12 May 2026

Senator Jana Stewart
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submitted via the Committee website

Dear Senator Stewart

headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

headspace provides early intervention mental health and wellbeing services to 12- to 25-year-olds, via a network of 175 centres across Australia. headspace also offers online and phone support services and resources through our digital programs. Our services are designed around four core streams: mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drugs support, and vocational services.

Racism against First Nations people in Australia is pervasive and is one of the most impactful social determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Racism is particularly harmful for First Nations children and young people. Recognising this – and combatting all forms of racism – will improve both immediate and long-term benefits for First Nations people at all life stages.

Our submission focuses on First Nations young people's experiences of racism, and the impact on their social, emotional and cultural wellbeing. Our First Nations Youth Advisory has provided contributions for the Committee's consideration, including their perceptions of government's actions to address racism, hatred and violence. headspace would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission with the Committee in more detail.

More broadly, headspace recognises the importance of addressing racism and improving the cultural safety and responsiveness of headspace services for First Nations young people and family. In recent years, headspace has progressed a range of reforms – from embedding cultural governance through to introducing cultural supervision across headspace services – that are demonstrating how to embed cultural safety at scale and achieve system-wide change. We would also welcome the opportunity to explore headspace's work in this area with the Committee, if this is of interest to members.

Yours sincerely

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headspace Youth Mental Health Foundation submission to the inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Introduction

headspace National welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Our submission focuses on the experiences for First Nations young people and the impact of racism on their social, emotional and cultural wellbeing.

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing prevention and early intervention mental health and wellbeing services to 12- to 25-year-olds. headspace services provide holistic care for mental health, physical and sexual health, alcohol and other drugs and work and study needs. headspace offers in person, online and phone services, and supports young people in school and university settings. For more information about headspace's programs and services, refer to **Appendix 1**.

headspace National's submission is focused on the following terms of reference:

1. The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time.
2. The effect of online platforms on the reach, prominence and harm caused by racism and hate directed at First Nations people.
3. Initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reduce individual and collective harm.
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.

This submission includes the perspectives and experiences of members of the headspace First Nations Youth Advisory Council (FNYAC). This group brings diverse cultural and youth perspectives on issues they are facing and provides strategic and operational advice to guide and advance headspace's First Nations Wellbeing and Engagement strategic priorities. Contributions from FNYAC have been de-identified for inclusion here.

TOR 1: The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence

Key takeaways and recommendations

- Racism against First Nations people is a persistent and current issue. It is a common experience for First Nations young people, across all aspects of their lives.
- Experiences of racism impact on First Nations young people's social, emotional and culturally wellbeing. Strengthening First Nations young people's connection to culture, identity and community also provides the foundation for healing.
- Government needs to implement contemporary responses to combat racism across education settings, workplaces, in health and social services, the media and the community more broadly.

Racism is pervasive and occurs across multiple settings

For First Nations young people, racism is a routine part of daily life, occurring in schools, workplaces, sporting environments, public spaces and online. Experiences of racism range from overt verbal abuse and bullying through to covert racism and microaggressions, often dismissed as innocent questions or comments.

Experiences of racism among members of FNYAC included:

> *Identity questions, experiences dismissed, cultural mockery, and being told to stop speaking or 'move on'.*
>
> *Being racially vilified in shopping centres still. Maybe more so than ever.*
>
> *Being told we are dole bludgers and get everything free from government.*
>
> *Having their blakness quantified by how much 'dna' they have.*
>
> *Not being allowed to be angry when boundaries have been violated and seen as an angry Blak kid.*

Members of FNYAC reported experiencing persistent racism. This aligns with national data on the frequency and pervasiveness of racism.[1] These experiences of racism are not always outside the home, as one member of FNYAC described:

> *My mum's Aboriginal and my dad's not, and holds racist views. I've seen how it's affected my younger brother – how he connects to culture, he feels a lot of shame and doesn't feel like he belongs. I can see how racism in a household can really affect a young person's sense of self and culture.*

Members of FNYAC also described having their identity questioned or invalidated, and being judged on the basis of their appearance. These experiences created shame and discouraged young people from expressing their identity or sharing their experience. FNYAC members reported:

[1] See for example, Thurber, KA, Brinckley, M-M, Jones, R, et al, 2023, Population-level contribution of interpersonal discrimination to psychological distress among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults, and to Indigenous-non-Indigenous inequities: cross-sectional analysis of a community-controlled First Nations cohort study, *The Lancet*, 400(10368): 2084-2094.

