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Pandemic Racism in Australia: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to diverse manifestations of racism in Australia, from everyday attacks against Asian Australians to discriminatory policies towards temporary migrants. Since the start of the pandemic, considerable knowledge on pandemic-related racism has been produced. This knowledge has yet to be consolidated, leaving questions about the nature, forms, impacts and trajectories of racism during the pandemic. This paper presents a systematic review and synthesis of research on racism during the pandemic, with an emphasis on pandemic-specific racism. We searched the databases Scopus, MEDLINE and PsycINFO for research published between January 2020 and July 2022. Eighteen research studies were included in the review, along with reports of routine data collection by five organisations. The research reviewed collected data mainly around the pandemic's 'second wave' in Australia (June–October 2020), focusing largely on Asian Australians and temporary migrants nationally and in Victoria. Widely studied forms of COVID-racism were verbal abuse, physical attacks, exclusion and Othering, and institutional racism involving governments, media and employers. We examined the pandemic's health and socio-economic impacts, and variations in experiences of racism over time between ethnic groups. As Australia emerges from the pandemic, we consider the review's implications for pandemic response, anti-racism practice and policy, and future research.

KEYWORDS

Racism; pandemic racism; discrimination; COVID-19 pandemic; systematic review; Australia

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major global event that has led to outbursts of racism worldwide (Coates 2020, Haokip 2020, He et al. 2020). It has had significant impacts on society, including reinforcing stereotypes, spreading misinformation, and deepening existing racial and ethnic disparities in many countries (Elias et al. 2021, Gover et al. 2020, Gravlee 2020). Like other global crises, such as the Spanish flu, Ebola and SARS, the pandemic has created fertile grounds for diverse manifestations of

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exclusionary ideologies (Elias et al. 2021, Guadagno 2020), exacerbating existing racial tensions and leading to diverse forms of discrimination (Caiani and Graziano 2019, Mondon and Winter 2020).

In Australia, the pandemic has given rise to diverse manifestations of racism, such as assaults against Asian Australians, criminalisation of minority groups as suspect ‘spreaders’ of the virus, and discriminatory policies affecting temporary migrants (e.g. Farbenblum and Berg 2020, Kamp et al. 2022). Since the start of the pandemic, considerable knowledge on pandemic-related racism has been produced through academic research, opinion polls, incident reporting tools, and other data sources. This rich body of evidence is yet to be consolidated, leaving questions about the nature, forms, impact and trajectories of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing these questions is crucial for grasping the current moment in race-relations, and drawing lessons from the pandemic. To this end, we conducted a systematic review and narrative synthesis of racism during the pandemic, with an emphasis on pandemic-specific forms of racism.

We draw on Australia as a useful site and case study for examining COVID-racism, whose lessons may be extended to other national contexts. These lessons may be especially useful for other countries in the Global North such as Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, which have been shaped by settler colonialism and intensive migration. They are also relevant more globally, for countries that have seen similar forms of discrimination during the pandemic, from everyday attacks against people of Asian backgrounds to discriminatory policies towards temporary migrants.

1.1. The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant global event affecting the fabric of human societies worldwide. COVID-19’s first reported case was in late 2019. In March 2020, it was declared a global pandemic by the WHO, followed by worldwide travel bans and immigration restrictions, quarantines and lockdowns (Chinazzi et al. 2020, Stobart and Duckett 2021). Over the next two years the world has seen an economic crisis, ‘waves’ of infections accompanied by openings and closures, while awaiting vaccinations and treatment. Death rates remained high for about two years before finally subsiding in early 2022. By mid-July 2023, the WHO reported 768 million confirmed cases and nearly 7 million deaths (WHO 2023). While no longer declared a global emergency, COVID-19 continues to affect populations globally, from ‘long COVID’ (post COVID-19 conditions) and other health consequences of the pandemic (e.g. delayed surgeries) (Storen 2022), to economic and financial hardships (e.g. increased unemployment and heightened price levels) (Rathnayaka et al. 2023), to housing and patterns of mobility (Toger et al. 2021). These have been unevenly felt, with vulnerable groups and minorities disproportionately affected (Ballantyne and Giarrusso 2023, Breslau et al. 2023).

The pandemic has unfolded within environments already marked by considerable social conflict, on global, national, regional and other scales, with numerous struggles for social justice and equity that were fought at the eve of the pandemic. Still, the pandemic has resulted in new uncertainties, intensifying pre-existing anxieties and

generating new ones, aided by the erosion of trust in authorities and circulation of misinformation and disinformation. And while some collaborative efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus and develop and deliver vaccines were successful (Bavel et al. 2020, Brown and Susskind 2020), the pandemic often exposed vulnerabilities and exacerbated pre-existing inequities across countries (Guadagno 2020, Van Dorn et al. 2020).

1.2. The Pandemic in Australia

The first case of COVID-19 in Australia was reported on 25 January 2020, and was soon followed by various government restrictions. From March 2020, borders began closing and airlines ceased operations, affecting temporary migrants and other non-citizens (De Nardi and Phillips 2022). Australians were encouraged not to travel overseas, while international students were encouraged to leave Australia (Fronek et al. 2021, Prentice et al. 2020). This was followed by further measures such as social distancing, and ‘stay at home’ orders. By the end of 2022, Australia faced four ‘waves’ of pandemic outbreaks in March–April 2020, June–October 2020, June–December 2021 and during most of 2022, while Melbourne and Sydney experienced some of the longest and most stringent ‘hard’ lockdowns in the world. Other measures such as curfews, restrictions to travel radius, and mandating masks, were introduced as well. As vaccination rates increased, restrictions were eased from October 2021 and international travel recommenced the following month, while final travel restrictions were removed in April 2022. More than a year later, the pandemic has yet to be fully eradicated with many still hospitalised and needing treatment (Department of Health and Aged Care 2023).

