



# COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS RACISM INCIDENT REPORT

**Reporting Racism Against Asians in Australia Arising  
due to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic**

A collaborative initiative by the Asian Australian Alliance  
and Osmond Chiu, Research Fellow at the Per Capita  
Thinktank.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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We would like to thank our project partners Democracy in Colour and Diversity Arts Australia for their contributions.

We also acknowledge the respondents to the survey, without whom this project could not have been completed. We give thanks to your courage and effort in coming forward with your stories in order to shed much needed light on the issue of racism against Asians and Asian-Australians amidst this pandemic.

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## **BACKGROUND**

The COVID-19 Racism Incident Report Survey was launched on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020 and, to date, has collected over 410 reports of COVID-19-related racism. This report analyses quantitative and qualitative data from the first two months of the survey (April 2<sup>nd</sup> - June 2<sup>nd</sup>). There were 377 reports over this period.

This project is a collaboration between the Asian Australian Alliance and Osmond Chiu, Research Fellow of Per Capita Thinktank. Our partners include Democracy in Colour and Diversity Arts, Australia. The project was inspired by the work being done in the US by Asian American organisations such as the STOP AAPI Hate campaign, which collected over 1,700 reports of anti-Asian racism over a six week period.

The collection of this data on individual experiences has cumulatively shown that there has been a clear pattern of racist attacks against Asians and Asian Australians as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and that they are not isolated incidents.

This preliminary report will discuss some of the trends, issues, observations and make recommendations based on survey results.

## **METHODOLOGY FOR DATA COLLECTION**

- The online survey consisted of a combination of 13 multiple-choice questions and 7 qualitative questions. The online survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and launched on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. An additional question asking for international student status was added on April 16, 2020. The data was translated into simplified and traditional Chinese and Korean on April 21, 2020. The data used

for this analysis covered the period of April 2nd, 2020 to June 2nd, 2020. Overall 377 cases were included in this analysis.

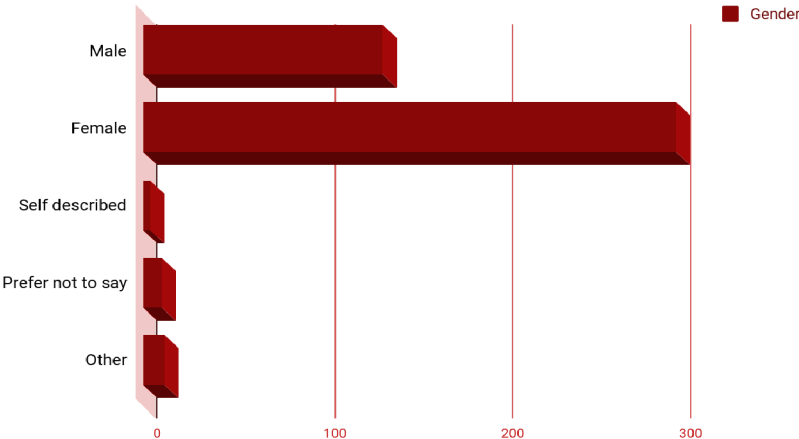
- A nonprobability sampling method was used because the purpose of the survey was to collect detailed information on incidents of racism to identify patterns. Participants self-selected and were able to complete the survey confidentially.
- The survey was promoted via social media, emails, links in online newspaper articles and through partner organisations.

