

# **PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO RACISM, HATE AND VIOLENCE DIRECTED AT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE**

Submission | May 2026

## **Acknowledgment**

SNAICC acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, waters and communities. SNAICC's head office is located on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, and SNAICC operates nationally.

SNAICC acknowledges Traditional Owners of all lands and waters across this continent and pays respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge and respect their continued connection to Country, care for community and practice of culture for generations uncounted.

## **About SNAICC**

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We work for the fulfilment of the rights of our children, to ensure their safety, development, and wellbeing. We are a community-controlled peak leading systemic and structural reform to protect and advance the rights, safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and their families and communities.

At the heart of SNAICC's work are the principles of community control and self-determination. We advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the design, governance and delivery of policies, systems and services that affect children and families, recognising this as essential to achieving sustained and meaningful outcomes.

SNAICC has a diverse national membership made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, services and individuals working across the child and family wellbeing and early childhood sectors. This includes organisations delivering early childhood education and care, child and family services, family support and reunification services, out-of-home care and kinship care, and services supporting children and young people at risk. As a national peak body, SNAICC works closely with its members, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities, and as a member of the Coalition of Peaks, to ensure that lived experience, cultural knowledge and community priorities are central to our advocacy, submissions and recommendations.

SNAICC works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, governments and non-Indigenous services to improve policy, service design and accountability, and to support culturally-led, evidence-informed approaches that deliver meaningful and lasting outcomes for children and young people.

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## Executive Summary

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Racism, Hate and Violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. This submission focuses on how racism operates structurally and impacts cumulatively in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families, and how public discourse, political narratives and government systems contribute to ongoing harm. It identifies clear pathways to addressing this racism, including implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement), investment in Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), building cultural competency in mainstream organisations, and truth-telling and accountability.

This submission highlights how racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is rooted in colonisation and reinforced through government systems and funding mechanisms. It outlines how political and media narratives have escalated and normalised racism and legitimised punitive responses that disproportionately impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Over-representation in systems such as child protection and youth justice is the result of structural racism embedded in attitudes, policy design, funding priorities, and decision-making. Structural racism results in continued and repeated government intervention in the lives of children, families and communities that perpetuates cycles of trauma, dispossession, and marginalisation.

The continuing, and in many instances worsening, gaps in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children demonstrate the failures of mainstream systems and services. A lack of cultural safety and competency in non-Indigenous service settings limits the accessibility of high-quality supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and negatively impacts health, development, and wellbeing outcomes. While improving cultural safety in non-Indigenous services and systems is essential, this submission clearly highlights that ACCOs provide the most effective and culturally safe responses to addressing the impacts of racism and need to be funded appropriately to do so.

SNAICC emphasises that addressing racism, hate and violence requires major transformational reform, including full and genuine implementation of the National Agreement, alongside investment in ACCOs, shared decision-making, truth-telling, and accountability for racism across government systems and public discourse. These actions are essential to creating safe, supportive environments in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can grow up strong connected to culture, community and Country and able to exercise their right to self-determination.

## Recommendations

### **1. Implement the National Anti-Racism Framework by establishing a formal truth-telling mechanism and embedding truth-telling in national initiatives and education**

The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities should:

- a. Establish a formal mechanism to lead a nationally coordinated approach to truth-telling, as was initially proposed as part of the now-lapsed *Truth and Justice Commission Bill 2024*.
- b. Ensure truth-telling initiatives at the national level reinforce the Priority Reforms in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Anti-Racism Framework Recommendations 1, 3 & 5); and
- c. Embed truth-telling through education reform and direct support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led initiatives, including:
  - i. curriculum reform to embed age-appropriate, culturally safe teaching about colonisation, the Stolen Generations, and ongoing systemic racism, led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
  - ii. resourcing and funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led truth-telling initiatives as nationally recognised mechanisms for anti-racism, healing and prevention (National Anti-Racism Framework Recommendations 48, 50).

### **2. Ensure continued bipartisan commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap including implementing recommendations from the Productivity Commission Review and the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review**

All Australian governments should continue bipartisan commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap through:

- a. Acting on the findings and recommendations of the Productivity Commission Review and the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review, with a focus on addressing identified implementation failures;
- b. Embedding the Priority Reforms into agency policy, legislation, funding agreements and service delivery frameworks to ensure implementation is not contingent on political cycles;
- c. Strengthening accountability of central agencies and portfolio departments for progress against Priority Reforms, including transparent public reporting; and
- d. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander shared decision-making and leadership across implementation.

### **3. Establish strengths-based and evidence-informed standards for political and media discourse**

The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, should recognise and address the relationship between political and media framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and the services that support them, and the racism, harassment and online abuse experienced by these groups, by:

- a. Committing to strengths-based, evidence-informed public communication about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, including in election periods and public policy debates;
- b. Supporting strengthened media regulation and standards to prevent racialised reporting, misinformation and harmful narratives about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, informed by the National Anti-Racism Framework (Recommendations 46, 47 and 49); and
- c. Examining the role of social media in driving and amplifying racism and investigating mechanisms to make platforms and profiles accountable for harmful racist commentary.

### **4. Embed shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people into the implementation and review of reforms that affect them**

The Australian Government, with state and territory governments, should establish and resource structured mechanisms for shared-decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, including in any reforms arising from this Inquiry, ensuring that:

- a. Engagement specifically includes children and young people experiencing youth justice, out-of-home care, and living in remote and regional communities;
- b. Engagement and co-design meet established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led participation frameworks, with non-compliant processes treated as non-participation and redesigned; and
- c. Resourcing is comprised of dedicated and long-term funding that is not contingent on short-term project cycles, and should be directed to ACCOs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led youth organisations, and the SNAICC Youth Voice.

### **5. Recognise systemic racism as a key driver of child protection and youth justice outcomes and strengthen government accountability to address this through the National Agreement**

The Australian Government should explicitly recognise systemic and institutional racism within government systems as a key driver of the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in child protection and youth justice systems, and embed this recognition into core government functions and decision-making through:

- a. Strengthening accountability for how National Agreement outcomes related to children, families and justice are defined, measured and acted upon, including by requiring targets, measures and performance frameworks to:
  - i. explicitly recognise institutional racism and system design as drivers of outcomes; and
  - ii. demonstrate how policy, funding and practice reforms are addressing those drivers, rather than relying solely on outcome-based reporting; and
- b. Requiring National Agreement outcomes related to children, families and justice to directly inform government priorities and decision-making, including Ministerial leadership, National Cabinet and intergovernmental processes, and public reporting, so that these outcomes guide policy and funding decisions from the outset, rather than being treated as secondary or retrospective reporting requirements.

**6. Invest in trauma-informed and culturally responsive anti-racism training programs for services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families**

The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, should invest in and expand trauma-informed and culturally responsive anti-racism training across the child and family support, child protection, youth justice and early childhood education and care workforces by:

- a. Providing sustained funding to scale nationally delivered programs such as SNAICC's Waterways Training Package that supports government and non-government service delivery organisations and ACCOs to strengthen culturally safe, trauma-informed and anti-racist practice;
- b. Embedding participation in accredited cultural safety and trauma-informed training as a core requirement for organisations delivering child protection, family support, youth justice and early childhood education and care services, through funding agreements, commissioning frameworks and accreditation standards;
- c. Extending investment in workforce development beyond frontline staff to leadership, governance and systems-level roles, to support sustained organisational change rather than one-off training; and
- d. Funding independent evaluation of training initiatives, including programs such as Waterways, to assess impact on workforce capability, organisational practice and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and to inform continuous improvement.

## **7. Review, strengthen and consistently apply cultural safety and anti-racism standards in regulatory and quality requirements across child and family services**

The Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments and regulatory authorities, should strengthen cultural safety and anti-racism across services that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families by:

- a. Reviewing and strengthening the [National Quality Framework](#) and associated standards to explicitly embed cultural safety, anti-racism and accountability for addressing systemic racism across early childhood education and care;
- b. Ensuring consistent application of quality standards by state and territory regulatory authorities, including through assessment, monitoring and continuous improvement processes;
- c. Aligning quality and regulatory frameworks across service sectors to promote a consistent, whole-of-system approach to cultural safety and anti-racism in services that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families; and
- d. Undertaking ongoing review of quality frameworks in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to ensure standards remain effective in addressing racism and supporting culturally safe practice over time.

## **8. Implement long-term, sustainable funding models that strengthen self-determination and the ACCO sector**

State and territory governments, supported by the Australian Government for national coordination, implement long-term, sustainable funding models that increase the proportion of funding directed to ACCOs for culturally safe supports for children, families and communities, by:

- a. Implementing the [National Child and Family Investment Strategy](#) and, as part of this commitment, developing an implementation plan to shift services and funding to the ACCO sector delivering child and family services;
- b. Implementing tailored ACCO funding models developed by SNAICC in early childhood education and care and child and family support services, with a focus on the core funding principles;
- c. Ensuring proportional funding to ACCOs, consistent with [Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families](#) recommendations, including a target of 30–40 per cent of child and family support funding directed to ACCOs;
- d. Requiring regular, transparent public reporting by jurisdictions on progress toward proportional funding targets for ACCOs across child and family support and aligned services such as youth justice; and
- e. The Australian Government leading a coordinated national approach to ACCO funding reform using intergovernmental agreements, funding frameworks and National



Agreement architecture to support consistency, accountability and system-wide transition.