Bullying based on appearance – curly hair, being called 'monkey' and compared to apes – are all still very common.

People in positions of power (teachers, for example) can assume Indigenous students have problems (alcoholism, domestic violence etc).

I joined the school band, playing the flute. The teacher, a white guy in his 50s, told me that I can't be playing the flute because my lips were too big and it wasn't realistic. That one comment stuck with me.

First Nations young people experience both interpersonal and structural racism

Racism isn't limited to individual acts; it is also embedded in many of Australia's systems and institutions. First Nations young people experience structural racism via inequalities and barriers that prevent them (or their family) from accessing opportunities in society, or via laws, policies and practices that disadvantage or inequitably impact on First Nations young people.

Youth justice in Australia clearly demonstrates the structural racism that persists today. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are dramatically over-represented in detention, where access to culturally safe mental health care is limited. There are many examples of racist legislation, policies and procedures that compound this problem: for example, First Nations young people have more adversarial interactions with police and more arrests, but lower rates of diversion.[2] Many First Nations young people in detention have also had contact with the child protection system; these young people are less likely to be granted bail as they don't have suitable accommodation.[3] Rather than addressing this racism, governments are pursuing 'adult time for adult crime' policies and further compounding the over-surveillance and criminalisation of First Nations young people.

Public commentary and the media often normalise racism

Media commentary and public debate – including performative apologies following public racism – also contribute to the harms experienced by First Nations young people. Commentators and the media can reinforce negative stereotypes and legitimise racist views within the wider community. A member of FNYAC described a cycle of racism:

It hurts more when morning shows like Sunrise seem to continually vilify our communities and make a performative apology and then make the 'mistake' again the following year. It normalises it.

The focus on the referendum on the Voice also contributed to First Nations young peoples' experiences of racism. FNYAC members described racism becoming more overt and socially acceptable during this time, including within friendship groups and sporting teams. This caused additional distress for many First Nations young people, as FNYAC members noted:

The voice referendum really gave people a reason to believe its ok to be racist. The referendum really hurt my community and really hurt me.

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[2] Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023, *Yoorrook for justice: report into Victoria's child protection and criminal justice system*.

[3] Queensland Family and Children Commission, 2023, *Queensland child rights report*.

Racism has grown quite a bit since the referendum. I've had white sports mates be openly like, 'why do your people have a chip on your shoulder?' They've become so comfortable in it because they've seen there's a wider population of people who feel it's ok to treat us like this.

Racism in public places is often very visible, and can be felt collectively. Events such as the booing during the Welcome to Country at some ANZAC Day services – and the media and online commentary that continued after – can leave First Nations young people feel hurt, frustrated, upset or affected. Even racism that may be directed at an individual, such as a sports player, is felt collectively by First Nations people. Given the ongoing intergenerational trauma experienced by First Nations people, racism in public forums further compounds the impact on First Nations young people.

Interpersonal and structural racism undermine First Nations young people's social, emotional and cultural wellbeing

Racism has profound impacts on First Nations young people's social, emotional and cultural wellbeing.[4]

Racism is particularly harmful when experienced as a child or young person: it can initiate physiological dysregulation, immune system changes, disturbed sleep patterns, and substance abuse. It can also impact their mental health and prevents First Nations young people from accessing appropriate health and education services.[5] This can impact their emotional, social and cognitive development and have lifelong consequences on their health and wellbeing.

Members of FNYAC noted that racism creates shame, is traumatic and can lead to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. Members described how racism disrupts their connection to culture, which is central to their health and resilience:

It's a significant blow to an individual and community's confidence. Without that confidence you see our young people not reach their full potential until later in their 20s or 30s even.

