

Spectator racism is still rife in Australia's major football codes—new research shows it may even be getting worse

May 27 2024, by Keith Parry, Connor MacDonald, Daryl Adair and Jamie Cleland

How recently had spectators witnessed racist behaviour

Percentage of spectators who have witnessed racism, not all spectators

A-League Men NRL AFL

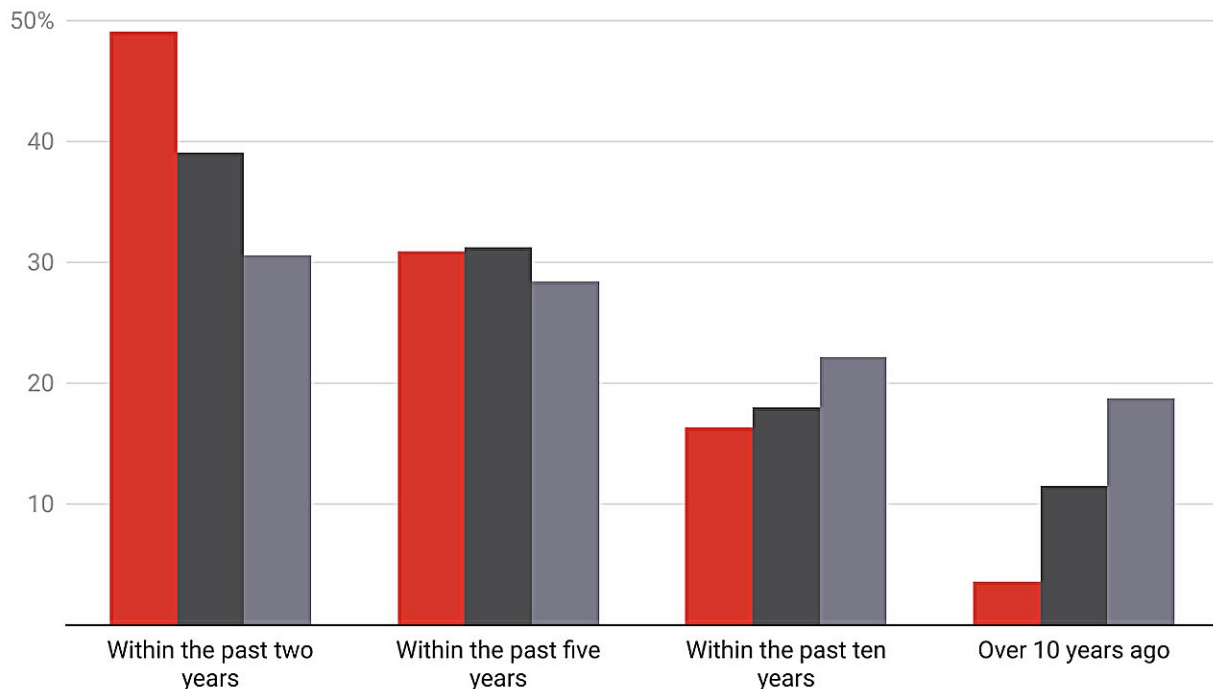


Chart: The Conversation • Source: Cleland, J., Adair, D., Parry, K., & MacDonald, C. (2024) • Created with Datawrapper

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The annual Indigenous rounds in [the Australian Football League \(AFL\)](#) and [National Rugby League \(NRL\)](#) celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

These events highlight the contributions of Indigenous players and aim to promote cultural awareness and foster reconciliation.

Some non-Indigenous sports fans, however, do not appreciate these initiatives. Some, in fact, continue to hurl bigoted abuse at players.

While many people would assume spectator racism is becoming rarer, [our new study](#) suggests the opposite is true among Australia's major male-dominated sporting codes.

Spectator racism may be getting worse

Some Australian football spectators use the stadium to [vent hostile attitudes](#) toward people of color, whether Indigenous, Pacific Islander, African or Asian.

This realization prompted us to conduct the first large-scale study of spectator racism in the three major men's leagues.

In 2021, we surveyed 2,047 participants from across the AFL, NRL and A-League Men, focusing on those who self-identified as white. We wanted to gather insights on racism as they witnessed and understood it while attending matches.

