



Systemic Racism

Racism is a complex issue that appears in different shapes and forms. Sometimes the impacts of racism are obvious, but other times they are so embedded within societal norms, they become harder to notice. This is referred to as systemic or institutional racism, where laws, policies and regulations, privilege the dominant racial group at the expense of minority racial groups.

So how does this work?

Systemic racism is revealed through the structures that form our society rather than individual actions. In Australia, the legal, political and economic systems that were built under colonial rule were designed to privilege Western discourse, culture, and values. These systems trickle down and affect all aspects of daily life including education, housing, employment and health care...

This causes non-Western groups to be inherently disadvantaged[i]. For First Nations Peoples, systemic racism continues to ignore their distinct cultures, laws and political systems through the domination of Western culture. Governments have embedded laws and policies that dictate decision-making rights for Indigenous peoples, and create barriers to community led initiatives[ii].

An example of systemic racism in practice is found in the findings of Mujic & Frijters (2013)[iii]. In their study, 1500 attempts were made by people of different racial and ethnic identities to board public buses, telling the driver they did not have enough money to pay for the ride.

The results:

72% of white people were allowed to stay on the bus.

36% of black people were extended the same kindness.

The by product of systemic racism and bias:

People of colour did nothing to deserve this unequal treatment. It had been systemically embedded.



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Some other examples of systemic racism in practise [iv]

- Australia's constitutional right to make laws specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- Australia's history of First Nations dispossession and assimilation acts
- First Nations Peoples experiencing inequitable outcomes in the criminal justice system
- The overrepresentation of First Nations children in the juvenile Justice system and out of home care
- Unequal police treatment between minority groups and White Australians
- Unfair lending practices and barriers for home ownership for minorities
- The struggle for minorities to get well-paid jobs
- The lack of representation of First Nations cultures and languages in schools[vi]

Accepting that systemic racism is embedded in society and ongoing, is the first step to its undoing[vii].



What does this look like?

It may be less obvious to privileged groups how systemic racism operates. Privileged groups benefit from systemic racism, and as a result are less likely to understand the inequity it causes.

Next Steps

- 1** Reflect how systemic racism may privilege you but put others at a disadvantage.
- 2** Learn more about systemic racism at our resources page.
- 3** Read our next factsheet on unconscious bias.
- 4** Become familiar with basic terminology.

- [i] Yin Paradies, Ricci Harris & Ian Anderson, “The impact of racism on indigenous health in Australia and Aotearoa: towards a research agenda”
- [ii] S. Kendall et al., “Incarcerated Aboriginal women’s experiences of accessing healthcare and the limitations of the ‘equal treatment’ principle”, *International Journal for Equity in Health* 19, no.48 (2020): 2-4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-1155-3>.
- [iii] Mujcic, R., Frijters, P., “Still Not Allowed on the Bus: It Matters If You’re Black or White!”, Institute for the Study of Labor, Discussion Paper No. 7300 (2013): <https://docs.iza.org/dp7300.pdf>
- [iv] S. Kendall et al., “Incarcerated Aboriginal women’s experiences of accessing healthcare and the limitations of the ‘equal treatment’ principle”
- [v] Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews and Bronwyn Carlson, “The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education”, *Race Ethnicity and Education* 19, no.4 (2016): 787, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2014.969224
- [vii] Audrey Thompson, “Gentlemanly Orthodoxy: Critical Race Feminism, Whiteness Theory, and the APA Manuel”, 2004, Wiley Online Library, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0013-2004.2004.00002.x>