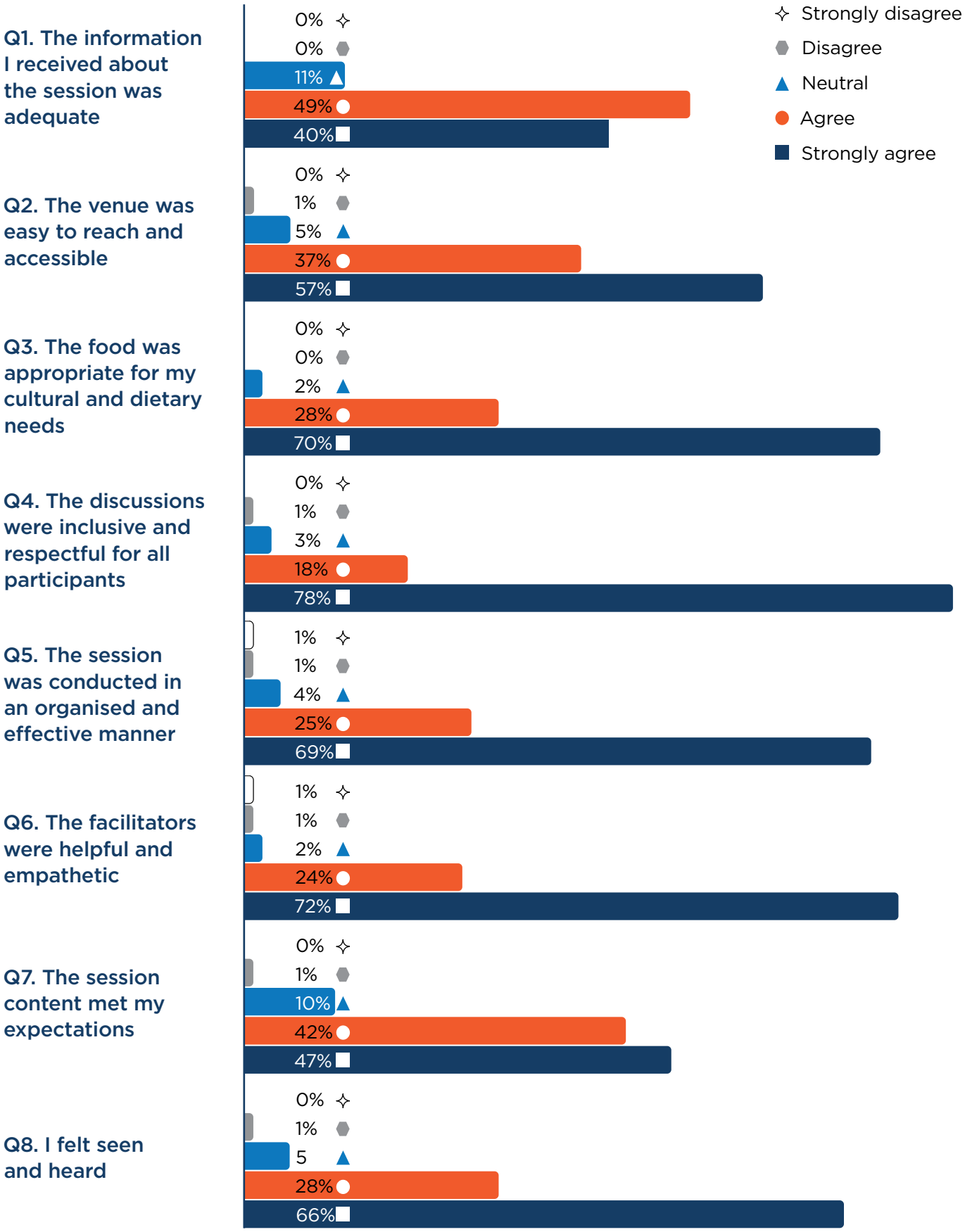
Participants were asked the questions in the table below and had a free text box/ field to enter any other feedback. The survey response rate was approximately 36% which is generally considered average (neither poor nor excellent). Participant feedback on the arrangements for and conduct of the sessions was extremely positive.

Both the quantitative results below and qualitative feedback supports a conclusion that the outcomes of the sessions were accomplished.

Although not universal, a consistent theme arising from the other feedback following the sessions was participants expressing a sense of relief and gratitude for being able to speak up on this topic.

> ‘Thank you for organising this session, it was like a therapeutic session for me.’ **(Jewish community member)**

> ‘Found the discussion thought provoking, generous and deeply insightful.’ **(Palestinian community member)**


Strongly disagree
Disagree
Neutral
Agree
Strongly agree
Q1. The information I received about the session was adequate
0%
0%
11%
49%
40%
Q2. The venue was easy to reach and accessible
0%
1%
5%
37%
57%
Q3. The food was appropriate for my cultural and dietary needs
0%
0%
2%
28%
70%
Q4. The discussions were inclusive and respectful for all participants
0%
1%
3%
18%
78%
Q5. The session was conducted in an organised and effective manner
1%
1%
4%
25%
69%
Q6. The facilitators were helpful and empathetic
1%
1%
2%
24%
72%
Q7. The session content met my expectations
0%
1%
10%
42%
47%
Q8. I felt seen and heard
0%
1%
5
28%
66%

1.5 Communities are experiencing increased racism

Many participants spoke to us about a sharp and distressing rise in racism since 7 October 2023, including antisemitism, anti-Arab racism, anti-Palestinian racism, and Islamophobia. Some Jewish and Israeli participants described an increase in negative sentiment toward people in Australia of Israeli background.

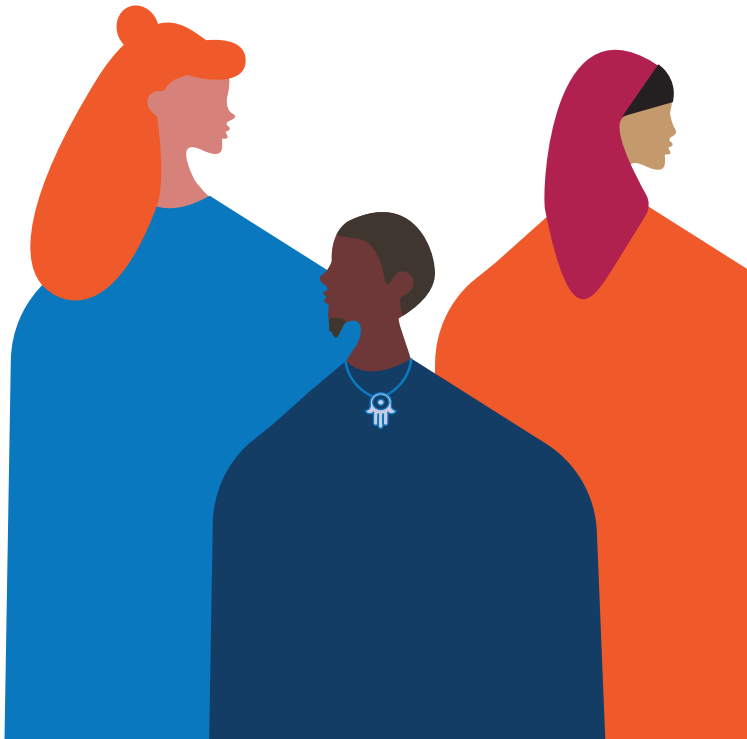
> 'It's definitely increased, I would say. But I think … every year that goes by, we're just getting more cases coming through and we're getting more people that are experiencing Islamophobia or cultural issues, identity issues.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

> 'Speaking to hundreds of people in my community, there's absolutely been an increase. …it's across the board, it's pretty much everywhere, whether that's in schools, and in the workplace, on the streets with graffiti. Endless graffiti all across the parks and park benches and it's just everywhere. There's absolutely been an increase in racism and antisemitism … from our experience, yes.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'There's been a massive increase in racism and discrimination, and people from all various levels of society are feeling it. A lot of the forms that I've personally experienced are hateful comments on my social media. Whether it's comments saying things like, 'You're a Hamas sympathiser. Why don't you go and die in Gaza? If you love Gaza so much, why don't you go back to that shithole?' All these sorts of very condescending, hateful, vile rhetoric that other people also get to see on my social media.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Although Muslim, Arab and Palestinian communities describe experiencing increased racism after 7 October 2023, many also acknowledged that it is not new and that these experiences are a manifestation of racism that has long existed in the system and that has been unaddressed.

> 'The racism already exists. It's not like it's happening after a particular date, after just one incident of something that happens in Palestine. And like I say, it's all giving a licence, whether it's media or it's government or it's whatever institution in this country. It's all giving a licence to people who are racist to essentially subject Arabs, Palestinians, Muslims – whoever is in solidarity with Palestine and Palestinians - to subject them to that racism. So, I think that's the more important point, not whether racism has increased, but whether people are experiencing it more now than ever before.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**



1.6 Community experiences of racism are intersectional

Across all communities, participants described how their experiences of racist harm are shaped by the intersection of their race with other social categories such as gender, culture and religion. They explained how their experiences build up over time through the complex interaction of broader systems, institutional practices, individual actions and internalised beliefs. Participants also told us their experiences are shaped by the accumulation of harm from multiple, varied experiences of racism. One-off incidents of racism occur but these cannot be understood in isolation. Many described how each of these incidents are symptoms of a broader system and build on what has gone before.

Across communities heightened levels of racism were encountered when markers of identity are more visibly expressed. Participants noted that the racist behaviour they face is often because of multiple parts of their identity.

Cultural expression through cultural dress, language, community practices, and storytelling was described as both a source of pride and a site of vulnerability. Participants spoke of being misrepresented or stereotyped, especially when their cultural identity was visible.