## **Embed truth-telling and transformation to deliver on the National Agreement**

### **The National Agreement provides a clear framework to address structural racism**

The National Agreement provides the established framework for governments to address structural racism, the ongoing impacts of colonisation, and the disproportionate harms experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The National Agreement is a landmark document which brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments in a commitment to close the gap in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians. The ‘gap’ is a result of racism and colonisation, and closing it requires an honest and genuine dismantling of the colonial systems and frameworks that have been imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The National Agreement outlines 17 socio-economic outcomes that aim to close this gap and four Priority Reforms which focus on changing the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must share in decision-making that affects them and design policy solutions for their communities.

### **Governments are failing to deliver on the National Agreement**

Reviews of the National Agreement have clearly demonstrated that while its architecture and principles are sound, governments are lagging on implementation and failing to understand the urgency and scale of transformation required to close the gap (Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, 2025b; Productivity Commission, 2024). These reviews have highlighted that structural racism persists inside government systems, policy frameworks and services, and is not consistently identified, measured or dismantled. These shortcomings are reflected in the worsening of several National Agreement targets. As a whole, the National Agreement is not on track to be implemented in its timeframe, representing a failure of action and accountability for all Australian governments. Part of addressing this failure is a commitment to genuine transparency and truth-telling across government and public spheres.

### **Truth-telling is key to dismantling structural racism**

Self-determination is critical to designing and implementing effective policies that achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and truth-telling is a key enabler of self-determination (SNAICC, 2024b). For too long, governments have fallen well short of their commitments under the National Agreement, deciding what works and what does not for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and failing to deliver meaningful and tangible positive change. Truth-telling engages honestly with the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and colonisation, acknowledging all aspects of Australia’s colonial history and

the realities of racism and oppression that continue in the present. It involves bringing the lived experiences and testimonies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those historically silenced, into public, institutional and policy decision-making. Truth-telling is not a symbolic exercise or a single event, but an ongoing and often confronting process that challenges dominant narratives, enables accountability for past and present harms, and creates a shared understanding necessary for meaningful change. Structural and systemic racism in Australia cannot be addressed without full truth-telling.

Racism in contemporary Australia cannot be separated from the historical realities of colonisation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is the world's longest continuous culture, having existed for more than 60,000 years. Invasion was and continues to be a significant threat to this culture, with successive government policies enabling the dispossession and disenfranchisement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Colonisation relied on the erroneous claim of *Terra Nullius* as legal justification for the taking of land, denied recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Constitution until 1967, and deployed policies that separated families, stole wages, and deprived Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of opportunities to participate as equal citizens (SNAICC, 2024b). While the actively racist and genocidal policies are no longer in place, their legacy continues and creates ongoing and distinct experiences of racism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This racism cannot be remedied if it is not fully acknowledged.

Dominant narratives in Australian education systems, government policy and language, and media continue to minimise or obscure the roots of racism and systemic inequality. This makes it harder for the general public and decision-makers alike to recognise how structures are continuing to harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Without a proper understanding about this violent history and its ongoing impacts people will be less likely to understand the need for or support policies that are designed to address inequalities (Frameworks Institute, 2026). Settings like early learning services and schools play a critical role in shaping attitudes and supporting both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children to be well-informed and establish a shared understanding of their identities and belonging. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, truth-telling in these spaces supports healing and strength in their identity, culture and community. Truth-telling in non-Indigenous systems especially signals that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are recognised, welcomed and valued, improving cultural safety and trust in services.

The Australian Government must demonstrate its commitment to implementing the National Agreement and to truth-telling through a formal mechanism that is shielded from political cycles and upheaval. While there has been some progress towards truth-telling, it has been largely inconsistent. The Commonwealth's *Truth and Justice Commission Bill 2024* lapsed in 2025 with the dissolution of the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (Parliament of Australia, n.d.), leaving a gap in a national coordinated approach to truth-telling. SNAICC (2024b) strongly supported the Bill's establishment of a commission into historic and ongoing discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which would have been

an essential mechanism for truth-telling and accountability. The lapsing of this Bill and the lack of progress to establish a Commission demonstrate a failure on the part of government to actively and ambitiously pursue critical reforms, regressing to ‘status quo’ approaches that perpetuate harm and inequality. SNAICC recommends that the establishment of a formal mechanism be an immediate and explicit priority resulting from this Inquiry as a foundation for healing and reconciliation.

**Recommendation 1:** Implement the National Anti-Racism Framework by establishing a formal truth-telling mechanism and embedding truth-telling in national initiatives and education.

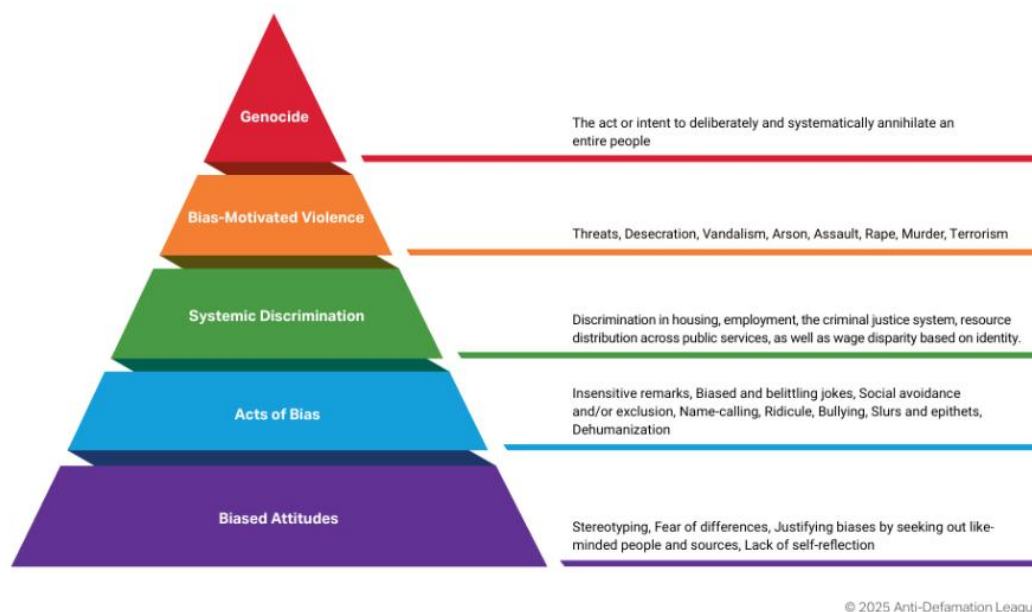
**Recommendation 2:** Ensure continued bipartisan commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap including implementing recommendations from the Productivity Commission Review and the Independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Review.

## **Racism is shaped and enabled by political, social, and media environments**

Racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not occur in a vacuum. Individual incidents of extremism and violence such as the attack on Camp Sovereignty in Naarm/Melbourne in September 2025, and the alleged terrorist attack at the Invasion Day protest in Boorloo/Perth in January 2026, occur within a broader social environment in which racism is normalised, legitimised and amplified. Political rhetoric and media narratives often reflect or define what is publicly acceptable. When they reinforce stereotypes and fear-based framing about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, they legitimise discrimination and create conditions in which violence and extremism are more likely to occur.

The Anti-Defamation League’s Pyramid of Hate (Figure 1) provides a framework for understanding how racism escalates. It outlines how racism spans from biased attitudes and everyday behaviours to discrimination, violence and terrorism. The model demonstrates that overt acts of violence and extremism are not isolated or spontaneous events but are enabled by more common and socially tolerated forms of bias that are reinforced through public discourse, political narratives and institutional practice.

**Figure 1: The Pyramid of Hate (Anti-Defamation League)**



The pyramid also highlights how racism can go unidentified or be masked as something else. A member of the SNAICC Youth Voice shared that racism directed at young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is frequently filtered through different framing that obscures the racialised dynamic underneath. They described racism underpinning assumptions about age, professionalism or capability that enable racism to be deflected, reframed, or denied at the point where a young person might otherwise challenge it. This is important for this Inquiry to consider, as official complaints mechanisms, workplace processes and media categorisations typically only record what is named as racism, and much of it never is. The *Mayi Kuwaya Study*, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led cohort study of more than 8,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, found that racism is under-reported and national data does not capture systemic and structural racism (Thurber et al., 2023).

Racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people clearly cannot be understood without confronting colonisation as an ongoing system of power, as opposed to a 'historical event'. From the first acts of genocide and dispossession, institutional and systemic racism were deliberately embedded through policies designed to control Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to undermine sovereignty and self-determination, to sever connections to culture, community and Country, and to enforce assimilation. These colonial foundations continue to inform contemporary legal, policy and institutional frameworks, reproducing exclusion and inequality and reinforcing racism.

### **‘Tough on crime’ narratives normalise harsh responses**

Political rhetoric plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and in setting the parameters for social policy. So-called 'tough on crime' rhetoric

and policy frequently rely on racist narratives that frame Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in particular as a public safety risk, rather than as children experiencing systemic disadvantage and structural inequity and in need of care and support. This framing reinforces harmful stereotypes, fuels moral panic, and legitimises punitive policy responses that are discursively framed as neutral or necessary 'law and order' measures despite clear evidence that incarceration does not reduce crime or make communities safer.

Election cycles increasingly intensify these dynamics, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people too often used as 'political footballs' in debates where they have little or no voice. Deficit-based language and images are amplified through media reporting and political commentary, normalising harsh government responses that focus on policing, detention and control rather than investment in community-led supports that are proven to be more effective in addressing offending. During the lead-up to the 2025 federal election, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities were publicly singled out by politicians and media through claims of widespread child sexual abuse and calls for investigation without an evidence base to support a new inquiry (SNAICC, 2025a). These claims ignored decades of evidence, data and proven solutions, while relying on narratives that portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as uniquely unsafe. Such rhetoric politicised child protection and fuelled deficit-based public perceptions, contributing to increased surveillance and intervention rather than support.

## **Racism was exacerbated by the Voice Referendum**

The marked escalation in racist language and behaviour in the period leading up to and following the 2023 Voice Referendum also reflects this connection between political, social and media environments and individual behaviour. The Australian population were invited to publicly debate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's right to self-determination and to have a collective voice in decision-making about their lives. This process placed the identity, legitimacy and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves at the centre of national discussion.

The campaign environment was heavily shaped by misinformation from the 'No' campaign and fear-based narratives circulated through mainstream and social media. These narratives were amplified by political actors, contributing to heightened levels of racism, vilification and abuse during the campaign period. Racist ideas and stereotypes were normalised, contested less frequently, and at times openly rewarded in political and media discourse.

As a result, racist language and behaviour became more socially visible and, in some settings, more openly expressed. This shift had direct consequences for children and young people, who are uniquely vulnerable to both online and offline forms of racism, hate and violence that deny them and their families agency. Exposure to hostile and racist public debate during the Referendum period undermined children's sense of safety, belonging and cultural identity in everyday spaces.

While racism and racist political narratives are not new, the Referendum represented a significant intensification. Data from the Call It Out Racism Register, an independent and Indigenous-controlled reporting mechanism, shows that nearly one in five reports of racism during the 2023-24 reporting period specifically mentioned the Voice and/or the Referendum (Allison, Cunneen, Coombes, et al., 2025). This trend was reflected by reporting from the Australian eSafety Commissioner in late May 2023 showing a more than 10 per cent increase in complaints from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people relating to online abuse, threats and harassment linked to the Referendum debate (Anderson et al., 2023).

## **Racism on SNAICC's Social Media**

SNAICC has seen a significant increase in targeted attacks from social media users on our posts in the last 18 months. Since the Voice Referendum, the nature of these attacks has escalated and become more organised and deliberate. Previously, SNAICC received occasional trolling from social media users that included negative stereotyping or racist commentary on posts about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. This has since escalated into coordinated and sophisticated attacks across other social media platforms with targeted, vitriolic social commentary, reinforcing stereotypes and resulting in SNAICC's audience being antagonised into online conflict and experiencing online harm.

The racist attacks are not predictable but do follow common themes. SNAICC has observed that targeted attacks are more prominent on Facebook than on LinkedIn and Instagram. While it is difficult to predict which posts will be targeted for racist commentary, content relating to early childhood education and care, child protection and broader sector updates appears particularly susceptible to this type of engagement. There have been instances where Aboriginal people featured in SNAICC's content have been scrutinised based on their appearance, including the colour of their skin, with comments questioning their Aboriginality and, in turn, their credibility to speak on certain issues. Direct attacks are also made on individuals who engage positively with content relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In response to this online commentary, and to support the safety of SNAICC's staff and audience, SNAICC has utilised Meta moderation tools on these platforms to automatically filter and hide certain words or phrases. However, these measures are often insufficient to address the scale and evolving nature of this issue. This commentary frequently avoids breaching Meta's hate speech guidelines by deliberately excluding explicit language such as swearing or recognisable offensive terms. Instead, they employ coded or indirect language that enables harmful narratives and incites hostility towards SNAICC and our audience.

SNAICC has observed that when our content is shared into certain groups, it often attracts coordinated negative engagement. These groups frequently display alignment with right-wing politicians, parties or affiliated lobby networks. This pattern of mobilisation appears consistent and intensifies during federal and state election periods. In particular, Facebook groups that reference

the ‘No vote’ campaign, ‘Australia First’ and ‘supporters of the Australian flag’ have been observed to repeatedly engage with SNAICC content in ways that generate and amplify racist commentary. The increasing sophistication and organisation of race-based social media attacks alongside indications that some political actors are investing resources into such campaigns is of significant concern, particularly as election cycles approach.

These dynamics are illustrated by the response to SNAICC’s announcement of the Three-Day Guarantee (see Appendix B). The post was met with a high volume of comments suggesting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families were receiving ‘special treatment’ compared to non-Indigenous children and families. This behaviour appears to deliberately leverage Facebook’s engagement-based algorithm. By generating high volumes of reactive or adversarial commentary, coordinated groups increase the visibility of posts, leading to their further distribution across aligned networks and amplifying the reach of harmful narratives.

SNAICC has also observed a significant increase in racist commentary in the wake of the tragic death of Kumanjyi Little Baby. The intensity and vitriol of these responses are extremely concerning, reflecting not only a rise in online attacks targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but also an increased risk of these narratives contributing to harm beyond online environments, including violence against individuals and organisations. There are ongoing concerns about the impact on staff who are required to moderate and engage with this content.

Racism has profound impacts on people’s lives, shaping outcomes across health, education, justice and employment. The [National Anti-Racism Framework](#) identifies media and digital platforms as key drivers in how racism is reinforced or challenged, calling for stronger accountability, regulation and support for community-led storytelling to reduce harm and misrepresentation (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024). This points to the need for governments to implement the National Anti-Racism Framework and strengthen accountability for racism in public discourse, including accountability for media narratives and political discourse, while working in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to address racism online.

**Recommendation 3:** Establish strengths-based and evidence-informed standards for political and media discourse.

## **Shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people must shape reform**

### **Children and young people have a right to be involved in decision-making**

All children and young people have a fundamental right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, this right is also connected to culture, community, and collective wellbeing. Despite this, they are often overlooked and excluded as decision-makers, which not only reduces the quality of reforms and solutions but actively causes harm.

In 2025, SNAICC undertook a comprehensive national engagement process to inform the extent of need and design for a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Voice mechanism. Through this engagement, SNAICC heard directly from more than 150 people, the majority of whom were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and young people. This included engaging with over 45 ACCOs and other NGOs across 13 different locations in remote, regional and urban Australia.

The engagement took place in the immediate wake of the 2023 Voice Referendum and the sustained escalation of racist public debate that followed (Anderson et al., 2023; Wilkes et al, 2025). The perspectives of young people shared during this process provide insight into how racism, hate and violence operate in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and what is required of governments, media, and institutions in response. These insights are embedded throughout this submission, reflecting the value in meaningfully embedding children and young people's voices throughout the process of policy reform.

### **Young people are often subjects of national debates, not active and meaningful participants**

Those consulted during the Youth Voice engagement described the experience of children and young people being publicly debated rather than being partners in the decisions that shape their lives. This was particularly the case in political rhetoric, media commentary, and election cycles. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been positioned within the Australian policy landscape as 'a problem to be solved rather than a source of democratic potential and renewal,' and are routinely 'disappeared from the public discourse' as debate centres on adults' judgements about them rather than on their own voices (Nakata & Bray, 2023). This dynamic is itself a form of harm. It replicates the colonial dynamic of having decisions made about, rather than with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and sends a clear message to children and young people about whose voices are treated as legitimate.

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders describe experiences of being dismissed. A member of SNAICC's Youth Voice shared a recent encounter with a non-Indigenous health professional embedded in the government-operated primary healthcare service in his community. When the young person mentioned their role on SNAICC's national youth leadership structure, they were met with a response of laughter. When they asked why, the man fell silent. The member named the dynamic directly: the man 'didn't believe that we were sitting that high.' This experience captures a pattern of refusal to extend to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the standing that their work, their roles and in this case, their national responsibilities and contributions, have already earned.