# Part A – COVID-19 Racism Incident Report

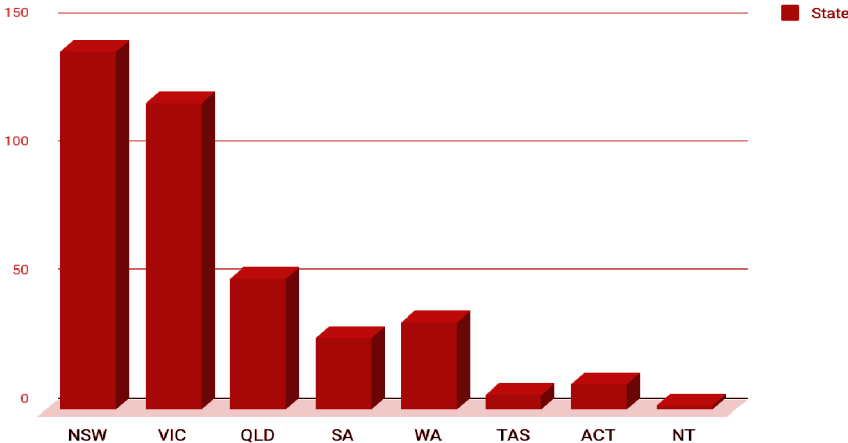
## Quantitative and qualitative data

### Summary of key quantitative data

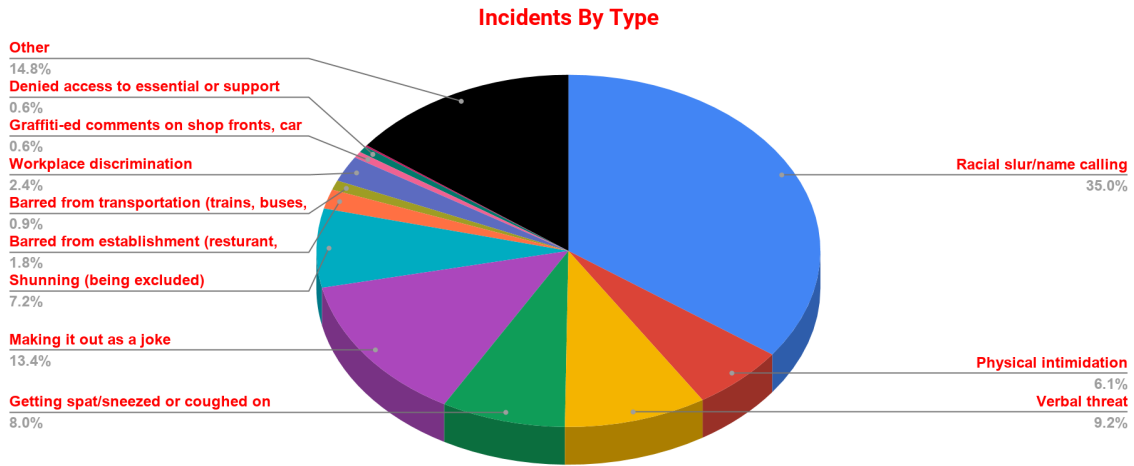
- Over 65% of the respondents identified as female



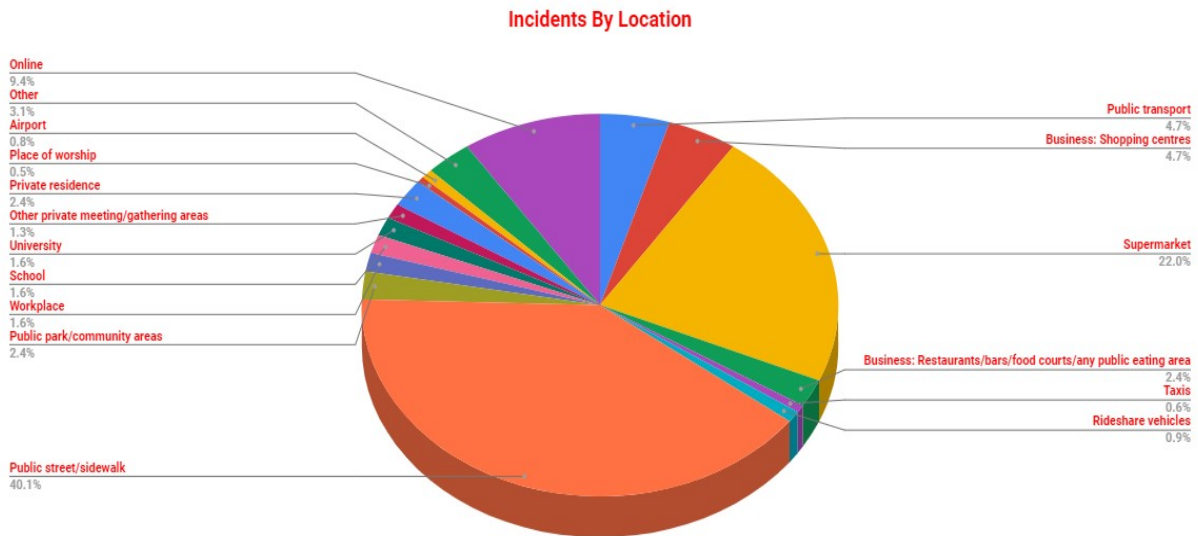
NSW recorded the most reports (37%), VIC recorded the second highest (32%) and QLD recorded the third highest (13%)



- The most common type of racism experienced (35%) was in the form of racial slurs/name calling.
- Almost 60% of incidents involved physical or verbal harassment (racial slurs/name calling, physical intimidation, verbal threats, getting spat at)



- 40% of COVID-19 related racism incidents happened on a public street/sidewalk, 22% of incidents happened in a supermarket. 9.4% of incidents reported happened online.





