



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence Directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Australian Association of Social Workers
Submission

May 2026

Acknowledgements

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We pay our deep respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community.

The AASW has overseen and developed the process for this submission. This includes coordination of internal feedback, reviewing contributions from members and social workers, conducting research, identification of information inclusions, and writing the submission.

This submission has been informed by Professor Bindi Bennett and Adjunct Professor Lorraine Muller, who have led yarning sessions and discussions, collected feedback, and identified key issues and priorities. The development of this submission has been directly informed by yarning sessions with First Nations AASW members and written feedback from social workers and social practitioners. Contributors have been de-identified to protect privacy and confidentiality, and to ensure they could share their perspectives and experiences openly. Contributors have been referred to as 'AASW members', 'social workers', or 'contributors' in referencing their feedback throughout this submission.

The AASW acknowledges that the issues addressed within this submission are complex, sensitive, and informed by a diversity of experiences and perspectives. While not all contributors agreed on every aspect of the submission, there was a shared recognition of the importance of progressing this work, creating space for these conversations, and contributing constructively to ongoing reflection, accountability, and reform relating to racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

The AASW sincerely appreciates and thanks the leadership and contributions of members and contributors who have directly informed this submission through their invaluable feedback, expertise, stories, and lived-experience insights.

For further information or questions relating to this submission, please contact the AASW CEO Office via aasw.ceo@aasw.asn.au.

About the Australian Association of Social Workers

The AASW is the national professional body representing more than 17,000 social workers throughout Australia, including over 320 members who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The AASW works to promote the profession of social work, including setting the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

AASW Position and Context

The AASW represents members who identify as First Nations Peoples and who work directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, communities, and organisations. Social workers operate across health, mental health, child protection, family violence, housing, justice, community services, and other health and social sectors – systems where racism is both experienced and, at times, perpetuated against First Nations Peoples and communities.

The AASW acknowledges the social work profession's historical and ongoing role in perpetrating harm against First Nations Peoples, including through active participation in the Stolen Generations and the continuing overrepresentation of First Nations Peoples in justice systems and children in out-of-home care. The AASW is committed to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination as foundational to ethical social work in Australia.

Furthermore, the AASW acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers can experience racism from clients, employers, colleagues, and fellow social workers, impacting wellbeing, cultural safety, and participation within workplaces and the broader profession.

The AASW unequivocally recognises that racism directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is a pervasive, structural, and escalating problem in Australia. It is not incidental – it is the direct and ongoing consequence of colonisation, dispossession, and the systemic inequities embedded across Australia's institutions, laws, policies, and social systems.¹

The impacts of racism are profound and cumulative. They manifest in poorer health and mental health outcomes, reduced access to services, disengagement from education and employment, and the erosion of cultural identity, community connection, connection to Country, and safety. Racism compounds intergenerational trauma and sits at the root of many of the inequities First Nations Peoples continue to experience across every domain of life.

The AASW calls on the government to implement a nationally coordinated anti-racism strategy with measurable targets, strengthened accountability mechanisms across public institutions, and sustained investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions. This must include improved reporting and monitoring of racism across health, justice, education, and child protection systems, mandatory anti-racism training for public sector workers, and genuine co-design with First Nations communities in all policy development and implementation processes. Central to this is the recognition that First Nations Peoples must lead this work. Self-determination is not a policy aspiration; it is a right as recognised in international law and it must be structurally enabled.

Acknowledgement of Social Work's Role in the continuing Stolen Generations

The social work profession in Australia has a painful and well-documented history of perpetrating racist and deeply harmful policies against First Nations Australians, including through the active participation in the Stolen Generations and the Northern Territory Intervention.² In recognition of this, in 2004 the AASW released a formal Acknowledgement Statement,³ recognising that social workers operated and enforced, and in some cases continue to enforce, harmful policies – including the removal of children from community, family, and Country – and the cumulative harm of these actions has intergenerational consequences that persist today.

AASW Actions

The AASW recognises that organisations throughout Australia operate within broader societal systems and structures, including those affected by historical and contemporary inequities. In acknowledging that genuine structural reform must be a shared institutional responsibility and advocating for meaningful action to address racism and structural barriers across systems and institutions, the AASW remains committed to ongoing review and continuous improvement in its own policies, practices, and structures.

¹ Lowitja Institute. (2026). *Racism and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: The need for targeted policy interventions to protect the health and wellbeing of our future generations* [Position paper]. Lowitja Institute. https://www.lowitja.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Racism-and-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-children_position-paper-1.pdf

² Holl, K., et al. (2025). Social work and Aboriginal Australians: What gets in the way of good practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 55(1), 418–436. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae149>

³ Australian Association of Social Workers. (2024). *AASW statement on the 20th anniversary of the apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and acknowledgement of social work's role in the continuing Stolen Generations*.