While engaging children and young people as meaningful participants is critical, it must also be done safely. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, speaking publicly carries real risks, particularly of online abuse, of being used to validate deficit narratives, and of backlash when their perspectives do not align with dominant framings (Allison, Cunneen, Whyman, et al., 2025). Organisations consulted during engagement for the SNAICC Youth Voice raised these concerns about the safety of youth participation in a public environment that is shaped by deficit framing and politicised narratives (SNAICC, forthcoming, b):

*'We want to hear from young people – but is it safe [for them]? Or is it only if they agree (or align?) with existing narratives?' – Koorie Youth Council, Melbourne (Victoria)*

Young people and other stakeholders were clear that the responsibility for creating the conditions for safe participation rests with institutions, not with young people themselves:

*'Onus is on the listener, not the young person – seniors must be ready to engage with young people and adjust to their needs, rather than expecting young people to adapt to them.' – Aarnja, Broome (Western Australia).*

## **Those most harmed by racism must be at the centre of the response**

A genuine response to racism must reach beyond young people already engaged through services and advisory structures to connect with those most directly impacted by racism. This must include young people impacted by youth justice, out-of-home care, and living in communities that have been repeatedly failed by mainstream responses:

*'Focus on reaching those who've been failed by the system – not just those with positive service experiences.' – Mounya Aboriginal Youth and Community Services, Sydney (New South Wales).*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who are most affected by racism, hate and violence, including those subject to heightened police surveillance, over-representation in child protection, and online harassment, are also those least likely to be reached by consultation processes. These processes are often designed around formal services or established advisory bodies that marginalise those voices. This point is not new. In 2018, the Koorie Youth Council

published the Ngaga-dji ('hear me') report, a youth-led, Aboriginal-led piece of research that gathered the stories of 42 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in Victoria's youth justice system through yarning circles and individual interviews. The report was explicitly framed as amplifying the voices of children 'that society silences with incarceration and stigma' (Koorie Youth Council, 2018).

Responses that do not reach these young people will not meaningfully reduce harm. They also risk reproducing the very pattern of tokenistic engagement that young people have explicitly named as unsafe and which can further exacerbate experiences of racism. The Ngaga-dji model, with community-designed yarning circles, de-identified composite accounts reviewed by a young people's focus group, and explicit solutions grounded in self-determination, offers a working precedent for how such engagement can be done well (Koorie Youth Council, 2018).

### **Shared decision-making with children and young people helps to avoid unintended consequences**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are navigating racism in the spaces they inhabit every day. The Call it Out Racism Register showed that, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (aged 0-19), incidents of racism occurred most commonly in educational settings (30 per cent) and online or other media (31 per cent combined: 16 percent 'other media' and 15 percent 'social media or online'; Allison, Cunneen, Whyman, et al., 2025). Schools and digital environments, the two spaces in which children and young people spend most of their days, are also spaces where they are very likely to encounter racism. This is reflected in the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People's report *Let us learn: Inquiry into the educational experiences of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care* (2023), which documented widespread experiences of racism faced by Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care within education settings. This highlights how the failure of schools and systems to listen to young people's experiences contributes to disengagement and harm (Commission for Children and Young People, 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people's high use of social media also amplifies their experiences of racism (Cory et al., 2024).

This racism does not occur in isolation. Reports to the Register show that online attacks on young people and on the services that support them often directly echo the language of politicians and media figures, with spikes in racist commentary documented immediately following racialised news reporting (Allison, Cunneen, Whyman, et al., 2025). This pattern is consistent with the Pyramid of Hate (Figure 1), illustrating that when bias is normalised and amplified at the top of the pyramid through political and media discourse, it manifests as hate speech, harassment and abuse at the everyday levels. Much of this now reaches children and young people, including through screens in their pockets and the schools they attend.

At the same time, young people were clear that online environments are important sites of cultural expression, solidarity, and youth-led agency. The SNAICC Youth Voice particularly identified social

media and digital engagement pathways as essential for enabling peer-to-peer relationships and reaching young people. Any regulatory response to online racism must therefore be designed with young people, not just for them, so that measures intended to protect young people from harm do not inadvertently fail or exacerbate existing conditions. Without engaging with young people, reforms risk cutting young people off from the digital spaces in which they build identity, connection and voice, without replacing opportunities that focus on the strengths that those platforms can provide.

## **Case Study: Insights from Amelia Whyman (Malayangapa and Wankumarra)**

Amelia Whyman, a 17-year-old Malyangapa and Wankumarra woman and Youth Ambassador with Mounty Aboriginal Youth and Community Services, described her experiences of racism as a young First Nations person in the *Call It Out Annual Report 2024-2025* (Allison, Cunneen, Whyman, et al., 2025). She spoke about moving between her home community in Wilcannia and boarding school in Sydney and her account mirrors several of the themes young people raised during the SNAICC Youth Voice engagement. Whyman describes experiencing both interpersonal racism in public spaces, including being racially abused by a stranger at a train station at age 15, while bystanders watched and did nothing, and the compounding effect of culturally unsafe school environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are left isolated from community, culture and identity. She describes the weight of racism as intergenerational, noting that it can resurface trauma passed down from ancestors and create fear for cultural and physical safety. She also speaks of how racism impacts on her peers' mental and physical wellbeing, including depression, isolation, suicidal thoughts and disordered eating.

Whyman is clear that solutions already exist in community, and that young people themselves are building them. She is working with other young people from Mount Druitt to establish an Aboriginal Youth Peak for NSW, describing this as a way for young people to have more of a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Her testimony demonstrates both the weight of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are carrying and the leadership they are already exercising in response. On being heard, Whyman is direct:

*'A lot of kids don't have a voice... Kids need to stop being shut down.'* – Whyman in Allison, Cunneen, Whyman, et al. (2025).

## **Shared decision-making must meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led participation standards**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people should be engaged in shared decision-making using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led frameworks for meaningful participation. The Koorie Youth Council's Wayipunga ('supporting young people'; 2022) framework, developed through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander- and youth-led workshops across Victoria,

sets a benchmark for culturally safe participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in decision-making. Cory and colleagues (2024) built on the Wayipunga framework to further propose five requisites for meaningful participation: visibility; inclusion; acknowledgement of structural and relationship power dynamics; free, prior and informed consent; and a genuine shift of power. They distinguish these from ‘performative non-participation’ and ‘tokenistic participation’ categories that include, among other red flags, consultation that is retrospective rather than prospective, that is led by non-Indigenous actors, that cherry-picks politically aligned voices, or where outcomes are pre-determined.

Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reportedly being asked to recount experiences of racism, in consultations, in inquiries, in research, and in media interviews, often without transformative action following. Young people’s message is direct: that without transformative action, consultation is itself a form of racism – a continuation of the pattern by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are asked to prove their experience of harm without being met with change. Young people are not just asking for truth-telling, but truth-listening that leads to transformative action. They want to see the racism experienced throughout their daily lives addressed, accountability from those who amplify deficit narratives, and shared decision-making in reforms. Any reforms resulting from this Inquiry should be tested against established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led participation standards rather than against ad hoc consultation processes designed by government.

*‘I’m glad that someone from the Torres Strait get(s) to influence the decision making.’ – SNAICC Youth Voice member*

**Recommendation 4:** Embed shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people into the implementation and review of reforms that affect them.

## **Racism as a driver of over-representation in statutory systems**

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in child protection and youth justice systems is the outcome of structural racism that has shaped policy, practice, and attitudes since colonisation. As already outlined, racism operates through biased attitudes, stereotypes and deficit-based understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities that become normalised in public discourse. These beliefs are embedded in institutional policies and practices, shaping how systems and the workforce assess risk, make decisions, and justify intervention. Media narratives that emphasise criminality, exaggerate risk and rely on deficit-based framing amplify and legitimise these biases, shaping public expectations and tolerance of punitive and paternalistic interventions. Stalling progress and regression on the National Agreement’s Targets 11 and 12 demonstrate the failure of governments to address over-

representation and the child protection to youth justice system pipeline. Addressing these outcomes requires governments to acknowledge that systemic racism is driving over-representation in child protection and youth justice, and to pursue transformational system change rather than incremental reforms.

## **Racism in child protection systems**

In the National Agreement, governments committed to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent by 2031 in Target 12. Progress toward this target is stalled and worsening (Productivity Commission, 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children now comprise around 45 per cent of all children in out-of-home care (SNAICC, 2025b).

Child protection systems are informed by racist assumptions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will always be safer and better off in out-of-home care. These systems frequently apply deficit-based judgements that mischaracterise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as inherently unsafe, and do not recognise the more than 60,000 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing knowledge, culture and practice. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have cared for children across generations through strong kinship systems, cultural authority and community responsibility. These deficit-based assumptions overlook the level of harm that children experience in out-of-home care, and remove children from the families and cultures that would otherwise protect them from harm. Evidence shows that separation from culture leaves children without networks of care and support, increases psychological harm, and contributes to increased rates of youth suicide (Chamberlain et al., 2022; SNAICC, n.d.). Instead, systems assume that removal is benevolent and actively pursue this as the preferred solution, while doing little to support families to address the circumstances that lead to intervention to prevent removal or to encourage reunification. This practice is evidenced in low prevention investment, low reunification rates, and limited investment in reunification supports (SNAICC, 2025b).