- Almost 10% of incidents occurred online, with 43% of these happening on Facebook



- More than 84% of perpetrators were unknown to the respondents.
- Over 90% of respondents did not report their incident to the police.
- 15% of respondents identified themselves as international students, of whom 80% were from China.
- The survey was translated into both Chinese and Korean and responses in these languages constituted 3.4% of the total reports.

### **Qualitative data: specific incident examples**

The following is a breakdown of incidents by type and includes de-identified examples.

- **Racial slurs/name calling** made up the majority of reported incidents (35%).
  - **Female, 23, Perth, Malaysian Chinese** - *“A group of white men walked by and called me to go back to China while I’m actually Malaysian. He*

*called me "you're fucking Asian, go eat bats and die alone. Don't come to Australia."*

- **Physical intimidation** comprised 6.1% of reported incidents. The number of incidents is cause for concern considering they occurred over a span of only two months.
  - **Female, 19, Sydney, Vietnamese Australian** - *"Told to stay away from them because I'm Asian so I have coronavirus. Told that it was my people who brought the virus over here. Attempted to kick me. Called me an Asian slut and an Asian dog. Told me to go eat a bat. Threatened me with a knife. Spat in my face getting spit in my left eye."*
- **Verbal threats** made up 9.2% of incidents. Verbal threats differ from "racial slurs/name calling" in that it involves a verbal threatening action.
  - **Male, 50, Melbourne, Chinese** - *"Caucasian man got on the bus. Started saying things to the bus driver "why you looking at me". No reply from driver. Caucasian man gradually escalated to "go back to where you came from, you're bringing the virus here". All this occurred without provocation."*
- **Getting spat/sneezed or coughed on** accounted for 8% of reported incidents. Many of the cases were accompanied by racial slurs/name calling. Given concerns about the spread of COVID-19, this should be considered on par with acts of physical violence.
  - **Female, 29, Sydney, Vietnamese** - *"Was walking home and a ute slowed down on the far side of the road and yelled something, I had headphones in, I just heard "fucking asian..... From .... Virus" and spat at me. But luckily there were two lanes between me and this driver so I didn't get spat on."*
- **Making it out as a joke** made up 13.4% of incidents. Many of these incidents involved a perpetrator known to the survey respondent.
  - **Male, 46, ACT, Chinese Indian Australian** - *"A colleague who I did not meet before asked if I knew what C-O-V-I-D was. I said yes it's the virus. Then he jokingly asked if I knew what CCP was. I said I don't know. Then I*

*was told I'm Chinese I should know as it stood for Chinese Communist Party. I replied ``what is it got to do with me as I'm mixed Indian-Chinese and now Australian."*

- **Shunning/being excluded** made up 7.2% of incidents, including where respondents reported being refused to give or receive service.
  - **Female, 36, Melbourne, Chinese East Timorese-** *“Customer refused to be served by myself or other staff of south East Asian appearance stating we were “sick” even though none of us had any signs of sickness. He waited to be served by staff members of a different complexion for over 10min.”*
- **Barred from establishments (restaurants, shops, bars etc)** made up 1.8% of incidents, which involved the respondent being refused entry into an establishment due to being racially profiled and discriminated against.
  - **Male, 40, Brisbane, Chinese -** *“We were lining up and two men in front of us got to the front and the Security guard confronted the two men asking them what they were trying to enter the store for. The men looked at each other and it was clear they couldn't understand the security guard. The security guard proceeded to say as the men spoke among themselves “I can't understand you, I speak the language of this place straya not Chinese or whatever you're speaking. He proceeded to shoo them away. I tried to stop the men to tell them to go into the store but they left and the guard said “I dont know why they want to come in here”, I responded on a number of occassions assertively he told me to shut the fuck up. He has since been stood down after I threatened to report it on television and to the police.”*
- **Barred from transportation (Trains, buses, taxis, Uber etc)** made up 0.9% of incidents which involved the respondent being refused entry into a communal transportation service due to being racially profiled.