1.3. Pandemic-racism Globally

Racism relating specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic, or, in short, COVID-racism or pandemic-racism, started briefly after news about the virus began to spread (Elias and Ben 2023, Tessler et al. 2020). Sinophobia and wider anti-Asian sentiments were apparent in the proliferation of racial slurs and physical attacks, graffiti and hashtags associating Chinese people with the virus, political dog-whistling and mediated racism (e.g. Gover et al. 2020, McGarity-Palmer et al. 2023, Ng 2021). Mainstream and social media contributed to the racialisation of the coronavirus (Ittefaq et al. 2022) and to the spread of anti-Asian racism across several countries (Ng 2021). Politicians’ dog whistling and anti-Chinese rhetoric contributed to increasing hate speech and xenophobia (Barreneche 2020, Human Rights Watch 2020, McGarity-Palmer et al. 2023, Ng 2021). Pandemic-racism further targeted other migrant and minority groups (Collard 2023, Gover et al. 2020), often as suspect ‘breachers’ of restrictions and ‘spreaders’ of the virus, including African migrants in China and Muslim minorities across various countries (Guadagno 2020, Poole and Williamson 2023). The pandemic circulated in media platforms, drove ubiquitous calls for foreigners to ‘go home’, and informed discriminatory policies. One place where incidents have been documented is a Wikipedia page titled ‘Xenophobia and racism related to the COVID-19 pandemic’¹ that lists hundreds of (mainly interpersonal) incidents occurring globally.

Global crises often create fertile grounds for diverse manifestations of exclusionary ideologies (Elias et al. 2021, Guadagno 2020). In many cases, they exacerbate existing

racial tensions and lead to diverse forms of discrimination (Caiani and Graziano 2019, Mondon and Winter 2020). As we have discussed elsewhere, racism during the pandemic has often fed on climates of exclusive nationalism and xenophobia (Elias et al. 2021), while some scholars have characterised racism itself as a pandemic (Godlee 2020). Pandemic racism has had other noteworthy characteristics. During the pandemic, we have seen new technologies rise to prominence, a surge in the volume of online activity, especially in social media, and advances in the use of algorithms and AI. These technologies were used in practices of state policing and surveillance of racialized and/or migrant neighbourhoods. The pandemic was also a watershed moment for online racism, leading to increased online activity and ongoing challenges to regulating misinformation, hate and discriminatory content, as illustrated by analyses of the rapid evolution of Sinophobia on Web communities (Schild et al. 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic reaffirmed that blatant racism is *not* a thing of the past. The torrent of anti-Asian attacks early on showed that capacities for violence, abuse and hatred remain close to the surface, ready to rise under certain conditions (e.g. xenophobia, uncertainty and inciting authorities). Subtler forms of racism were still expressed during the pandemic, while some of its deeply hidden structural forms have come into plain sight (Bonilla-Silva 2022). The pandemic exposed, amplified and directed attention to existing structural inequalities and racial disparities (Tai et al. 2021), apparent in disparate rates of pandemic-related infections, hospitalisations and deaths, while exacerbating myriad social issues. Minorities who had limited access to health and social services under the COVID-19 pandemic, such as temporary migrant workers, were victimised by structurally racist practices and systemic exploitations accentuated during the pandemic (Istiko et al. 2022, p. 10).

1.4. Pandemic-racism in Australia

Fear and panic about the pandemic were readily spurred by some media reports. For example, in late January, several days after the first case was reported, the Herald Sun published a sub-header that read ‘Chinese virus pandamonium [*sic*]’ (with ‘panda’ marked in a different colour), whereas the Daily Telegraph warned that ‘China kids stay home’ from school (ABC 2020), and various media spread panic about Chinese restaurants allegedly frequented by people who had contracted the virus. Around the same time, reports detailed rising racist incidents targeting Asian Australians, citing incidents reported by statutory agencies and organisations monitoring discrimination incidents (Tessler et al. 2020). Racial discrimination complaints to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) rose in January and February 2020, while in Victoria, eight times more enquiries were received about racial vilification in April 2020 compared with April 2019 (Kamp et al. 2021, VEOHRC 2020). From early April 2020, a newly established incident reporting tool recorded 377 complaints in just 2 months (Asian Australian Alliance 2021).

The then Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, suggested that international students struggling to support themselves should ‘go home’ (Nguyen and Balakrishnan 2020), while temporary migrants were later excluded from Government support packages such as JobSeeker and JobKeeper. In May 2021, a ban on Australians travelling from India left around 9,000 unable to return, which was condemned since similar

outbreaks in the US and UK did not result in such a ban (Bucci 2021). Reports revealed how minorities were targeted and disproportionately affected by pandemic-racism, including experiences of pandemic-related racism among youth from culturally diverse backgrounds (Doery et al. 2020), over-policing based on racial appearance (Boon-Kuo et al. 2021), and extreme 'hard' lockdown measures targeting residents of public housing, which per the Victorian Ombudsman were in breach of human rights (O'Keeffe and Daley 2022).

Available research and data have often reported on the experiences of Asian Australians with racism and discrimination of various forms (Berg and Farbenblum 2020, Doery et al. 2020, Gallagher et al. 2020, Kamp et al. 2022, Weng et al. 2021a). In these studies, 'Asian Australian' usually refers to people with an Asian heritage and/or who identify as Asian. Some of these studies focused specifically on Chinese Australians (e.g. Kassam and Hsu 2021, Li and Chen 2021, Zhao et al. 2022). Other studies have described racism experienced by international students, institutionally and interpersonally (Berg and Farbenblum 2020, Weng et al. 2021a). The repertoire of COVID-racism assumed multiple forms, including xenophobic attacks, graffiti, racial slurs, hate speeches, and widespread online abuse (e.g. Ballantyne and Giarrusso 2023, Berg and Farbenblum 2020, Gover et al. 2020). Additional research examined institutional discrimination. Residents of Melbourne's public housing towers described being discriminated against, feeling criminalised and unsafe, and have taken to social media platforms to contest discrimination (O'Keeffe and Daley 2022). An 'Australian first mentality' has further limited the access of refugees and asylum seekers into the labour market (Cooney-O'Donoghue et al. 2022).