> 'If I go to work with my keffiyeh, I'll be asked to remove it. Because wearing a keffiyeh means you're biased. If you are wearing a keffiyeh, it means you're antisemitic. If you are a wearing a keffiyeh, you are a terrorist. If you are wearing a – I can keep going on and on.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Gendered experiences of racism were also reported across communities, each describing them differently. These experiences were often intensified when they intersected with other aspects of identity, such as religion or migration background. Some common experiences were being spat on, having scarves ripped off, and physical or verbal attacks. For the Muslim community, these experiences were particularly pronounced among women and girls who were visibly identifiable.

> ‘As Muslim women, we are very visibly different to the general community. So, when we walk out, we walk out in a hijab, in more modest clothing. So, we’re very easily targeted.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

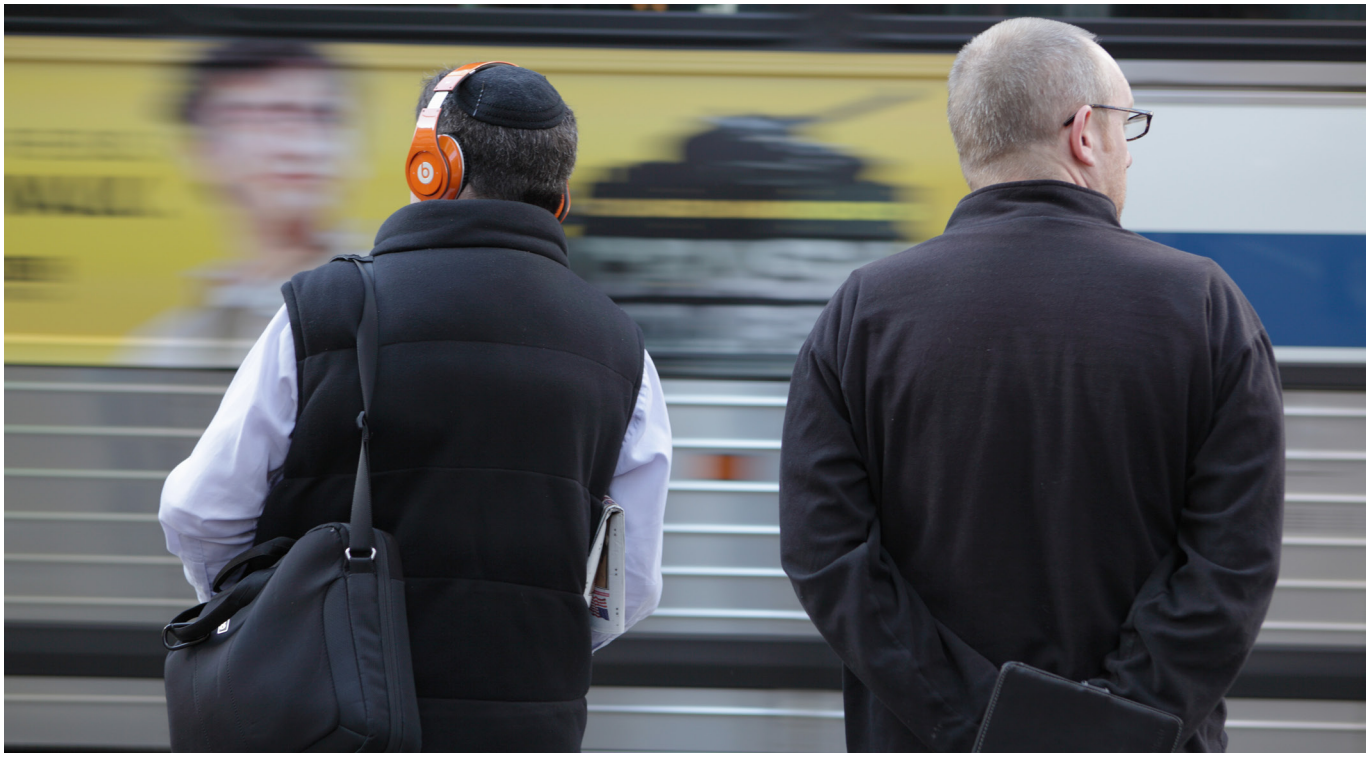
> ‘My daughter, she took her hijab off. After she suffered a lot in her school. She was bullied at school. She couldn’t handle it. Many times. She couldn’t handle it. She has to take it off. She suffered.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Within the Jewish community, men were often more visibly identifiable, and therefore more likely to be targeted in public.

> ‘I think those who are most affected are those who are visibly Jewish, and so the Orthodox men, because Orthodox men’s garb is well, if they’re, if they’re ultra-Orthodox, it’s that very obvious Black Hat, sometimes side lock thing. But even if they’re modern orthodox because they often wear a skull cap. That makes them stand out. Women don’t stand out as much because their outfits are not as obvious.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Religious identity was deeply tied to experiences of racism. Participants described being excluded and vilified for their faith, facing institutional bias, and being denied the right to express their beliefs safely. Many Muslim participants described how practicing their faith often exposed them to higher rates of racism.

> ‘If you’re a Palestinian woman and you’re hijabi, you don’t feel safe. My mum doesn’t go out in the public on her own. I go out with her, or my brother goes out with her. She doesn’t feel safe. If we go into the city, especially if we go into the city, she’s not going by herself. I’ve heard so many about things within the community, stories of women being screamed at and sworn at just because they’re walking down the street. That happens all the time and they get racist language thrown at them because they’re identifiable, they’re wearing a hijab.’
> **(Palestinian community member)**



2. Impacts of racism on communities

Key points

Participants from all communities are experiencing significant social and emotional harm. There is a sharp decline in mental wellbeing, and an increase in isolation and fear. Participants noted concerns around their safety and trust in institutions. Dehumanisation was a common experience, with participants describing their erasure, the loss of their humanity, and the denial of their lived experiences. Amidst this, many described finding solidarity within their communities and trusted circles.

> 'It's sucked the air out of everything because this issue has just become all over everything. That's the thing now. Whatever we used to do and think about first thing in the morning, those things aren't so prevalent anymore. Things like this is just a symptom of what's happened. So, it's had a big impact.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'None of us are equipped to deal with this... I don't think any of us are the people that we were pre-the 7th of October... the people that we were, are completely different to the people we are now. Sometimes I think about who I was before, and I don't even recognise that version of myself anymore. And I think it's the same for everybody. It's the things that we've experienced, it's the things that we've witnessed, whether it's witnessing live-streamed genocide on our phones 24/7 to the experiences of the day-to-day Islamophobia and anti-Muslim or anti-Palestinian hate. None of us ... are ... coping.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

2.1 Communities are experiencing a mental health crisis

Participants shared how their identities are shaped by histories of forced movement and separation from their homelands.

Jewish participants spoke about the legacy of trauma from being descendants of Holocaust survivors, carrying the weight of genocide not as distant history but as lived experience passed down through generations. Many Jewish participants said that antisemitic and racist behaviours are not only harmful in the present moment but also trigger deep intergenerational trauma. Participants said this is the context in which Australian Jews have experienced the rise in antisemitism, with many feeling threatened.

> 'I'm a third generation Holocaust survivor. I think that anxiety and that memory is something that has been transmitted to me... I experience flashbacks. I experience panic attacks. We had graffiti on our street this week and it sent me spiralling the whole weekend until today when I realised, I was spiralling. Having flashes, Holocaust flashes and dreams about my own family story. Images of Holocaust scenes or death scenes and emerging of, I think the images we see coming out of Israel and my own psychological landscape. I had to go on medication. ...I've seen this in most of my friends.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Palestinian participants spoke about the past and continuing forced removal of their people from their ancestral lands and the ongoing and devastating loss of life in Gaza and the West Bank. Many described the heartbreak of being denied the right to return home,

and the pain of watching family, friends, and communities suffer.

Across communities, many participants said they live 'half here, half there', trying to continue life in Australia while worrying about loved ones in conflict zones. This was especially true for migrants and refugees, who spoke about dislocated families, visa issues and the emotional stress of being separated from their families, communities and homes.

Participants in all communities also spoke of being traumatised by watching events overseas unfold live on television or their phones, with many experiencing severe anxiety, depression and a deep sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

> 'My daughter...had a psychotic breakdown from watching the genocide over the first three months of its existence. So, we spent a good portion of our new year in Emergency with her because of her psychosis from watching the genocide online. ...I think it's underestimated how this is impacting on our young people. She's watching people like her being slaughtered online, as is the rest of the Muslim community, and no one is decrying it, no one is calling it for what it is, and no one's saying it's wrong. And that's the outcome for young people.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

The impact on daily life was significant. Adult participants found it difficult to work, university students described struggles to concentrate, and parents said their children were unable to attend school. Participants reported some families experiencing internal breakdown due to emotional strain. Several participants shared that they had sought psychological support or started taking medication to manage their wellbeing.

> 'We should also talk about this - systemic racism is the tool, but the impact is now a public health crisis. It should be spoken about as a health crisis... We're traumatised. We're depressed and we're overwhelmed. We are all those things. That's why it should be spoken about.'
> **(Arab community member)**

However, many described facing barriers to accessing appropriate and culturally safe mental health services, leaving them without the support they needed during a time of acute distress. Current health systems were seen as inaccessible, inadequate, and lacking awareness of how racism and trauma affect health and wellbeing.

> 'But when we seek help, there is no understanding of what we're dealing with watching this live genocide on our phones, our people made to feel like they're nothing and their death is just another day....and then, when we speak about it, there's just no understanding on how much it's impacting us day to day and our ability to keep going.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Participants described a common concern that there is a lack of recognition of grief and emotional distress, particularly when these feelings are connected to global events and affect communities collectively. They also spoke of the ways in which people and families' distress and trauma is affecting community wellbeing and flowing out into all aspects of their everyday lives.

