

# Choosing to act: How Victorians can prevent race-based discrimination and support cultural diversity

## Research highlights

Preventing race-based discrimination to improve health and wellbeing



### Introduction

Most Victorians value their state's cultural diversity (VicHealth 2007) and believe that race-based discrimination is an unacceptable problem that requires more attention. Two studies have recently demonstrated the powerful impact that race-based discrimination has on mental health. Aboriginal and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Victorians who experienced the highest levels of race-based discrimination within the previous 12 months also recorded the most severe levels of psychological distress (VicHealth 2012 a & b). The researchers concluded that individual coping strategies, such as ignoring it, reporting it or confronting the person, did not provide sufficient protection from harm and suggested that reducing the number of racist incidents would be a more efficient method of improving mental health and wellbeing.

International researchers have found that people who have been exposed to race-based discrimination had a higher risk than others of developing mental illnesses, such as anxiety and depression (Nelson et al. 2010); and they were also more likely than others to exhibit unhealthy coping behaviours such as over-eating, smoking, alcohol and substance misuse, which increased their risk of developing physical health problems (Nelson et al. 2010). Emerging evidence suggests that race-based discrimination may also increase the risk of cardiovascular disease (VicHealth 2012c) and lead to broader community problems, such as social conflict and poorer business performance (Forrest & Dunn 2007; Nicholas et al. 2001).

There is great potential to reduce race-based discrimination and prevent these harmful consequences by harnessing the support of people who witness discriminatory or intolerant behaviours, policies and practices (i.e. bystanders) and helping them take positive action in the places where these issues occur (Nelson et al. 2010).

### The survey

VicHealth, the Social Research Centre and The University of Melbourne conducted a survey to identify Victorians' recognition of incidents of race-based discrimination and their readiness to take action when it occurred (Russell et al. 2013). The random telephone survey was conducted with 601 Victorian residents aged 18 years and over. Four hundred of the respondents lived in the Melbourne Statistical Division and 201 lived in other parts of Victoria. Approximately three-quarters of the sample were born in Australia and one-quarter were born overseas. More detail about the survey can be found in the technical report: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander-discrimination](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander-discrimination)

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**“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” – Martin Luther King, Jr**

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This survey asked Victorians:

- about their views on scenarios involving racist incidents in social situations, workplaces and community-based sports clubs
- what they would do in these scenarios
- if they had witnessed a racist incident in the previous 12 months and taken action, and
- if they thought that workplaces and community-based sports clubs could play an important leadership role to help reduce race-based discrimination.

# Silent bystanders are an untapped resource and should have a greater role in preventing racial discrimination and supporting Victoria's cultural diversity.

## A snapshot of the findings

- The overwhelming majority of Victorians surveyed (83%) believed that more should be done to minimise or address race-based discrimination in Australia, and more than 85% thought that workplaces and sporting clubs have an important role to play in leading this action.
- Respondents' level of acceptance of racist incidents\* varied according to the type of incident and the place where it occurred. For example, one-third of respondents believed that racist jokes were never acceptable in social situations and 59% thought they were never acceptable at work.
- Approximately nine out of every 10 respondents believed that racist insults and sledges\* were never acceptable in social situations, workplaces or sports clubs.
- 30% stated that they would take action against racism in all of the scenarios presented to them. Most were always willing to act in the sports club scenarios.
- 23% of people (ranging from 13% to 34% across scenarios) claimed they would feel uncomfortable, but would not do anything when they witnessed a racist incident. This group holds the potential for a powerful, new wave of action.
- 205 respondents witnessed a racist incident in the previous 12 months and 47% of these reported doing something positive to stop the racism. Nearly three-quarters of those who acted said something directly to the perpetrator, 19% spoke to somebody else and 5% physically expressed their disapproval (e.g. walked away).
- The demographic characteristics of people who were most likely to act include: women, university graduates, people aged between 35 and 54, and people born overseas.
- Most of the Victorians who acted stated that they did not agree with racism or thought the racist act was either hurtful or unacceptable. People were most likely to act if they were confident of support from their peers and organisation (e.g. policies, culture that addresses racism seriously). Most of those who did not act believed that the act was harmless, agreed with the racist behaviour or thought that it was somebody else's role to act.

## Conclusions

- This research indicated that all people can play an important role in efforts to combat racism and intolerance and that there is a strong potential to encourage more bystander action in workplaces and sports clubs, especially in response to less blatant forms of racism, such as racist slang.
- When discrimination and intolerance go unchallenged they are effectively condoned. Silent bystanders are an untapped resource and should have a greater role in preventing racial discrimination and supporting Victoria's cultural diversity.