Beyond the immediate harm caused by discriminatory acts, COVID-racism has led to increased mental health issues, social isolation, and barriers to accessing healthcare and essential services (Cheah et al. 2020, Luo et al. 2021). Moreover, there are concerns regarding the long-term societal implications of COVID-related racism, which could further perpetuate systemic inequalities and hinder social cohesion (Bambra et al. 2020). Quantitative analyses conducted with the general population as well as with Asian Australians and other subgroups documented the health, social and economic effects of racism (e.g. Berg and Farbenblum 2020, Biddle et al. 2020, Doery et al. 2020; 2022, Kamp et al. 2021), with examples of negative associations with mental health (e.g. Biddle et al. 2020, Kamp et al. 2021). Other research documented health effects of the pandemic on Indigenous peoples and migrants (Roder et al. 2022), and the impact of racism on behaviours such as walking, among Asian Australians (Ma et al. 2022).

A review should allow drawing firmer conclusions about pandemic-racism in Australia across this literature. Although several studies have examined forms of pandemic racism, the unique forms of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to be jointly discussed. Individual studies often look at how racism affects participants' lives, yet the wider impact of pandemic racism has remained unclear. Debates about the trajectories of racism over time, and its increase/decrease for different groups (e.g. Ballantyne and Giarrusso 2023, Kamp et al. 2022), may be advanced by drawing on additional data regarding the nuances pertaining to the time periods, measures used, and groups affected. Finally, reviewing the characteristics of existing scholarship would allow us to point to needed research and data going forward.

2. Study Aims and Questions

The paper provides a new systematic review of pandemic racism in Australia, based on research and data published between January 2020 and July 2022. The study's overall aim is to generate a novel, comprehensive account about the nature of pandemic racism in Australia. It does so by synthesising the emerging evidence on racism associated with COVID-19, based on scholarly research and complaint data collected by organisations. We use this evidence to engage with questions about the forms, effects and trajectories of pandemic racism. By synthesising this evidence base, the review allows drawing stronger conclusions about pandemic racism, beyond the findings of individual studies.

The review focuses on three main research questions: (1) What are the various forms that pandemic racism has taken in Australia? (2) What effects has pandemic racism had on health and socio-economic outcomes? and (3) How has the prevalence of racism, as experienced, changed throughout the pandemic? Additionally, we describe key characteristics of this scholarship. By presenting the cumulative evidence about the forms and adverse effects of pandemic racism, this review makes a unique contribution to calls to address racism and its impacts. Our account of the changes in the prevalence of racism experiences over time helps to settle debates on whether racism increased or decreased during the first year of the pandemic. We consider nuances around pandemic racism that affected Asian Australians over time (specifically Chinese Australians), and extend previous analyses (Ballantyne and Giarrusso 2023) to examine the experiences of additional ethnic and migrant groups.

We define racism as a system of oppression, which creates hierarchies of advantage and disadvantage between groups based on 'race', ethnicity, religion and related characteristics, generating and exacerbating unfair and avoidable inequalities (e.g. Ben et al. 2022, Berman and Paradies 2010). We focus on COVID-racism, which we conceptualise as forms of racism relating to the pandemic. These can include, for example, discourses about people as a 'virus' and as irresponsible 'spreaders' of the virus, or fearing that people are infectious just because of their (assumed) ethnic background/appearance. The review is also concerned with studies of racism occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, that explicitly discuss the pandemic as a context or in their framing. We are less interested in studies that have examined racism during the pandemic without specifically referencing the pandemic, and examine these only in relation to wider trajectories. We note that a wide body of research has shown rising levels of racism unrelated to the pandemic (Elias et al. 2021, Lee et al. 2019). While the review is not limited to any particular groups, our eventual focus on Asian Australians and international migrants reflects the scope of the scholarship reviewed, and indeed wider concerns about racism in Australia in the pandemic's wake. This is not to suggest that racism towards other groups has been unaffected by the pandemic, but that they have less frequently been examined by the scholarship reviewed.

3. Methods

3.1. Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

To synthesise the evidence about racism in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, we searched the databases Scopus, MEDLINE and PsycINFO, for papers published in

English between 1 January 2020 and July 2022. We used the following criteria to determine whether papers should be included in the review: (1) the paper describes primary research, including quantitative, qualitative and/or mixed-methods research, using all study designs; (2) data were collected between January 1st 2020 and end of June 2022, that is, during the first two-and-a-half years of the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) the research includes at least one measure or finding relating to COVID-racism, or to racism during the pandemic while making clear reference to the pandemic; and (4) the research was conducted in Australia and published in English.

Measures of racism were defined in a way that coincided with how we conceptualise racism in the Introduction. We included racial-, ethnic-, national-, religious- and migration- based discrimination, prejudice, stigma, stereotypes, micro-aggressions, Islamophobia, antisemitism and related terms (see [Table 1](#)). All study populations were included, regardless of participants' ethnic and migration backgrounds or other demographics. We included scholarly journal articles, published reports and two public opinion polls (Biddle et al. 2020, Hsu and Kassam 2022) that have been published and copyrighted. To identify reports and public opinion polls, we complemented the database search by a desktop scan, while drawing on our knowledge of the field of racism research in Australia to identify further sources. We also searched the reference lists of included studies, and of relevant reviews conducted during the research period (Ben et al. 2023, Istiko et al. 2022). Dissertations, conference papers and presentations were excluded. While our focus is on the first two-and-a-half years of the pandemic, we also discuss data collected pre-pandemic for comparison.

In addition to academic research, we discuss routine data collection and reporting mechanisms by government and community organisations, including the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Asian Australian Alliance (AAA), Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), the Islamophobia Register, and the Victorian Equal Opportunities and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC). The first four focused on Australia nationally, while the fifth focused only on the state of Victoria,

3.2. Screening, Data Extraction and Analysis

[Figure 1](#) provides a flow chart showing the primary search results, and the final inclusion of studies (PRISMA). All search results were imported into EndNote X9. Once duplicates were deleted, 2,793 references remained. We then independently double-screened the titles and abstracts to assess eligibility for inclusion. This phase produced 179 references.

Table 1. Search strategy.