The AASW recognises and acknowledges that as an organisation we still have more work to do. The AASW is committing to being brave, knowing it will be uncomfortable, and is bold enough to say we still need to do better. We, as an organisation strive to embody the very things taught in social work: respect of difference, inclusion, social justice and anti-racist practice.

The AASW further acknowledges feedback from members regarding opportunities to further support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples within the Association.

The AASW aspires to stand in solidarity with First Nations peoples and communities and commits to working alongside communities to amplify and uplift their voices and advocate for systemic changes. The AASW is currently undergoing a period of review and reform, and is committed to strengthening culturally safe, responsive and inclusive practices and supporting First Nations representation across the organisation. The AASW will undertake the following actions to guide an ongoing process of review, engagement and reform:

- AASW First Nations Board Directors will lead the development of a Board process to review how the AASW works with and engages First Nations members, stakeholders, and branches across the organisation, including identifying priorities and new initiatives.
- The AASW will recommence its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) process, with the Board having appointed a Chair to lead the RAP Committee. The RAP process will help to guide and inform further actions, priorities, and areas for reform to strengthen the AASW's approach to reconciliation and accountability. This will involve engagement with First Nations members to help guide and inform implementation and monitoring.

Executive Summary

The AASW, representing more than 17,000 social workers nationally and more than 320 members who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples, submits to this inquiry with both professional expertise and an accountability obligation: the social work profession has itself perpetuated racist harm, most notably through its active role in the Stolen Generations and the continuing disproportionate removal of First Nations children from their families.

The impacts of racism are cumulative and compound across every domain of life including health, mental health, education, employment, housing, and justice.⁴ Social workers have expressed that they witness this daily. Racism functions as a determinant of wellbeing, eroding cultural identity, connection to Country, and community safety, and deepening intergenerational trauma.⁵ First Nations women, children, people with disability, and LGBTQIA+ people experience compounding and intersecting harms. Online racism further amplifies this harm, particularly for First Nations young people, and Australia's regulatory framework has failed to respond at scale.

AASW members have emphasised that effective responses to racism must be community-led, healing-centred, and adequately resourced. The AASW strongly advocates for sustained, flexible block funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as the primary vehicle for community-led anti-racism responses. Sustainable funding models are required to enable genuine organisational autonomy

⁴ Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioning Agency (ANTAR). (n.d.). *Impact of racism*. <https://antar.org.au/issues/racism/impact-of-racism/>

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). *Racism and Indigenous wellbeing, mental health and suicide* (Catalogue number IMH 17). <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/aaa3ad29-995e-4aab-89b3-2df61eb086cb/aihw-imh-17-racism-and-indigenous-wellbeing-mental-health-and-suicide.pdf>

rather than grant-cycle dependency. Co-design must be substantive and commence prior to policy development, not serve as post-hoc consultation.

Current reporting and complaints mechanisms are also experienced as inaccessible, slow, and re-traumatising. These reporting mechanisms must be redesigned to be culturally safe, timely, and capable of producing enforceable outcomes. To do this, funding and decision-making authority must be provided to ACCOs and First Nations communities to ensure anti-racism strategies are being led by the communities and peoples who experience racism daily.

Guided by the expertise and lived-experience of First Nations AASW members and social workers, the AASW makes six recommendations to the Committee: sustained long-term ACCO funding; First Nations leadership across all anti-racism initiatives; investment in healing-centred and culturally grounded programs; funded support for community-led reporting platforms including the Call It Out platform; strengthened and independent oversight powers for the Australian Human Rights Commission; and a transparent, First Nations-governed data framework for racism reporting that upholds data sovereignty principles.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Sustained, long-term funding to ACCOs

The Australian Government must provide sustained, flexible, and long-term funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Funding structures must move away from short-term grant cycles toward block funding models that enable genuine organisational autonomy, long-term planning, workforce stability, and community ownership of service delivery. Strengthening and investing in ACCOs is a key component of addressing systemic inequities and supporting culturally safe, community-led responses to racism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and is consistent with the Closing the Gap Priority Reform Two (increasing the amount of government funding for First Nations programs going through ACCOs).

Recommendation 2: First Nations leadership and decision-making authority in all anti-racism and wellbeing initiatives

First Nations Peoples must hold leadership and decision-making authority in the design, implementation, governance, and evaluation of all government-funded anti-racism and wellbeing initiatives. This must move beyond consultation and tokenistic co-design processes toward community-controlled, self-determined approaches that ensure First Nations ownership, accountability, and cultural authority throughout all stages of policy and program development. Processes must be appropriately resourced and commence prior to policy development.