## Recommendations

1. The survey identified that a substantial number of people were uncomfortable when they saw racial discrimination, but did not take bystander action. Bystander programs could build on this recognition of harmful behaviour and help individuals overcome the final barriers to action.
2. Programs that are designed to increase bystander action must build people's knowledge and skills, address the social conditions that can lead to race-based discrimination and intolerance, and also help establish a climate where there is strong, visible support for constructive bystander action.
3. These programs are most likely to be effective when organisations integrate them with a commitment to eliminating race-based discrimination and valuing diversity. The overwhelming public support for leadership on racism in workplaces and sports clubs suggests that there is considerable opportunity for bystander action in these settings.
4. Particular efforts are required to inspire young people and men to act.

\* Racist incidents include racist insults/abuse/sledging/stereotyping/jokes/recruitment. The term 'racist insults' was used for the social and work scenarios and 'racist sledging' was used for the sports scenario.

## Key concepts

### Race-based discrimination<sup>1</sup>

Practices and behaviours that result in unfair and avoidable inequalities between groups in society based on race, religion, culture or ethnicity. It covers both interpersonal discrimination (occurring between individuals) and systemic discrimination (discrimination as a result of practices, policies or cultures within organisations). 'Racism' is also used in this study as a term extending beyond practices and behaviours to cover beliefs and prejudices.

Discrimination may not always be obvious or intentional. As blatant forms of race-based discrimination have become increasingly socially unacceptable, negative attitudes and behaviours may be exhibited in more subtle ways, such as using racial stereotypes or excluding people from other cultural backgrounds. Discrimination may also occur in organisations because of practices developed over many years that inadvertently exclude or disadvantage people from certain cultural backgrounds.

### Supporting cultural diversity

Respecting and valuing a range of ways of living and being, within democratic and human rights frameworks, governed by the rule of law.

### Bystander action

Action taken to identify, speak out about or seek to engage others in responding to specific incidents of discrimination and intolerance. Bystander actions may also occur in response to behaviour, attitudes, practices or policies that contribute to race-based discrimination and intolerance. It might also include responding to practices in organisations that are discriminatory or may contribute to discrimination (e.g. policies that disadvantage a specific cultural group). This action does not focus on getting involved in potentially dangerous situations.

<sup>1</sup> The definition used in this publication is broader than the legal definition of discrimination.

# Most Victorians value their state's cultural diversity and believe that race-based discrimination is an unacceptable problem that requires more attention.

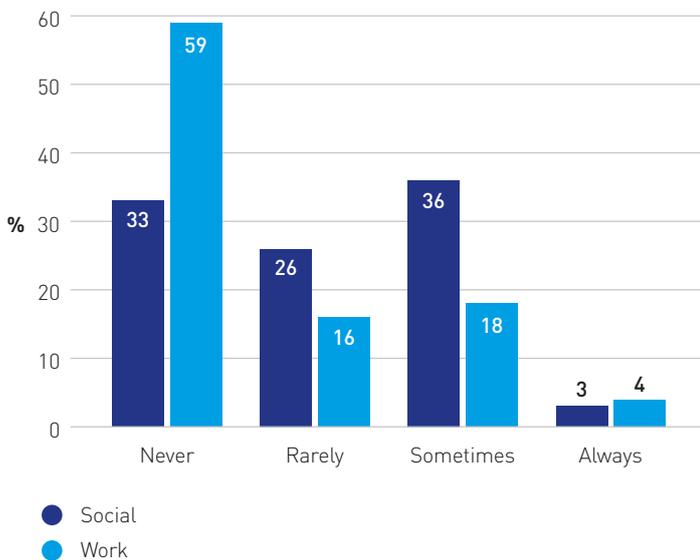
## Main findings

### Did Victorians believe that racial discrimination was ever acceptable?

More than eight in 10 of those surveyed (83%) believed that more should be done to minimise or address racial discrimination in Australia. The majority of respondents thought that almost all of the discriminatory behaviours and practices put to them across a range of social, workplace and sports club scenarios were never acceptable. Victorians disapproved of interpersonal racism (e.g. a racist insult or abuse, racist sledging), as well as racism occurring in organisational contexts (e.g. racist recruitment, job allocation or team selection). Their disapproval was strongest in scenarios where individuals were directly targeted (e.g. racist insults and abuse) compared with behaviours without a personal target or impact (e.g. racist jokes).