All these experiences make it unsafe to share lived experience and discourage First Nations young people from speaking up.

Racism creates shame, making young people question their identity, worth and belonging.

Racism doesn't only impact individual First Nations young people. It also disrupts First Nations peoples' connection to culture, Country and community, damaging their collective strength. As a member of FNYAC described:

I guess the question is, how does it NOT impact us. Because it destroys mob. The western world forgets our culture is our identity, it's not separate. It's our heart, spirit and mind.

Addressing racism is essential to improving outcomes for First Nations young people

There is clear evidence that addressing racism will reduce inequalities among First Nations children and young people. For example, researcher Naomi Priest and colleagues analysed

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[4] AIHW, 2024, *Racism and Indigenous wellbeing, mental health and suicide*, Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse.

[5] 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*. Melbourne.

longitudinal data to show that removing interpersonal racism could greatly reduce mental health and sleep problems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children compared to their non-Indigenous peers.[6] Addressing structural racism and its harmful effects, by reviewing and refining policies, dismantling discriminatory practices and creating culturally responsive services would lead to further improvements.

headspace National recognises that racism remains a barrier to care for First Nations young people (and similarly for multicultural young people across Australia). To address this, headspace National has embarked on a continuous journey of learning and growth, to strengthen cultural governance, leadership and capability, and deliver culturally safe care. This work is First Nations led, informed and governed, includes reflective practice, ongoing training in anti-racism and decolonisation, participating in challenging conversations, and learning from lived experience. This critical work will continue to be needed until racism is eliminated as a barrier to care and First Nations young people have access to culturally safe and responsive care across all headspace services.

As noted above, the social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations young people provides a framework for understanding the impact of racism. It also provides an essential frame for addressing racism. A social and emotional wellbeing approach centres self-determination and is grounded in connection to culture, community and Country. While supporting individual healing, it also helps services to identify and address racist policies and practices.

TOR 2: The effect of online platforms on the reach, prominence and harm caused by racism and hate

Key themes and recommendations

- Online racism can be anonymous, intense and persistent, amplifying the harms experienced by First Nations young people.
- Government's digital duty of care should clearly target racism and set clear expectations for companies to prevent and address racism.

Many First Nations young people experience racism online. These experiences of racism can be more intense and relentless, particularly when it is anonymous, than in-person racism. Members of FNYAC noted:

> *It's harder online. In person, I can hold my own and respond, but online it's hard to respond to faceless people.*
>
> *The racism online is relentless – not having to show your face gives people more confidence to be racist.*
>
> *Online is a really dark place for our young people.*

FNYAC members noted that reporting online racism to Facebook, Instagram or other social media companies did not lead to any action. The ineffectiveness of reporting mechanisms and responses compounded the harm they experienced and reinforced a sense of being unprotected online.

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[6] Priest, N., Guo, S., Wijesuriya, R. et al, 2024, To what extent could eliminating racial discrimination reduce inequities in mental health and sleep problems among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children? A causal mediation study. *Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific*, Oct 8:51:101196.

Government's proposed digital duty of care provides an opportunity to compel social media platforms and other online providers to proactively prevent racism and hate speech online. In developing the digital duty of care, Government should ensure that racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people is explicitly addressed.

TOR 3: Initiatives that are effective in combatting racism

Key themes and recommendation

- A range of experts have provided recommendations to Government on combatting racism and discrimination, including opportunities to address its impact on the health and wellbeing of First Nations children and young people.
- Government should prioritise, adopt and implement these recommendations, particularly the recommendations provided by the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework.

In recent years, the Australian Government has commissioned inquiries and reports into racism, including the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework. This provides a roadmap for governments, businesses and community organisations to address all forms of racism. Governments at all levels across Australia should adopt the 63 recommendations provided by the Commission, with adequate investment to implement the recommendations in full. This should include establishing the National Anti-Racism Taskforce, and funding for the Australian Human Rights Commission to develop an implementation plan specific to First Nations peoples' experience of racism.

