

Anti-Racism Toolkit

Health Impacts

Many First Nations organisations are working to address the health impacts of racism experienced by adults, children, and young people. Ongoing colonisation has contributed to systemic disadvantage in key determinants of health, including housing, education, employment, and healthcare. Within these systems, unconscious bias and assumptions about First Nations Peoples can create mistrust and prevent equitable services.

The dominance of Western understanding to health has hindered opportunities for First Nations Peoples to practice their own cultures, laws, and languages. As culture and language are central to Indigenous wellbeing, their loss can contribute to poorer social, economic, and health outcomes.

“Society and policy has attempted to treat the symptom of disadvantage rather than the root causes.” [i]

Cultural Determinants of Health and Wellbeing

For First Nations Peoples, wellbeing extends beyond the absence of illness. It includes connection to culture, Country, spirituality, and a holistic to the life cycle of birth and death.[ii] Culture can help ease the harmful impacts of racism. But racism can also be a barrier to full participation with culture and community.

Racism affects health through several pathways, including: [iii]

- Chronic stress
- Risky health related behaviour, i.e. increased drug and alcohol consumption
- Avoidance of health-care services
- Culturally unsafe service-provider relationships, i.e. with a healthcare provider
- Loss of connection to family and culture
- Intergenerational trauma

These contribute to significant mental and physical health outcomes. Mental health impacts include higher rates of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Physical health impacts include increased risk of preterm birth, obesity, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease.



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Impact of Racism on Children and Young People

Childhood and adolescence are key developmental stages that shape long-term health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes. Exposure to racism during these stages can have lasting negative effects on both physical and mental health.



For First Nations children, racism: [iv]

- Doubles the risk of mental health issues or asthma (5-10 year olds).
- Increases emotional and behavioural difficulties (6-12 year olds).
- Negative impacts mental health, sleep, behaviour, and obesity (7-12 year olds).

Systemic Reform

To address health inequalities, racism needs to be explicitly identified as an underlying cause of disadvantage. First Nations communities are often assessed through deficit-based frameworks that overlook the systemic problems that cause this disadvantage.

Moving forward requires action at multiple levels. At the **systemic level**, governments and institutions must address racism directly, support self-determination, and strengthen community-controlled services. At an **individual level** this includes education about racism. It also means holding people accountable by calling out racism when you see it.

Community-Led Initiatives

Aboriginal controlled community health services (ACCHS) enable First Nations communities to have control over their own healthcare, improving access, trust, and outcomes. These culturally grounded, community-led models draw on Indigenous knowledge systems and support long-term wellbeing through self-determination.

Examples include:

- The RHD endgame strategy
- Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Service
- The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP)
- The Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS)
- Mayi Kuwayu



[i] Leach Cave, Matthew Cooper, Stephen Zubrick, & Carrington C. Shepherd, "Caregiver-perceived racial discrimination is associated with diverse mental health outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 7-12 years", *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 2019, 18 (142), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12939-019-1045-8>

[ii] Lowitja Institute, "Culture is key: Towards cultural determinants-driven health policy", National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, April 2021, https://www.lowitja.org.au/content/Image/Lowitja_CultDetReport_210421_D14_-_WEB.pdf.

[iii] Niyi Awofeso, "Racism: a major impediment to optimal Indigenous health and health care in Australia", *Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin*, 2011, <https://healthbulletin.org.au/articles/racism-a-major-impediment-to-optimal-indigenous-health-and-health-care-in-australia/>.

[iv] DM Macedo et al., "Effects of racism on the socio-emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal Australian children", *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 2019, 18(1), 1-10, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6706881/>.