

Addressing Racism and Discrimination

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**GREATER
DANDENONG**
City of Opportunity



Introduction

The City of Greater Dandenong is Australia's most culturally diverse municipality. Whilst Council celebrates its vibrant and diverse community, it is also aware of the ongoing challenges of racism and the need for further action in supporting community members.

Council's Youth and Family Services (CGD YFS) team has been actively consulting with young people to learn more about their experiences of racism, and to understand how these experiences impact on their social and economic participation, wellbeing and sense of community belonging. This discussion paper sets out the key themes to emerge from local consultation activities with young people, for consideration by the Victorian Anti-Racism Taskforce as they work to develop a new state-wide Anti-Racism Strategy.


Located in Melbourne's south-east, Greater Dandenong has a population of 175,000 people. 1 in 6 residents is a young person, aged 12-25 years (30,548 individuals). 50.5% of young people in Greater Dandenong were born overseas; and 70% speak a language other than English at home.


The Greater Dandenong community also experiences high levels of vulnerability and disadvantage, and ranks as the second-most disadvantaged municipality in Victoria (and the most disadvantaged municipality in metropolitan Melbourne) per the 2016 SEIFA Index. This vulnerability is demonstrated in above average rates of youth unemployment, the lowest median weekly income level in Melbourne and the largest population of homeless persons in Victoria.

Council is aware that racism and discrimination is an issue of concern to many young people in Greater Dandenong. A local breakdown of data from young people in Greater Dandenong who participated in the 2019 Mission Australia Youth Survey demonstrates that:

- Young people in Greater Dandenong rated equity and discrimination as their second-highest issue of national concern.
- 20.7 per cent of young people in Greater Dandenong are 'extremely' or 'very' concerned about discrimination in their community.
- 9.3 per cent of young people in Greater Dandenong are concerned that discrimination will be a barrier to achieving their post-school goals. (This is three times higher than the average level of concern across Victoria.)

Greater Dandenong Council recognises its central role in providing a universal service base for young people and families in the municipality. As a local government, Council has a leading role in responding to the health and wellbeing needs of the community, and has a strong commitment to amplifying youth voice. As such, CGD YFS have been working closely with local young people to understand their concerns and inform future work.





This paper has been informed by recent consultation activities with young people, including:

- Change Makers: a group of 14 young people who came together in June 2021, and are currently working to plan and deliver a local project challenging racism and discrimination;
- A Youth Leadership Forum: gathering of 50 student leaders from local secondary schools, held in March 2021; and
- The Greater Dandenong COVID-19 Research Project which principally engaged young people and families (conducted in 2020).

What young people have told us

How racism occurs


Young people involved in the consultation defined racism as discrimination experienced as a result of personal and systemic prejudices and biases towards identities, including culture, ethnicity, race, language and faith.


Young people were asked how and where racism occurs. Three consistent themes emerged.

(1) Systemic Racism

- Young people conveyed concerns that racism occurs in systems of government, institutions, service systems and the media.
- Young people stated that the influence of institutions such as the media can lead to further racism at a community level, due to misinformation or biases in reporting. (For example, the misrepresentation of cultural groups in unfairly using the actions of a few individuals to perpetuate a negative stereotype of a whole cultural group.)
- Regarding the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was noted that there was a lack of representation from people of colour conveying COVID-19 messaging, which was not reflective of our multicultural population.
- A lack of diverse representation in leadership roles (including government and other decision-making authorities) was also identified as a concern for young people.

(2) Racial and religious stereotypes

- Racism involving stereotypes was a common experience cited amongst the young people who we consulted. Young people described how stereotyping impacted on their mental health and sense of community belonging, as it often resulted in judgement and exclusion.
 - Young people felt that most negative racial stereotypes develop due to personal biases and prejudices, and a lack of understanding of different cultures.
 - Young people also discussed the fallout from what may be considered 'positive cultural stereotypes'. These can be harmful in minimising the role of individual
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identities, goals and aspirations. Young people may also experience pressure to match or 'live up to' these stereotypes. Examples cited of positive stereotypes included assumptions that people of Asian descent are exceptionally smart or that people of African descent have greater athletic ability.