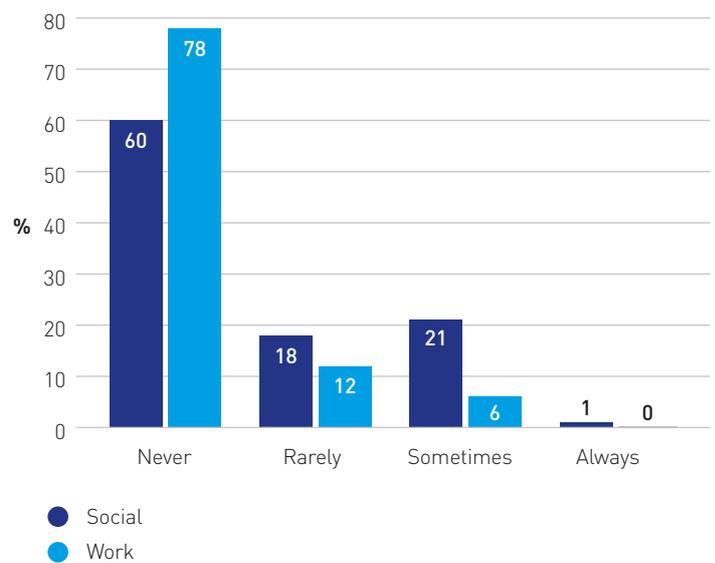
Their level of acceptance also shifted depending on the setting where the behaviour took place. For example, Figure 1 shows that almost twice as many people thought that racist jokes were never acceptable in the workplace compared with social situations<sup>2</sup>.

**Figure 1: The percentage of Victorians who believed that racist jokes were acceptable in social situations and workplaces<sup>3</sup>**



In Figure 2, the proportion of people who believed it was never acceptable to use racist slang or stereotypes grew from 60% in social situations to 78% in workplaces.

**Figure 2: The percentage of Victorians who believed that racist slang or stereotypes were acceptable in social situations and workplaces**

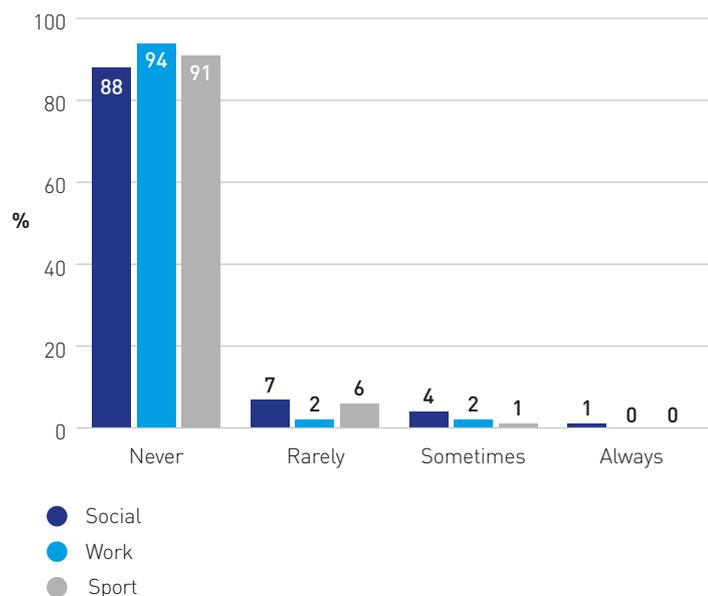


Victorians who believe that it is never acceptable to use racist insults against others socially, in the workplace or in sports clubs, may be encouraged to learn that approximately nine out of 10 of other Victorians support this stance (see Figure 3).

<sup>2</sup> The sports clubs scenarios were often phrased differently. Consequently, they are not always included in comparisons with social situations and workplaces.

<sup>3</sup> The percentages in some graphs may not add up to 100%, as percentages for the 'don't know/didn't answer' category are not shown. Weighted survey estimates were used in the analysis to ensure that some results were not skewed due to the over- or under-representation of some sub-groups.

**Figure 3: The percentage of Victorians who believed that racist insults and sledges were acceptable in social situations, workplaces and sports clubs<sup>4</sup>**



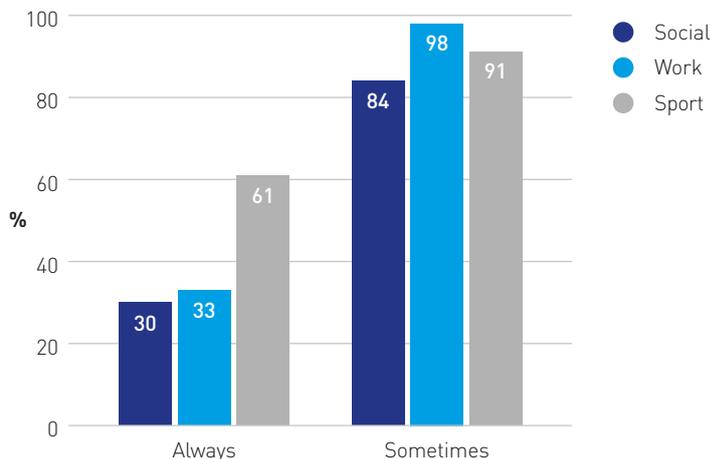
Overwhelming numbers of respondents also thought that it was never acceptable for workplace leaders to issue race-based pay (94%), socially exclude someone from a different race (85%), or use someone’s race as a criterion for job recruitment (79%) or job allocation (86%). In sports clubs, 93% of Victorians stated that they would never accept racist crowd behaviour or racist team selection.