MEDLINE Search Strategy (adapted for other databases as needed)
 (TI (discrim* OR prejud* OR racis* OR islamophob* OR 'anti semit*' OR racial OR ethnic OR victimi* OR 'anti-migra*' OR stereotyp* OR stigma* OR 'micro aggress*' OR 'race-based' OR 'unfair treat*' OR mistreat* OR vilification* OR 'anti immigra*' OR 'anti refuge*' OR 'anti Muslim*' OR 'anti Indigen*' OR 'anti aboriginal*' OR 'anti Asian*' OR 'anti African*' OR 'anti black*') OR AB (discrim* OR prejud* OR racis* OR islamophob* OR 'anti semit*' OR racial OR ethnic OR victimi* OR 'anti-migra*' OR stereotyp* OR stigma* OR 'micro aggress*' OR 'race-based' OR 'unfair treat*' OR mistreat* OR vilification* OR 'anti immigra*' OR 'anti refuge*' OR 'anti Muslim*' OR 'anti Indigen*' OR 'anti aboriginal*' OR 'anti Asian*' OR 'anti African*' OR 'anti black*')) AND (TI (Australia* OR Victoria* OR Melbourne* OR 'New south wales' OR Sydney OR Queensland OR 'Northern Territory' OR 'Australian Capital Territory' OR Tasmania OR 'Western Australia' OR 'South Australia') OR AB (Australia* OR Victoria* OR Melbourne* OR 'New south wales' OR Sydney OR Queensland OR 'Northern Territory' OR 'Australian Capital Territory' OR Tasmania OR 'Western Australia' OR 'South Australia'))

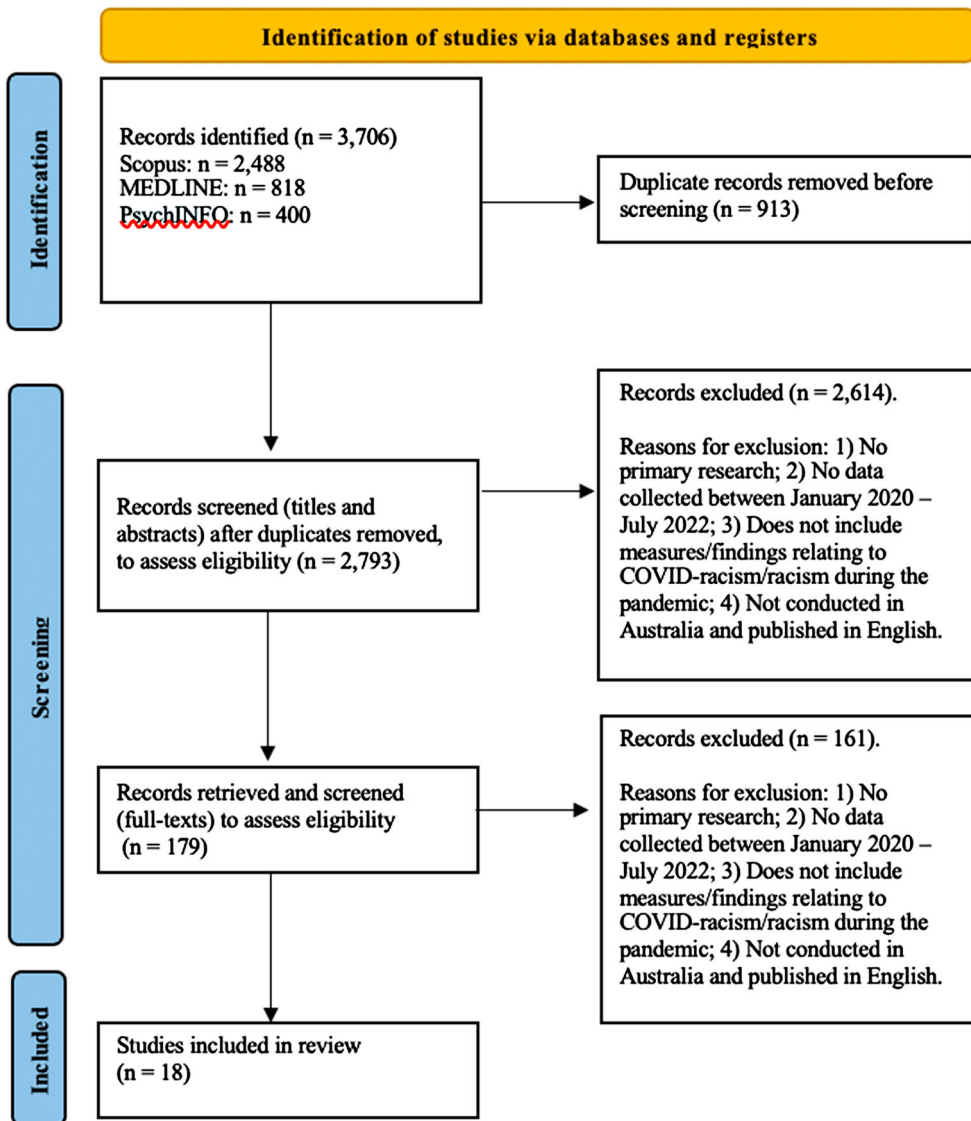


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only. From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. For more information, visit: <http://www.prisma-statement.org/>

The full texts of potentially eligible studies were obtained and screened to confirm they met the four inclusion criteria discussed above. We resolved all disagreements between us by discussion and consensus. We also ran extra searches among the 2,793 references, using COVID-19 pandemic related keywords ('COVID-19', 'coronavirus' and 'pandemic') to ensure good coverage of studies specifically relating to the pandemic.