Recommendation 3: Investment in healing-centred, culturally grounded responses

Invest in programs that address both the compounding trauma caused by racism and its structural drivers. These responses must be holistic, culturally grounded, and embedded within First Nations-led healing services, with sustained investment in social, emotional, cultural, and community wellbeing initiatives.

Recommendation 4: Sustained investment in community-led reporting mechanisms

Provide sustained funding to community-led anti-racism platforms, including Call It Out (callitout.com.au), to ensure robust data collection, community reporting mechanisms, advocacy capacity, and evidence-based policy development.

Recommendation 5: Strengthened accountability and oversight mechanisms

Strengthen the powers and resourcing of the Australian Human Rights Commission, ensuring it is empowered to make enforceable findings and recommendations regarding institutional racism and systemic discrimination.

Recommendation 6: Include racism reporting and accountability measures in the Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data

Strengthen the Australian Government's Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data to include specific guidance and standards relating to the collection, governance, monitoring, and reporting of data concerning

racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. This should be developed in partnership with First Nations communities and organisations and ensure that all racism-related data collection and reporting processes are consistent with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.

Response to the Terms of Reference (TOR)

TOR 1: The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time

Racism directed to First Nations Peoples is not a collection of isolated incidents, individual prejudices or unconscious biases. It is a deeply structural phenomenon that is built into the settler-colonial structure built into Australian laws, policies, institutions and systems.⁶ Racism directed towards First Nations Peoples is a direct consequence of the legacy of colonisation and has been maintained through successive government policies.

Prevalence of Racism in Service Settings

AASW members regularly witness the impacts of racism across health, welfare, and justice systems. Social workers consistently report that racism is not isolated but embedded in everyday service delivery and institutional practice. This includes:

- Dismissive or inadequate treatment of First Nations Peoples by health professionals, including failure to properly investigate symptoms, premature discharge, and assumptions of non-compliance or substance use.
- Disrespectful, punitive, or culturally unsafe interactions within government agencies such as Centrelink, Police, housing services, and child protection systems.
- Culturally unsafe practice that fails to recognise the importance of family, kinship systems, and cultural obligations, often resulting in inappropriate service responses.
- Lack of recognition of connection to Country, culture, and community as protective and healing factors in assessment and intervention.
- Over-surveillance and disproportionate intervention by child protection systems, particularly affecting First Nations mothers and families.
- Criminalisation of behaviours linked to poverty, trauma, homelessness, disability, or cultural expression, disproportionately impacting First Nations Peoples, young people, women, and people experiencing mental health distress.
- Disproportionate use of coercive practices, including policing responses to welfare concerns and mental health crises, rather than trauma-informed or culturally safe supports.
- Barriers to access caused by rigid bureaucratic processes, digital exclusion, and lack of interpreter or cultural support services.
- Failure to provide culturally appropriate advocacy or informed consent processes, leading to miscommunication and mistrust of services.
- Experiences of stereotyping and bias in decision-making, including assumptions about parenting capacity, compliance, or credibility of First Nations Peoples.
- Misidentification of the primary aggressor in family violence situations, resulting in First Nations women being wrongly characterised as perpetrators, leading to inappropriate criminal justice responses, increased surveillance, and failure to recognise patterns of coercive control and victimisation.
- Ignoring First Nations voices only to accept what is said when a non-First Nations person says the same thing.

One AASW member recounted observing the dehumanising treatment of Aboriginal people by police, where individuals seeking assistance were met with verbal abuse and physical aggression. Such accounts are not

⁶ Ness, I., & Cope, Z. (Eds.). (2021). *Settler imperialism and Indigenous peoples in Australia*. In *The Palgrave encyclopedia of imperialism and anti-imperialism*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29901-9>

anomalies, they reflect well-documented patterns documented in coronial inquiries, royal commissions, and community testimony over decades and across AASW member consultation with First Nations members.

Another social worker also shared feedback to inform the Inquiry, contributing their account of professional experiences of systemic racism towards Aboriginal Peoples. They explained that they have experienced significant resistance when attempting to recognise the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma in practice with Aboriginal participants. Their efforts to include culturally responsive approaches or acknowledge the links between colonisation, trauma, and family violence have been dismissed as 'personal views' or considered inappropriate. Furthermore, raising concerns about these issues resulted in being labelled difficult and unprofessional. These experiences reflect how systemic racism and cultural blindness continue to operate within institutions, including through the silencing of culturally informed practice and the privileging of white Anglo-centric perspectives over Aboriginal ways of knowing and healing.

This account demonstrates just how common systematic racism is reproduced within institutional settings through the silencing of culturally informed practice, the dismissal of Aboriginal-led understandings of trauma and healing, and the privileging of Western clinical frameworks over First Nations knowledge systems, ultimately undermining culturally safe and effective service delivery.