“If someone on the sidelines makes a racist slur, a member from the club or an umpire will immediately go and speak to them. There are no racial slurs that ever get away.”  
 – research participant

### How many Victorians were willing to take bystander action?

The survey respondents were also asked whether they would be willing to take action in the scenarios. More than eight in 10 said that they would be willing to take some form of action in at least one of the scenarios, with more than nine in 10 willing to act in workplaces and sports clubs (see Figure 4). Approximately one-third of respondents said they would act in all of the social and workplace scenarios put to them and more than half were prepared to act in all of the sports club scenarios.

**Figure 4: The percentage of Victorians who said they would always or sometimes act in response to various racist scenarios<sup>5</sup>**



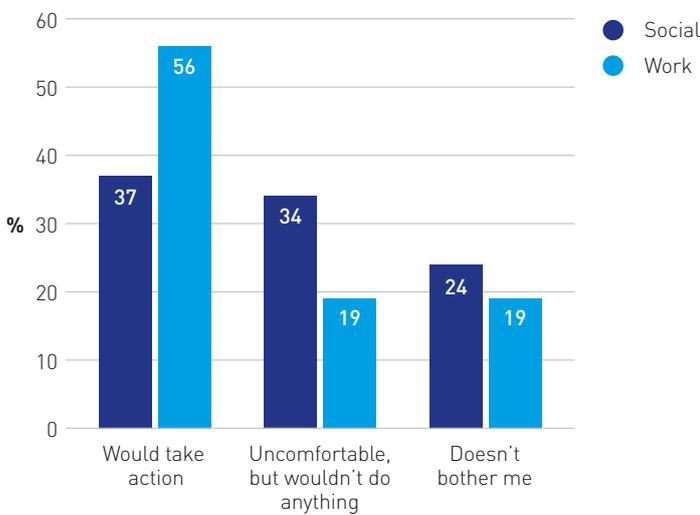
<sup>4</sup> The term ‘racist insults’ was used for the social and work scenarios and ‘racist sledging’ was used for the sports scenario.

<sup>5</sup> Note that ‘sometimes’ includes people who answered ‘always’.

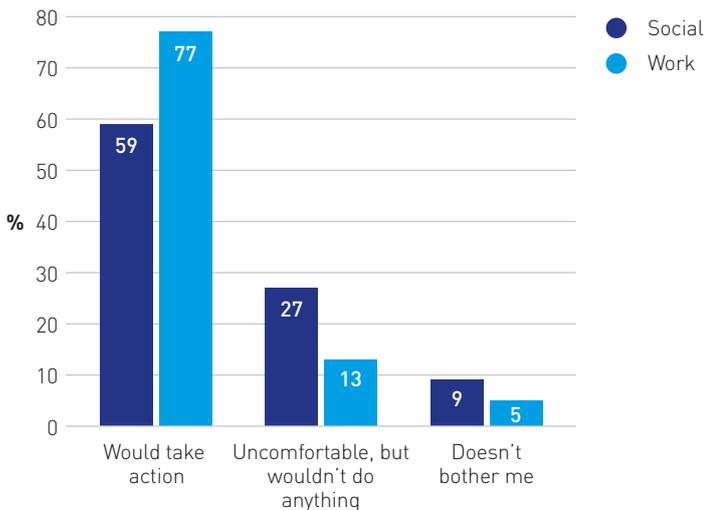
# All people can play an important role in efforts to combat racism and intolerance.

Figures 5 to 7 demonstrate that the proportion of people willing to act varies according to the type of behaviour that they object to. For example, people declared a stronger willingness to act against racist jokes and slang at work than in social situations (see Figures 5 & 6).

**Figure 5: The percentage of Victorians who said they would act when they heard a racist joke in social situations or workplaces**

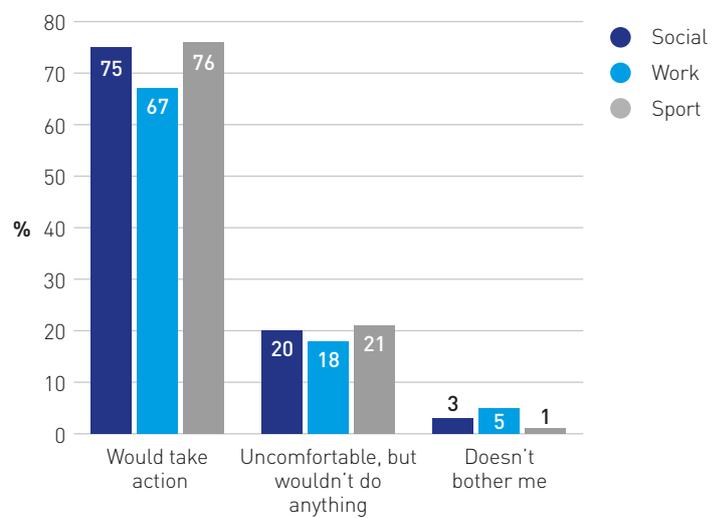


**Figure 6: The percentage of Victorians who said they would act when they heard racial slang in social situations or workplaces**