> ‘It’s really been a big shock for me to start to realise that if I am feeling a certain way, a lot of other people are also feeling that. What that does then to all of those ripple effects that you have in your family, in your workplace, wherever. For me personally, I’ve had a lot of health issues because what we’re holding is grief.’
> **(Palestinian community member)**

> ‘I want to point out the mental load that this has had on Jewish mothers. So, we’re carrying, having to advocate, having to be representatives, having to care for our kids, having to deal with our kids’ relationships in their friendship circles…it’s proliferated everywhere.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

2.2 Communities are isolated

Many community members spoke about withdrawing from social spaces because they no longer felt safe or welcome. Participants noted increased fear and uncertainty, leading to people becoming more insular and limiting interactions outside their trusted circles. Others also described increased isolation within their own communities, with long-standing friendships and family relationships strained or ended altogether.

> ‘In my own circle of friends, I’ve definitely experienced a feeling of isolation and a shrinking of my social group…there’s just no longer the openness that there used to be here. I’ve been here for 25, 30 years, and it didn’t matter what race, colour or ethnic group you were from really. It was a very open area, and now I feel like that people have gone quite extreme on…speaking out against Israelis and a hostility towards Jewish people…there’s definitely a shift that’s happening.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Some community members reported being excluded from friendship groups and musical groups, and asked to leave their share house, because of their identity and perceived political views. This left many people unable to bring their full selves into both public and private settings.

> ‘When I said isolation, if for example, if I’m at your place and if I speak about what’s happening in Gaza, people are so scared to communicate with me anymore. That created isolation. If we speak…someone might target us. That’s what I meant when I said isolation. People are speaking up, they’re feeling isolated.’
> **(Arab community member)**

Many participants, particularly those from the Palestinian community, spoke of layered grief, mourning not only the loss of loved ones but also the loss of homes, safety and peace in their homeland. For many, this grief was intensified by experiences of racism in Australia. Participants described how the broader community’s response to geopolitical events often felt deeply alienating, marked by a lack of empathy and selective solidarity. Some even spoke about being blamed for their pain and suffering, which deepened feelings of isolation and injustice.

As a result, many felt as though their pain was invisible or unshared. Without accessible spaces for collective mourning, people were left to grieve alone. Often, this grief remained quietly carried, dismissed or met with hostility when voiced.

These experiences left many questioning their sense of belonging within their own communities and Australia more broadly. Participants shared experiences of feeling disconnected from public life and institutions.

> ‘The question then becomes… is Australia home still for us, right? Is it home for our children or our grandchildren? Do I belong here?’
> **(Muslim community member)**

2.3 Community experiences are being dismissed and denied

Many participants in all communities shared that their experiences were routinely dismissed or invalidated. When participants spoke about their feelings, they were often met with explanations about why they were wrong and that they should view the situation differently. Reports of racism were minimised, reframed as political opinion, or denied altogether.

This kind of gaslighting sent a clear message that communities were not allowed to define or speak openly about their experiences of harm. Instead, members of the broader Australian community often positioned themselves as the ones to explain how affected communities should respond.

> 'Whether we are fanatically pro-Israel, all the way through to we don't think Israel should exist at all, I think we're all hurting. This has been a painful 18 months, or whatever it is, and for that to be denied, diminished, gaslighted or put down as "Who cares about your feelings. There are dead kids in Gaza." Yes, there are dead kids in Gaza, but ...that shouldn't mean that we get to hurt less. Our hurt is real.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Palestinian Christian participants shared that their identities and experiences are often dismissed or misunderstood. Many spoke about being told they are not 'real' Christians, or that their perspectives are not legitimate. They described frequently having to explain that Christianity is not only present in the Middle East, but that it originated there. These participants highlighted that what is occurring in Gaza and the West Bank is often portrayed in black-and-white terms and interpreted by the broader public as a Muslim versus Jewish issue. This framing dominates media coverage and Australian discourse, erasing the Palestinian Christian experience.

> 'As a community, as Palestinians who are Christian, we thought it was obligatory for us to actually share our voices and say, "No, this isn't to do with religion whatsoever. This is impacting us as Christians as well." I've got family in Gaza. I've got family in the West Bank, in Israel. I've got family all over. It does not matter what religion.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

2.4 Communities are being dehumanised by various actors

Across communities, participants told us about the dehumanising effect of their experiences. They described their erasure, the loss of their humanity, and the denial of their lived experiences. Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants shared that dehumanising language and material has become more pronounced since 7 October 2023.

The impact of international events and the subsequent framing of these events in Australia by political leaders and the media was described as particularly dehumanising, with community members feeling like their lives and stories are less valued.

> 'We have to keep making the case for our humanity. Nobody should have to do that. We are human, and we shouldn't have to keep reinforcing the fact that Muslims should be considered humans and looked at equally, or Palestinians or Arab or anyone.... But we are constantly in a position, particularly after October 7th... Palestinians have to go out and say, 'My people shouldn't be experiencing that.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

An increase in negative stereotypes and language was also reported by participants across all communities. This increase was seen as devaluing and discrediting people and groups, leading to dehumanisation. For example, some participants shared that even speaking about the loss of life or

advocating for the lives of Palestinians has led to them being labelled as 'extremists'. Many Jewish participants noted criticism of Israel's policies and actions can cross into harmful stereotypes and described a lack of understanding in the broader community about the ways in which this happens.

> 'But in the past year and a half, this massive dehumanisation. Again, another element, I've never experienced – you know it anecdotally and in stories, but you see a dehumanisation of Jews in history. Now we see a lot of dehumanisations of and demonising of Zionists, of Israelis, a lot of black and white perspective, a lot of simplification, et cetera. I haven't experienced it before.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Participants across communities also described the dehumanisation that results from being homogenised or reduced into a single, simplified identity by others. This was reported as happening in multiple spheres including in public narratives by leaders and the media and in institutions like workplaces, schools and health services. Stereotypes and reductive narratives stripped members of all communities of their diverse histories, beliefs, and lived experiences. Participants spoke about being treated as representatives of a group rather than individuals. This erased internal diversity within communities and ignored the multiple ways in which people experienced and responded to racism.

> 'I love the people I work with but I'm still being asked questions, as though I'm a representative of the entire Palestine movement and what's happening in Palestine. Mind you, these questions are deeply rooted in racism, might seem covert, they might seem, "Educate me" but there are ways and especially in a job where you have nothing to do with Palestine, to be a spokesperson for us. That is deeply entrenched in racism.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

2.5 Communities feel unsafe and have lost trust

Threats to physical safety

Participants shared that while they had experienced racism prior to 7 October 2023, the frequency and intensity of these incidents have significantly increased since then. This escalation has included physical intimidation, harassment, and assault. Many described feeling unsafe in everyday spaces they once moved through with ease.

Participants frequently mentioned that wearing cultural or religious clothing and symbols like hijabs, keffiyehs, kippahs, Stars of David and traditional garments made them more vulnerable to racism and other violence.

> 'It's become very politicised. So, I think twice about when I wear a Megan David (Star of David), which identifies my religion. Whereas before October 7th, I don't think anyone really would think twice. I mean I'm not wearing it right now. But should I tuck it away? I don't know who I'm around. It's become ...a polarising thing. You don't know how people will react to you being Jewish. Whereas I think previously most people in Australia were just maybe curious or it didn't matter because we're a multicultural society...I think now we all think twice about when we are in places where we might not know everyone, how comfortable do we feel outing ourselves as being Jewish? And that is a terrible thing.' **(Jewish community member)**

Although the list of incidents described to us is extensive, participants reported examples such as having a hijab pulled off, a Star of David necklace torn from someone's neck, being assaulted while walking alone, being spat on, and experiencing direct threats of violence. Some incidents involved targeted property damage, including a synagogue being set on fire, anti-Muslim graffiti, a rabbi's car being burned and a severed pig's head being thrown at a mosque.

> 'There are moments where I genuinely will turn around because I think, am I being followed? Will someone jump out of the woodworks and physically assault me? It is really real and it's scary, especially as a woman, and a visibly Arab looking woman.' **(Palestinian community member)**

In response to these threats, some communities hired private security to protect places of worship or changed their routines to feel safe during prayer, highlighting the ongoing fear of the threat of violence.

Decisions around wearing religious or cultural items were shaped by people's sense of safety and their commitment to self-expression. Some chose to remove or conceal these markers of their faith or cultural identity to protect themselves from harm, while others continued to wear them with pride, even when doing so felt unsafe.

> 'Being a Palestinian after October 7 is impossible because you have to hide your necklace, and hide your keffiyeh, and hide your clothes and not wear your grandmother's thobe. And so, I feel that maybe before October 7, people didn't really understand what it meant, but after that they didn't understand worse.' **(Palestinian community member)**

Muslim women in particular shared that they now only visit busy areas like city centres when accompanied by male family members for safety. Others withdrew from social groups to avoid speaking about their heritage. Parents described the emotional toll of watching their children question whether they belonged, especially after witnessing their families or communities being targeted.

Many in the Jewish community told us that separating ethnicity from religion is complex and often impossible.

> ‘I get very torn because I don’t want to deny it. But yes, I get scared of what could happen, of the reality, of what standing up as a proud Jew, where that gets you. It just brings up a lot of that intergenerational trauma that Jews have always lived with.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Community members shared that their Jewish identity is frequently incorrectly conflated with the actions of Israel, leading to unjust targeting. This has resulted in people being harassed for practicing their faith or expressing cultural identity because of what others assume about their political views. Many described feeling unsafe attending synagogue, wearing religious or cultural clothing, or participating in community events.