Decisions about children's safety are commonly informed by risk assessment tools, thresholds and practice frameworks that are not culturally safe and assess family safety and wellbeing based on Western ways of thinking. These tools reflect and reinforce deficit-based understandings of Aboriginal families, increasing the likelihood of intervention and removal rather than support (Jones et al., 2026). While child protection systems ostensibly seek to remove children from unsafe environments, evidence shows that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their families without adequate cultural understanding, appropriate support having been provided, or clear evidence that removal was the option of last resort.

For example, in South Australia, one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were the subject of a pre-birth notification to child protection, compared to one in 33 non-Indigenous children (Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People SA, 2024). These infants are being removed at birth in hospital settings at an alarming rate without their mothers being informed,

supported, or meaningfully involved in decision-making (Jones et al., 2026). Despite early engagement with maternal and health services, mothers were rarely advised that removal was an imminent risk, and documentation repeatedly reflected deficit-based assessments rather than efforts to support family safety (Jones et al., 2026). The absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship and community engagement or input indicates that these removals occur through institutional processes that prioritise control over care, constituting systemic racism.

This example highlights a lack of adherence to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP; SNAICC, 2026a), which aims to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. The ATSICPP is formally embedded in Australian child welfare legislation and recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities, and ACCOs are best placed to make decisions about their children's welfare and must be actively involved in decision-making about their lives. The ATSICPP comprises of five interrelated elements: Prevention, Partnership, Placement, Participation and Connection. The pre-birth notifications and subsequent removals discussed above represent a failure to engage with these elements. In particular, preventative action was not taken, decisions were not made in partnership with ACCOs, and mothers, families, and communities were not supported to participate in decisions about the safety and wellbeing of their children.

This example is representative of broader concerns about the application of the ATSICPP. Only 32.1 per cent of children in out-of-home care are placed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relatives (SNAICC, 2025b). Children are therefore exposed to compounding harm: first through the absence of early, preventive support, and again through systems that respond to trauma with punitive or risk-focused approaches. Rather than reducing harm, these institutional responses can deepen disadvantage and entrench cycles of removal and criminalisation.

There is a direct and unbroken line between the forced removal of children during the Stolen Generations and current patterns of state intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. While legal frameworks have changed over time, the impacts on families remain similarly devastating. Contemporary removals continue to be shaped by biased and racist assumptions about parenting, safety and wellbeing, rather than by evidence of harm or respect for cultural authority. The persistent over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems reflects not just systemic failure, but systems operating as they were designed to – exercising control over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

## **Racism in the youth justice system**

Australia's youth justice system remains predominantly driven by criminal justice responses, rather than by evidence-based approaches that prioritise children's wellbeing and community safety. This is evident in governments' continued failure to progress Target 11, which aims to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10–17 in detention by at least 30 per cent

by 2031 (Productivity Commission, 2024). Youth justice outcomes do not arise in isolation; they reflect a system shaped by over-surveillance and punitive responses to social and structural disadvantage (O'Brien, 2021). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are drawn into these systems not because they are inherently more likely to offend than their non-Indigenous peers, but because they are policed more, supported less, and subjected to political and media narratives that legitimise punitive, ineffective responses to vulnerability and disadvantage.

Policing in Australia did not emerge as a neutral system of public safety. From its inception, policing was used to enforce genocide, dispossession and racial hierarchy, functioning as an instrument of governance to control Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Roscoe & Godfrey, 2022). This continues today in the disproportionate surveillance, criminalisation and punishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are policed more frequently and more intrusively than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Police are more likely to stop, move on, search and question Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, making them visible to authorities earlier and more persistently across their lives (O'Brien, 2021). This is not the result of higher levels of criminality, but of higher levels of police presence in specific communities and the uneven exercise of discretion within policing practices.

Policing is also often positioned as the default response to 'offending' behaviours that are the result of complex issues and support needs. It is routinely deployed as the first response to social issues in communities, including poverty, trauma, homelessness, and mental health crises (National Justice Project, 2025). A child engaging in criminal behaviour is likely to be in need of a suite of supports from their family, kin, community, and health and wellbeing professionals, but too often all they receive is police intervention. The more police presence there is in a community, combined with limited access to culturally safe support services and high levels of social disadvantage, the more incidents are recorded, and the more pathways are created into the youth justice system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2024; O'Brien, 2021).

There is also a concerning link between out-of-home care and the youth justice system. Research indicates that placement in out-of-home care increases the likelihood of contact with the justice system (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2020; Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023a), creating what is known as 'care criminalisation'. More than two-thirds of children who are incarcerated have been in child protection systems in the previous 10 years (AIHW, 2024). This cohort of criminalised children are often known as 'crossover kids' (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023a), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are 26 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be part of this group (AIHW, 2024). The Sentencing Advisory Council in Victoria noted that more than half of children experiencing out-of-home or residential care offended for the first time during or after being placed in care (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2020). While this suggests a link between trauma and maltreatment and subsequent offending, it also suggests that the experience of care itself is a contributing factor to offending (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2020).

Children in out-of-home care are also often criminalised for behaviours that would typically be managed through family discipline rather than criminal charges, including behaviours stemming from trauma, mental health issues, and disability (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023a). Carers and residential care workers are more likely than parents to call police to respond to children's 'challenging' behaviours, which can lead to escalating behaviour and further charges such as 'resisting arrest' (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023a). The Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023a, p. 196) received evidence that children were charged for 'throwing a sponge, breaking a plate, or "theft" of food from communal kitchens.' There is a clear need to address the shared socioeconomic drivers of involvement with child protection and youth justice, as well as to upskill the out-of-home care workforce to respond to children's behaviours without involving police.

Youth justice responses are also influenced by perceptions of a 'crime wave', which often misrepresent reality but lead to tougher youth justice responses. Public discourse around youth offending, particularly during election periods, regularly centres on claims of 'youth crime waves' and calls for tougher sanctions on younger children. However, in many jurisdictions, these media-led perceptions that youth crime is on the rise are misplaced. Analysis of Victoria's crime statistics data shows that numbers of offences recorded for the 10-19 age group decreased slightly between 2016 and 2025 (Crime Statistics Agency Victoria, n.d.). There is strong evidence that 'tough-on-crime' responses, especially for children, are ineffective, expensive and result in higher rates of offending and reoffending. Incarcerating children, especially younger children from 10-13 years old, has been shown to be criminogenic and not a deterrent to future offending. Research has shown that 'a staggering 94% of children imprisoned between the ages of 10 and 12 receive another prison sentence before they even reach adulthood' (Singh, 2023). Additionally, more than 50 per cent of young people released from detention return to some form of criminal justice supervision within just 12 months (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023b). Despite evidence of their ineffectiveness and harm, the persistent narrative of 'youth crime waves' legitimises punitive responses.

The findings of numerous coronial inquests, inquiries and investigations, and formal complaints to the United Nations (UN) have concluded that the youth justice system is harmful to Australia's children, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bearing a disproportionate level of this harm. In May 2026, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination found that the extreme over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia's youth justice system is the result of systemic and structural racial discrimination. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comprise around 65 per cent of children in detention despite representing only 6.5 per cent of the child population (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2026). The Committee identified racial profiling, over-policing, a minimum age of criminal responsibility as low as 10, and harsh detention practices as key contributing factors to this over-representation (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2026).

In detention, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately exposed to isolation, excessive use of force, denial of basic needs and prolonged lockdowns (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023b). The harms of detention are compounded by children’s developmental vulnerability. Adolescence is a critical period of neurological development associated with impulsivity and emotional regulation. Detention during this stage, particularly for children with histories of trauma, significantly increases risks of self-harm, recidivism and long-term challenges (Shepherd et al., 2018).

Urgent action is needed to address the significant harms caused by the youth justice system. All Australian governments should act to stop the downward spiral of punitive state responses in youth justice and engage in meaningful truth-telling that recognises systemic racism as a driver of over-representation. This action is consistent with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination’s (2026) recent recommendations.