Eighteen research studies met our inclusion criteria and were included in the review, which were reported across 16 journal articles and eight reports (see Table 2). Five of the

Table 2. Characteristics of studies reporting pandemic racism data.

| # | Author, year of publication | Period of racism data collected | Data collection methods | Study location | Sample size | Participant ethnic, racial, national backgrounds |
|----|---|---|--|----------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Berg & Farbenblum, 2020a; 2020b | July 2020 | Survey | Nationally | N=6149 | Temporary visa holders, especially international students |
| 2 | Biddle et al., 2020 | April 2020; October 2020 (with comparisons to 2019) | Survey/Poll | Nationally | N=3043 | General population, with focus on Asian Australians |
| 3 | Coffey et al., 2021 | May - June 2020 | Interviews and text/image/video posts | Victoria - Melbourne | N=3 | International students - various backgrounds |
| 4 | Cooney-O'Donoghue et al., 2022 | July - November 2020. | Interviews | Victoria | N=55 | Refugees and asylum seekers, and their managers - various backgrounds |
| 5 | Doery et al., 2020; 2022 | June 2020 | Survey | Victoria | N=376 | General population, with focus on multicultural backgrounds |
| 6 | Fronek et al., 2021 | December 2019 - July 2020 | Psychological assessment | Queensland | N=151 | International students - various backgrounds |
| 7 | Kamp et al., 2021; 2022 | November 2020 - February 2021 | Survey | Nationally | N=2003 | Asian Australian |
| 8 | Kassam & Hsu, 2021; Hsu & Kassam, 2022 | November 2020, September - October 2021 | Survey/Poll | Nationally | N=1040 in 2020; N=1002 in 2021, with comparisons to the general population | Chinese Australian |
| 9 | Li and Chen, 2021 | May 2019 - May 2020 | Interviews and participant observation | Nationally | N=31 (not including participant observation) | Chinese based in Australia |
| 10 | Lim & McDonald, 2022 | June - August 2020 | Survey | Nationally | N=113 | Asian Australian |
| 11 | Ma et al., 2022 | September 2020 | Survey | Victoria - Melbourne | N=1132 | Asian Australian |
| 12 | Markus, 2020; Markus, 2021; O'Donnell, 2022 (Mapping Social Cohesion) | July 2020, November 2020, July 2021, July 2022 | Survey | Nationally | General population: N=5883 in 2020; N=3572 in 2021; N=5757 in 2022. Chinese Australians: N=500 in 2020 | General population in 2020 -2022, and Chinese Australians in 2020 |
| 13 | O'Keeffe & Daley, 2022 | June - July 2020 | Social media posts | Victoria - Melbourne | N=48 | Not specified, residents of public housing |
| 14 | Roder et al., 2022 | March - August 2020 | Ecological design | Victoria | N=15482 | General population, with focus on people born overseas/ LOTE/ Indigenous peoples |
| 15 | Simic, 2021 | 2020 - 2021 (months unspecified) | Autoethnography | Victoria - Melbourne | N=1 | Bosnian migrant of refugee background |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

| # | Author, year of publication | Period of racism data collected | Data collection methods | Study location | Sample size | Participant ethnic, racial, national backgrounds |
|----|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|--|-------------|--|
| 16 | Tan et al., 2021 | August - September 2020 | Survey | Nationally | N=1375 | General population, expressing anti-Asian racism |
| 17 | Weng et al., 2021a; 2021b. | July - August 2020 | Interviews and census data | Victoria – Melbourne + Tasmania - Hobart | N=34 | Migrants of various backgrounds |
| 18 | Zhao et al., 2022 | August 2020 - December 2020 | Survey | Nationally | N=108 | Chinese international students in Australia |

articles were published in journals focused on social policy and analysis, including three articles published in the *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. Three other articles were in journals focused on education, while two focused on gender and two on health. Other journals were on a broad range of topics, including youth, religion, human rights, and transportation. Each of the 18 research studies was counted just once, and where the same study was reported multiple times (e.g. in a report and an article), we retained as much data as possible. We extracted data into an Excel spreadsheet, which was divided into four parts, consistently with the analysis: (1) study and participant characteristics; (2) forms and settings of racism, including subgroup comparisons; (3) impacts of racism on health and socioeconomic outcomes, and group disparities; (4) changes to racism over time. Where reported, prevalence and associations data were extracted as well. Data extraction and coding were undertaken by the first author (JB), and reviewed by the second author (AE). Disagreements were discussed and resolved between the two authors.

Data analysis was largely descriptive, drawing on elements of narrative synthesis (e.g. Popay et al. 2006). During the coding phase, the data from the 18 research studies were tabulated, organised and categorised according to the four study parts and the respective research questions outlined above (see Ben et al. 2023, for a similar process). The analysis examined patterns in study findings and characteristics, using ‘vote counting’ to record study numbers (counts) in each category across variables of interest. For quantitative analyses, we extracted and synthesised metrics related to racism’s prevalence and association data. For qualitative analyses, we recorded examples of key findings, which were discussed in-text. Due to the small number of studies, findings about the forms, effects and changes to pandemic racism were presented textually. Findings from routine racism data collection by human right commissions and community organisations were integrated into the synthesis part that focused on the trajectories of pandemic racism.

4. Results

4.1. Study and Participant Characteristics

What are the characteristics of studies about racism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia? The studies reviewed focused specifically on racism during the pandemic ($n = 6$), or examined racism as part of a wider investigation of challenges facing migrants and minorities during the pandemic ($n = 12$). Most of the research collected data in 2020, and the pandemic’s ‘second wave’ (June – October 2020) was the primary focus of this scholarship, with 17 of the 18 studies collecting at least some data then. Four studies collected data in 2021 and/or 2022, reflecting limitations to the timeframe of our search (ending in July 2022) and declining interest in the topic. Five studies included pre-pandemic racism data as well as later data.

Studies focused on Asian Australians ($n = 9$), often of Chinese background ($n = 5$), and to a lesser extent on temporary migrants ($n = 4$) (especially international students) and other migrant and minority groups. Two of these studies focused on participants from refugee backgrounds and two had separate analyses of Indigenous peoples. Nine studies focused on the national level, while eight studies focused on Victoria,

including five studies conducted in Melbourne. Another study was conducted in Queensland.

Similar numbers of studies used quantitative methods ($n = 9$) and qualitative methods ($n = 7$), while two studies applied mixed-methods or combined quantitative and qualitative analyses. Ten studies employed surveys, and four employed interviews, sometimes in combination with census data, participant observation, or video-based posts using an app. Others used social media posts, psychological assessment, autoethnography, and an ecological design to analyse government data. Sample sizes varied considerably. Qualitative studies' samples ranged from a single participant to $n = 151$ participants, while $n = 108$ to $n = 15,482$ participants were involved in the quantitative studies.

