



MEDIA RELEASE

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VAST MAJORITY OF ABORIGINALS TARGETS OF RACISM: SURVEY

A survey of 755 Aboriginal people in four Victorian localities has found they experience extraordinarily high levels of racism, with at least 97 per cent having been targets of verbal or physical abuse, or discriminatory behaviour in the past 12 months.

A VicHealth, Lowitja Institute, University of Melbourne and *beyondblue* survey, published today at Congress Lowitja 2012 in Melbourne, shows up to 70 per cent had been targets of eight or more racist incidents during the past year.

Participants in two metropolitan and two rural localities across Victoria were more likely to score higher on the Kessler scale for psychological distress as they experienced more incidents of racism. Half reported high or very high levels of psychological distress.

Lead researcher of the *Mental health impacts of racial discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities* report, Associate Professor Margaret Kelaher, from the University of Melbourne, said: "Almost every Aboriginal Victorian who participated in this survey had experienced racism and the risk of high or very high levels of psychological distress increased as the volume of racism increased.

"There were no coping strategies that could reduce the negative health effects of exposure to racism, so this study really suggests that prevention is likely to be a more effective and efficient public health intervention than simply responding to harmful incidents."

In racist incidents, over half of the participants had their property vandalised; 92 per cent said they'd been called names or teased; 86 per cent felt ignored; 84 per cent were sworn at or verbally abused; 82 per cent were told they were less intelligent; 67 per cent had been spat on or had something thrown at them and 66 per cent had been told they did not belong.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said the research established a link between racist incidents and poor mental health for Indigenous people, and had strong implications for how we deal with racism in the future.

"VicHealth has undertaken considerable research over the past decade which has built the case for preventing, and responding to, race-based discrimination. This report provides evidence that racism has a serious impact on health and reveals an urgent need to address this issue in Victoria," Ms Rechter said.

"We want Victorians to understand that race-based discrimination affects people's health and that we all have a role in stopping it. We've seen some great examples recently of how role models in the community can shine the spotlight on the damaging impact of racism and drive home the message that racism has no place in the workplace, at the pub, in sports and indeed in our society."

beyondblue CEO Kate Carnell AO said discrimination and bullying of any kind, including racism, could have a profound effect on a person's mental health. "Racism is never acceptable," she said.

"Research shows that the suicide rate in Indigenous people is about 70 per cent higher than in non-Indigenous Australians. One third of Indigenous Australians report high to very high levels of psychological distress, which is more than twice the rate for non-Indigenous Australians. Stamping out racism is vital if we want to ensure that all Australians have the best possible chance of achieving good mental health."

Lowitja Institute Chairperson Pat Anderson is not surprised by the findings of the study. "This research confirms what we already know about the connection between the social and emotional effects of racism and its direct influence on mental health and wellbeing," she said.

"It is important that this information is widely available and openly discussed and we will continue working to build an evidence base about the effects of racism to advocate for change. Racist attitudes and beliefs have consequences and can create long-term harm for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. People can't thrive if they feel excluded."

MEDIA CONTACT: Jane Gardner 03 9667 1319 / 0435 761 732 (VicHealth Senior Media Officer)

VicHealth has funded two Victorian councils to undertake the Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Project. This survey was conducted at the start of a four year pilot to promote positive attitudes and behaviour towards cultural diversity in order to reduce race-based discrimination.

About the survey

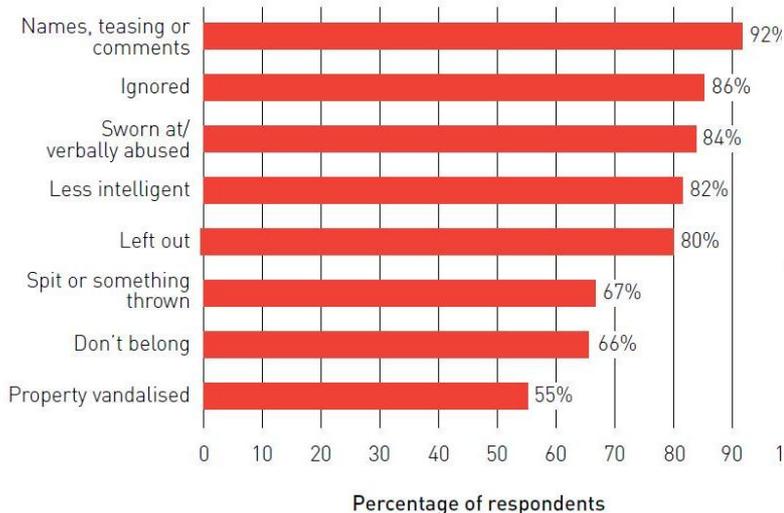
The survey was undertaken with 755 Aboriginal people living in two metropolitan and two rural local government areas in Victoria in 2011. The results were consistent across the four municipalities. It is not possible to determine whether the results of this research are any higher or lower than any other area of Victoria or Australia. These comparisons were not made in this study and the context and definitions of racism vary across other studies.

Download the report summary at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/LEAD-Indigenous

Key findings:

- The odds of a person who experienced high levels of racist incidents (12+) being above the threshold for high or very high psychological distress was 342 per cent greater than those who experienced no exposure to racism in the last 12 months.
- The level of psychological distress experienced by the survey participants was very high. Over 60 per cent of people who experienced 12 or more incidents of racism exceeded the threshold for high or very high psychological distress.
- The most common response to racism by those who experience it, was to ignore it, followed by verbal confrontation, wanting to confront it but not knowing how, talking to someone about it, and putting up with it.
- There was no significant difference between levels of self-reported racism in city areas and country areas, suggesting racism is widespread.
- Racism was most commonly experienced in public places, such as shopping malls, followed by education, in sports, and in employment. It was least likely to occur in council offices, banks and in health organisations.
- Specific types of racist behaviour were associated with a greater likelihood of the victim experiencing poor mental health. The most harmful types were: having someone suggest you do not belong, feeling left out and avoided, having property vandalised, being spat on or having an object thrown at you, and being hit or threatened.
- The threat of racism was also an issue, with 70 per cent indicating they often worried about encountering racism directed at them, or a friend or family member.

Type of racist behaviour experienced



Place where the racism was experienced

