



National Council of Churches in Australia

1 June 2026

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
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INQUIRY INTO RACISM, HATE AND VIOLENCE DIRECTED AT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the traditional custodians of the land where we live and work. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging and we acknowledge the First Nations people who are receiving and reading this submission.

There are 18 national churches that are members of the NCCA including church communities brought by the colonisers and others that reflect more recent arrivals.

1. The Churches and Racism

NCCA President, Rev John Gilmore said in February 2024:

I need to acknowledge with deep lament and shame that the churches in Australia have not always been communities of hope and life for many, many Indigenous peoples. You have been abused, hurt, dislocated and had your language and culture repressed or eliminated in the actions of the church and its peoples. Many of us have co-operated with the government programs of assimilation and the forced removal of children from families into missions ... There has been a failure of churches to listen to the pain and suffering of so many.¹

Churches condemn all forms of racism as profoundly immoral because racism rejects the equality of all people, created in God's image with human dignity and rights. Racism seeks to divide the human family. Every form of

¹ Rev John Gilmore (8 February 2024): *Response to the Indigenous Christian Theologians at the conclusion of the "Raising Tribal Voices" Conference*. University of Divinity, Box Hill VIC. [Accessed on NCCA website](#), 19 May 2026

Anglican Church

Antiochian
Orthodox Church

Armenian
Apostolic Church

Assyrian Church
of the East

Australian Catholic
Bishops Conference

Chinese Methodist
Church

Churches of Christ

Congregational
Federation

Coptic
Orthodox Church

Greek
Orthodox Church

Indian
Orthodox Church

Lutheran Church

Mar Thoma Church

Religious Society
of Friends (Quakers)

Romanian
Orthodox Church

Syrian
Orthodox Church

The Salvation Army

Uniting Church

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social or cultural discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language, or religion offends against the great commandment to love one another.

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ... experience racism at a higher rate than the general population. Racist attitudes and behaviours often become more pronounced, and less veiled ... At the heart of racism is the failure to recognise that we are all inherently equal and valuable, so that is where we need to start in addressing racism.*²

The Salvation Army's Social Justice Stocktake Report 2025 quotes the Reconciliation Barometer 2022 that "60 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reported experiencing at least one form of racial prejudice in the past six months."³ In 2024, the rate was 68% for 24-35 year olds.⁴ And it records that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples also experience the highest rates of workplace discrimination (50 per cent compared with 24 per cent of non-Indigenous workers).

Experiences of racism included verbal abuse, social media abuse, being refused entry or service, being prevented from renting a property, and physical violence, with younger First Nations people reporting higher levels of racism than other age groups. Racial discrimination is experienced at the hands of police, taxis and rideshare services, government services, hospitality and utility providers, and employers.⁵

NCCA acknowledges the substantial submission to this Inquiry by the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the Uniting Church in Australia and fully supports the ten recommendations of their submission to address racism, hatred and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This NCCA submission wishes to highlight opportunities for reform that address the prevalence, impacts and drivers of racism, hate and violence that are systemic, structural and experienced collectively and individually by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. In particular, this submission will address the following Terms of Reference:

- The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time.

² Salvation Army Social Justice Stocktake 2025, <https://socialjusticestocktake.salvationarmy.org.au/issues/racism-and-discrimination/index.html>

³ Reconciliation Australia. (2022). 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer: <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Australian-Reconciliation-Barometer-2022.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/2024-ARB-Racism-and-First-Nations-Peoples.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-24/survey-finds-significant-rise-in-racism-indigenous/105453342>

- Initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reduce individual and collective harm.
- Other matters related to racism, hatred and violence directed at First Nations people.

NCCA is committed to the churches working together for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and for the healing of our peoples. We believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, nurtured and sustained by God before colonisation, are recognised and celebrated at the very heart of what it means to be Australian.

2. National Anti-Racism Framework

A significant step towards addressing racism and discrimination against First Nations people would be the implementation of the Race Discrimination Commissioner's National Anti-Racism Framework 2024. The recommendations of National Anti-Racism Framework⁶ address up front that a National Anti-Racism Framework should:

- acknowledge the systemic and structural nature of racism, including the historical and ongoing impacts of settler colonisation on First Nations peoples
- be intersectional, community-centric, and recognise racism as a complex and shifting phenomenon
- embed truth-telling and self-determination for First Nations peoples
- be adequately, appropriately, and sustainably funded
- include mechanisms for co-design and participation of First Nations peoples and other negatively racialised communities in the Framework's operation.⁷

The Framework is a clear and evidence-based roadmap for governments, business and community organisations including churches to eliminate racism based on the experiences of First Nations peoples.

As NCCA stated in our submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security on the Exposure Draft Legislation: Combatting Antisemitism, Hate and Extremism Bill 2026:

*We believe that it is very important to ensure that Australia's First Peoples, our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and our Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) peoples in Australia, are protected from hate crime and extremism as they are daily targeted and affected by hate speech, racial vilification, racial discrimination, social and economic marginalisation.*⁸

⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). Accessed 14 May 2026: [The National Anti-Racism Framework Full Report 2024](#)

⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). Accessed 14 May 2026: [The National Anti-Racism Framework Full Report 2024](#)

⁸ National Council of Churches in Australia (15 January 2026). Submission 129.

First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous people have consistently told the Australian Human Rights Commission that the experiences of First Nations peoples must be central to all anti-racism action and inform all strategies across national outcome areas.