- **Female, 26, Sydney, Chinese Malaysian Australian** - *“ My friend is Vietnamese background and I am Malaysian Chinese background. I ordered an Uber one night whilst out in Newtown. When our Uber arrived, the driver who was of European background (could tell by accent), refused us and said he didn’t want to catch COVID-19 because we were all Asian”.*
- **Workplace Discrimination** made up 2.4% of incidents, which involved the respondent being discriminated at their own or someone else’s workplace, due to being racially profiled.
  - **Female, 47, Sydney, Japanese** - *“I was sitting at a table near a lift area at work, eating lunch while waiting for someone. Two Caucasian female junior colleagues came out of the lift and spotted me. They asked me why I was eating there instead of my own desk or somewhere inside the office area. One of them followed this question with "Oh so you are self-isolating because that's what Asians do" in a "sort of jokey" way. I was taken aback by this explicit reference to 'Asians' and felt it was inappropriate to reduce a colleague to a race. I didn't respond to this specific question, and continue to talk generally to both of them, but now more to the other colleague, who didn't join in the 'joke'. She then repeated the same question "So you are self isolating like all other Asians", and the other colleague looked notably uncomfortable”*
- **Graffiti-ed comments on shop fronts, car windows or the home** made up around 0.08% of incidents.
  - **Family, Sydney** - *“Graffiti blaming Asians for COVID-19 was spray painted on the walls of a domestic residence off Shaftsbury Rd, Eastwood.”*
- **Denied access to essential or support services (Medical practice, counselling services, childcare etc)** made up 0.6% of incidents, which involved

the respondent being refused access to some kind of essential or support service, due to being racially profiled.

- **Female, 34, Perth, Chinese** - *“I was taking my child to the GP office, and when I walked in another waiting patient walked towards us and blocked us from walking further saying that “Asians need to stay indoors due to the spread of COVID-19. I was so traumatised and upset and it took 3 minutes for the reception and some doctors to come to our aid.”*
- **Denied access to rental accommodation** comprised 0.02% of incidents which involved the respondent being refused access to their rental property, due to being racially profiled and discriminated against.
  - **Male, 25, Brisbane, Mainland Chinese** - *“I was entering my apartment building, when I was pushed out. A fellow resident had pushed me and told me that I was not allowed to enter the building unless I was quarantined and cleared of the coronavirus. I said that I don’t have it and that resident replied that “all Asians have it because of our disgusting eating habits”*
- **Other** made up 14.8% of incidents which involved the respondent being racially attacked but the incident didn’t fit into the other categories. An example would be being stared at intensely in a public space. Many of these incidents didn’t involve an obvious racial attack, but the respondent felt singled out due to COVID-19 and being of an Asian background.
  - **Female, 30, Melbourne, Korean Australian** - *“Old woman with face mask approached me and stared at me for 5 seconds while I was waiting for the store to open. Her demeanour was aggressive and hate filled. I did not back down and stared at her back. We locked eyes for 15 seconds before she mumbled something and moved off. The other white person standing nearby did not notice.”*
- It is important to note that 3.4% or 13 reports came from respondents who completed the survey in Chinese and Korean. All of these respondents identified

as either current or former international students, recent migrants or those on some type of working visa.

- **TRANSLATED FROM CHINESE - Male, 26, Bowen (QLD), Chinese -**  
*“Due to the end of the farm season, we need to move to Bowen and after searching for new accomodation on Facebook due to the fact we need to find cross state housing information in advance, I messaged the person, the landlord. She was very rude when replying to my message and said that "we had to quarantine in our own country". I explained that due to flight cancellation, the farm requires us to move and the Australian Government is trying to work things out for us to stay. She then replied rudely and started to say things which discriminated against Asians. I got so angry that I deleted a lot of that message. She later counter attacked and threatened to report us to the Government.”*
- **TRANSLATED FROM KOREAN - Female, 24, Sydney, Korean -** “I described my intention to buy a dog. The other party ( who I wanted to buy the dog from) replied: "Are you serious! I breed show quality dogs! Not pets for Asians! Don't contact me again and go back to China or wherever you come from".