4.2. The Forms of Pandemic Racism

What are the various forms that pandemic racism has taken in Australia? The most widely studied forms of COVID-racism were verbal abuse and harassment, physical attacks, exclusion and Othering, and institutional racism involving governments, media and employers. Experiences of racism during the pandemic were pervasive, often in the range of 30-40% and higher, varying significantly between ethnic/racial groups, with widespread reports of verbal abuse, and racism in public, online and employment settings. However, there are strong indications that experiences were under-reported, particularly by Asian Australians.

4.2.1. Interpersonal Forms of COVID-racism

Studies of Asian Australians focused largely on experiences with verbal and physical abuse, associations with the virus or China, and strange looks and stares. Participants in Berg and Farbenblum (2020, pp. 45–46) were targeted by slurs, told they were 'a virus' (e.g. 'fking corona', 'Chinese virus'), harassed for wearing masks early on (when not compulsory), or told to 'go back to China'. This often occurred in public settings such as streets, public transport, and while shopping or driving, as well as online (Kamp et al. 2021, Markus 2020).

Overt verbal and physical forms of racism were particularly reported during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Li and Chen (2021), racial attacks on queer Chinese women on dating apps became more aggressive and overt once COVID started, as apparent in messages such as 'No bats, thx!', being called a 'Chinese virus' or asked to quit the app and 'Stop spreading your virus here!'. In Weng et al. (2021a), Chinese community leaders discussed a widespread subtle 'bias' against Chinese people and observed that the pandemic 'triggered' overt racist attacks. Such observations about a rise in overt racism go against recent historical trends where racism has gradually become more subtle and hidden.

Exclusion and Othering were often experienced by Asian Australians and migrants from other backgrounds, and several studies described experiences such as being stared at, and getting 'strange looks' due to wearing a mask (e.g. Coffey et al. 2021, Berg and Farbenblum 2020, p. 45). Participants in Li and Chen (2021) described a form of exoticism for wearing masks and receiving 'weird questions' about eating wild-life, under a veil of 'curiosity', that made them feel uncomfortable, and which they sensed were intentionally used to denigrate Chinese people. In another study, younger

Australians (general population) were more likely to avoid Chinese restaurants during the pandemic than other venues (Tan et al. 2021).

There is also evidence of pandemic racism affecting migrants from other (non-Asian) backgrounds (Berg and Farbenblum 2020, Doery et al. 2020). Migrant and minority groups experienced Othering and criminalisation, and suspicion that they spread the virus and exploit Australia economically. Examples include a Cameroonian woman told that ‘Africans caused the second wave’ in Victoria, a Colombian student told to ‘leave the country’, and ‘respect the Australian people’, and respondents from various nationalities who reported being regularly told to ‘get out of Australia’ and ‘f*ck off back home’ (Berg and Farbenblum 2020, p. 46).

4.2.2. Structural and Institutional Forms of Covid-racism

Reviewed studies engaged with wider issues such as discriminatory policies, anti-immigrant sentiments in media and political discourse, and heightened preferences for ‘locals’ in the labour market. Media political discourses, especially by leading politicians, and discriminatory policies, were widely discussed. For example, criminalisation and racialised media frames were applied in reports of African women as criminals who flouted COVID-restriction rules, while Senator Pauline Hanson made comments on television about the public housing lockdown that were seen as racist (Weng et al. 2021b). As noted earlier, the then Prime Minister was seen as contributing to Othering and discrimination by urging international students to ‘go home’, as the government denied international students pandemic-related support (e.g. Fronek et al. 2021).

Several policies have disproportionately affected minorities and were called out as discriminatory by study participants (e.g. De Nardi and Phillips 2022). One infamous case was Victoria’s hard and abrupt lockdown of a public housing estate. Residents discussed being criminalised, ignored and mistreated by authorities (O’Keeffe and Daley 2022). They questioned the racial equitability of the response (e.g. ‘[authorities] would never do this to white people’), and argued that the lockdown was about protecting communities in nearby, affluent suburbs, rather than the towers’ community (O’Keeffe and Daley 2022). Experiences of discrimination-based immobility were also focused on in an autobiographical account, describing the pain of being unable to see family, and cruelty and indifference towards migrants (Simic 2021). Some study respondents noted how the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing preferences for ‘locals’ in the labour market, suggesting that refugees and asylum seekers may suffer from bias as employers prioritise ‘Australians first’, and that the media generated narratives of fear that refugees will take jobs from ‘local Australians’ (Cooney-O’Donoghue et al. 2022).

Still, there are strong indications that experiences of racism are under-reported in surveys, particularly by Asian Australians. There are various reasons why people may generally under-report such experiences, including, for example, to avoid the social and health costs of perceiving racism, limits to perceiving and recognising racism, and holding onto social, cultural and political values that are incompatible with viewing racism as important (e.g. Ben 2023, Dunn and Nelson 2011, Kaiser and Miller 2001). Among Asian Australians, several studies have shown indications that experiences with pandemic racism have been under-reported or otherwise downplayed. For example, Kassam and Hsu (2021) found that Chinese Australians they surveyed have underestimated the level of discrimination against people of Chinese heritage in

Australia compared with the general Australian population (26% vs. 36%). Likewise, a Scanlon Foundation survey focused on Chinese Australians, found that 20% of participants declined to respond to a question about discrimination. It concluded that participants likely under-reported experiences of discrimination, which survey administrators interpreted as a cultural reluctance among Chinese Australian participants to draw attention to themselves, seeking to 'avoid confrontation and emphasise harmony over conflict' (see Markus 2020, p. 90).

4.3. Effects, Responses, and Group Disparities

What effects has pandemic racism had on different health and socioeconomic outcomes? The review found evidence that racism adversely affected depression, anxiety, stress (Kamp et al. 2021; 2022, Zhao et al. 2022), subjective mental health (Zhao et al. 2022), and mental health problems (Doery et al. 2022). Still in another study, racism had no effects on depression, anxiety and stress for Asian Australians (Lim and MacDonald 2022). Significant findings were supported by studies looking at self-reports of negative emotional responses to racism, where racism made respondents feel unsafe and afraid (Fronck et al. 2021, O'Keeffe and Daley 2022, Zhao et al. 2022), upset, angry, offended (Li and Chen 2021) and unwelcome (Coffey et al. 2021).