First Nations communities have called on governments to commit to transformative changes that address entrenched inequalities. Some specific recommendations for this include: incorporating provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into all relevant domestic laws; a nationally recognised definition of First Nations cultural safety; First Nations focused anti-racism content in school curricula; formalised partnerships between Australian governments and First Nations community-controlled organisations; and strategies to address racism experienced by First Nations people in workplaces.⁹

The NCCA calls on the Australian Government to commit to fully fund and implement the National Anti-Racism Framework.

3. National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Since 2008 successive Australian governments have committed to “Closing the Gap” in life outcomes and to end the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

Data tables showing the starting points and progress for each Closing the Gap target by jurisdictions, are available on the Productivity Commission Closing the Gap Information Repository Dashboard.¹⁰

While there are positives that include increased life expectancy, better health outcomes, improved educational opportunities, and greater economic participation, Australia is not making the progress that was intended in the Closing the Gap targets.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, systemic racism and disparities in access to education, housing, and justice contribute heavily to the inequality between First Nations people and non-Indigenous Australians.¹¹

The Productivity Commission Review report¹² in February 2024 emphasised the need for a departure from a tokenistic approach and encourages governments to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations, and communities in assessing and addressing institutional racism and unconscious bias. The report also highlights the importance of

⁹ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024). Accessed 14 May 2026: [The National Anti-Racism Framework Full Report 2024](#)

¹⁰ Productivity Commission, accessed 14 May 2026: [Closing the Gap targets and outcomes | Closing the Gap](#)

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, accessed 14 May 2026: [Closing the Gap targets: key findings and implications, Long and healthy lives - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

¹² Productivity Commission. (2024). Closing the Gap Information Repository. [\[Link\]](#)

empowering Indigenous communities to drive their own solutions and participate actively in decision-making processes.

Institutional and structural issues are inherent in how the policies and programs created to close the gap are designed and implemented. Government departments need to step up with significant and consistent resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled community health and wellbeing services, designed to achieve a closing of the gap in health, education, mental health and social outcomes. There also needs to be adequate resourcing of remote communities.

It is critical that governments co-design and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in good faith to develop programs that are truly fit for purpose and culturally appropriate. Community-driven solutions work, yet little has been done to move away from top-down approaches and the commitment to shared decision-making is rarely achieved in practice.¹³

The NCCA calls on Australian governments to provide sufficient funding, targeted to achieve the Closing the Gap outcomes, and prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to deliver services wherever possible.

4. Criminal Justice

*Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention centres in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.*¹⁴

The poignancy of this statement is felt ever more acutely today with multiple crises impacting the human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, not least of which is the rising rate of incarceration, particularly of young Indigenous people which is at crisis level.

First Peoples comprise over 30 per cent of the adult prison population. Even more distressingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth constitute 6.6% per cent of the total youth population in Australia but represent sixty percent of youth in detention aged 10 and over across the country.¹⁵ It is difficult not to conclude that systemic racism is operative, unintentional or otherwise. There is over-policing of Indigenous communities and over-reliance on punitive measures.

¹³ Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research (2025). Coalitions of Peaks – independent review of Closing the Gap. Accessed on 14 May 2026: [Review of Closing the Gap — Coalition of Peaks](#)

¹⁴ Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017.

¹⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-detention-population-in-australia-2024/contents/summary/first-nations-young-people-in-detention>

“The various criminal legal systems operating in Australia appear to be in crisis nationwide,” said Alice Jill Edwards, the Special Rapporteur on torture and Albert K. Barume, Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. “Children are suffering undue harm to their safety and well-being, as well as to their educational and life prospects as a result of short-sighted approaches to youth criminality and detention.”¹⁶

Many have not been convicted of any crime and most are on remand, detained because the system has failed to provide safe, community-based alternatives. Investment in Indigenous-led diversion, early intervention and prevention programs is urgent. Evidence shows¹⁷ such programs keep children out of the justice system and make communities safer in the long run.

The Closing the Gap target is that by 2031, there will be a reduction in the rate of Indigenous young people (10–17 years) in detention by at least 30%. Australia has made no progress on this target.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years of age across all Australian jurisdictions would be a step in the right direction. The age of criminal responsibility in most Australian states and territories is 10. This is younger than in most other industrialised countries. This contravenes the benchmark of a minimum age of 14 established in international law. Australia has been widely criticised for not adhering to international recommended standards.¹⁸ In the 2020 Universal Periodic Review of Australia’s Human Rights, 25 countries called on Australia to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14.

The NCCA calls on the Australian Government to enshrine a National Children’s Act that upholds child rights as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensures that state and territory juvenile justice systems are fully compliant with our international human rights obligations by raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

The NCCA calls on the Australian Government to honour its commitment to fund alternatives to incarceration, with Indigenous led community-based diversion programs.

5. Conclusion

Racism – the lie that we are not all equal - diminishes us all. This submission proposes three steps toward addressing its deeply embedded nature in our society: through the implementation of the National Anti-Racism Framework; a renewed impetus to “Closing the Gap” and raising the age of criminal responsibility coupled

¹⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/media-advisories/2025/05/youth-justice-systems-across-australia-crisis-un-experts>

¹⁷ <https://bocsar.nsw.gov.au/media/2020/mr-circle-sentencing-cjb226.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/media-advisories/2025/05/youth-justice-systems-across-australia-crisis-un-experts>

with more humane community-based approaches to juvenile offending. These are practical and implementable steps that require the political will to do so.

The NCCA stands in solidarity with First Nations people, many of whom belong to our member churches. We hope and pray that this Inquiry, in highlighting the ugly truth about racism directed at First Nations people and how to combat it, will provide the impetus to governments and all sectors of society including churches for a transformation to a more just and caring culture in Australia where First Nations people are heard and their rights protected.

Yours faithfully

Rev John Gilmore
NCCA President

Ms Elizabeth Stone
General Secretary