> ‘I don’t agree with what’s happening there. I don’t think any of us do …but they equate us with what’s happening there, and we’re feeling the response of that.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Muslim participants reported that practicing their faith often exposed them to higher rates of racism. Many shared that this had intensified after the events of 11 September 2001. They told us that global narratives emerging in the aftermath of those terror attacks led to Islam and Muslim identity being framed through a lens of suspicion and threat, fuelling hostility and discrimination. Participants said this shift entrenched systemic surveillance of Muslims and social stigma, making simple acts of faith such as attending places of worship, observing cultural practices, or wearing a hijab or abaya subject to harmful associations with extremism.

> ‘September 11 happens. Suddenly “You’re an Arab, you’re a terrorist”.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Threats to psychological safety

Participants spoke about the emotional impact of their experiences, which intensified after military operations in Gaza began. Many described feeling judged, silenced, or viewed with suspicion simply for expressing their identity or beliefs. This fear was often reinforced in public spaces through subtle but persistent signals. Being watched, receiving lingering glances, overhearing hostile comments, or noticing others physically moving away, all contributed to a sense of unease. Even routine activities like shopping or walking on the beach became moments of distress, with some participants being told 'to go back to where you come from'. Across all communities, medical staff with visible cultural or religious identities told us of often feeling scrutinised or distrusted by patients with some having their roles questioned.

> 'I suppose I'd say to the broader community we've been your friends, neighbours, colleagues, relatives even for a long, long time. And many of you do actually know who we are, what we stand for, and we've shown a lot of respect and support for other communities who may have needed that at various points. Walk a mile in our shoes, try and imagine what it's like before you condemn us.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

In many cases, while there was no direct threat to their physical safety, participants described feeling increasingly uncomfortable and anxious in public spaces. Many said they no longer feel able to exist in these spaces as they once had. They reported feeling on edge, hyper-aware of their surroundings, and unsure whether they would be treated safely or fairly. This emotional distress was often linked to the presence of signs, symbols, or language that these participants perceived as racist or hostile. Some explained that while no danger was present, the cumulative impact of these cues made them feel unsafe or excluded. Some Jewish community members told the Commission that such displays of cultural expression and some political speech were racist.

> 'I feel less and less comfortable. The streets where we do our shopping is obviously highly politically charged and there's flags everywhere. And I personally don't feel comfortable.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants, as well as some Jewish participants, described the tension that emerges when cultural or political expression or solidarity is mischaracterised as a form of racism. They told us of circumstances where, in their view, their expression was inappropriately silenced. For example, they reported being prevented from wearing cultural clothing, symbols, or jewellery, or being discouraged from speaking out in support of Palestinians. This was described as happening most often in workplaces and in educational settings. These participants told us that they believed these forms of expression were either incorrectly seen as racist, were inappropriately limited or were silenced because they made, or might make, others feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

> 'We get this messaging day in day out from the media and from the politicians that somehow the existence of Palestinians, a Palestinian flag, people calling for Palestinian freedom…is a threat to Jews… it's also that sort of messaging really contributes to … social division and that sort of fear and hysteria that affects Jewish people as well and sets up the two different groups as if they are opposing interests.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Similarly, Jewish participants described being encouraged by employers, colleagues and educators to hide visible markers of their faith and their heritage or religion and to stay silent about geopolitical events.

Erosion of trust

Participants described how feeling unsafe in public spaces contributed to a broader breakdown of trust in government and other institutions. Many felt excluded from systems that are meant to protect and support all members of society. They shared that laws and policies designed to promote fairness and equality no longer felt applicable to them, and that their safety was not being prioritised.

> 'I came here for my future, for my children, for the future...I want them to live in. A system that promotes freedom of speech that is anti-racist, that is a non-discriminatory system where there is a free go where there is equal opportunity for everybody. But all this proved to me to be a lie. ...7th of October proved it.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

This erosion of trust led some to question their place in Australia, even though they had either been born here or lived in the country for many years. Despite their long-standing contributions and strong sense of citizenship, they felt increasingly disconnected from the nation they call home.

The breakdown in trust extended to government-funded services, where participants felt their needs were misunderstood, deprioritised, or ignored. This included health, education, and social services, where culturally safe and responsive support was often missing. As a result, many felt that the systems designed to serve the public were not built to serve them. People with visible cultural or religious markers reported feeling hyper-visible and concerned that their personal or political views or those of service providers could influence the quality of service or treatment they received.

> 'We have a whole counselling centre at our university. All the counsellors are white, they don't understand anything from what the students who have lost 20 members of their family members, or if they came from Gaza or some other country in the world. They are not equipped to help them or support them. So, the institution has no support system, so if you're lucky, you have colleagues around you.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

2.6 Communities have found support and solidarity

Despite the challenges people faced, many participants shared powerful stories of resilience and connection. In the face of rising hostility and fear, and a view that governments and institutions were failing them, communities came together to support one another in ways that were both practical and deeply meaningful. Participants highlighted that community-based support often filled the void left by institutions, offering validation, safety, and a sense of belonging in times of distress. Participants described organising informal check-ins, creating spaces for healing and building networks of care that helped ensure no one felt alone.

> 'I think if there's anything that's good that's come out of October 7th, it's brought us together as a community. And in Queensland, that's no small feat given how widely dispersed we are across the state and the small numbers we are. So that's a good thing.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Some participants frequently recognised First Peoples' communities as consistent and compassionate allies. Participants from Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab communities said the presence of First Peoples during moments of grief and uncertainty was deeply valued, recognising how they showed up, listened with care, and stood alongside them

in solidarity. This support was seen as rooted in shared histories of displacement.

> 'I want to acknowledge that First Nations people have been in solidarity with Palestinian and Lebanese communities and have shown such love and care. It's really important.'
> **(Arab community member)**

Participants from all communities stressed that the legacy of colonisation is not a thing of the past and is embedded in current policies, practices, and institutional cultures that shape how power is distributed, people are treated, and services are delivered in Australia. They acknowledged that without a meaningful reckoning with this legacy, systemic racism will continue.

> 'I think that the behaviour that the general white colonial Anglo population sees, in terms of discrimination, is the treatment that they render in those institutions to the Aboriginal people. And until we can change, in the general sense of the Australian culture, and bring that unity that the Prime Minister is talking about, it'll be very difficult to resolve the different issues of different races and different cultures that are being brought to the country originally to enlarge the economic power of it, and not necessarily because the white population was curiously interested in sharing their world with other people.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Many participants recognised that First People's communities experience a unique form of structural racism in Australia, as the original and colonised inhabitants of this land. Participants acknowledged this specific experience while also drawing connections to their own experiences of racism.

> 'Racism is a form of governance…but it's also tied to, fundamentally, dispossession. We're in Australia and the first act of nation building in this country was the dispossession of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. And this is a characteristic of racism that replicates itself.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Participants also shared individual moments where acts of kindness from people in public spaces, neighbours, teachers or managers at work were deeply appreciated and brought genuine joy. While these examples were isolated and not reflective of broader systemic change, participants highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships and everyday interactions. These gestures, though small, were noticed and valued by all community members.

> 'I heard from some members of the community actually asked me, "Hey, I'm so sorry." After the 7th of October, "Hey, I'm so sorry that this is what your family's going through, and it must be really hard for you guys, and I feel for you.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

3. The operation of racism in systems and institutions

Key points

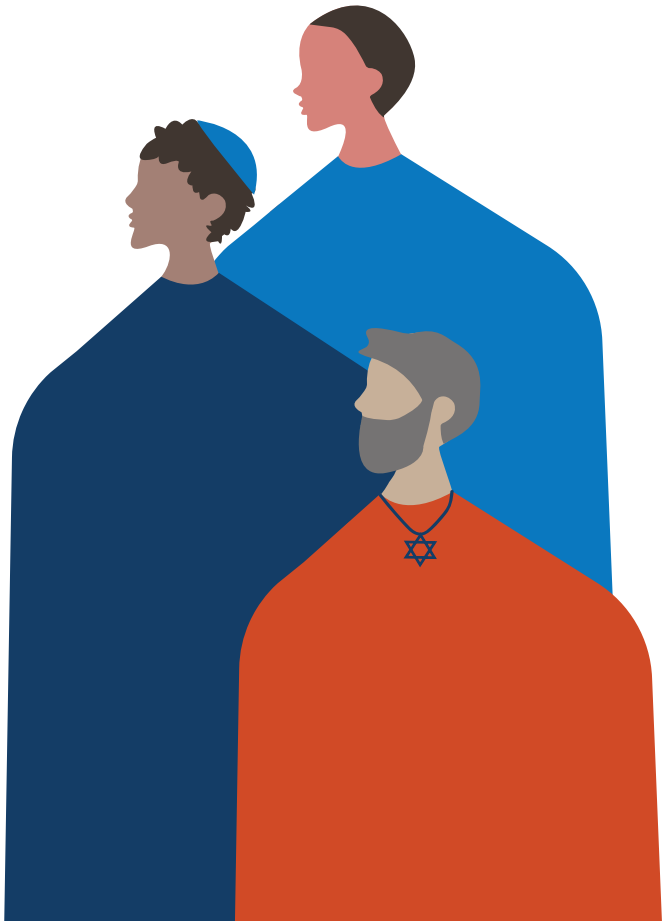
Participants described racism as embedded across multiple systems and institutions. In workplaces and educational settings, they reported being bullied, excluded, and generally feeling unsafe. Many participants noted Palestinian perspectives and solidarity were silenced.

In the media, participants in affected communities described biased and racist coverage that they told us was fuelling daily experiences of racism and hostility. Significant racism, along with mis- and disinformation, was reported on online social media platforms. Across communities, participants described experiencing harm from the political narrative of politicians and the actions, and inaction, of governments.