Racism as a Social Determinant of Health

Racism functions as a primary social determinant of health and wellbeing. Research consistently demonstrates that experiences of racism are associated with:

- Elevated rates of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety
- Increased risk of cardiovascular disease and chronic health conditions
- Poorer maternal and child health outcomes
- Reduced engagement with health services due to anticipated discrimination
- Shortened life expectancy.⁷

These health impacts compound existing disadvantage and contribute to the persistent gap in health outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations Australians. This widening disparity reflects the ongoing effects of structural inequality, intergenerational trauma, and unequal access to culturally safe and appropriate health services. As a result, First Nations Peoples continue to experience higher rates of chronic illness, preventable disease, and reduced life expectancy. These entrenched inequities directly undermine progress towards the Closing the Gap targets, particularly those focused on improving life expectancy, reducing infant mortality, and ensuring access to quality primary healthcare.⁸ Without sustained, system-wide reform that addresses the social determinants of health and embeds First Nations self-determination in service design and delivery, these targets risk remaining aspirational rather than achievable.

A First Nations Elder and highly respected practitioner has generously shared the following insight to inform the Inquiry:

"Indigenous Australians have to live with the knowledge that 75% of the Australian people display, at least, an unconscious bias towards them. Incidents of racism reported by Aboriginal people have been increasing for at least ten years. More than 200 Aboriginal people have died in the custody of the state in the past 10 years. In the year 2024-25 a record number of 33 people died in custody. Suicide rates amongst Aboriginal

⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2025). *Racism and health inequities in Australia: Scoping review of the impact of racism on health outcomes and healthcare access*.
https://humanrights.gov.au/data/assets/file/0029/71795/RDT_Health_Report_FINAL_ACC.pdf

⁸ Productivity Commission. (2024). *Closing the gap review: Study report*. Australian Government.
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report/>

people are more than double those of non-Indigenous Australians and the rate continues to increase. In 2024 over 300 Aboriginal people took their own lives.”

Racism experienced by First Nations Peoples has a significant impact on health and wellbeing and beyond measurable health outcomes. Racism inflicts profound harm on dignity, cultural connection to community, identity and Country.⁹ The Australian Human Rights Commission’s National Anti-Racism Framework emphasises that racism is a structural feature of Australian society that requires structural responses.¹⁰

Despite these ongoing systemic barriers (including within the social work profession), social workers continue to play an important role in challenging racism, advocating for structural reform, and supporting First Nations Peoples to navigate systems across health, justice, housing, education, and child protection that are often culturally unsafe and exclusionary. Social work practice is grounded in principles of human rights, social justice, self-determination, and community empowerment, positioning the profession to support truth-telling, healing, and reconciliation. However, meaningful change cannot occur without broader institutional reform and accountability.

One AASW member reflected that in her practice, she frequently witnesses Aboriginal men expressing feelings of hopelessness and exclusion, stating that they have asked: “Why can’t I have my dreams and aspirations met like everyone else?” This statement powerfully captures the cumulative impacts of racism, intergenerational trauma, systemic inequality, and social exclusion on hope, identity, and opportunity. It reflects the reality that many First Nations Peoples continue to experience structural barriers that limit equitable access to education, employment, housing, healthcare, and social participation. AASW members and social workers emphasise that racism does not only produce measurable disparities across health and socioeconomic outcomes; it also erodes dignity, aspiration, belonging, and the ability to imagine a safe and equitable future.

During a yarning session, AASW members raised concerns regarding the normalisation of racism in regional and remote communities, where limited service options, social isolation, and entrenched discriminatory attitudes can intensify experiences of exclusion and reduce access to culturally safe support. Members further highlighted the prevalence of everyday racism and microaggressions, including paternalistic assumptions, cultural minimisation, and “well-intentioned” discriminatory behaviour that is frequently dismissed or normalised within workplaces and institutions. While often minimised, these experiences accumulate over time and contribute significantly to psychological distress, cultural unsafety, and exclusion. AASW members emphasise that addressing systemic racism requires not only responding to overt acts of discrimination and violence, but also confronting the everyday practices, assumptions, and institutional cultures that continue to marginalise and disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

First Nations Peoples have always demonstrated resilience and strength in the face of racism. But resilience should not be required to survive systems that are supposed to provide support. Therefore, the AASW calls on the Committee to ensure that the findings of this inquiry translate into concrete, funded, and enforceable action that addresses the structural drivers of racism and supports First Nations-led healing and self-determination.

⁹ Thorpe, A., Yashadhana, A., Biles, B., & Munro-Harrison, E. (2023). *Indigenous health and connection to Country*. In M. K. Goodman (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of global public health*. Oxford University Press

¹⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024). *National Anti-Racism Framework*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/resource-hub/race/anti-racism-framework>

TOR 2: The effect of online platforms on the reach, prominence and harm caused by racism and hate directed at First Nations people.