Higher proportions of the Victorians surveyed were prepared to take action against racist insults and sledging, as Figure 7 demonstrates. Three-quarters would act in social and sporting environments compared with two-thirds in the workplace.

**Figure 7: The percentage of Victorians who said they would act when they saw racist insults, abuse or sledging in social situations, workplaces or sports clubs**



The people whose answers lay in the middle column in Figures 5 to 7, "uncomfortable, but wouldn't do anything", carry the most potential for a new wave of anti-racist action. If this extra 23% of the population (ranging from 13% to 34% in different circumstances) could be supported to act, then an overwhelming majority of people would be available to stand up against racism in all of the situations listed.

"Some Sudanese people went past us and the little girl had the braids all sticking out. My mum, in complete innocence, who is age 85, said: 'That little picaninny is adorable'. I went bright red and said: 'Mum don't say that again'." – research participant

## What did Victorians do when they saw a racist incident?

Two hundred and five respondents (34% of the 601) reported witnessing race-based discrimination in a social situation, workplace or sports club during the 12 months prior to the survey. They were more likely to have seen race-based discrimination in a social situation (23%) than in a workplace (13%) or a community sports club (12%). Some witnessed incidents in more than one setting.

Almost half of the 205 people who saw a racist incident acted (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: The proportion of people who acted when they last witnessed racism**

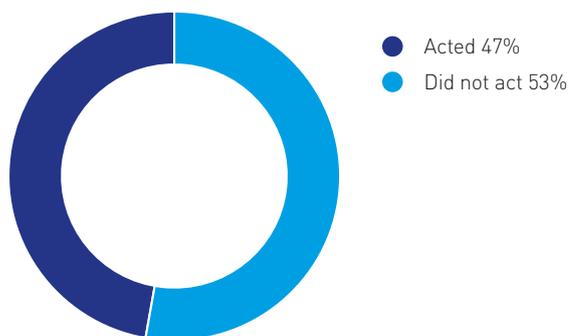
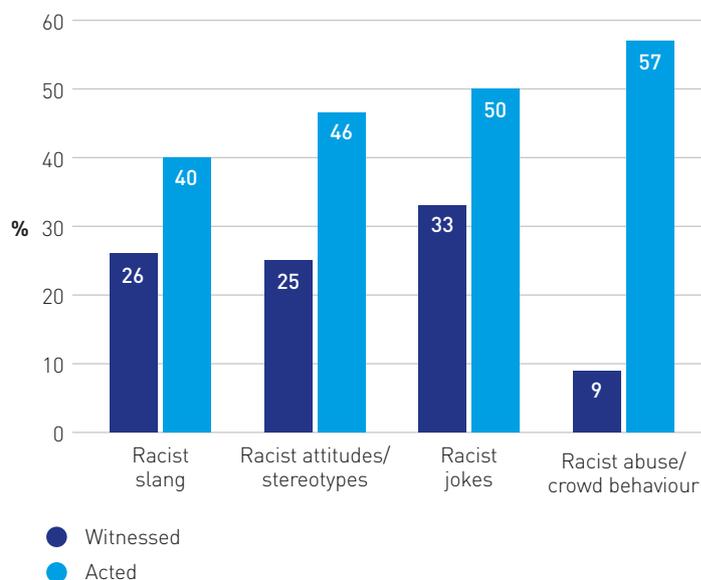


Figure 9 shows the proportion of those who acted depended on the types of incidents witnessed. For example, even though only 9% of the 205 respondents witnessed racist crowd behaviour, more than half of those who saw it acted to address it. In contrast, racist slang, attitudes/stereotypes and jokes were seen by more people, but a smaller proportion acted.