Across all areas of public life, participants told us there were limited pathways to safely raise concerns about racism. They reported that reporting mechanisms were unsafe and ineffective, and that police responses were inconsistent or that police took no action at all. The justice system was perceived by some participants in the affected communities as failing to act on racism and protect targets from harm.

> 'At every instance you stand up against that instance where it's appropriate, but there has to be an understanding of the systemic nature of racism and how it works together. They work together and we have to have that overarching perspective of ending racism...I'd love to go that far. And without that, I think we are just battling this instance and then that instance. We need to have a systemic picture of how this works.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'I think it's the structural nature of the racism. We can talk about individual, the individual cases are really important, they're our evidence. But we're talking about structural and systemic and institutional racism and that's really important to acknowledge.'
> **(Arab community member)**



3.1 Workplaces

Discrimination against employees

Many participants described being subject to increased and severe acts of racism since 7 October 2023. A common theme amongst all participants was that while racism in workplaces is not new, it has been exacerbated.

Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants told of being excluded from consideration for employment opportunities because they expressed pro-Palestinian views.

> 'We definitely saw an increase right across … workplaces, we saw it in the medical field. We even saw it in people applying for jobs. So, if they had a particular name or it's also become quite common for employers to jump on social media and search your name before they decide to shortlist you for an interview. So, they were being excluded because they were outwardly pro-Palestinian.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Some people reported facing overt forms of racism such as bullying and exclusion linked to their expressions of identity, most commonly language, clothing, symbols, and religion. People described experiencing microaggressions and overt hostility from colleagues and managers that created environments where they felt unsafe and unwelcome. Participants described being treated differently, having their ideas dismissed, or feeling pressured to remain silent about their beliefs.

> 'I've had issues in the workplace where I've been Sieg Heil'd and where there have been songs played on a loudspeaker over the kitchen like Heil Hitler, Kill the Jews, Kanye West. And everybody turns their head and looks at me and many of the staff are aware of my religion and constantly make fun of me and point out that fact to other people and bully me because of it.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Silencing and penalisation

Participants across all communities told us about being silenced or penalised for expressing solidarity with Palestinians or speaking out against racism. Some were explicitly warned by their workplaces not to attend protests or share political views publicly. Others reported being investigated, reprimanded or dismissed for making statements that called for peace or acknowledged the suffering of Palestinians. Participants shared that complaints processes were often weaponised, with assertions that professional bodies are being used to intimidate or silence people.

> 'I've heard stories where doctors have tried to write statements in solidarity with Palestinians, and they have suffered consequences as a result of that. In their workplaces, or within their unions or within their groups. Multiple instances of such. It's the fact that you're calling for the end of attacks on healthcare workers in Gaza, and that is deemed inappropriate, and that you might suffer as a result of that is quite disturbing. Healthcare workers should not be a target anywhere.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Lack of safety

Workplaces were often described as unsafe environments for expressing identity, grief or solidarity. Many felt they had to hide their views or avoid conversations to protect themselves. This lack of safety extended to informal workplace culture, where microaggressions, exclusion and silence were common.

> 'We've seen more discrimination, racism in... their jobs. So, this is what we're seeing. The silencing. So, people feel like they can't bring their whole selves to their work. So, if they're Palestinian, ... they can't grieve in their workplace, they can't come to work the next day and share with their colleagues how devastated they are because all of a sudden they're creating an unsafe environment.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

The absence of culturally safe spaces and inclusive policies meant that even when racism occurred, there was little recourse from internal complaints and reporting processes. Human resources processes were seen as ineffective or biased, and many chose not to report incidents, assuming that nothing would change.

> 'And when I've tried to take it up with my manager or the supervisors in place at the time, they haven't done anything that even slightly resolves the situation at all. At most they've gotten not even a stern, just a talking to. Just been "This is wrong, don't do it again." And it doesn't help anything because they end up coming up to me calling me a snitch.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'I put in a formal complaint. I didn't hear anything for ages...a lot of complaint processes are designed to exhaust people... my complaint went to that room in the basement where complaints go to die, because nothing was done. Even though I have to say, my managers were very supportive of me. The whole time too, checking in on me. Perhaps because they might be a bit scared of me because I know my rights. I've got the language. But I feel complaint systems, all our complaint systems do not work in the service of justice.'
> **(Arab community member)**

The Commission also heard from participants across communities that workplaces often lack culturally appropriate and trauma-informed responses to the global events that were deeply affecting their communities. When participants described navigating grief and trauma at work, they described being frequently met with limited and procedural options such as taking personal leave or accessing generic employee assistance programs.

> 'I was told specifically – last year one of my cousins was killed – well, she didn't die, her husband and her children did in Gaza. And I was told that if I'm going to be upset about it, I should take leave. And I found out at work, so I got a text message saying, "Hey this has happened" I was told to take leave. That was what they offered or EAP (Employee Assistance Programs).'
> **(Muslim community member)**

These measures, while standard, did not reflect an understanding of the cultural and emotional dimensions of such experiences. Participants described feeling unsupported and unseen in moments of profound distress, with workplaces failing to offer meaningful acknowledgment or flexibility.

Job loss

Several participants shared that they were terminated after raising concerns about racism. Many believed that similar incidents go unreported due to fear of retaliation and a lack of trust in workplace processes. In some cases, dismissals were justified using vague or unrelated reasons (e.g. "we don't have work for you anymore"), making it difficult to prove or challenge. This lack of transparency and accountability further eroded confidence in institutional fairness and reinforced the perception that speaking out against racism comes at a personal cost.

> 'We've had a lot of complaints in relation to discrimination in the workplace. But it's not even just the Arab community. It's everybody that's shown solidarity to the Arab community has also faced huge discrimination. We honestly cannot keep up with the amount of people that have been disciplined, that have been sacked, that have been silenced in the workplace. So that's been a huge psychological risk in relation to going to work and just trying to exist in your workplace and make a living. You obviously might know stories, we definitely have lots of complaints there.'
> **(Arab community member)**

The Commission's Racism@Uni Report also includes detailed findings from professional and academic staff that support what *Seen & Heard* participants in all communities shared about their experiences in tertiary education workplaces.

Impact on businesses

Other participants shared that the viability of their businesses had been affected. These impacts were often compounded by identity-based assumptions and heightened political tensions.

Some Jewish and Israeli business owners reported a sharp increase in hostility and targeted incidents. They described staff and customers being subjected to harassment and verbal abuse when their businesses were visibly associated with their ethnic or religious identity.

> ‘I own a restaurant…. With the mezuzah on the door and selling Israel products, and some of my staff are Israelis, the owner Israelis, we sell Israeli food. … I have to say that, before 7 October, we never had any, any issue. Never at all. Everybody loved us, everybody was coming in. Since October 7, there was lots of people coming in and giving comments, saying things, saying things to my employees that are not appropriate, and saying things to me and to my business colleagues. And it is obviously – it’s not that it grew, it just – it was never – it never happened before. It just all of a sudden people are coming and saying …what they think, which is freedom of opinion. That’s fine, but still, the opinion is really – it’s Jew hatred …definitely we felt the growth of antisemitism in the area.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Loss of professional opportunities

Participants in all communities shared stories of losing work, representation or professional standing due to their identity or public views. Creatives such as musicians, writers, and visual artists described being excluded from events or disinvited from activities which they had previously regularly taken part in.

> ‘That there are people who were cancelled, people who were thrown out of [musical] bands, people who were told their work was not wanted anymore, people who are represented by galleries, artists who were told that they couldn’t be represented anymore, or by literary agents who said they wouldn’t represent them anymore. They weren’t generally told. This is because you’re Jewish. Oh, sorry. I just can’t represent you anymore because most people know that it’s technically against the law to say that. But it’s, you know, oh, sorry, we don’t have any work for you anymore is fine. You know, you can’t prove that.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Others told us about funding and award decisions that were negatively impacted by their identity or assumptions about their views. Some participants told us it was difficult to challenge or prove this.

> ‘They’re losing not just their jobs, but … a whole funding of an award system was taken away… that’s political surveillance and discrimination. So, it’s like white people, non-Arab, non-Palestinian people are being persecuted because of their beliefs.’
> (Arab community member)

3.2 Education

Many people spoke about facing racism and discrimination within the education system. Parents shared what their children experience at school, university students have described feeling unsafe on campus, and teachers have recounted being silenced for showing solidarity, advocating for change or teaching about the history of their communities. Academics also described losing funding and financial support since 7 October 2023, even though their teaching materials and research topics have remained unchanged. They believe this shift is due to their work now being viewed as political, rather than cultural or historical as it was in the past.

The Commission’s Racism@Uni Report includes detailed findings from students and staff that support what *Seen & Heard* participants in all communities shared about their experiences in university settings. Findings included in reports of the Australian Parliament which considered staff and student experiences at Australian universities also echo the findings above.[1]

Discrimination against students

Students described being targeted with racist slurs, threatening graffiti and acts of intimidation, especially when their

identities were visibly expressed. Those with visible markers of identity spoke about being followed around school or university campuses, bullied, singled out in forums, subjected to public ridicule and deliberately excluded from both social and academic spaces. Many shared experiences of being isolated by peers, ignored by staff and made to feel unsafe in classrooms.

> 'Last year, on Year 12 muck-up day, the students arranged the desks in her classroom into the shape of a swastika. It was the first classroom she walked into that morning. The room was twice the size of this one, and the entire space was filled with a swastika.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Palestinian, Muslim and Arab students spoke about being harassed and routinely stereotyped as aggressive or threatening. These responses were often triggered by acts of mourning or solidarity such as attending vigils or a peaceful protest. Some were banned from displaying cultural symbols or flags, others were discouraged from participating in campus activism or sharing their views in class. This created a climate of fear and self-censorship, where students felt compelled to suppress their identities and emotions to avoid retaliation and disciplinary action.