**Recommendation 5:** Recognise systemic racism as a key driver of child protection and youth justice outcomes, and strengthen government accountability to address this through the National Agreement

## **Building cultural competency in mainstream organisations and workforce**

### **Cultural safety within mainstream services is critical but limited**

Structural racism continues to shape the design and delivery of mainstream service systems, as evident in the lack of a culturally competent workforce and appropriate standards and regulations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families often can feel unwelcome and unsafe in mainstream services and misunderstood when seeking help or support. Cultural connection is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and requires connection to family and community to foster and strengthen cultural identity and belonging (Krakouer et al., 2017). Non-Indigenous systems and services generally do not have the cultural knowledge to actively nurture these connections. Research focused on health services and care has highlighted the importance of trust for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, and adults in seeking support (McCalman et al., 2022). Even when families have identified a need for specific supports, they have indicated they would delay or avoid seeking out these supports due to a lack of trust with providers and apprehension about cultural safety (Waller et al., 2022). A lack of understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities among the mainstream workforce often creates a deficit-based approach that measures children and families against indicators that are not fit-for-purpose. These experiences contribute to deep distrust and feelings of judgement and shame that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families’ participation in these services.

The child protection and justice systems were originally shaped by colonial priorities of control, and these influences continue to persist through the day-to-day behaviours and competencies of the workforce within these systems. Workforce behaviours are informed by assumptions about parenting and risk, a lack of understanding about cultural practices and a tendency to prioritise surveillance and compliance over engagement and support. In practice this often looks like the inappropriate escalation of concerns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and unequal responses to similar behaviours compared to non-Indigenous peers. These actions are not neutral and contribute to patterns of over-intervention and increased contact with the child protection system (Chamberlain et al., 2022; SNAICC, 2025b). Strengthening the cultural capability of the mainstream workforce is therefore critical to shifting critical systems towards being culturally safe and competent.

## **Culturally responsive training: The impact of SNAICC’s Waterways training**

One avenue to developing culturally safe services and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is to build cultural competency across all mainstream workforces working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Through our work at SNAICC, we continue to hear the call for culturally responsive trauma-informed training that provides tools and frameworks to address the needs of the sector. In response, SNAICC designed Project Waterways to support workforces to develop cultural competency. Waterways is a two-day, face-to-face workshop delivering culturally responsive and trauma-informed training for government and non-government service delivery organisations and ACCOs working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The training is anchored in truth-telling around the ongoing impacts of colonisation and celebrates the intergenerational knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through Project Waterways, SNAICC has been able to reach a wide cross section of the workforce supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to provide purpose-built training that builds understanding of the impacts of racism perpetuated by colonisation and bias, working with a total of 240 organisations.

In a survey released before the project to identify the sector’s needs, respondents identified that cultural responsiveness was often approached as ‘tokenism’ in their organisations and practice. The results indicated that the sector was facing challenges in fully integrating cultural responsiveness, and was limited to participating in celebratory events, such as NAIDOC Week, without embedding deeper structural processes. Respondents also identified a lack of accredited cultural training available for the sector.

Participants described undertaking the Waterways training as challenging and transformative, explaining that it created a space to explore personal biases and the broader structural forces that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Participants found that yarning, cultural immersion, and practices like Dadirri (deep listening) led to a deeper understanding of Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and therefore a more critical and deliberate approach to their practice. In the months following the training, participants shared that they were continuing to reflect, implement, share, and discuss their learnings, and that the training led to practice improvements. One participant commented that the training ‘definitely improved the way I work with youth.’ Feedback also showed that participants valued the training resources, with one noting that ‘I regularly refer to my practice guide... I have used a lot of the content in my role as Cultural Supervisor.’ Many participants called for broader access to Waterways training for the sector and expressed interest in follow-up sessions and deeper training for high-risk contexts.

## **Standards and frameworks must be strengthened in partnership**

Strong cultural safety and anti-racism standards must be applied across services that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and be regularly reviewed for effectiveness. The current National Quality Framework, Australia’s system for regulating early childhood education and care, was designed to regulate mainstream services and does not capture the distinctive governance, service models, and cultural foundations of ACCOs that enable them to deliver holistic supports. It does not sufficiently account for the diversity of service models and cultural approaches required to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. SNAICC has consistently heard from service providers that applying a framework that was not meant for these services risks misrepresenting quality, creating regulatory burden, and undermining culturally grounded practice.

An independent review of the National Quality Framework, conducted in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, is necessary. This review should identify systemic barriers, assess cultural safety, and ensure the Framework supports rather than constrains quality outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending both ACCOs and non-Indigenous services. Without this critical examination, reform efforts risk replicating existing inequities and continuing to marginalise community-controlled and integrated service models.

Similarly, reform is needed to the variable standards that apply to child protection and prevention focused family services in each jurisdiction. Standards in some jurisdictions include a level of dedicated cultural safety requirements, for example explicit references to implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in the Queensland Human Services Quality Framework and the requirements for Aboriginal Cultural Safety in the Victorian Social Services Standards. However, the extent and detail of these requirements are variable even where they exist and receive little emphasis in some jurisdictions, while accountability for compliance is lacking in most cases. National Standards in some sectors, such as the National Standards for Out-of-Home that include a focus on cultural care and connection for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children lack reporting and compliance requirements for organisations and are reflected variably in more specific and enforceable state and territory standards. Consistent standards can strengthen accountability, ensure more equitable service provision, and support culturally safe

practice across mainstream systems. Embedding clear and comparable expectations across the sector would also improve access to services and enable earlier intervention and prevention, reducing the escalation of issues that lead to involvement with child protection and youth justice systems.

**Recommendation 6:** Invest in trauma-informed and culturally responsive anti-racism training programs for services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

**Recommendation 7:** Review, strengthen and consistently apply cultural safety and anti-racism standards in regulatory and quality requirements across child and family services.

## **Strengthening the ACCO sector will improve outcomes for our children**

Systemic racism is also evident in the underfunding of ACCOs to deliver essential services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. ACCOs can provide the gold standard in culturally safe and strong services that wrap around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to support their holistic wellbeing. Even absent specific experiences of racism, non-Indigenous services work to a framework of safety, health, development, and wellbeing that is not inclusive of or responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Community-controlled organisations have this cultural understanding and community connection embedded within their service because they *are* community. While non-Indigenous services can and should improve their practice towards cultural safety, ACCOs understand what cultural safety and cultural responsiveness means to their communities and families.

### **Access to early childhood education and care is critical**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need increased access to early childhood education and care. Quality early childhood education and care shapes children's sense of identity, safety and belonging. Concerningly, progress towards the National Agreement Target 4, which is focused on increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census, is going backwards (Productivity Commission, 2026a).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander childhood development is impacted by limited access to appropriate ACCO-led early childhood education. Until 2023, non-Indigenous children had higher rates of enrolment in year before full-time schooling than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with the gap as wide as more than 30 per cent in 2016 (Productivity Commission, n.d.). While enrolment in preschool has improved, disparities in access to earlier supports during the most critical years of children's early development have been persistent. In 2024, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander children were 33 per cent less likely to access approved childcare services between the ages of 0-5 (Productivity Commission, 2026b). There are also significant gaps in access to high-quality and culturally strong early learning supports that are needed to set Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children up to thrive (dandolopartners, 2023).

Access to services continues to be impacted by geographic location. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are more likely to live in regional and remote areas of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) where there is less access to, or choice of, early childhood education and care services. Childcare deserts, a region where there are more than three children per childcare place, cover 53 per cent of regional Australia and 82 per cent of remote Australia (Victoria University – Mitchell Institute 2022; 2024). As of 2022, nine million Australians are currently living in a childcare desert (Victoria University – Mitchell Institute, 2022).

### **Chronic under-investment drives over-representation**

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection and youth justice systems is also driven in part by this chronic under-investment in ACCOs. Current expenditure patterns help explain why progress against Target 12 is going backwards. In 2023-24, Australian governments spent nearly \$10.2 billion on child protection and family support services for children, including protective intervention services, care services, family support services (FSS) and intensive family support services (IFSS; SNAICC, 2025b). Combined, the proportion of funding for FSSs and IFSSs represented only 15.6 per cent of total expenditure on child protection and the out-of-home care system (SNAICC, 2025b). In the youth justice system, governments spend \$1.1 billion on detention compared to \$520 million on community-based supervision (Productivity Commission, 2026b). This imbalance reflects a system designed to respond to perceived risk, after harm has escalated, rather than to address the social, economic, and cultural factors that support family safety.

The Family Matters Report (SNAICC, 2025b) describes the evidence that Aboriginal community-controlled prevention, early intervention and family support programs are highly effective in keeping children safe and connected to family. However, despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comprising a significant proportion of those in out-of-home care, the ACCOs that are best placed to support them receive less than six per cent of child protection funding (SNAICC, 2025b). This reflects systemic decision-making that continues to deprioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approaches within mainstream policy settings.

The impacts of under-investment extend beyond entry into care, shaping children's experiences while in care and their outcomes after exiting the system. In 2022–23, 34.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children exited out-of-home care into 'other circumstances', including independent living, homelessness and youth detention (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). These outcomes point to systems that intervene late, provide inadequate support, and fail to address trauma in culturally safe ways.