The most common behavioural responses to racism were taking no action/ignoring the discrimination faced, followed by discussing the experience with others (e.g. family, friends) (Doery et al. 2020; 2022, Kamp et al. 2021, Markus 2020). Less common behaviours included challenging the perpetrator, getting angry or laughing about it, and, online, writing a comment on website/platform, or reporting to the website's operator. Reporting to authorities was consistently lowly ranked in studies of behavioural responses and often seen as ineffective (Kamp et al. 2021, Li and Chen 2021).

The research reviewed also found evidence for health, behavioural and economic disparities between racial, ethnic and national groups during the pandemic. Roder et al. (2022) showed that the incidence of COVID-19 infections was higher among people speaking non-English languages at home, born overseas (living in regional areas), and among Indigenous peoples (living in metropolitan areas). Asian Australians had worse life satisfaction and subjective mental health outcomes than the general population (Biddle et al. 2020). Chinese international students have experienced more depression, stress, and mental health changes in response to the pandemic's outbreak, and lower levels of wellbeing, compared with domestic students (Zhao et al. 2022). Asian Australians were also less likely to increase their walking during the pandemic compared with White/Anglo people (Ma et al. 2022). Finally, Asian Australians experienced a bigger drop in the number of hours worked (Biddle et al. 2020), while other studies reported the pandemic impacted migrants' employment prospects (Cooney-O'Donoghue et al. 2022, Doery et al. 2020)

4.4. Trajectories of Racism

How has the prevalence of racism experiences changed throughout the pandemic? We focus here on several studies that have directly engaged with this question, tracking incidents of racism before and during the pandemic, along with complaint data routinely

collected by human rights commissions and community organisations. We discuss these sources jointly to provide a fuller picture of pandemic racism, while acknowledging variabilities to their methodologies, localities, measures and timepoints.

During the first months of the pandemic, there were contradictory reports about the extent of racism experienced (Ballantyne and Giarrusso 2023). First, based on some reports, racism seemed to have spiked during the initial outbreak. The AHRC reported significant rises in racial vilification complaints in January and February 2020. In Victoria, eight times more enquiries were received about racial vilification in April 2020 compared with April 2019 (Kamp et al. 2021, VEOHRC 2020). As noted earlier, the incident reporting tool by the Asian Australian Alliance recorded 377 complaints between April and June 2020 (Asian Australian Alliance 2021).

However, other data for 2019–2020 suggested a different picture. Contra to the eight-fold increase in enquiries to the VEOHRC, the same Commission received *fewer* actual complaints during that year. Similarly, the Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) survey indicated no change in experiences of discrimination (reported retrospectively for the preceding 12 months) between the periods leading to July 2019 and July 2020 (which included the pandemic's outbreak), before declining in the period leading to November 2020 (Markus 2020).

A similar picture of fewer reported experiences was portrayed by studies of Asian Australians that included pre-COVID comparisons. The ANU Poll data found experiences of racism reported by Asian Australians fell 12% between April 2019 and April 2020 (Biddle et al. 2020). These increased again in October 2020, possibly due to easing restrictions at the end of the 'second wave' (Biddle et al. 2020). Kamp et al. (2021, 2022), using a retrospective design, had similar findings, with an 8% decline in the pandemic's first year compared with the preceding year (Kamp et al. 2021). MSC analyses found slight decline in experiences among Asian respondents (41% in 2018-2019, 39% in July 2020) (Markus 2020). Possible explanations suggested for these results were the restrictions on social interactions (and 'possibilities to discriminate') and Asian Australians avoiding contact due to fears of discrimination (Biddle et al. 2020, Kamp et al. 2021).

Ballantyne and Giarrusso (2023) helped clarify these findings. They found that examining the experiences of 'Asian Australians' jointly may muffle differential effects for subgroups, since Australians of East and Southeast Asian backgrounds in their study reported more experiences of racism than Western, Southern and Central Asian Australians. These results align with differential rates found by Berg and Farbenblum (2020), where migrants from China reported the highest rates of racism experienced (52%), followed by East/Southeast Asian migrants, while rates for South Asian migrants were lower (although still considerable). Supporting this argument, a Scanlon Foundation survey of Chinese Australians in May-June 2020 found that 41% indicated experiencing 'much more' or 'more' discrimination during the pandemic, while 32% indicated 'about the same', and only 2% said 'less' (Markus 2020, p. 90).

The analysis by Ballantyne and Giarrusso (2023) can also explain contradictions that emerged in earlier reporting. The AHRC records complaints by the general population, and it is possible that the surge in complaints it detected in January-February 2020 was due to increased reports by East/Southeast Asian Australians. Unlike the AHRC reporting tool, the AAA's tool was completed predominantly by East/Southeast Asians and provides extensive evidence of experiences with pandemic racism. However, the AAA began

collecting data only in April 2020, making it impossible to compare incident trends to earlier in 2020. The gap between the much-increased interest in protections from discrimination observed by the VEOHRC, alongside the decrease in the number of actual complaints it received, confirms observations that racism was likely under-reported around that time.

Finally, some data sources tracked racism beyond the first year of the pandemic. Data from 2021 and 2022 suggest that overall, the prevalence of racism experiences and complaints has increased later into the pandemic, then declined or remained unchanged. The AHRC and VEOHRC both saw complaints increase in July 2020–July 2021, then decrease in 2021–2022, while experiences of discrimination among the general population increased in 2021 and remained the same in 2022 (Markus 2021). The trend was opposite for Asian participants in the MSC surveys, whose reports of discrimination experiences increased from 39% in 2020–42% in 2021 (no report in 2022). However, discrimination due to Chinese heritage slightly decreased in late 2021 compared to 2020 (37% to 34%) (Hsu and Kassam 2022, Kassam and Hsu 2021).