## Part B – Analysis and interpretation of data

### Data Analysis

- The majority of respondents (65%) identified as female. This may suggest power dynamics are at play with perpetrators stereotyping Asian females as weak and/or easy targets.<sup>1</sup>
- International students accounted for 15% of respondents, 80% of whom were from a Mainland Chinese background. There are currently more than 165,000 Chinese students studying in Australia, accounting for a quarter of all international students.<sup>2</sup> Education is Australia's third-largest export earner, contributing \$30.3 billion dollars in 2017.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese Education Ministry has recently cautioned Chinese students considering/currently studying in Australia to be vigilant of 'racist incidents' arising from the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> With 80% of international student survey respondents of Chinese origin, the data reinforce such claims made by the Ministry and could potentially lead to a downturn in future Chinese student numbers.
- NSW recorded the highest number of reports (37%), followed by VIC (32%) and QLD (13%). The overwhelming majority of incidents occurred in the capital cities, with Sydney taking up around 30% of the survey responses. This is reflective of the higher population on the East coast of Australia as well as the greater proportion of Asians in the capital cities of these states. 2016 Census data indicates that 28% of those in Sydney and 24.4% in Melbourne have Asian ancestry.
- Respondents most commonly experienced racist incidents on a public street/sidewalk (40%) and in a supermarket (22%), with the majority being in the form of physical and/or verbal threats. These statistics are in line with media coverage - often in the form of amateur video footage - of the growing number of racial attacks against Asians in public spaces.<sup>5</sup> Racist attacks are further fueled

by negative media coverage of Asians in Australia, such as racist hoaxes about Asians stockpiling goods during the pandemic - rumours that were later proven false but promoted by senior political figures like Immigration Minister Peter Dutton.<sup>6</sup>

- Over 84% of respondents did not know the perpetrator, which demonstrates the random, opportunistic nature of these incidents.
- Online racist incidents were reported by 10% of respondents. Online harassment and cyber abuse is experienced by one in three Australians and costs an estimated \$3.7 billion in health costs and lost income.<sup>7</sup> They are most prevalent on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, which accounted for 70% of online incidents. Hashtags such as #chinesevirus and #kungflu, popularised by the American President Donald Trump, have further fueled this rise in anti-Chinese online bullying during this pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the ease with which fake accounts can be set up on these platforms protects perpetrators with the safety of anonymity, allowing for a proliferation of extreme racist bullying.
- There were a significant number of respondents who reported discrimination at their place of work, often by a colleague and often made out to be a joke. According to research conducted by the ANU's Australian Research Centre, 65% of Asian-Australians report being discriminated against in the workplace.<sup>9</sup> A contributing factor to this discrimination revolves persistent stereotypes around Asians as being meek or soft-spoken, and ill-suited to promotion or visible leadership roles - the so-called 'bamboo ceiling' phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Race Discrimination Commissioner Chin Tan stated that *"Asian-Australians account for only 3.1 per cent of partners in law firms, 1.6 per cent of barristers and 0.8 per cent of the judiciary. Research shows that underrepresentation impacts not only the individual, but in areas such as justice, it also has a community and systemic impact."*<sup>10</sup>
- The lack of diversity in Australian media and the arts indirectly impacts on issues of racism against Asians. The media has been complicit in spreading anti



Chinese sentiments with sensationalist headlines, racially charged imagery and one-sided reporting around the issues concerning the pandemic and the growing influence of China.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the relative invisibility of Asians on mainstream TV, film, radio, print media etc, despite making up 12% of the population, prevents their normalisation into the Australian psyche and increases the likelihood of racist attacks against those who are perceived as not belonging in Australia.

- The results from the survey support the notion that these types of racist attacks are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of attacks against people of Asian origin happening across Australia.<sup>12</sup> In early June, the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued a travel alert to its citizens, stating that "due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial discrimination and violence against Chinese and Asian people in Australia have seen a significant increase."<sup>13</sup> The data from the survey would seem to back up these assertions and refute responses by Australian politicians that they 'have no basis in fact,' (Tourism Minister Simon Birmingham) or that "there hasn't been a wave of outbreaks of violence against Chinese people" (Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack).<sup>13</sup>

### **Analysis on the lack of reporting of incidents to authorities**

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (around 90%) did not report their incident of COVID-19 related racism to the police. This statistic is not surprising given generalised under-reporting of racist incidents among the Asian/Asian Australian community.<sup>14</sup> Factors include:

- Many who are naturalised may view Australia as an adopted country and thus consider themselves as "guests" and not permanent residents with equal rights. They may also feel compelled to be grateful to be 'allowed' to live here and thus discouraged to complain.<sup>15</sup>
- Reporting to authorities may be considered too troublesome.