> 'So many of my friends, especially Muslim friends, particularly in universities, they have faced exclusion or been discriminated against. Not in direct ways but also in very subtle ways. They are not able to open up because there are no spaces to open up. And there are no ways to express your trauma or express your pain. Because you don't expect – when there is already a bias in the media, in the larger narrative. So, their story is largely missing from that.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Some Jewish participants noted racism and hate speech are increasingly normalised on university campuses, often occurring in the context of political activism. They claimed that their institutions frequently fail to recognise or address this, and that the emphasis on open debate often outweighed attention to their comfort and sense of belonging.

> 'To be honest, at least at university, I wouldn't go to the higher-ups anymore. I've tried to deal with them; they were useless. They don't really care about antisemitism or anti-Zionism. So, I just deal with it myself. That's what it's got to. Like I just have to deal with it myself with my friends, with the people around me, my family.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Silencing and censorship

The Commission heard of the policing of speech and silencing of Palestinian voices and perspectives across primary, secondary and tertiary educational settings. Silencing and surveillance were described as interpersonal, but also as structural and embedded in policy and practice. We heard of university students involved in a protest for Palestine being tracked using Wi-Fi location data and subsequently facing disciplinary action. Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants reported instances of their children being silenced and prohibited from speaking, writing or referencing Palestine in informal activities and formal academic work.

> 'My friend, I found out her child at school in his art class, he was drawing Palestine flags and one of the students called him a terrorist and the teacher did nothing and actually asked him to stop drawing Palestine flags.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

When students and staff members attempted to raise concerns or made complaints, they were often met with indifference, procedural delays or responses that deflected responsibility. They were labelled as troublemakers for disrupting the perceived peace of the school or university. Rather than being supported, they were told to stop causing disturbances and to avoid making others uncomfortable.

> 'And although there are meant to be mechanisms in place to address racism, in fact a lot of schools were taking on a punitive response when issues were raised. Because these students or even the teachers who had identified issues of racism within... the staffing environment were branded as, you know, agitators that were creating trouble for the school.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

> 'And the problem with universities is they don't actually punish these people. So, you report the incidents, and they don't get suspended, they don't get banned, and it just shows that it's so socially acceptable for them to say these things because they're not getting punished and they're just getting away with saying these things. So, there's no real incentive to not say them anymore. So, I just think the universities and the government need to take a much stronger stance to actually show and set a precedent that there is punishment to saying these sorts of things.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

3.3 Media

Bias

Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants described how the media has played a significant role in shaping public attitudes through biased reporting and harmful stereotypes. Communities spoke of being misrepresented as violent or extreme, portrayed as aggressors or as inherently political.

> 'We are represented - Muslims, Arabs, Palestinians - as less human, as terrorists, as violent, as aggressive. Which, of course, has a toll on our mental health.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

These participants told us that expressions of solidarity with people in Gaza were often framed by the media as extreme or threatening. These portrayals contributed to a climate where entire communities were vilified, and people felt unsafe speaking publicly.

> 'As a Palestinian watching other Palestinians get vilified and slandered and completely raked over the coals in the media...I'm watching that and I'm like, am I next? If I continue to speak out about Palestine, will it be me next? And for a person who has three children, a mortgage, bills to pay and wants to provide support to her family back home, it's a very scary concept. And ...then you self-censor.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Some Jewish community members shared the view that media reporting about Gaza had contributed to a rise in antisemitism. These participants told us the media was biased against them, there was too much emphasis on reporting on events in Gaza and inaccurate reporting about the situation there. They believed this was contributing to audiences wrongly conflating the actions of Israel with Jewish people in Australia and contributing to a rise in antisemitism and anti-Israeli sentiment.

> ‘As long as the media’s obsessed with demonising Israel, people will make the link, even if officially the news report, of course, will only talk about Israel, not the Jews. But the person hearing it is still thinking that’s what the Jewish country does.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Mis- and disinformation

Participants also highlighted how the media, including social media platforms are used to spread misinformation, disinformation and other harmful narratives. False claims, conspiracy theories, and propaganda are amplified across platforms, shaping public opinion and contributing to exclusion. Many described encountering content that portrayed Palestinian, Muslim and Arab communities as inherently violent, manipulative, or threatening, which reinforced damaging stereotypes.

> ‘I think the biggest culprit of racism is the media and how it spreads information. For the longest years we’ve known the media has spread the biggest misinformation about Muslims. Since 9/11, Muslims have always been painted with a terrorist tag. And this information has been spreading for over 20, 25 years now. The culprit is the media.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Misinformation was often accompanied by visual content such as memes, videos and graphics. These materials were described as distorting reality and inciting hate. Jewish participants described encountering memes reminiscent of antisemitic depictions of Jews in 1930s Europe. Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants reported regularly encountering racist images depicting them as violent and as terrorists. Participants noted that such content is not only inaccurate but also deeply harmful, particularly for young people who rely on social media as a primary source of information.

Jewish participants noted that racist tropes, such as those that form the basis of conspiracies were subtly reinforced.

> ‘Yeah, but we’ve heard – we’ve heard in our childhood – they’ve all heard that the Jews control this and the Jews control Hollywood and the media and the world banking system. And because they’ve heard it growing up, they think it must be true.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Participants also shared with us their frustration about their limited capacity to take action against mis- and disinformation and recognised this as an issue requiring a system-based solution.

> ‘All those misinformation, disaccountability, or other things you pointed out, these are the larger systemic problems or structural problems. And as individuals, we don’t have power to do anything. Because the structure is created in a way, even if you try to reach out to these institutions or to these programs, they don’t help us. I mean, we have to push, in a way, how these exchanges happen between those who are in positions of power and between those who are not in positions of power.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Social media platforms and online hate

Participants described social media platforms as major sites of racism, harassment and hate speech. Many reported receiving violent threats, being doxed or targeted with slurs and abuse.

> ‘There’s a mosque that is being built and its launch was some four months ago… Sometimes I like to go there to find peace of mind and to worship God. And on the comment sections of the announcement of the launch of that mosque, we find someone commenting “It’s time for a Christchurch 2.0”…I have to now live in fear, and it’s not just some ideological fear; it’s a very real fear. When we see these things, I don’t feel as comfortable anymore going and praying at a mosque that’s in my backyard.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

> ‘I was in a… WhatsApp chat group that was doxed by vile people … They took our very innocent support group chat and exposed it to potential terrorists online who made a list of Jews with our photos and went into our social media and verified who we were and spread this list not only around Australia on social media, but around the world.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

There was widespread frustration with the failure of social media companies to moderate harmful content. Participants described reporting abuse and receiving no response, or seeing violent posts remain online for weeks. Some noted that platforms allowed hate speech to flourish, while removing content that expressed solidarity or grief. This lack of accountability contributed to a sense that social media platforms were complicit in racism.

Inaccurate and selective coverage and double standards

Many Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants shared the view that the failure of the mainstream media to accurately describe what is happening in Gaza contributes to the dehumanisation and silencing of Palestinian people in Australia as well as Muslim and Arab communities.

> ‘Particularly in the media, the language and rhetoric that the media uses is dehumanising. The fact that they won’t say genocide or apartheid or Palestine. That they say that this is a war and a conflict. That they try and platform Hamas instead of talking about Palestinians’ need for liberation and justice. And the fact that they try to trivialise what’s happening and make it about one point. I think you cannot get past the level of racism we see every day.’
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Palestinian, Muslim and Arab participants also expressed deep frustration with the selective and uneven nature of mainstream media coverage. Many felt that their communities were misrepresented, dehumanised or ignored by mainstream media organisations. These participants described how their histories and lived experiences were rarely acknowledged or contextualised by the media, and how issues affecting them were often underreported or framed through biased narratives. This perceived lack of accurate and balanced coverage contributed to feelings of invisibility, invalidation and mistrust in the media.

> ‘They don’t say massacred or killed or murdered or shot. They say died. The language they use to describe the killings of people, they don’t even use their names. When they talk about Israelis and Israeli lives, they have a story. It is humanised. When it comes to a Palestinian, you don’t hear their voice. They do not even know their names. Even when we talk about Palestinians’ voices in Australian society, even when we are talking about our experiences, it’s very rare.’
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Members of the Jewish community spoke about how the media has elevated individual voices that do not reflect the diversity of views in the Jewish community, presenting those people as the face and spokespeople for the broader community. These participants also noted that only certain Jewish and Israeli voices and narratives were centred in media coverage. This was described as unhelpful and a contributor to antisemitism.

> ‘And what I find the media are doing, they’re picking the fringe voices and platforming them. And it’s not the fault of the fringe voices, you’re allowed fringe voices. But to say that this is what the majority think and all of a sudden it is making us against them within the community.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

The media's role in shaping public perception had real consequences for community wellbeing. Across communities, participants described feeling unsafe, anxious, and retraumatised by the way their communities were portrayed. Some avoided watching the news altogether, while others felt compelled to monitor coverage to protect themselves and their families, ensuring their voices are captured appropriately. Even when the Commission invited community members to share their experiences through audio recordings so we could represent their voices accurately in this report, many expressed concerns. Participants, particularly Palestinians, feared that we or other authorities might take their words out of context and misrepresent them.

3.4 Political leadership

Political polarisation

Participants across communities expressed deep concern about the influence of political discourse in shaping public attitudes and fuelling division. They expressed the view that political leaders often use issues of racism and discrimination to advance their own agendas, rather than to promote understanding or justice. This politicisation of community identity, sense of belonging, and connection to homeland has contributed to public hostility and undermined efforts to build solidarity.

