

Reducing race-based discrimination

Local government action guide no. 5

Promoting health and preventing illness in the community



Local governments play a major role in supporting the objectives of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* by protecting, improving and promoting public health within their municipality. By integrating action across the social, cultural, built, economic and natural environments, council policies and practices can make major contributions to economic prosperity, community cohesion and population health outcomes.^{1,2}

Race-based discrimination can take place in many forms, including race-based attacks, systemic bias or exclusion, being undermined in social situations, or having a person's culture devalued. Councils can reduce race-based discrimination by upholding fair policies and processes and actively supporting cultural diversity.

This guide is one of ten outlining a range of evidence-informed actions that councils may consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans and other strategies. The proposed strategies are consistent with national and state health promotion priorities and prevention frameworks, including *The Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2011–2015* and VicHealth's *Reducing race-based discrimination and supporting diversity: A framework for action*.

Why is reducing race-based discrimination a public health and wellbeing priority?

Experiencing race-based discrimination can result in:

- anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, and stress-related illness³
- unhealthy coping behaviours, such as dropping out of physical activity and community activities, smoking, and misusing alcohol or drugs³
- restricted access to education, information, employment, social support and human rights
- long-term social and material disadvantage
- lower rates of participation in sports, cultural and civic activities.

Race-based discrimination is common:

- In Australia, 47 per cent of people born in non-English speaking countries reported experiencing race-based discrimination (compared with 20 per cent of the Australian-born), and 14 per cent reported experiencing race-based discrimination in the previous 12 months (compared with 7 per cent of the Australian-born).⁴
- In 2006, one in ten Victorians believed that some races are inferior to others and that people from different racial backgrounds should not marry one another.⁵
- In 2006, one in three Victorians held views suggesting some discomfort with people from different racial backgrounds.⁵
- Aboriginal Australians and people from culturally diverse backgrounds, especially Middle-Eastern, Asian and African backgrounds, are most affected by race-based discrimination within Australia.³

Discrimination occurs when a particular group of people is treated differently (especially unfairly), resulting in unequal access to resources, power and opportunities. Discrimination can be interpersonal (occurring between individuals) or institutional (when policies and procedures or laws disadvantage a specific group). Supporting cultural diversity means accepting a diversity of values and ways of living within a human rights framework and with respect for the rule of law.

A sample council strategy to reduce race-based discrimination

Strategic goal

Council is committed to reducing race-based discrimination by helping to create a vibrant and inclusive social and cultural environment that values people in all their diversity.

Objectives and actions

Provide a fair and equitable culture

- Develop a policy on cultural diversity that embeds diversity into all council functions and activities.
- Promote the use of interpreter services and translate material into languages other than English.
- Employ a cultural diversity officer to oversee the implementation of council's diversity policy and maintain a focus on multicultural issues.
- Provide cultural diversity training for all staff.
- Develop council staff leadership skills to address discrimination and promote diversity.
- Consult with different ethnic groups to understand their specific concerns and needs.
- Encourage job applications from people who represent the racial diversity in the community.

Tackle discrimination in the community and build on positive attitudes to multiculturalism

- Encourage dialogue between different ethnic groups to promote understanding and empathy.
- Support community-based activities that bring people together and promote harmony.
- Build and sustain networks and partnerships between different groups.

Communicate positive messages

- Communicate anti-discrimination and pro-diversity messages through council media.
- Develop and disseminate materials that dispel cultural myths and stereotypes and raise awareness and empathy.
- Begin formal events with an acknowledgement of the municipality's traditional custodians and Elders past and present.
- Support the development of cross-cultural leadership within the community.

References

- 1 Blane, D, Brunner, E & Wilkinson, R, 1996, *Health and social organisation: Towards a health policy for the 21st century*, Routledge, London, p. 12.
- 2 Wilkinson, R & Marmot, M, 2003, *Social determinants of health: The solid facts* (2nd edn), www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/abstracts/social-determinants-of-health.-the-solid-facts
- 3 VicHealth, 2009, *Building on our strengths: A framework to reduce race-based discrimination and support diversity in Victoria*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.
- 4 Markus, A & Dharmalingham, A, 2008, *Mapping social cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation surveys*, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Monash University, Melbourne.
- 5 VicHealth, 2007, *More than tolerance: Embracing diversity for health*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.