**Figure 9: Racist incidents that Victorians reported witnessing and acting on**



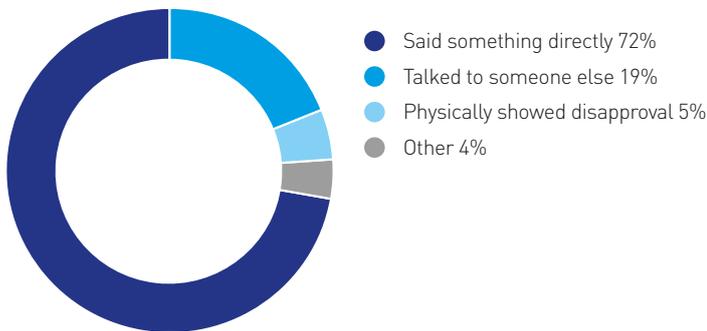
When the demographic details of the respondents were analysed, it was found that:

- women were more likely to take action than men (55% compared with 37%)
- people aged 35 to 54 were more likely to take action (55%) than those over 55 (50%) and people aged 18 to 34 (29%)
- university graduates were more likely to take action than people who did not have a university qualification (60% compared with 42%), and
- those born overseas (69% from an English-speaking background; 59% from a non-English speaking background) were more likely to take action than those born in Australia (41%).

# There is a strong potential to encourage more bystander action in workplaces and sports clubs.

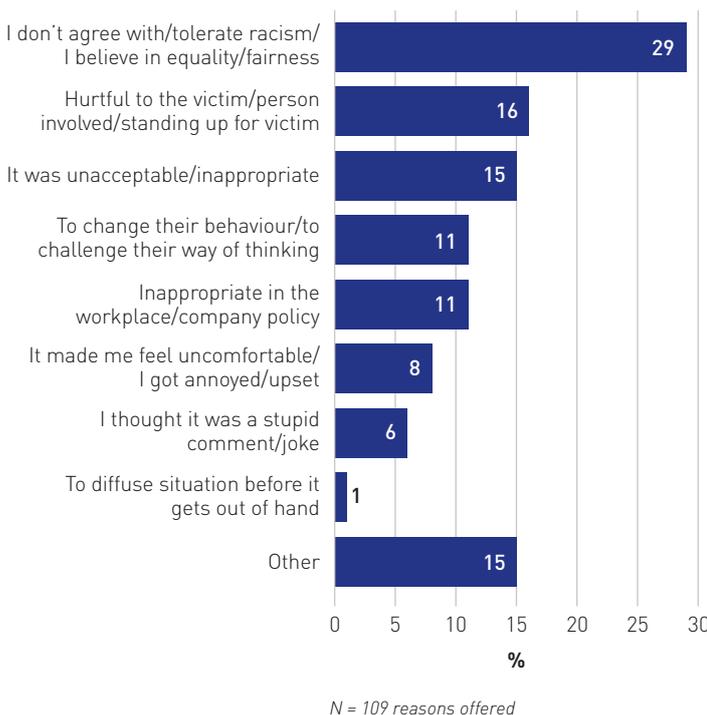
As Figure 10 demonstrates, more than seven out of 10 people who took a stand against the racist behaviour they saw expressed their disapproval directly to the perpetrator (e.g. told them to stop). Others spoke to someone else or took further action away from the situation or physically expressed their disapproval (e.g. walked away).

**Figure 10: The type of action taken by Victorians**



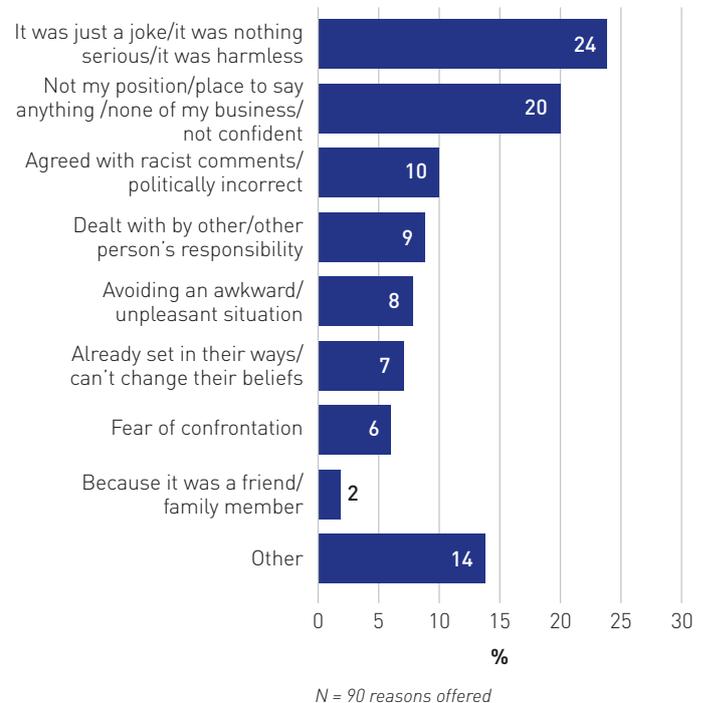
The reasons why people acted ranged from moral objections (e.g. "I believe in equality and fairness"; "The behaviour was inappropriate") to motives that related to the prevention of harm (e.g. "It was hurtful to the victim"; "I got upset") and education (e.g. "To change or challenge their behaviour"). Figure 11 shows that most acted to express their moral objections.