If governments are serious about addressing over-representation and meeting their commitments under the National Agreement, reform must include a shift in both investment and transformation of systemic approaches. Meaningful progress requires resourcing ACCOs and embedding culturally safe, community-led responses. These changes are critical to challenging the systemic settings and decision-making frameworks that continue to produce unequal outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

## **Implement funding models that strengthen the ACCO sector**

Current funding models have historically advantaged mainstream providers and create a constant difficulty and insecurity for ACCOs in trying to sustain a strong sector and provide essential supports (SNAICC, 2024a). SNAICC's forthcoming *Doing Things Differently* report highlights that ACCOs are disproportionately dependent on government funding and especially short-term funding arrangements, while non-Indigenous services have had historical and ongoing advantages in establishing and maintaining sustainable organisations. Amongst the challenges faced by the ACCO sector, a lack of access to land and capital infrastructure is significant. This is in contrast to the large, amassed land and infrastructure holdings of numerous faith-based and other large-scale non-government service providers that built wealth off stolen land and profited from the historical and ongoing racist exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from access to property ownership. These same organisations typically have 'locked-in' government service contracts that have been rolled over from one funding cycle to the next for decades, leaving no point of access for ACCOs to build their service delivery. The lack of sustainably funded ACCOs leaves significant service gaps for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, who may disengage from non-Indigenous services due to a lack of cultural safety and be unable to access an ACCO provider close to home.

The funding models developed in the *Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services* (SNAICC, 2024a) and *Doing Things Differently* reports provide a recommended approach for sustainably and appropriately funding ACCOs. This approach recognises ACCOs as service providers and leaders in both early years and child and family support. The models consider the entrenched gaps in resourcing between ACCO and non-Indigenous services and provide for the distinct workforce needs of ACCOs, the holistic model of support they deliver, and aim to strengthen the community-controlled sector as a whole. Increasing and sustaining funding to the ACCO sector is essential for ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families can access culturally safe and strong services that set them up to thrive.

**Recommendation 8:** Implement long-term, sustainable funding models that strengthen self-determination and the ACCO sector.

## Appendix A: References

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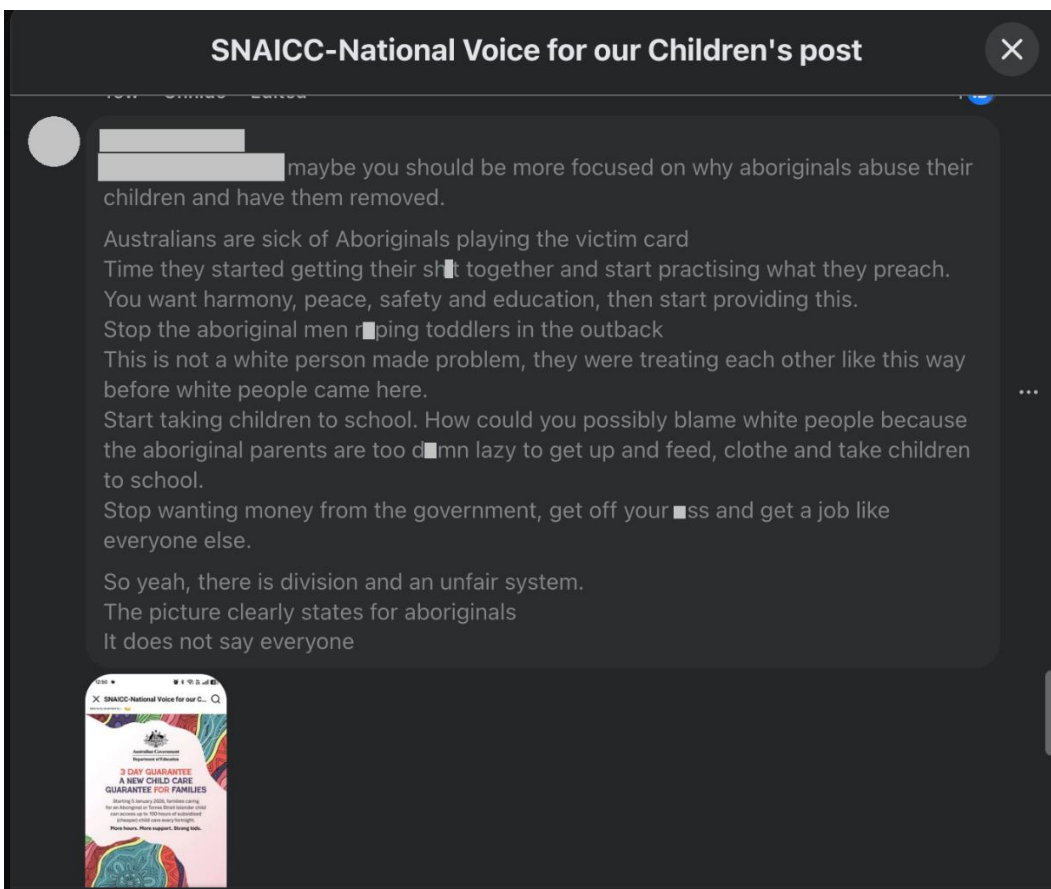
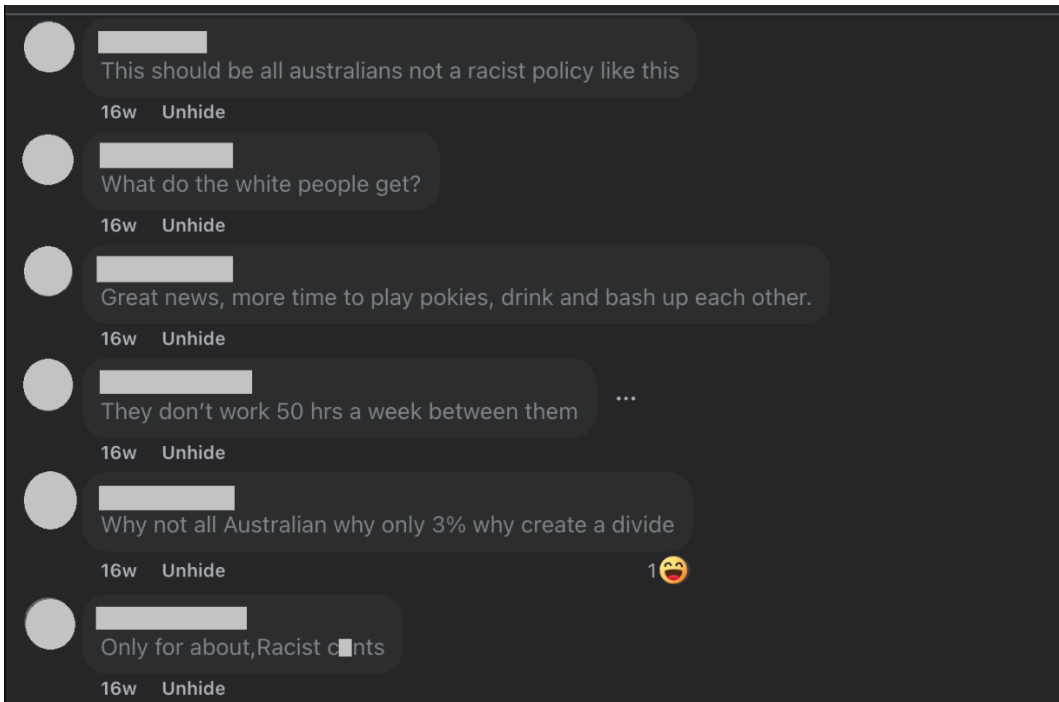
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## Appendix B: Examples of racism on SNAICC social media

