

## **AIHS Position Statement: Understanding Racism as a Workplace**

### **Health and Safety Issue**

#### **Purpose**

The Australian Institute of Health and Safety (AIHS) is committed to safeguarding the health, safety and wellbeing of workers by preventing and managing workplace racism as a recognised work health and safety (WHS) risk.

This sets out the AIHS position on racism as a psychosocial hazard and recommends risk mitigation priorities for stakeholders across the Australian WHS ecosystem, including regulators, policymakers, businesses, industry leaders and WHS professionals.

Workplace racism includes conduct directed at a person because of their race, ethnicity, cultural background or national origin that a reasonable person would recognise as offensive, humiliating, intimidating or exclusionary. It encompasses overt acts such as racial slurs and discriminatory treatment, as well as less visible forms including microaggressions, unconscious bias, structural disadvantage and casual racism. Racism at work is a preventable hazard that can cause significant psychological, physical, social and economic harm. It must not be treated as an isolated behavioural issue or an individual failing.

This position draws on the 2026 AIHS Member Survey on Racism as a Workplace Health and Safety Issue, a review of Australian and international research, and relevant legislation and guidance. It is intended as a foundation for continued leadership in policy, practice and advocacy. As Australia's peak body for WHS professionals, the AIHS plays a central role in supporting the profession to address workplace racism through evidence-based guidance, education and advocacy.

## Context

PCBUs have a primary duty under WHS legislation to eliminate or minimise risks to health and safety, including those arising from racism. Safe Work Australia frames this as a positive, prevention-oriented obligation, stating a PCBU must "do all that you reasonably can to eliminate or minimise the risk of racism occurring at work" (Safe Work Australia, 2024). The regulatory landscape is shifting further: Victoria already imposes a broad positive duty to eliminate race discrimination in workplaces (VEOHRC, 2024), and the Australian Human Rights Commission has recommended a race-focused positive duty at the Commonwealth level, with a review of positive duty compliance scheduled for 2026–2027 (AHRC, 2024). By the late 2020s, workplace racism is likely to be assessed through both WHS and equality law frameworks.

The evidence of harm is substantial and significantly underreported. Gari Yala research found 38% of First Nations workers reported unfair treatment due to their background, 44% heard racial slurs at work, and 59% experienced appearance racism (Young & Hatfield-Dodds, 2023); VEOHRC found around 50% of 2023 race discrimination complaints arose in the workplace – itself likely a fraction of actual prevalence (VEOHRC, 2024). Paradies et al. (2015) document racism as a determinant of health, linked to psychological distress, anxiety and depression. Critically, racism often operates systemically: repeated or seemingly minor behaviours can accumulate into significant psychological harm even where no single incident appears serious, and Safe Work Australia warns that where it goes unaddressed, workers become less likely to report other hazards too – making it a systems-level risk amplifier (Safe Work Australia, 2022).

The 2026 AIHS Member Survey confirms a gap between intent and practice. Most respondents agreed racism should be recognised as a psychosocial hazard and managed through preventative WHS systems, yet most said it is only sometimes or rarely recognised as a WHS issue in practice, confidence in the profession's capability to manage it was low, and over half had personally observed or experienced workplace racism. The most-requested improvements were stronger leadership expectations, integration into psychosocial risk frameworks, and clearer regulatory guidance. A minority saw racism as solely an HR matter – the AIHS position is that it requires WHS, HR and leadership working together, as with other recognised psychosocial hazards.

## **The AIHS Position on Racism and WHS**

The AIHS affirms that racism is a preventable work-related harm that must be managed through systematic WHS risk management, in collaboration with HR, leadership and specialist functions. It is a psychosocial hazard within the meaning of WHS law and should be treated accordingly. This position is anchored specifically in the primary duty of care under section 19 of the model WHS Act, which already requires PCBUs to eliminate or minimise risks to health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable, including risks arising from harmful behaviours such as racism.