We found sobering evidence of the persistence of racism within these spectator communities, despite efforts by sports to combat it: 50% of AFL fans, 36% of NRL spectators and 27% of A-League Men fans had witnessed racist behavior during their lifetimes.

We asked respondents when they had witnessed racism and, as the table below shows, fans of all codes reported they had seen it at greater levels in the past two years compared to periods before this time.

This finding suggests fan racism is getting worse in all three sports and in the A-League Men, this reported racism is growing at the fastest rate of the three codes.

Acknowledging the problem

Spectator racism has long been an issue in Australian men's sports.

National sport governing bodies acknowledge there is a problem, but have for many years struggled to effectively combat it, either failing to respond resolutely or [doing so too slowly](#).

In 2021, the Australian Human Rights Commission provided sports with [guidelines for addressing spectator racism](#), and since then penalties for transgressions have become more consistent.

However, [poor behavior](#) from some fans has hardly disappeared.

Our new research, [published in the International Review for the Sociology of Sport](#), found spectator racism continues to be present in three major Australian men's leagues: the AFL, NRL and A-League Men.

The impact on athletes

The impact of fan racism is brutal for players.

In recent years, Indigenous footballers Adam Goodes and [Latrell](#)

[Mitchell and Cody Walker](#) have borne the brunt of vitriol like this.

By comparison, the A-League Men has featured few Indigenous players, but racism towards athletes from [migrant backgrounds](#) has certainly been obvious, along with [neo-Nazi expressions](#) of white supremacy.

Fan explanations for racism

Many survey respondents contended that [spectator](#) racism is learned behavior, passed down through families or like-minded fans. In that sense, racism is normalized, especially in public places like sports stadiums where barrackers may feel anonymous.

Most of those surveyed strongly criticized [racial prejudice](#), acknowledging Australia's history of racism and ongoing examples of bigotry at sport events, with some pointing to even worse behavior among fans online via [social media](#).

Some fans who opposed racism explained it as a moral failing of individuals, whom they perceived to be "bad apples." But by focusing solely on individuals, they overlooked wider social influences.

Racism is acquired behavior, not just a personal choice, and it arises [via institutions such as sport](#) and social practices like barracking at the footy.

Some respondents from our study were comfortable with "casual bigotry" whereby racist comments made in the "heat of the moment" are deemed "banter." They seemed unaware this permissive attitude allows racist discourses to remain alive.

A minority of respondents were unfazed by any of this, freely admitting their own racist views, declaring a belief that sports, and society, are best served by white power.

Sport's response to racism

In the football codes, there is now better awareness of what constitutes racist barracking at games. Greater media coverage of racist incidents, especially via its capture on digital devices, has improved the chance of offenders being exposed, along with potential consequences.

Just as importantly, the three football leagues have improved their detection measures, such as by anonymous reporting hotlines within stadiums. Indeed, our study showed most fans are aware of mechanisms to report racist (or other discriminatory) behavior.

Yet, despite a significant proportion of our [survey respondents](#) indicating they had observed inappropriate crowd conduct, just 3% of AFL fans, 2% of NRL fans, and 1% of A-League Men supporters reported using the hotlines.

So, there is a gap between some white fans witnessing and reporting racist incidents.

Therefore, while sports leagues have introduced penalties for racism, the effectiveness of these measures is limited by their reliance on witness responses and the complexity of observers providing proof.

What more can be done?

In the context of anti-racism and Australian society, the fight against bigotry must not be left to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Prime responsibility lies with white Australians who, after all, are generally privileged to not be objects of racial bigotry. Therefore, white

sports fans who reject the ideology of white supremacy, like racist barracking at a game, have the opportunity to demonstrate a sense of solidarity with those who have been the subject of abuse.

It is often said education can alter racist attitudes. After all, if racism can be learned, surely it can be [unlearned](#).

That process is certainly worth pursuing but in the short term, the imposition of consequences for inappropriate fan conduct is vital.

The football codes are finally getting serious about penalties, with lengthy or even [life-time bans](#).

What is urgently needed, though, is a greater commitment by fans, especially white fans, to report racism when they observe it. Otherwise they're giving a free kick to bigots.

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