Political responses to global events were seen as shaping public sentiment more powerfully than the events themselves. Participants observed that spikes in racism often follow the rhetoric of political leaders, not the crises themselves. When leaders respond to crises with language that scapegoats or targets communities, that language is often amplified by the media and repeated by the public in harmful and derogatory ways.

> 'I've been really upset to see antisemitism and issues around Israel-Gaza being used as a political weapon by all parties, everyone in politics, is really disappointing. It just should be, everyone's committed to Australian multiculturalism, and it doesn't matter what political party you're from and of course people have different maybe foreign policies, but when it comes to how people are treated in Australia, it just should never be something that politicians are yelling at each other about in question time to score political points.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Across communities, participants also expressed the view that there was purposeful conflation by political leaders (as well as community leaders and the media) of anti-Zionism with antisemitism with the intention of silencing criticism of Israel, including silencing Jewish voices.

Participants across all communities also described the language of some politicians as overtly racist, especially toward Palestinian and Muslim communities. Participants consistently reported instances of politicians using dehumanising language, including harmful stereotypes, and downplaying or dismissing racism experienced by communities.

> 'The dehumanisation that we suffer, lack of acknowledgement that we exist as human beings. And then linked to that, the way the politicians have been speaking about us – a denial of Islamophobia – that is "fictitious", they say.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Absence of diverse political voices

There were also concerns about the absence of diverse voices in political decision-making. This absence was seen as contributing to a disconnect between decision makers and the lived realities of communities most affected by racism. Participants from Palestinian, Arab and Muslim communities explained that diversity in political leadership is not just about visibility, but about bringing a range of experiences and perspectives that can inform more nuanced and effective responses. They highlighted the need for leaders who understand the complexity of community experiences and who are willing to engage directly with those impacted.

> 'Understanding that we probably...were coming from different backgrounds, right? Maybe the best person to understand the issues that faces that group, is the people.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Failures of government in recognising genocide

Participants across communities expressed deep distress, concern and disappointment in the Australian Government's lack of political will to acknowledge that genocide is occurring in Gaza.

> 'So, I mean I can't fathom this. This causes us as Palestinians living in Australia extreme distress, extreme. I mean I get nightmares. I lost faith in humanity. Where is the humanity? Why there are two laws in the world? Law that applies to the rest of the world and another applies to Palestinians. As if we are alien, as if we don't belong to this planet, as if we came from Mars or Pluto. I mean why you are treated differently? This is causing us extreme loss of faith and the level of despair that we have reached.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

Many participants pointed towards expert evidence, including from international human rights and law bodies, that described the situation as a genocide rather than a war or conflict. For example, on 16 September 2025, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory said the Israeli authorities and security forces were committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza.[2] This finding has been reinforced by several other independent human rights organisations.[3] Israel rejects this finding and some participants from the Jewish community also told us they do not accept it.

> 'So apartheid, genocide, colonisation, all these things are patently false. They're just false in every possible sense.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Participants told us that this failure to accurately describe what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank is another example of racism.

> 'Calling a genocide a conflict is already part of the problem. It's already just … belittling the lives of Palestinians. It's already telling people that the lives of Palestinians are less important. So, I'm really having to reckon with that. Like, how do I go on living in this society that you know doesn't value me, doesn't value my life.'
> **(Palestinian community member)**

> 'At the higher level, the increase in racism in my view is significantly driven by the government and major institutions in this society. Because you've got the federal government just not doing anything to stop a genocide, even though the community of those people being genocided are calling for action. So that is serious dehumanisation happening right there. And then from the antisemitism side, like constant conflation between Jews and Israel, Jews and Zionists.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

3.5 Government

Government responses

Across communities, participants told us that government responses to all forms of racism must remain grounded in systemic approaches rather than fragmented measures. Participants emphasised that racism is not driven by communities themselves but by institutional and structural forces. When government frames racism as isolated incidents or treats communities separately, it risks deepening divisions and reinforcing harmful narratives. Participants from all communities called for a unified, thoughtful approach that addresses the root causes of racism and avoids pitting groups against one another.

> 'It's the messaging and directions that are coming from the people that have the most power in this country...that are making laws, that are pitting different forms of discrimination against each other. There was no reason for the different positions we now have for Islamophobia and antisemitism. The antisemitism taskforce that exists in the AFP [Australian Federal Police] – not to minimise the rise of antisemitism, of course it exists - but all forms of discrimination are linked. There's no reason why we need to separate and compete with one another.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Representation and engagement

There was a strong sense from participants in all communities that government does not adequately represent or engage with communities affected by racism. Participants described official consultation processes as superficial, with decisions already made before community input was sought. Some felt that their voices were used to legitimise government actions rather than to shape them.

Many felt that instead of addressing the specific realities faced by communities experiencing racism, government actions were often generic or symbolic. This left communities feeling misunderstood or deliberately overlooked.

> 'We've gone to a lot of these meetings. We've provided our feedback. And I'm going to say, personally, I'm kind of a bit fed up. What changes are we seeing? Nothing. What are we seeing on the floor? Our women are getting attacked, they're getting abused, their mothers are getting abused, attacked. Nothing's changing… When we raise our issues that are genuine, it's overlooked.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Others highlighted the absence of culturally safe spaces within government, where people could speak openly without fear of being misunderstood or misrepresented. This lack of meaningful engagement contributed to a sense of alienation and reinforced the perception that government is disconnected from community realities.

> 'It just gives the impression it's tokenistic. We feel more marginalised, more isolated, more alienated.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Perceptions of bias

Participants described a strong perception of bias in government responses following 7 October 2023. Many felt that public statements from government agencies appeared politically motivated and lacked neutrality, failing to acknowledge the grief and trauma experienced by their communities.

Some participants also pointed to funding decisions to organisations they believe favoured those aligned with government messaging, while grassroots groups with strong community connections were sidelined. This contributed to the sense that government institutions were not built to serve all communities fairly, and that racialised communities were expected to navigate systems that neither recognised nor responded to their lived realities.

The Commission was also widely criticised. Palestinian, Muslim and Arab communities were frustrated, angry and disappointed that we did not acknowledge that a genocide is occurring in Gaza. Many felt that the Commission, a national institution independent from the Australian Government, should have taken a public position on this. Our neutrality and apolitical approach were described as contributing to the racism being experienced within these communities.

> 'There's no sense that it's a body that is willing to recognise the reality of what we are all experiencing. The genocide, in five years they might be able to talk about it as a genocide. But at the moment, it's not something that they're able to even just symbolically, softly say that is something, that they recognise the level of violence… We are mostly witnessing it as a community of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim Australians because we see ourselves in it. We see the way that media, critical bodies, Human Rights Commission, their capacity to ignore it and to invisible it, invisibilises us. If they can't even name what's happening to the people that I'm connected to ancestrally because of how they look, because of histories of colonialism, imperialism, all this. Then how am I going to be ever safe? How am I ever going to be safe enough to be able to access a complaints system?'
> **(Arab community member)**

In some sessions with Jewish communities, participants criticised the Commission's response in the immediate aftermath of 7th October 2023.

> 'This is interesting that there's been this initiative taken, but where was AHRC on October 8th? I want to know that.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'But I think that mistrust has grown too since October 7th. And particularly in government bodies like the Human Rights Commission.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

3.6 Legal system

Participants described the legal system as a site of entrenched racial bias, particularly civil law processes. Many shared the view that people's access to justice was directly affected by their identity. Being someone with lived experience of racism was identified by participants across communities as a factor that automatically reduces someone's access to legal remedies, regardless of the circumstances. This was not seen as accidental or occasional, but as a built-in feature of the legal system that continues to disadvantage racialised communities.

Gaps in legal protections

Muslim participants raised concerns about how racism is defined including in the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)*. Many spoke about the uneven recognition and protection of religious and racialised communities, noting that legal frameworks sometimes fail to reflect experiences of racism that intersect with someone's faith.

> 'About that definition [of racism in the Racial Discrimination Act] … it's not religious… we are not included as the others in the Act. There is no religious group. It's only for Sikh and the Jewish only. As … Muslims … we are not included in this Act.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

These legal gaps contribute to a broader sense of exclusion and undermine trust in the justice system.

> 'The law doesn't see what we go through, it's like we're invisible.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Lack of consequences and accountability through the system

Participants also described that perpetrators of racial violence and harassment often face little to no meaningful consequences from the justice system. Even in cases involving physical assault, threats or hate speech, police responses were seen as inadequate, with charges rarely reflecting the racialised nature of the harm. This lack of accountability was described as sending a message that such behaviour is tolerated, contributing to a climate where racialised communities feel unsafe and unprotected. The absence of serious legal repercussions not only undermines trust in law enforcement but also emboldens further acts of hate.

> 'There is no accountability for those people who target other people's livelihoods, sack them from their jobs, harass them on the street, spit in their face, pull their hijab off. There's barely accountability for these things. The occasional person goes to court or gets a fine or slap on the wrist.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

> ‘We got doxed …and the interviews were a year and a bit more later … but it did feel like it went into nothing…you didn’t feel like it went anywhere… we’re still not sure whether there’s going to be any sort of legal action from the doxing.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

> ‘So when the government doesn’t provide the consequences or if the police aren’t, as was commented on, given the capacity to act on legislation, or legislation isn’t strong enough, or the judiciary, whatever, doesn’t provide the capacity to rule in keeping the legislation, there needs to be accountability.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Existing laws disproportionately target certain communities

Across Arab and Muslim communities, we heard the view that anti-terrorism law is structurally biased and discriminatory, both in its language and in its implementation. This has the effect of reinforcing harmful stereotypes and contributing to a broader climate of fear, surveillance, and exclusion.