Beyond the Framework, the Australian Government's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 highlights the impact of racism on health and sets Priority 8 of the plan to *Identify and eliminate racism*. The plan highlights the need to address racism under a human rights–based approach.

In addition to these, there are various reports and investigations that provide a range of recommendations on how to address racism. Examples include:

- the AIHW's report on systemic racism and social and emotional wellbeing and mental health: Tom Calma, Tanya Hirvonen and Abigail Bray provide a range of opportunities to eliminate systemic racism and healing the inter-generational impact on First Nations people's health and wellbeing[7]
- the Lowitja Institute's policy position paper on racism and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children provides policy, research and systems reforms to combat racism and its impact on First Nations children and young people.[8]

[7] Calma, T., Hirvonen, T, Bray, A., 2025, *Relationship between systemic anti Indigenous racism and social and emotional wellbeing and mental health: recent national and international evidence, policy and programs,* Catalog number IMH 30, AIHW, Australian Government.

[8] 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*. Melbourne.

This work has been led by First Nations people, and provides clear and effective steps to address racism and the impact on First Nations young people. The Australian Government should consider and invest in these recommendations.

Embedding cultural governance arrangements is an effective tool to combat racism

headspace's experiences in establishing and strengthening cultural governance arrangements demonstrates how organisations – and service networks more broadly – can combat racism and improve the cultural safety and responsiveness of services for First Nations young people. Organisations with effective cultural governance embed First Nations values, principles and practices into their organisational structures and policies. At headspace National, a range of cultural governance arrangements mean First Nations leadership, knowledge and lived experience are at the centre of decision making. These arrangements include:

- the headspace National **strategic plan**, the *headspace strategy 2025-2028*, sets a clear strategic priority to embed cultural safety and strengthen cultural capability across headspace, to meet the social and emotional wellbeing needs of First Nations young people
- a **Cultural Governance Advisory Committee**, a board committee providing oversight, guidance and accountability on all First Nations matters
- the **First Nations Wellbeing and Engagement division**, established to lead change across the headspace network, and provide First Nations executive leadership.

These arrangements mean headspace is stewarded by First Nations people and First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing, for all First Nations matters. They provide mechanisms to support self-determination, improve cultural safety and for First Nations young people, family, communities and staff, and incorporate practices such as cultural supervision in service delivery. These arrangements also help staff across headspace to continue to learn and reflect about racism, grow their cultural capability and to practice anti-racism. This makes embedding cultural governance an effective reform tool to address racism across service governance, design and delivery.

This aligns with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which is grounded on the belief that better outcomes are achieved when First Nations people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them.

TOR 5: The effectiveness of avenues for reporting and responding to racism

Key theme

- First Nations young people need avenues for reporting racism, but these are often not available, visible or effective.
- Mechanisms to report and respond to racism need to be co-designed with First Nations communities, to build mechanisms that are culturally safe, visible and effective.

Visible, effective and culturally safe mechanisms for reporting and responding to racism are essential. First Nations people have emphasised the need improve the accessibility and safety of

existing avenues, to provide avenues that are culturally safe, centre community wellbeing, and provide redress for the harms experienced by individuals and communities.[9]

For First Nations young people, this needs to include clear and effective avenues for reporting racism they experience in all areas of their lives, including in education settings, at work, and online. In addition to being culturally safe and visible to the young people, leaders in each of these settings need to proactively communicate these reporting avenues to staff, students and community members. These mechanisms will only be effective if First Nations young people are aware that there is an opportunity to report racism:

> *It's never been obvious how to report racism at uni, school or in sports. You learn about bullying and sexual harassment but not racism – it needs to be separate, or it gets overlooked.*
>
> *No one has ever sent me information about how to report an incident. There's room for improvement there.*

First Nations young people also need to trust that these reporting mechanisms will be effective and reducing racism and addressing the harms they have experienced. For many First Nations young people, this trust is lacking. Many reporting mechanisms have been designed or framed from a Western perspective, lack transparency, and do not provide culturally safe and trauma-informed support. This limits reporting and makes it more difficult to effectively respond to specific instances of racism.[10]

Avenues for reporting and responding to racism towards First Nations young people need to be designed with First Nations young people, and provide safe, accessible, anonymous and community-centred mechanisms.