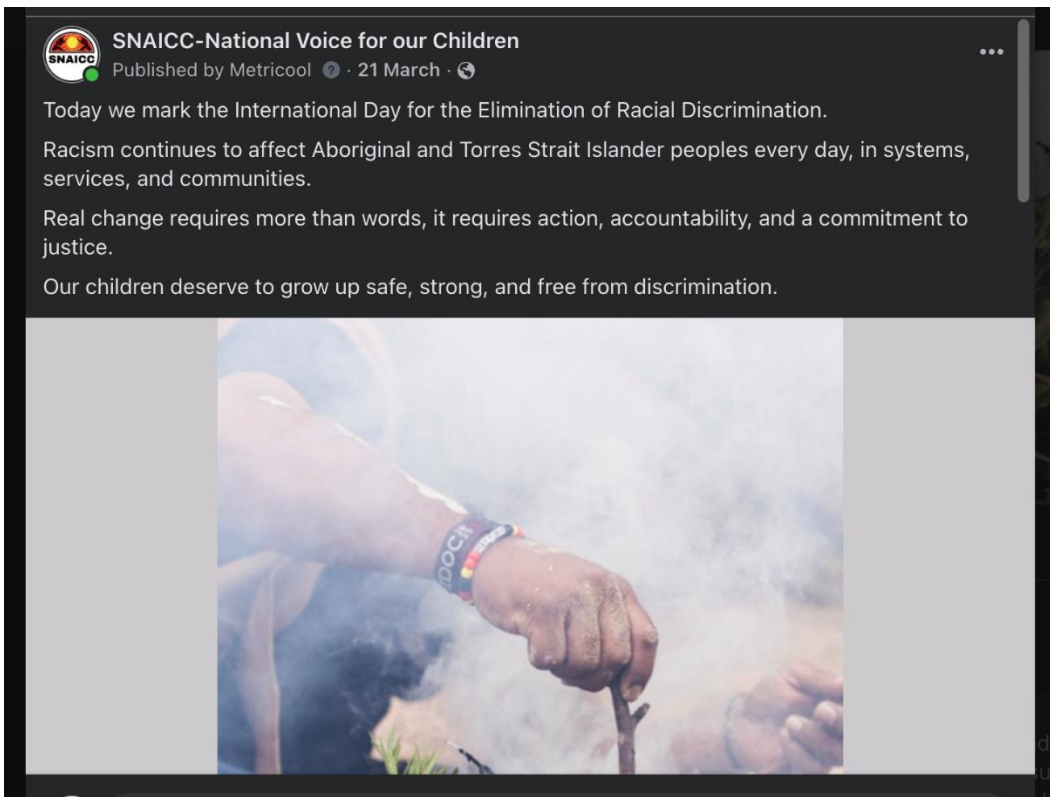
Original post: 3 Day Guarantee



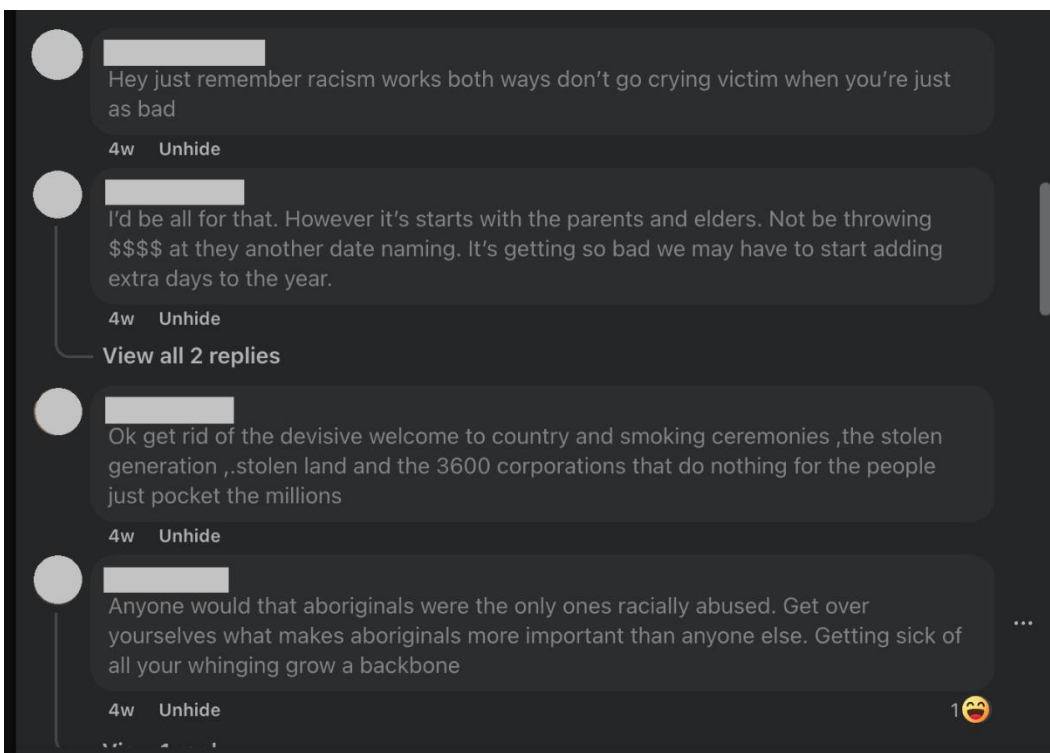
## Racist comments: 3 Day Guarantee



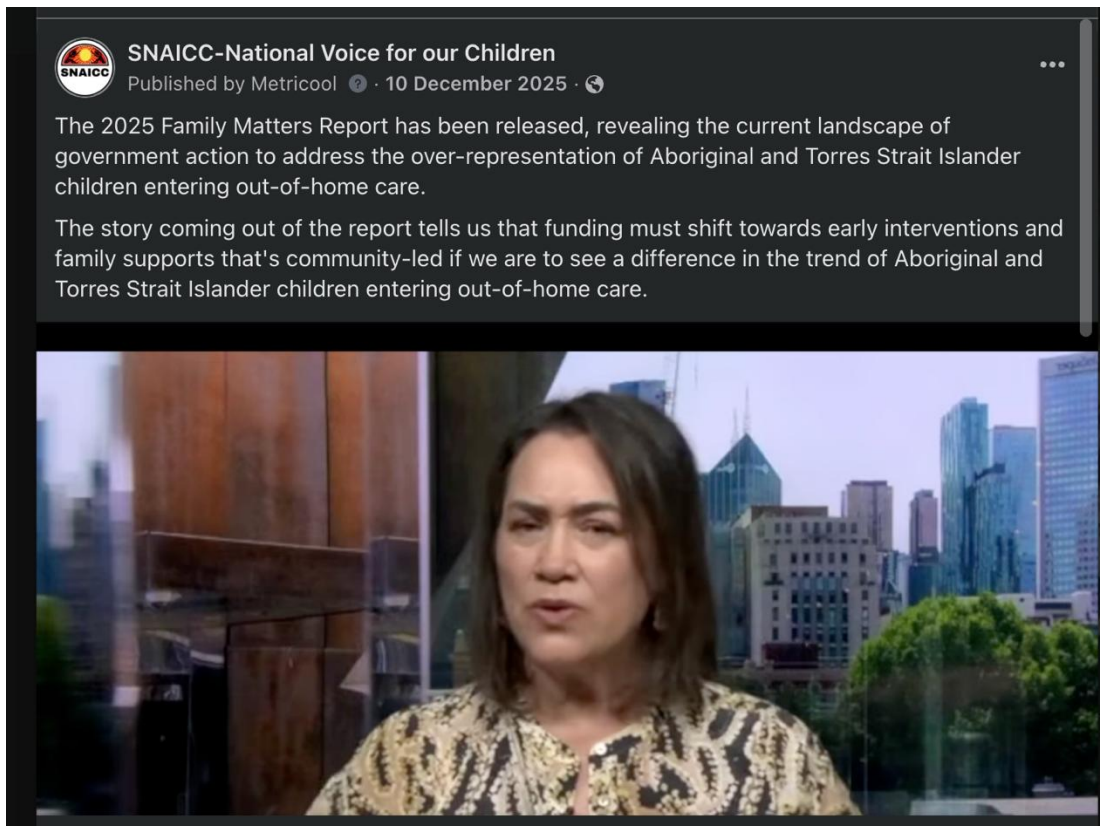
Original post: International Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination



Racist comments: International Day to Eliminate Racial Discrimination




### Original post: 2025 Family Matters Report release



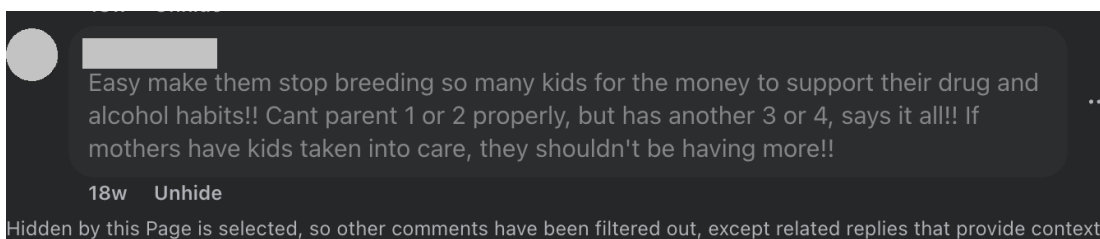
**SNAICC-National Voice for our Children**  
Published by Metricool · 10 December 2025 ·

The 2025 Family Matters Report has been released, revealing the current landscape of government action to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering out-of-home care.

The story coming out of the report tells us that funding must shift towards early interventions and family supports that's community-led if we are to see a difference in the trend of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering out-of-home care.



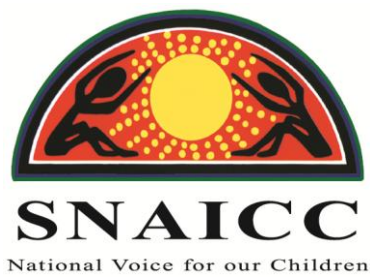
### Racist comments: 2025 Family Matters Report release



Easy make them stop breeding so many kids for the money to support their drug and alcohol habits!! Cant parent 1 or 2 properly, but has another 3 or 4, says it all!! If mothers have kids taken into care, they shouldn't be having more!!

18w Unhide

Hidden by this Page is selected, so other comments have been filtered out, except related replies that provide context.



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