The AIHS advocates for two outcomes: explicit recognition of racism as a psychosocial hazard within WHS frameworks, supported by practical regulatory guidance; and introduction of a positive duty to prevent race discrimination at the Commonwealth level, consistent with existing obligations in other jurisdictions.

We recommend the following risk mitigation priorities for key stakeholders in the Australian WHS ecosystem.

### **Regulators and Policymakers**

- Strengthen and harmonise regulatory frameworks to ensure racism is clearly recognised and enforced as a psychosocial WHS risk across all Australian jurisdictions.
- Develop and publish practical guidance clarifying overlapping PCBU obligations under WHS, anti-discrimination and other relevant legislation, including the implications of positive duty frameworks for workplace racism prevention.
- Support national data collection and research on workplace racism — including a national prevalence survey analogous to those on sexual harassment — and fund validated psychosocial risk measurement tools that treat racism as a recognised risk factor within national surveillance and reporting systems.
- Engage with the Australian Human Rights Commission and relevant state bodies to ensure a coordinated national approach, aligned with positive duty developments and grounded in prevention.
- Amend the non-exhaustive hazard list in section 19(3) of the model WHS Act to explicitly reference harmful behaviours, including racism and discrimination, elevating these risks to the same regulatory standing as risks from plant, substances and facilities — and ensure any positive duty introduced through anti-discrimination legislation is explicitly anchored to this section 19 primary duty of care, so WHS and anti-discrimination frameworks are harmonised rather than parallel and disconnected.



## **Businesses and PCBU's**

- Embed racism risk management within WHS management systems, using hazard identification, risk assessment, control and continuous improvement processes consistent with the psychosocial hazard model.
- Move beyond reliance on anti-discrimination policies and cultural awareness training by implementing higher-order controls that address root causes in workplace culture, systems and leadership, consistent with positive duty obligations.
- Establish psychologically safe, confidential and accessible reporting mechanisms, including options outside standard management hierarchies, and ensure they are trusted by workers from all backgrounds – recognising that racism suppresses reporting of other hazards as well.
- Actively monitor workforce experience through culturally safe consultation and data collection, recognising that most workplace racism is subtle and significantly underreported.
- Address racism from third parties including clients, customers, patients and contractors, particularly in customer-facing, health, transport and hospitality sectors.
- Invest in training and capability development that equips managers and workers to identify and respond to all forms of racism, including casual, covert and unconscious forms, and to understand the particular experiences of First Nations workers and workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

## **WHS Professionals**

- Recognise racism as a psychosocial hazard within the core scope of WHS practice, while working collaboratively with HR, diversity and inclusion specialists and legal functions to deliver integrated prevention and response systems.
- Apply systems thinking to identify the organisational, cultural and structural drivers of racism risk, including workplace design, leadership culture, reporting systems and power dynamics.
- Build competence in identifying and responding to all forms of racism, including microaggressions, unconscious bias, structural disadvantage and the intersecting vulnerabilities – such as visa status, gender and seniority – that affect whether workers can safely report.
- Advocate within their organisations for prevention-by-design approaches and support worker consultation processes that create genuine safety for workers from diverse backgrounds to participate in hazard identification and risk management.

## **The Australian Institute of Health and Safety**

The AIHS commits to:

- Providing evidence-based guidance, tools and education to support prevention and response, drawing on Australian and international research and the lived experience of affected workers.
- Building capability within the WHS profession through professional development programs, webinars and specialist resources on racism as a psychosocial hazard.
- Collaborating with regulators, industry, unions, professional bodies including HR and diversity specialists, the Australian Human Rights Commission, and researchers to advance effective, coordinated responses to workplace racism.
- Engaging in policy and legislative reform discussions at state and national levels, including contributing to positive duty developments and advocating for racism to be embedded in WHS frameworks.
- Sharing the findings of the 2026 Member Survey and supporting continued research, including a national prevalence survey, to strengthen the evidence base for effective workplace racism prevention.
- Regularly reviewing and refining this position to remain aligned with emerging evidence, regulatory developments and the experiences of WHS professionals across Australia.

## References

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