(3) Lack of understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity

- Young people identified that a lack of exposure to other cultures results in a lack of understanding, and felt that this is a key driver of racism.
- Young people added that internalised biases can result from an individual's upbringing. Exposure to the opinions of family members and friends influences views and attitudes towards people from different backgrounds.
- Racism can occur when humans are considered different based on physical markers or characteristics that are unique to a specific culture. Racism is experienced by those who do not match the idea of what is considered to be the 'mainstream' or 'normal' in a particular society.
- Young people identified that there is a lack of resources to educate themselves about diversity.
- Lack of representation in the public domain of culturally diverse role models, leaders and mentors.


Settings

Young people identified a range of settings in which racism can occur, however, they were in agreement that racism can (and does) occur across all facets of society. The settings identified by young people are outlined below:

- School
- University
- Workplace
- Public places (including public transport, shopping centres, parks and streets)
- Sporting clubs
- On the road
- Social media
- Systemic racism (including the media, government institutions and the service system)

These settings are consistent with the findings in Greater Dandenong's COVID-19 Research Project. The report highlighted the prevalence of racism in public places, including shops and parks. Public space was also a key location for racism identified in the Centre for Multicultural Youth 'Hidden Cost' report (2020).

This data illustrates that young people may experience racism in all aspects of their lives, from their working and learning environments to their commute (both private and public transport) as well as in the community. The prevalence of settings where young people can be exposed to, or experience racism highlights the profound negative impact racism can have on their sense of community belonging and safety.





Responses

Consultation with young people has identified a range of priorities for reducing and responding to racism. These are outlined below.

(1) Continuing to strengthen and celebrate cultural diversity

- Creating opportunities for the community to learn about different faiths and cultures.
- Encourage sharing of culture through food, dance and cultural festivals or events.
- Utilising social media platforms to provide information and awareness campaigns.


(2) Raising awareness of the impacts of racism

- Young people have told us that perpetrators of racism often do not understand the impact of their words, actions or behaviours.
- Young people who experience racism report feeling isolated, hopeless and disconnected. They also describe the adverse mental health impacts, citing depression and anxiety arising from experiences of racism.
- Young people have told us that raising awareness of the impacts of racism, also benefits those directly impacted through building a sense of shared experience with others. This helps to break down the isolation commonly experienced by individuals racially vilified.
- Reporting channels are underutilised by young people who experience racism, either because they are not aware of these options or they do not have trust in these processes. To feel more empowered when they encounter racism, young people need to know that they have options.
- Being unable to identify individual perpetrators of racism may also be a barrier to reporting. Young people (and the broader community) should be aware of the potential benefits of reporting even where those responsible cannot be identified. This may include authorities being able to identify patterns around time, locations, and the nature of incidents.

(3) Empowering bystanders to take action

- Young people have told us that they would like to see a focus on equipping bystanders with strategies to respond to racism when they see it in the community.
- They acknowledge that bystanders may not understand the importance of standing up and supporting those experiencing racism.

(4) Promoting diversity in community leadership

- Young people have told us that there needs to be stronger pathways for young people from culturally diverse backgrounds to build leadership skills and experience.
 - Culturally diverse young people need to know that there are pathways for them to participate in decision-making processes at local, state and federal level. They may feel reluctant to do so due to a lack of diversity in decision making bodies, including parliament.
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- Young people want to hear and see more from culturally diverse community leaders, who can act as positive role models.

CGD YFS has a strong record of working closely with our culturally diverse community to build cross-cultural understanding and celebrate diversity. Below are two case studies from previous programs or projects. Both case studies highlight the importance of young people being involved in the co-design of local initiatives.

CASE STUDY ONE: CREATING CHANGE

The City of Greater Dandenong Youth and Family Services' *Creating Change* program is a 2016 National Local Government Award winning program.

Creating Change aims to strengthen social cohesion by creating opportunities for young people to make meaningful connections across diverse cultures, through creating a safe and - neutral space for young people to discuss a range of intercultural and interfaith topics. The program encourages young people to be at the front and centre of increasing social cohesion in their school and community.