Online racism targeting First Nations Peoples has increased in reach and intensity, creating hostile digital environments. First Nations-run pages and publicly facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples receive large volumes of racist commentary, often leading people to withdraw from engaging online.¹¹ Digital platforms have become spaces where racist abuse is normalised, amplified, and often goes unchecked.¹² The anonymity and reach of online environments embolden perpetrators while exposing First Nations individuals and communities to sustained harassment. This toxicity is a significant contributor to harm among First Nations young people.¹³

AASW members and First Nations community members report that the volume and intensity of abuse online has grown significantly since the Voice Referendum, and this abuse includes slurs, threats and dehumanising language.¹⁴ First Nations young people are particularly vulnerable to online racism, which contributes to psychological distress, social isolation, and, in some cases, self-harm. For First Nations young people, online racism intersects with developmental vulnerabilities and can exacerbate existing mental health and social challenges.¹⁵ Social workers and AASW members report that online racism is a contributing factor in presentations of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among First Nations young people who are accessing services and seeking support. Social workers and AASW members also identified that online racism contributes to lateral violence within communities by amplifying trauma, division, and community conflict in environments where harmful commentary and misinformation spread rapidly.

An AASW member has provided the following insight to share with the Inquiry:

“I think we all know that the Australian political landscape and the recent Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum has enabled a recent and very shocking rise in public racism, hate and violence towards First Nation Peoples in Australia. I am appalled by this. I see online platforms have also enabled vicious verbal violence to flourish and grow – just have a look at [name removed for privacy] and other Indigenous leaders’ social media and the racist garbage they are exposed to on online platforms. Outlawing racism on social media platforms would be a helpful start.”

Currently, the Australian regulatory framework has failed to adequately respond to online racism. There is inadequate platform accountability and inconsistent enforcement when there is clearly unlawful speech on social media platforms. Current reporting mechanisms place the onus on those experiencing racism to identify, report, and follow up on harmful content. Even when content is removed, perpetrators rarely face meaningful consequences.¹⁶ This regulatory failure allows online racism to proliferate with limited oversight or deterrence, contributing to ongoing psychological harm, social exclusion, and the normalisation of racist

¹¹ The Guardian. (2026, March 6). *Indigenous Australians share the racist messages they receive online: “No one’s feeling safe”*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2026/mar/06/indigenous-australians-racist-social-media-messages-ntwnfb>

¹² Tynes, B. M., Willis, H. A., Maxie-Moreman, A., Ortiz, S. M., & English, D. (2024). Online racism and its impact on children, adolescents, and emerging adults of color. In D. A. Christakis & L. Hale (Eds.), *Handbook of Children and Screens: Digital Media, Development, and Well-Being from Birth Through Adolescence* (pp. 283–290). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69362-5_39

¹³ National Justice Project. (n.d.). *Reports: Racism affecting First Nations children*. <https://www.justice.org.au/reports-racism-first-nations-children/>

¹⁴ SBS News. (2025, March 6). *Report finds Voice referendum normalised racism and increased hostility toward First Nations people*. <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/report-finds-voice-referendum-normalised-racism-and-increased-hostility-toward-first-nations-people/bnqw83lbw>

¹⁵ Tao, X., & Fisher, C. B. (2022). Exposure to social media racial discrimination and mental health among adolescents of color. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(1), 30–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01514-z>

¹⁶ Jakubowicz, A., Dunn, K. M., Mason, G., Paradies, Y., Bliuc, A.-M., Bahfen, N., Oboler, A., Atie, R., & Connelly, K. (n.d.). *Cyber racism and community resilience: Strategies for combating online race hate*. Western Sydney University, School of Social Sciences.

abuse directed toward First Nations Peoples and other racialised communities. The AASW submits that stronger legislative protections, enforceable platform accountability measures, and culturally safe reporting and response mechanisms are required to address the growing harms of online racism.

Recommendations for Digital Safety

The AASW supports:

- Culturally safe reporting mechanisms that do not re-traumatise those who report
- Investment in digital literacy and online safety programs developed and delivered by First Nations communities
- Sustained funding for community-led platforms like Call It Out that provide alternative reporting pathways: [Call It Out | Report incidents of racism and discrimination](#)
- Research into the impacts of online racism on First Nations Peoples, particularly young people, to inform targeted interventions
- Social media entities being held accountable for racism and racist abuse on their platforms

TOR 3: Initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reduce individual and collective harm.

AASW members strongly emphasise that effective anti-racism initiatives must be community-led, healing-centred, culturally grounded, holistic, sustained, and accountable, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and organisations design, deliver, govern, and evaluate long-term responses that address both the structural drivers and lived impacts of racism. However, AASW members highlighted that many effective First Nations-led programs are routinely underfunded, defunded, or discontinued despite demonstrating strong community outcomes. AASW members reflected that programs grounded in culture, connection, and self-determination are often the first to be cut, particularly where they challenge mainstream service models or government expectations.