**Figure 11: Victorians' reasons for taking action**



The range of reasons offered by the people who did not act (see Figure 12) were more likely to be based on perceptions that the act would do no harm (e.g. "It was nothing serious"); that they had no role, authority or power to intervene (e.g. "It was not my position"; "I was not confident"; "It was a family member"); that the behaviours aligned with their morals (e.g. "I agreed with the racist statements"); that education would be futile ("They are already set in their ways") or that they feared the repercussions of the confrontation.

**Figure 12: Victorians' reasons for not taking action**



## What factors encourage a person to take bystander action?

The conditions that encourage people to take action in response to race-based discrimination varied among settings. However, the survey indicated that Victorians were most likely to take bystander action if they:

- were aware that their organisation had policies or practices in place to deal with racism
- perceived that their organisation had a culture where people of all races and ethnicities were made to feel welcome, treated with dignity and encouraged to take up important roles
- perceived that racist behaviour would not be acceptable in their organisation
- were confident that they would have the support of peers or colleagues, and
- were confident that the matter would be taken seriously in their organisation.

People were more likely to take action against race-based discrimination in junior sports clubs compared with adult sports clubs and were more inclined to take action in larger than smaller workplaces.

Respondents who worked in larger workplaces (200 or more employees) were more likely to feel that racist behaviours were unacceptable than those working in smaller workplaces (69% compared with 43%). They were also more aware of relevant workplace policies (70% compared with 41%). While over two-thirds were aware of formal workplace policies and practices, only a quarter reported knowing about formal policies and practices in sports clubs.

Individuals who were more likely to take action were those who:

- were confident in their own capacity to take action
- strongly agreed with the proposition that they can help to make a difference to ensure that people are treated with dignity and respect, are treated fairly, and are not discriminated against, and
- held attitudes that were concerned about race-based discrimination and supportive of diversity (compared with those whose attitudes suggested an intolerance of diversity).

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**“If I heard two guys talking outside a nightclub and there were groups of people around and they started being racist I’d just shut up, whereas at the cricket I would say something.”**  
– *research participant*

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These findings were consistent with international research (Nelson et al. 2010) that identified common factors that supported anti-racist bystander action. At an individual level, people were more likely to be active bystanders if they:

- knew what constituted race-based discrimination
- were aware of the harm caused by race-based discrimination
- felt a responsibility to intervene, and
- felt confident in their ability to intervene.

International research has also found that active bystanders were more likely to be found in organisations and communities that were led by people who recognised race-based discrimination, supported strong sanctions against racist practices and provided opportunities for positive inter-group interaction.

## Victorians' views on the roles and responsibilities of workplaces and sports clubs

An overwhelming number of respondents believed that workplaces and sports clubs should play a strong leadership role in supporting bystander interventions through education and the promotion of racial respect and tolerance (see Figure 13).

“I work for a large corporation. It fosters a positive environment. We have values and behaviours and a policy so if anything does come up in regards to discrimination and harassment, we’ve got techniques to overcome it.” – research participant

Figure 13: The percentage of Victorians who believed that workplaces and sports clubs should play a leadership role on racism

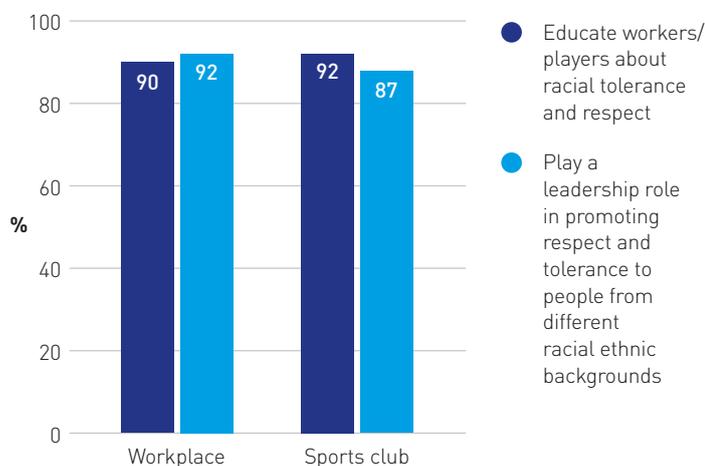


Figure 14 shows that almost 100% of the Victorians surveyed agreed with the view that workplaces have a role in treating employees from all racial backgrounds fairly and taking action when a racist incident occurs. They also agreed that sports clubs should make an effort to welcome people from all races into their club and stop players and supporters from racially abusing others (see Figure 15).