Conclusion

The Australian Government needs to play a key leadership role in setting community norms, in addressing systemic and structural racism.

Government inaction on racism also compounds the problem. For example, not progressing work on the National Anti-Racism Framework delays improvement and damages the trust of First Nations young people in Government's commitment to address racism. Similarly, governments need to adhere to policies and regulation designed to be anti-racist and non-discriminatory. As members of FNYAC noted:

> *[Government can] actually act on all the enquiries and recommendations made to them. And actually uphold regulations, policies and legislation.*
>
> *Not undermine legislation and change it. If government (federal or state) continually undermine us themselves, how do they expect the general public to respect us?*

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[9] Australian Commission for Human Rights, 2025, *The National Anti-Racism Framework: a roadmap to eliminating racism in Australia,* Australian Government.

[10] Dudgeon, P., Bray, A., & Walker, R., 2023, Mitigating the impacts of racism on Indigenous wellbeing through human rights, legislative and health policy reform. *The Medical journal of Australia*, *218*(5), 203–205.

Appendix 1: headspace programs and services

headspace provides early intervention mental health services to 12 to 25 year olds. headspace offers young people integrated and individualised support across mental health, physical and sexual health, alcohol and other drugs, and work and study. Such holistic, multi-faceted support are a vital component of a responsive service system model.

Our integrated service model includes:

- **headspace centres:** the headspace network of services are youth-friendly, integrated service hubs, where multidisciplinary teams provide holistic support across the four core streams.
- **community awareness:** guided by local youth reference groups and centre staff, Community Awareness Officers at each headspace centre work locally to build mental health literacy, reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking, identify local needs and ensure young people know they can access help at headspace.
- **digital mental health programs and resources:** headspace uses its digital platform to make a range of information and supports accessible to young people, parents and carers, professionals and educators.
- **eheadspace:** our virtual service provides safe, secure support to young people and their family and friends from experienced youth mental health professionals via email, webchat or phone. There are also online group sessions led by clinicians or peers, focused on the big issues facing young people and their family and friends.
- **headspace campaigns:** campaigns focus on stigma reduction, building mental health literacy and encouraging help seeking, while ensuring young people know headspace is a safe and trusted place they can turn to in order to support their mental health.
- **headspace in schools and universities:** Through evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, early intervention and postvention services, headspace delivers key initiatives designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of school communities. This includes:
    - **Be You** – a mental health and wellbeing initiative for learning communities, supporting secondary schools to prepare for, respond to and recover together where there has been a death by suicide.
    - **Mental Health Education Program** – free mental health education workshops for schools
    - **University support program** – training and education opportunities to Australian universities to build their capacity and confidence to engage in conversations about mental health and wellbeing.
- **programs and resources to support priority cohorts of young people**: these include:
    - **Visible project –** a community based initiative using artwork as a form of community engagement and awareness.

- **Yarn Safe –** mental health and wellbeing resources and support for First Nations young people.

- **vocational supports:** headspace centres provide integrated mental health and vocational support to young people to help them remain engaged in work and study, including implementing Individual Placement and Support (IPS) in headspace centres. In addition, headspace provides vocational support via:
  - **headspace Work and Study Online** (hWS) is a national digital program that provides integrated mental health and vocational support via the phone, video conferencing, online messaging and email. hWS works closely with young people across their work/study journey from identifying work/study goals to maintaining a work/study placement, typically for a period of around three months.
  - **headspace Career Mentoring** connects young people aged 18 to 25 years living with mental health challenges with industry professionals to meet fortnightly over a period of six months via video conferencing and/or the phone to enhance a young person's employment and career opportunities.
  - **headspace Individual Placement and Support** is available in-person at 50 services.