Examples raised included mentoring initiatives, on-Country programs, wellbeing programs, driving programs, and community-led initiatives such as Murri Watch. Members also identified concerns regarding the increasing commercialisation of culture, including instances where cultural healing and practices such as weaving are delivered by non-First Nations providers for profit, undermining cultural integrity and displacing community-controlled approaches. AASW members stressed that the commercialisation of culturally safe spaces by non-First Nations-led programs exploits Aboriginal knowledge and identity for financial gain and risks eroding the authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead healing, cultural practice, and anti-racism responses grounded in self-determination and cultural authority.

AASW members further reflected on the distrust that can emerge when governments seek to identify “what works” in First Nations communities, only for successful initiatives to later lose funding or be absorbed into non-First Nations systems. As one AASW member reflected: *“They need to let us lead and let us stay leading even when it makes them uncomfortable and when they don’t understand it.”* This highlights the need for governments not only to invest in First Nations-led initiatives, but to commit to sustained, long-term support that protects community ownership, cultural authority, and program continuity.

Social workers have a critical role to play as leaders in anti-racism reform through advocacy, community development, trauma-informed practice, and systemic change. In particular, First Nations social workers must be recognised, supported, and resourced to lead anti-racist strategies within communities, organisations, and policy settings. First Nations social workers hold critical cultural knowledge, lived experience, and community accountability that position them to design and deliver responses grounded in self-determination, healing, and cultural authority. Their leadership is essential to ensuring anti-racism initiatives are culturally safe, community-controlled, and responsive to the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and systemic discrimination.

The AASW therefore calls for sustained investment in the First Nations social work workforce, including leadership pathways and the resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led social work practice, research, anti-racism initiatives, and broader social and emotional wellbeing programs. Investment must move beyond short-term, project-based funding cycles and instead support long-term community control, workforce stability, and the continuation of programs that communities themselves identify as effective.

AASW members underscore that initiatives aimed at addressing racism and improving outcomes for First Nations Peoples are most effective when they are grounded in genuine consultation, long-term commitment, cultural safety, and community leadership. The AASW therefore supports greater investment in healing-centred, culturally grounded responses that address both the impacts of racism and the broader structural conditions that contribute to inequity. These responses should be holistic in nature and embedded within First Nations-led healing services, ensuring that support is culturally safe, community-controlled, and grounded in the knowledge, strengths, and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

TOR 4: The threat posed by ideologically motivated extremism towards First Nations people and the role of intelligence and law enforcement agencies in protecting the community from that threat.

First Nations communities are increasingly facing targeted threats from extremist groups, with incidents intensifying in recent years and creating significant safety concerns.¹⁷ Aboriginal sovereignty advocates, and those campaigning for treaty and self-determination, have reported harassment, threats, and surveillance, alongside organised online campaigns designed to flood First Nations social media spaces with racist abuse and suppress First Nations voices through coordinated reporting and account suspensions. Communities have also reported incidents of physical intimidation at cultural gatherings and events.¹⁸ Indeed, there is escalating hostility and targeted racism towards land acknowledgments and Aboriginal elders – the AASW finds this significantly concerning.¹⁹

Ideologically motivated extremism exists on a continuum with broader forms of racism. The normalisation of racist narratives within political discourse, media commentary, and online spaces creates conditions in which extremist ideologies are able to emerge, spread, and gain legitimacy.²⁰ Addressing racist extremism therefore requires more than surveillance and enforcement responses; it requires confronting the structural racism and discriminatory attitudes that is embedded within Australian society that enables these movements to thrive.

One contributor shared the following to share to the Inquiry:

“When all the stuff happened around neo nazi and bashings happened, I lived nearby at the time. My child who is 34 rang and said mum don’t wear your colours on public transport. He was nervous for his elderly mother. How many other kids are worried for their parents or uncles or sisters. It’s a big heavy burden for a young person to have. Is it being addressed enough in schools...”