The program is delivered simultaneously in 2-3 secondary schools, for students in years 9 and 10. The program consists of three components

(1) School-based program:

Five sessions delivered in school, covering topics including identity and belonging, cultural similarities and differences, stereotypes, racism and conflict management.

(2) Building Bridges

A whole-day event which brings together students from participating schools to share their thoughts and ideas. Participants have the opportunity to hear from a panel of faith leaders. Students will also commence planning their school-based project/s to address identified issues on social cohesion.

(3) Project Phase

Students recommence weekly sessions at school to develop and deliver a project/s that promotes diversity and inclusion in their school.

CASE STUDY TWO: A CELEBRATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

This project was awarded a Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence (Community Innovation Award) in 2017.

This project aimed to positively profile the success stories and contributions of our migrant population to the development of the Greater Dandenong community. It was formulated by young people as part of the 2016 Young Leaders program, sharing the message that communities thrive when people of all cultures are able to fully participate in economic, social and political life.

The project consisted of an exhibition, showcasing the stories of 20 migrants and refugees from 13 countries, and explored the key factors which helped them settle successfully in Australia. These stories were also shared on the Greater Dandenong Youth Services Facebook page, reaching more than 28,000 people.

Accessing Support

Crimes motivated by prejudice, and racial or religious vilification are reportable crimes. However, our consultation with young people has identified a reluctance to report racism. There are significant barriers for young people in reporting experiences of racism, including a lack of awareness of the supports that exist, and a lack of confidence in gaining an outcome through the reporting process.

A strong theme that emerged from young people was the need for education about mechanisms for reporting racism and discrimination, for both victims and bystanders. Young people felt that racist jokes were normalised in society; and witnesses to acts of racism often did not feel confident to speak up, support the victim or make a report. Young people wanted to be provided with more information about where to seek support if impacted by racism.


Young people were asked to describe how it feels to be a victim of racism. Young people used the following terms to describe their feelings – isolated, excluded, intimidated, labelled, guilty, alone, depressed, trapped, powerless and hopeless.


While there are a range of supports that exist to support a person who has been impacted by racism and discrimination, from informal and formal reporting channels to legal aid and mental health support services, it is apparent that young people are not utilising these services and mechanisms. It is imperative that young people are aware of the supports that exist as well as transparency around the process and realistic outcomes for the victim.



Recommendations

On behalf of the young people engaged in Greater Dandenong's consultation activities over the past 12 months, CGD YFS tables the following recommendations for consideration by the Taskforce in developing the new state-wide Anti-Racism Strategy:

- (1) Racism and discrimination is a significant concern to young people, and they should be actively involved in co-designing initiatives that respond to their concerns.
 - (2) The Anti-Racism Strategy should explore opportunities for the State Government to partner with local Councils to support communities. Local government is a valuable community partner in anti-racism work, given the strong links and trust established within the communities they serve.
 - (3) Implement visible initiatives and campaigns across the community to promote community belonging, safety and harmony. Anti-racism messaging needs to target all ages, recognising the influence of attitudes held by parents, caregivers and significant adults in shaping the views of children and adolescents in the family unit.
 - (4) There needs to be a focus on raising awareness of the existing supports and reporting tools amongst young people, to better support those experiencing racism. This should include providing transparency around the reporting process and realistic expectations of outcomes.
 - (5) The prevalence of racism in schools suggests a need to increase education and training for school staff, teachers and students in responding to racism as a bystander.
 - (6) Representation in the media should reflect our culturally diverse population. Increase representation of culturally diverse people in the media (including social media) through highlighting positive news stories and culturally diverse people presenting the information.
 - (7) Provide further opportunities for newly arrived young people from diverse backgrounds to engage in community activities and build leadership skills, to anchor their sense of community belonging and increase representation in decision-making processes.
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For further information relating to this submission, please contact:

Aishling Fagan

Team Leader Youth and Community Development, City of Greater Dandenong

Phone: 03 9793 2155

Email: Aishling.Fagan@cgd.vic.gov.au