- Lack of knowledge of, and confusion about, reporting avenues and/or confidence in getting adequate redressal from the authorities. Frustration over chronic police inaction and constant denials by politicians that racism is a serious issue has seen the rise of vigilante style responses by the Chinese community.<sup>16</sup>
- A language barrier to reporting may exist given that English may not be their first language. The large number of non-English respondents to the survey indicates a need for simplified multilingual reporting processes to be available.
- They may feel that casual racism is an inevitable part of living in Australia, and that being racially discriminated against is not a serious crime if it does not involve violence.<sup>17</sup>
- Personal experiences in their country of origin may lead to a distrust of the police and/or authorities.<sup>18</sup>
- For those who are on student, working or bridging visas, uncertainty about their rights may lead them to believe that reporting to authorities may compromise their visas.<sup>19</sup> This may also be compounded by the large number of people working illegally or being underpaid in cash, especially in the restaurant industry.<sup>20</sup>

There has been engagement by the community/multicultural commissions/police liaison officers to encourage the Asian/Asian Australian community to report their incidents of racism to the police - no matter how minor it is. An expansion of these activities is a practical way in which police can start collecting data to understand and address this growing anti-Asian racism.

Based on the qualitative responses described in these reports, it appears that there were hardly any respondents who filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission or respective state regulatory bodies. While these bodies play an important role, it suggests that many within the Asian/Asian Australian community do not understand the importance of reporting or know the differences between state and federal bodies and the police. They may also be skeptical about the redress available as these bodies have

mainly conciliatory rather than enforcement powers and require identifying the perpetrator.

We acknowledge that there has been community engagement from state regulatory bodies with the community in ensuring translated materials are distributed but also that the Asian/Asian Australian community understands the role and significance of making complaints.

There are hate crime laws that exist in Australia, but they are rarely used. An investigation by the ABC found only 21 people have been convicted under hate crime laws in Australia, despite state police forces recording thousands of offences connected to discrimination.<sup>21</sup> Internal Victorian police data obtained by the ABC showed on average, approximately three offences per day were flagged as prejudicially motivated. This situation creates a vicious cycle in which limited data and a lack of prosecutions create the impression that race hate crimes are not a serious issue and not prioritised as a result.

The requirement to prove that the act incited a third party is a test that misses the impact of the act of vilification on the victim. Currently in Victoria there is a move to strengthen anti-vilification laws.<sup>22</sup>

There has been some response from different levels of government to raise awareness about reporting mechanisms since this rise in anti-Asian racism has received media attention. The Commonwealth, for example, has created a 'Help Stop Racism' webpage and the NSW Government has launched a '[Stop Public Threats](#)' campaign.<sup>23</sup> While welcome, there does not appear to be widespread community awareness about these campaigns and neither appear to have a proactive approach to combating racism. It highlights the need to provide increased funding for proactive anti-racism initiatives. The Commonwealth Government's last national anti-racism strategy and associated campaign "[Racism. It Stops With Me](#)" started in 2013.<sup>24</sup>

## Part C – Recommendations

- The Commonwealth Government should spearhead a new National Anti-Racism Strategy to improve community understanding of what constitutes racism, why it is a problem and ways to prevent it and reduce its prevalence and education about avenues to report.
- Police, relevant state anti-discrimination bodies and the AHRC should work together to improve data collection on racially motivated incidents and enable nationally consistent data on incidents of racism.
- The creation of a ‘one stop shop’ to simplify the process of reporting for those who have experienced racism.
- A creation of simple multi-lingual reporting avenues to facilitate reporting of incidents for those for whom English is not a first language. Services should not just be mere translations from English, but adapted and contextualised to the various CALD community needs. This may involve the creation of specific ‘language offices’ which can be the bridge for these communities in accessing government services in general.
- Removal of legislative barriers to prosecution for racially motivated criminal actions and the strengthening of anti-vilification laws
- AHRC should work with organisations such as the Australian Press Council to develop advisory guidelines for removing unconscious bias in reporting on Asia and Asian-Australian communities. This will assist newsrooms and media professionals in understanding how such bias can inadvertently flame anti-Asian sentiments, and the reasons why.
- Social media platforms should make it easier to report and remove trending content that is confirmed as false that may encourage COVID-19 related anti-Asian racism. Individuals who share removed content should be directly informed by platforms that the content was verified as false.

- Better cultural sensitivity training for police and greater investment in multicultural and community liaison work.
- Strengthen the work on promoting human rights among the temporary residents including international students. Reference to Principles to Protect the Human Rights of International Students
- Involvement of multicultural community leaders, civil rights organisations, student bodies and other stakeholders in developing strategies against racial discrimination.

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