¹⁷ Reconciliation Australia. (2025). *2024 Australian Reconciliation Barometer: Racism and First Nations Peoples*. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/publication/2024-australian-reconciliation-barometer-racism-and-first-nations-peoples/>

¹⁸ National Indigenous Times. (2026, January 29). *Commissioners urge nationwide action on racism following Boorloo Invasion Day attack*. <https://nit.com.au/29-01-2026/22378/commissioners-urge-nationwide-action-on-racism-following-boorloo-invasion-day-attack/>

¹⁹ The New York Times. (2026, May 1). *Indigenous Australians and the politics of Welcome to Country*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/01/world/asia/australia-indigenous-aboriginal-welcome-to-country.html>

²⁰ Torre, G. (2024, October 17). *National community consults reveal racism in Australia “widespread, insidious and damaging lives”*. National Indigenous Times. <https://nit.com.au/17-10-2024/14324/national-community-consults-reveal-racism-in-australia-widespread-insidious-and-damaging-lives>

The AASW notes that First Nations communities also have significant concerns regarding intelligence and law enforcement responses. First Nations communities have historically and currently experienced over-policing, excessive surveillance, and disproportionate intervention by police and security agencies, while simultaneously reporting inadequate protection from documented racist threats and harassment.²¹ AASW members and social workers have reiterated and provided numerous examples of this experience in their practice and communities, with one contributor stating *“In terms of some communities have PCYC. They have large police numbers up to 15- 20 in small communities. There is no need for those numbers in that community. And the reactivity of agencies is ridiculous in there”*.

There are also concerns that counter-terrorism frameworks may be misapplied against marginalised communities and that intelligence activities currently operate with insufficient transparency and accountability. The AASW therefore calls for greater independent oversight of intelligence activities relating to extremism, genuine partnership with First Nations communities in the development of counter-extremism strategies, adequate resourcing for protective measures for communities and advocates facing threats, and recognition that effective responses to extremism must address the underlying structural racism from which these ideologies emerge.

These concerns highlight the need for stronger accountability and oversight mechanisms to protect First Nations communities from harm. Effective anti-racism responses require independent bodies with the authority, resources, and enforcement powers to ensure meaningful action is taken to prevent and respond to extremist threats towards First Nations Peoples and communities. In this context, strengthened oversight is critical to restoring community trust, improving transparency, and ensuring that human rights protections are practical, enforceable, and accessible.

TOR 5: The effectiveness of avenues for reporting and responding to racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the consistency, timeliness and appropriateness of outcomes across jurisdictions and institutions.

Current government mechanisms for reporting racism are widely experienced by First Nations Peoples as inaccessible, culturally unsafe, slow, and ultimately ineffective. Many complaint processes are complex and difficult to navigate without legal knowledge or resources, while limited awareness of reporting avenues, language barriers, digital exclusion, and a lack of culturally appropriate information further restrict access, particularly for people in regional and remote communities.²² Significant concerns also exist regarding cultural safety, with processes often designed without First Nations input, staff lacking cultural competence, and complainants required to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences in environments where First Nations representation is limited.

Systemic shortcomings compound these issues, including lengthy delays in resolving complaints, low substantiation rates, weak outcomes that fail to address harm or prevent recurrence, limited enforcement powers, and an absence of systemic learning from recurring patterns of racism.²³ The AASW celebrates the *Call It Out* register and calls for urgent and sustained investment in First Nations-led reporting mechanisms. The *Call It Out Annual Report 2024–2025* further reinforces this need, documenting the persistent and

²¹ National Justice Project. (n.d.). *Police racism targeting First Nations communities*. <https://www.justice.org.au/police-racism-targeting-first-nations-communities/>

²² Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024). *Mapping government anti-racism programs and policies*. https://humanrights.gov.au/data/assets/file/0024/47256/Mapping_government_anti-racism_programs_and_policies_report.pdf

²³ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2023). *Mapping government anti-racism programs and policies report*. https://humanrights.gov.au/data/assets/file/0024/47256/Mapping_government_anti-racism_programs_and_policies_report.pdf

systemic nature of racism experienced by First Nations Peoples across multiple settings and highlighting the importance of culturally safe, community-led approaches to reporting, accountability, and structural reform.²⁴

Fear of further harm also acts as a major barrier to reporting. First Nations Peoples express concerns about retaliation from individuals or institutions named in complaints, potential impacts on employment, housing, or access to services, and the risk of re-traumatisation through complaint processes that minimise or dismiss lived experiences., and general community distrust of the policing and courts systems.²⁵ Underpinning these concerns is deep institutional distrust shaped by historical and ongoing experiences of systems that were designed to control, assimilate, and harm First Nations Peoples. As a result, effective reporting mechanisms must be culturally safe, accessible, trauma-informed, timely, enforceable, accountable, and connected to community-led support services. They must be designed in partnership with First Nations communities, include First Nations staff in key roles, provide multiple accessible pathways for reporting, ensure meaningful outcomes, and operate with strong independent oversight capable of addressing both individual harm and systemic racism.

One contributor also shared feedback recounting firsthand experience of responding to racism, identifying that they previously worked at a large faith-based organisation for about 10 years and in that time there were not any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Peoples employed in any senior roles or leadership roles, including in locations spanning across Northern Queensland. They described raising these concerns with organisational leadership, but that the response they received did not meaningfully address the concerns raised and reflected a broader workplace culture they experienced as unsupportive and harmful.

