

New UN report reveals the extent of systemic racism faced by people of African descent in Australia

October 6 2023, by Kathleen Openshaw



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A special UN working group this week tabled its first-ever [report](#) on the experiences of people of African descent in Australia to the [United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva](#).

The report documents what people of African descent living in Australia already know: Australia has a racism problem.

In fact, the UN's [Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent](#) said in a press release at the end of their visit that people of African descent in Australia are living "[under siege of racism](#)."

The new report says people of African descent experience racism in many key areas of life, including health, education and employment. It also highlighted the use of racialized hate speech in political rhetoric, [racial profiling](#) in law enforcement, and the highly racialized nature of Australia's immigration policies. In one section, the report said, "Some refugees of African descent expressed surprise that settlement was less of a protection tool, and more of a pathway to prison for their communities, stating, 'in Africa, we knew what was killing us.'"

What the working group found

At the invitation of the Australian government, the working group visited Australia for the first time in December last year.

The group's task was to evaluate the human rights situation of people of African descent living in Australia. It collected information on racism, [racial discrimination](#), xenophobia and intolerance during visits to Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. It also met with various arms of government (including senior officials of the federal government, the Australian Border Force and Australian Federal Police), non-government stakeholders, academics and human rights defenders.

The working group, supported by the [African Australian Advocacy Center](#), also facilitated public consultations across Australia where it heard from individuals and community leaders. And it received formal written submissions during and after the visit.

In its report, the UN working group called attention to how the legacies of British colonization and the White Australia policy still continue to have harmful impacts on Black people of African descent living in contemporary Australia.

In reference to a [2007 assertion](#) by then-Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews that African refugees fail to integrate, the report noted:

"This unsupported statement was never retracted nor repaired, even by subsequent governments. It lives on in the minds of people of African descent who see themselves as contributors to Australia and as African-Australian."

The report also observed the politicized association of youth of African descent with "African gangs" and criminality. It revealed their experiences of being racially profiled and surveilled by law enforcement.

Across Australia, [young people](#) also reported experiencing racism and cultural denial at university. Children reported similar experiences at school, where they are not presented with positive images of themselves. In fact, many reported being ostracized, subjected to racial slurs and bullied by both classmates and teachers. Their complaints often go unaddressed.

One student told the working group about an incident at school when a football labeled with racial and misogynistic slurs was thrown at her and other Black students in math class. She said, "Essentially, we have all seen the slow response. We have seen the staff take little to no relevant action—believe it or not, sometimes they do not play by the rules. We have felt lost. Emotionally bruised."

The working group noted children of African descent often feel there are "no safe spaces" for them to grow up Black in Australian society.

Scholars [Virginia Mapedzahama and Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo](#) have previously written about the burden experienced by people of African descent with black skin living in Australia.

Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo write that the main issue is not people's dark skin, but rather how it marks them as inferior, problematic and not belonging in a predominantly white space.

This can result in the diversity of Black Africans being flattened and their presence in Australia being seen in negative terms. Australian leaders have a particular responsibility not to contribute to such deficit-based portrayals of people of African descent.

Charting a path forward

The working group's report makes for difficult reading.

It shows the many compounding ways racism hinders the ability of people of African descents to fully participate in Australian society.

It also draws attention to the fact many felt their experiences of racism had been denied, minimized or ignored.

The report provides 27 recommendations to help guide the Australian government's future actions to address the working group's concerns. These include:

- people of African descent should be meaningfully included in all decisions that impact their lives
- narratives that feed a "culture of denial" of anti-Black racism should be confronted
- and that the same care and commitment should be devoted to addressing systemic racism in Australian institutions that the

government demonstrated in implementing the White Australia policy historically.

Although Australia has much to do, the UN report acknowledges the work the government has already done to guarantee the human rights of people of African descent. This includes the 2012 establishment of the [Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights](#) and the work of the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#).

The report also welcomed the federal government's willingness to engage in the process and take action.

Australia now has the opportunity to take on board the [report's](#) recommendations. Doing so will bring us closer to empowering people of African [descent](#) to contribute to—and benefit more fully from—Australia's prosperity.

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