> ‘Some of the more recent laws or bills that have been passed, the language itself is not problematic but the way they’re being interpreted is very anti-Muslim, shall I say.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Such mechanisms were described as framing Muslim and Arab communities as inherently suspicious or threatening. Participants from Arab and Muslim backgrounds shared the view that law enforcement agencies disproportionately target their communities.

> ‘A criminal is a criminal. Criminals should not have a religion attached to them. But what will happen is the first decision, the police chief will say, is it terrorism-related? That means if the person who committed that crime is a Muslim, straight away it is terrorism.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Existing laws are ineffective in addressing racism

Across consultations concerns were raised about the adequacy of current legal protection against hate and discrimination.

> ‘[We need] stronger legislation … our anti-discrimination, racial discrimination acts are not worth the paper that they’re written on. Obviously totally unenforceable.’ (Jewish community member)

> ‘There has to be a law that – there has to be consequence to this, because currently, there aren’t enough protections … even if you make a complaint, even if you go to court, there’s rarely anything you can do [to address racism].’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Some participants in all communities told us about the ineffectiveness of recent laws to meaningfully address racism.

> ‘The anti-terror legislation at federal level and the anti-protest legislation at New South Wales and Victoria are completely ineffective and I don’t want my community being seen as the reason we’re cracking down on human rights. The Victorian legislation would’ve done nothing to prevent Adass being fire-bombed just because you can’t protest outside of a church now. It’s insane. And historically, when have sweeping police powers ever benefited the Jewish people? It’s nonsense. And if we want to tackle antisemitism, we start with repealing that garbage legislation.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

> ‘You’ve got the police force who are bookended by legislation and judiciary, and the legislation hasn’t really been up to scratch. And even in its current form, even with the new changes … there’s definitely changes to legislation that needs to happen.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

3.7 Police

Police inaction

Participants consistently described a deep lack of trust in police responses to racism and hate crimes, shaped by repeated experiences of dismissal, minimisation and inaction. Across communities, participants described police as lacking awareness of how racism manifests in different communities noting their interactions with police revealed gaps in understanding about different types of racism, especially Islamophobia, antisemitism and anti-Palestinian racism. In some Jewish engagement sessions, participants spoke about the NSW Police response to the protest at the Opera House on 9 October 2023 and their hurt, anger and disappointment. They flagged this as a pivotal moment, alleging that police did not act against antisemitism which gave broader permission for harmful acts against their community.

> 'October 9 was a watershed moment because this huge hate-fest could occur on sacrosanct land with zero consequence. We've still seen zero consequence.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

Participants across communities shared that when they reported serious incidents to the police including physical assaults, threats and targeted harassment, their concerns were not taken seriously or were treated as low priority. In several cases, police failed to follow up entirely, leaving participants feeling exposed and unsupported. One participant recounted reporting a violent attack involving the removal of their cultural clothing and physical assault. Although they were initially told the matter would be taken seriously and followed up, they never heard back.

Participants also described how police often fail to recognise the full impact of racism. Racially motivated crimes, threats, and harassment were frequently reframed or dismissed as isolated incidents.

> 'I have tried the police a couple of times, but again, it's things that are not taken that seriously because it's like, so what if you're calling for the elimination of the Jew? It's not like you're killing anyone right now. So, who cares.'
> **(Jewish community member)**

> 'When I was reporting the incident, the police officer was trying to minimise the experience... But a racially motivated prejudice act is a crime. We talk about this all the time. You can't sit there and try and make me feel like it was less...'
> **(Muslim community member)**

This failure to name and address these acts as racism contributes to a culture of impunity and deepens community trauma.

Others spoke of receiving inappropriate or implausible justifications from police about the incidents they reported. These explanations often deflected responsibility or downplayed the racialised nature of the harm, contributing to a sense that authorities were unwilling to acknowledge or address racism.

> 'The one who dropped the [dead] kangaroo [in front of the Mosque], we got the photo on the CCTV with the face, with everything and the police come back to us. Say he just dropped it off there because he had it in his car and he didn't know where to go to leave it and put it in front of the mosque because he believes the Council will come and collect it for free.'
> **(Muslim community member)**

Over time, incidents such as these erode community confidence in law enforcement and reinforce the perception that racism is not treated as a serious or legitimate concern. Many said they had stopped reporting altogether, believing that "nothing happens," and that police are not a safe or supportive resource for racialised communities.

> ‘It’s OK to criticise the Israeli Government, but not hold Jews collectively responsible for that action… We’re coping with a trauma, and it shouldn’t be our responsibility to knock on the door to law enforcement and government agencies to say, “This is actually the law.” We’re not asking you to change the law; we’re asking ministries to protect the Jewish community in the same way as others without us having to ask.’
> **(Jewish community member)**

Fear and surveillance

Rather than providing safety, police presence was often experienced as intimidating or threatening. Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab participants described avoiding protests or public gatherings out of fear of police surveillance. Others said they felt watched or monitored, particularly when visibly expressing solidarity with affected communities. Some participants also reported instances of alleged police misconduct toward them and their community. This created a climate of fear, where people felt they had to choose between civic participation and personal safety.

> ‘Police at our protests have pushed Muslims while they’re praying on the grass, because they were at the end of the rally and they wanted them to keep moving, OK? So, there’s not a lot of trust in the system and in police.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Some participants also noted that police were present at events but did not intervene when hate speech or violence occurred. This passive presence was interpreted as complicity, further eroding trust.

> ‘I would never, ever report an Islamophobic incident if it happens to me. You’re asking me to trust police. I can’t man, I can’t. I’ve got too much trauma from it … I just can’t do it.’
> **(Muslim community member)**

Our consultations for this report were concluded before the protests at Sydney Town Hall on 8 February 2026 in response to the visit of President Herzog.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4. Final remarks

The Commission again thanks those organisations and community members who so generously engaged with us about the distressing experience and harm of racism. We thank the project team staff for their deep commitment and care in hearing, gathering and documenting the lived experiences of people with whom it engaged.

Communities we spoke to called for systemic reform to address the structures and practices that perpetuate racism. They emphasised the need for coordinated action, accountability and embedding anti-racism across all sectors. As a first vital step the Australian Government should implement and fund the National Anti-Racism Framework in honour of the voices of those who participated in this national project.

Appendix

Terminology

Term	Descriptions
Anti-racism	Anti-racism is about more than being 'not racist'. Anti-racism involves active decisions that seek to combat injustice and promote racial equity. Being anti-racist involves actively attempting to combat racist policies, practices, cultures and ideas. It can be helpful to think of anti-racism as a skill set that we can develop and use to promote a better, more equitable society
Human rights-based approach	A human rights-based approach to anti-racism is one that is informed by the principles of participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and legality. It is guided by Australia's obligations under the International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to adopt immediate and effective measures to eliminate racism.
Interpersonal racism	Interpersonal racism refers to racism that occurs in everyday interactions. It can take many forms, such as abusive language, harassment, exclusion or humiliation. Interpersonal racism illustrates how systemic racial inequity plays out between people.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality is a conceptual framework conceived by African American academic Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is a concept that highlights how different parts of a person's identity and experiences impact one another and 'intersect'. They then inform a person's experience of systemic and structural inequality. For example, a person's experience of a form of discrimination, such as sexism, is also affected by other parts of their identity. This could include their race, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, socio-economic status or whether they live with a disability. In anti-racist action, intersectionality should always recognise race and its impacts on other forms of oppression.

Term	Descriptions
Race	The concept of race emerged relatively recently in history, during the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. It is built on the disproved idea that humans could be categorised into distinct biological races based on physical and social characteristics. Although race has no biological or scientific basis, thinking about race and its ongoing impacts remains essential, as ideas of race and racism remain entrenched in Australia's laws, cultures, and institutions, which continue to privilege groups who are racialised as white and create systemic inequalities today.
Systemic racism Structural racism Institutional racism	**Systemic racism** refers to the way a society or institution's cultural norms, laws, ideologies, policies, and practices result in inequitable treatment and outcomes. Systemic racism involves entire systems, for example, legal, healthcare, and criminal justice systems, and the various institutions and structures that support their operation. Systemic racism can also happen without specific laws, policies, or practices that keep it in place, where the legacy of those laws, policies and practices persists in systems long after they have ended. Structural and institutional racism are forms of systemic racism. **Structural racism** describes the inequalities and barriers that prevent equal access to opportunities. It refers to racism that is deep within the structures of society. This includes in laws, policies and cultural norms. **Institutional racism** is closely linked to systemic racism. It exists when racism is normalised within an organisation or institution. It includes the policies and practices that guide how organisations and institutions run. The terms systemic, institutional, and structural racism, while distinct, are often used to refer to similar phenomena and are sometimes used interchangeably.
Trauma-informed perspective	A trauma-informed perspective recognises the intersectional impact of racism and racial discrimination and ensures that people who experience racism can share their experiences in a way that is safe and sensitive to their experiences.

Endnotes

1 Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee, *Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024 (No. 2): Report- October 2024, Australian Senate Committees, Parliament of Australia, 2024*; Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (PJCHR), *Inquiry into antisemitism at Australian universities: Report- February 2025*, Australian Parliament Joint Committees, Parliament of Australia, 2025.

2 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, *Legal analysis of the conduct of Israel in Gaza pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, A/HRC/60/CRP.3, UN Human Rights Council, 16 September 2025.

3 Human Rights Watch, *Extermination and Acts of Genocide: Israel deliberately depriving Palestinians in Gaza of water*, 19 December 2024; Amnesty International, *You feel like you are subhuman: Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza*, 5 December 2024; B'Tselem, *Our Genocide*, July 2025.

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