The AASW supports long-term investment in community-led and transparent reporting frameworks grounded in First Nations leadership, decision-making, and self-determination. Community-led platforms play a critical role in providing culturally safe pathways for reporting racism, supporting affected individuals, and generating evidence that reflects the lived experiences of First Nations Peoples.

The AASW also recognises that independent oversight bodies must be adequately empowered and resourced to respond effectively through enforceable findings and meaningful accountability measures. Effective reform also depends on transparent and ethical data governance developed in partnership with First Nations communities, ensuring that the collection, use, and management of data relating to racism is consistent with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles and supports community control, trust, and evidence-based policy development.

TOR 6: Other matters related to racism, hatred and violence directed at First Nations people.

The AASW recognises the importance of continuing to reflect on and strengthen the social work profession's response to racism, cultural safety, cultural responsiveness and allegiance, and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. While social work is grounded in principles of social justice, human rights, and self-determination, AASW members and social workers have highlighted that First Nations Peoples continue to experience racism and barriers within service systems, workplaces, education settings, professional practice, and from colleagues and leaders. This includes concerns relating to cultural safety, representation, and the recognition of First Nations knowledge systems and leadership.

²⁴ Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research & National Justice Project. (2025). *Call It Out annual report 2024–2025*. <https://callitout.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Jumbunna-Call-It-Out-Annual-Report-2024-2025.pdf>

²⁵ National Indigenous Times. (2024, December 12). *Trauma and overt racism: Victorian study finds Aboriginal victims of crime fear not being believed by police*. <https://nit.com.au/12-12-2024/15387/trauma-and-overt-racism-victorian-study-finds-aboriginal-victims-of-crime-fear-not-being-believed-by-police/>

AASW members, social workers, and contributors also highlighted the significant responsibilities often carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners within workplaces and organisations, including providing cultural guidance, supporting colleagues and systems to respond to racism, and advocating for culturally safe practice. They noted that these responsibilities can place additional emotional and professional demands on First Nations practitioners, and contribute to burnout, workforce attrition, and ongoing barriers to the recruitment and retention of First Nations practitioners across the social work and community services sectors.

AASW members and social workers strongly emphasised the importance of continuing to strengthen culturally safe, responsive and inclusive approaches across social work education, regulation, and professional practice. This includes ongoing review of accreditation standards, codes of ethics, practice frameworks, and professional development to support social workers to work respectfully and effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities.

Voice, Treaty, and Truth-telling processes are also important mechanisms for addressing the ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic racism across Australia. These processes support First Nations self-determination, create pathways for genuine shared decision-making, and provide opportunities for truth-telling about historical and contemporary injustices experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The AASW recognises these processes as key opportunities to strengthen equity, respect, and culturally informed approaches across Australian systems and institutions.

Conclusion

The AASW maintains that racism is not a series of isolated incidents, but a structural reality that continues to undermine the health, wellbeing safety, and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities. As a profession, social workers acknowledge their own history of complicity in past and present colonial harm and recognise that we have a profound responsibility to progress systemic change from within.

Meaningful reform must be grounded in the transfer of decision-making authority and sustained resources to First Nations communities and their organisations as required under international obligations including *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*,²⁶ *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child*,²⁷ and the Closing the Gap targets.

The AASW recognises that addressing racism and inequity experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is closely connected to Australia's broader human rights, social justice, and reconciliation commitments. First Nations Peoples should have the right to self-determination which includes having their cultures, identities, and communities respected and supported, as reflected in international frameworks including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Consistent with the profession's commitment to human rights and social justice, the AASW supports continued efforts across governments, institutions, and communities to strengthen protections against racism and discrimination and to promote culturally safe, equitable, and inclusive systems and structures.

The AASW also recognises the important role of governments in progressing commitments under international obligations, domestic legislation, and Closing the Gap initiatives. This Inquiry provides an opportunity to further consider how these commitments can be strengthened through practical and coordinated action. Participants highlighted the importance of nationally consistent approaches to addressing racism, improving accountability and monitoring mechanisms across public systems, supporting Aboriginal

²⁶ United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

²⁷ United Nations. (1959). *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.un.org/en/declarations/index.html>

and Torres Strait Islander-led initiatives and community-controlled responses, and ensuring First Nations Peoples are meaningfully involved in policy development, implementation, and decision-making processes.

Addressing racism and inequity experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is integrated within Australia's broader human rights, social justice, and reconciliation commitments. First Nations Peoples have the right to self-determination and to have their cultures, identities, and communities respected and supported, as reflected in international frameworks including the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Consistent with the profession's commitment to human rights and social justice, the AASW supports continued efforts across governments, institutions, and communities to strengthen protections against racism and discrimination and to promote culturally safe, equitable, and inclusive systems and structures.



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