Figure 14: The percentage of Victorians who believed that leaders of workplaces have responsibilities to create safe environments for people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds

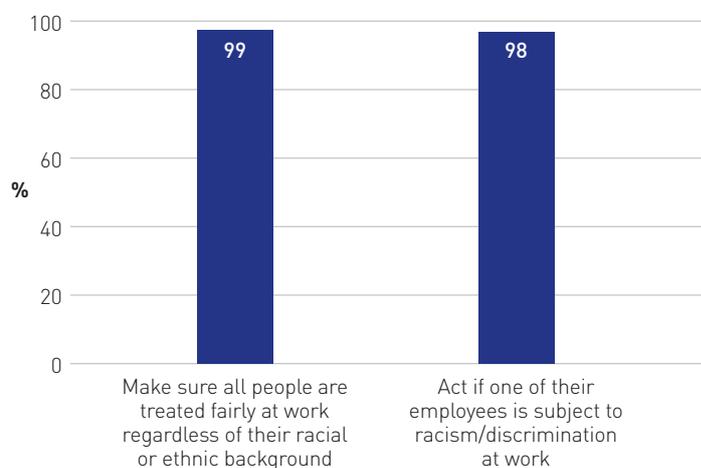
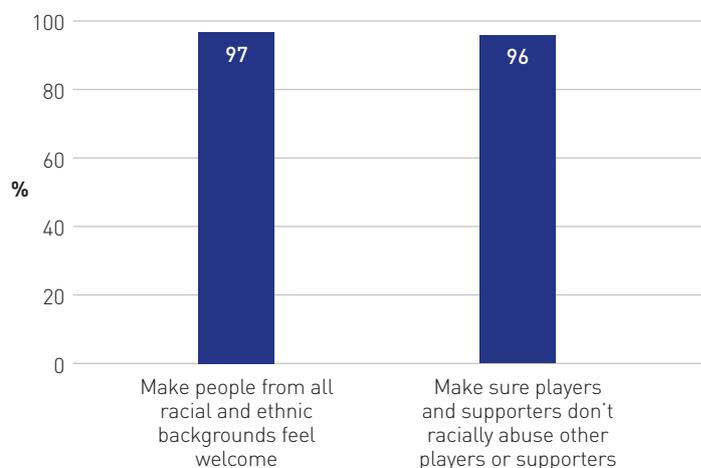


Figure 15: The percentage of Victorians who believed that leaders of sports clubs have responsibilities to create safe environments for people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds



## Conclusions

This research affirmed that the majority of Victorians recognised and were concerned about racism and intolerance and expressed overwhelming support for more to be done to address the problem, especially by leaders of workplaces and community-based sports clubs.

Victoria has strong government policies to support diversity and respond to racism, and many organisations have taken a proactive stand in this regard. A notable example is the Australian Football League, which has developed and enforced policies to combat racial and religious intolerance and promotes the value of cultural diversity through its multicultural program.

Some behaviours and practices may not be unlawful, although they can contribute to a climate where racism is accepted (e.g. perpetuation of racial stereotypes or racist joke-telling). This research indicated that all people can play an important role in efforts to combat racism and intolerance and that there is strong potential to encourage more bystander action in workplaces and sports clubs, particularly in response to less blatant forms of racism, such as racist slang.

When discrimination and intolerance go unchallenged they are effectively condoned. Silent bystanders are an untapped resource and should have a greater role in preventing racial discrimination and supporting Victoria's cultural diversity. Action is needed to address the social conditions that can lead to race-based discrimination and intolerance if we are to reduce the associated health problems. This involves strengthening community and organisational environments that are fair and respectful to people of all cultural backgrounds, and supporting bystanders to act with confidence.

## Recommendations

1. The survey identified that a substantial number of people were uncomfortable when they saw racial discrimination, but did not take bystander action. Bystander programs could help individuals recognise harmful behaviour and overcome barriers to action.
2. Programs that are designed to increase bystander action must build people's knowledge and skills, address the social conditions that can lead to race-based discrimination and intolerance, and also help establish a climate where there is strong, visible support for constructive bystander action.
3. These programs are most likely to be effective when organisations integrate them with a commitment to eliminating race-based discrimination and valuing cultural diversity. It would be more difficult to establish the next wave of bystander programs in social situations because they do not have established leaders or a capacity for supporting bystander action with resources such as policies or sanctions. The overwhelming public support for leadership on racism in workplaces and sports clubs suggests that momentum for increased bystander action would be best built in these organisations first.
4. Particular efforts are required to inspire young people and men to act.

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This publication is a summary of the VicHealth research report *Choosing to act: Bystander action to prevent race-based discrimination and support cultural diversity in the Victorian community* by Zachary Russell, Darren Pennay, Kim Webster and Yin Paradies.

For more information about this study and to view the research and technical reports, visit the VicHealth website: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander-discrimination](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/bystander-discrimination)

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The Social Research Centre and The University of Melbourne