The trajectories of racism's prevalence seem to diverge across non-Asian Australian groups too. For example, antisemitic incidents logged by the ECAJ declined during the first year that included pandemic data compared with the year before, yet rose strongly in 2021 and 2022, possibly due to media coverage of restriction breaches by Jewish people, and to growing activities by anti-vaxxer and anti-lockdown activists (ECAJ 2021). Meanwhile reporting of Islamophobic incidents dropped significantly in 2020 and 2021, as racism was directed more towards Asians, while lockdowns and distancing limited physical harassment (Iner 2023, p. 10). These possibly align with other findings from the same period that negative feelings towards Muslims have declined (O'Donnell 2022, p. 66). In the MSC, people born in Australia and from English speaking backgrounds, reported less experiences of racism compared with pre-pandemic levels, while people of non-English speaking backgrounds reported experiencing more racism. Moreover, there was greater awareness of racism in Australia as a 'very big' or 'fairly big' problem, up from 40% in July and November 2020, to 60% in 2021 and 2022 (O'Donnell 2022, p. 69).

5. Discussion

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to numerous expressions of racism, globally and in Australia. As the pandemic subsides more than three years on, we reviewed research on pandemic racism in Australia. We examined the forms COVID-racism has taken, its effects on health and socio-economic outcomes, and changes to the prevalence of racism experiences over time. Additionally, we examined the characteristics of this emerging body of research. We now consider implications from this review and outline possible directions for pandemic response, anti-racism practice and policy, and future research.

5.1. Implications and Further Research

Our synthesis confirmed that direct, blatant racism was pervasive in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, and may have been especially rife during the pandemic's early

stages. Other forms of racism included exclusion, Othering and criminalisation, extending earlier and historical expressions of racism towards different racial, ethnic and migrant groups, in Australia (e.g. Jupp 2007), and globally (Cohn 2018, Risse 2012). Going forward, anti-racism education, training and campaigns should expose and contest these deep-seated frames of prejudice, to prevent their future resurgence.

The research reviewed frequently discussed institutional and structural discrimination, and evidence of wide-ranging racial/ethnic disparities. The structural dimensions of racism have been receiving growing attention, while evidence of serious racial/ethnic disparities during the pandemic has been accumulating globally (Bonilla-Silva 2022, Elias and Ben 2023). Still, we are far from understanding, let alone addressing, longstanding systems of oppression. The cumulative evidence we have presented, as others have done in reviews from elsewhere (Khanijahani et al. 2021, Mackey et al. 2021), is a necessary step in calling for more attention and action to tackle these apparent inequities. We call on researchers to further unpack health, social, and economic disparities relating to the pandemic and scrutinise their possible links to racism. Disparities data will continue to be crucial for unearthing racism beyond its direct and interpersonal forms, also since further data remains to be analysed.

The central role that politicians and the media played, particularly early on, in framing narratives about the pandemic, spreading misinformation, and fomenting stigma and hate, call for action to increase accountability during times of crisis. Practices of singling out and scapegoating certain groups for political gains and ratings must be stopped and called out. Training and education, stronger ethical norms in reporting, and better regulation of media content are some ways that may help preventing the next 'ethnic scare'. Concurrently, social and traditional media platforms and local authorities must better regulate hate speech online, make it punishable, promote powerful norms and practices against it, and devise new standards for online safety.

The pandemic demonstrated needed improvements in the speed and effectiveness of our response to racism in times of crisis. We need robust links between service provision and research, as well as policymaking and community action to address racism. Routine, high-quality data on racism during the pandemic have been very limited in scope, quality and links to actual services, as various organisations working on anti-racism have commented (see discussions in Ballantyne and Giarrusso 2023, Ben et al. 2023). Community organisations are often at the forefront of exposure to racism's harms and are well-placed to provide support for people who experience it. Yet they are usually under-resourced and limited in how they can respond to racism. We recommend long-term commitment and adequate resourcing of community-based anti-racism initiatives, discussions to increase awareness regarding culturally appropriate response during emergency, and targeted initiatives to monitor racism on an ongoing basis.

Data collection for research purposes may be done by extending existing surveys such as the MSC and Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, to include questions about experiences of discrimination due to migrant status and nationality, the forms of racism experienced (e.g. physically, verbally) and its settings (e.g. employment, education), discriminatory behaviours, and to examine associations between racism and health and socio-economic outcomes. Under-reporting and limited disaggregated routine data collection make it hard to know the real dimensions of racism in the first months of the pandemic. Reasons for under-reporting should be understood, amid

particular, socially and culturally-specific contexts. The limits and ends of reporting itself are important to engage with, ensuring that people who report racism, particularly to authorities, receive adequate support and that reporting is followed by tangible action.

5.2. Review Strengths and Limitations

Our review focuses on research and data published during the first two-and-a-half years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has two limitations. First, while this timeframe allowed us to focus on studies conducted in real time, early into the pandemic, it left out several studies published afterwards. We are particularly limited in considering the longer-term impacts of the pandemic, as well as the prevalence of racism experiences, and its possible fluctuations, at a time when the pandemic has subsided. Since COVID-19 has not been entirely eradicated, it would be useful for future studies to examine whether pandemic racism persists in any of the forms we have described, and whether other forms and related inequalities have been emerging (Bambra et al. 2020). Future studies may also explore the potential links between pandemic racism and post-pandemic effects in areas such as health and wellbeing, or socio-economically.

Second, in focusing on early publications we have included grey literature such as reports and opinion polls, as well as routine data reported by community organisations and human rights commissions. Including these sources was necessary given the recency of the pandemic and our desire to cover as much of the early research and data on pandemic racism as practicable. However, these sources have not gone through academic peer-review to ascertain their rigour. This limitation is partly mitigated by the fact that five of the eight studies for which reports were published also published their findings in peer-reviewed articles.

Finally, we want to reiterate the main strengths of this review, namely that it provides a novel, comprehensive synthesis of pandemic racism in Australia and is a unique attempt to understand the nature of racism during the pandemic, by examining its forms, effects, and trajectories. Our findings bear implications for practice and policy, with an eye to needed improvement in responding to pandemic racism, and ultimately preventing its resurgence in future crises.

Notes

1. Accessed on June 08, 2023, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xenophobia_and_racism_related_to_the_COVID-19_pandemic
2. An asterisk (*) denotes inclusion in the review.

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