

## EXPERIENCE OF DISCRIMINATION AMONG REFUGEE YOUTH IN MELBOURNE



the good starts  
STUDY FOR REFUGEE YOUTH

Discrimination impacts negatively on a person's life chances and is a powerful barrier to successful settlement among refugee youth. This broadsheet reports on the experiences of discrimination among 88 young people aged 12 to 20 years of age from refugee backgrounds in their first and second years of settlement in Melbourne Australia.<sup>1</sup> The information was collected using standardized questions on discrimination<sup>2</sup> and qualitative interviews with young people in the Good Starts Study for Refugee Youth.<sup>3</sup>

### What do we know about the impact of discrimination on health and wellbeing?

- Discrimination is a major cause of social inequality and has a negative impact on the distribution of life chances, including access to education, employment, housing and good health.<sup>4</sup>
- Racism is a powerful form of discrimination and self reported experiences of racism are associated with negative health outcomes, especially negative mental health outcomes.<sup>5</sup>
- The elimination of discrimination is a key health promotion priority.<sup>6</sup>

### Experiences of discrimination among refugee youth:

- 42% of the refugee young people reported ever experiencing discrimination because of their ethnicity, religion or colour, by their second year in Australia.

*"This guy called me like I'm a nigger. I called him "You like white bread!"...because he looked like bread! He was Australian."*

- Many youth reported being discriminated against before coming to Australia, for example in refugee camps and in cities they lived in after they fled their home country. *"(In Egypt) there was really terrible racism...we use to fight with them...there were not any Sudanese or African persons who went to Egyptian schools...cause if you went to their school it would be really bad."*
- 46% of boys reported ever experiencing discrimination compared to 36% of girls.
- There was no significant difference in experiences of discrimination by ethnicity or cultural background.

### Where do refugee youth experience discrimination?

- **School:** 9% of young people reported discrimination in their first year at school in Australia and this increased to 20% experiencing discrimination at school in the second year.

*"The first day (at school) some people were nice but on the second day...they're mean! They do not respect black people. Like in the toilets, they write bad stuff...I can't do anything even if I tell the teacher..."*

- **On the streets:** 12% of youth experienced discrimination on the street or in public settings. *"We were walking in the street, me and my mate, coming from basketball, and the car stopped and they were calling us niggers."*
- **Police:** 13% of young people reported experiencing discrimination from police since arriving in Australia.
- **Shops and trains:** 21% of young people reported experiencing discrimination in public places since arriving in Australia, especially on trains and in shops. *"I went just... to buy a few things. I went to the counter and he's like "Empty your pockets". I'm like, "Why?" He's like, "Cause you' re stealing". I just emptied my pockets, he checked me, I had nothing. Then this other kid comes in, he was a white kid but I'm not trying to be racist He walks out and then just, beep, beep, beep and starts running. I was pretty angry I'm never going back."*

### How frequently do refugee youth experience discrimination?

- 12% of youth had experienced discrimination 3 or more times in their second year in Australia.

### How do refugee young people respond to discrimination or unfair treatment?

- 24% of young people accept discrimination as a "fact of life" and 76% say they try to do something about it *"There's nothing much you can do about it (racism). First we know the police is racist and next thing you know people in the street are racist, next thing you know maybe most of the country are. There's nothing much you can do about it."*

- 30% keep their experiences to themselves and 70% share their experiences with another person.

*“The students here, like they treat people badly, they try to be racist and stuff. I go and talk to the teachers about that and they talk to them. If somebody do something wrong we’ll go to the teacher.”*

- There is no difference between the ways that girls and boys respond to discrimination.
- Feeling discriminated against is one of the major causes of fights.

*“This year 12 guy, he was being racist...he came up to me and he pushed me and I just punched him straight away, then my friends jumped in.”*

## What is the impact of experiences of discrimination on refugee young people’s wellbeing?

- Those who ever experienced discrimination were significantly more likely to report poorer *psychological* (p=0.047) and *environmental* (p=0.017) wellbeing compared to those who had not experienced discrimination. Environmental wellbeing refers to the quality of the living environment. ■■

## LESSONS and INSIGHTS

- Refugee youth talk about different kinds of discrimination that impact on their lives in Australia. In a related study, Good Starts Arts<sup>7</sup>, refugee youth talk about loud and quiet discrimination. Loud discrimination is words or actions that can be clearly understood as being racist – verbal and physical abuse. Quiet discrimination is more difficult to name and, in some ways, more difficult to find productive ways to deal with.
 

*“Some teachers...maybe they’re a bit racist but I don’t think so...only one of them...he doesn’t teach me...but whenever there’s some trouble or a fight that teacher always calls my name...people say he’s alright and everything...but I don’t know... that’s what I feel about it.”*
- Most of the discrimination that youth talk about stems from what they consider to be racism.
- For many refugee youth, the racism they experience in Australia is a continuation of the racism they experienced prior to arrival in Australia.
- Refugee youth explain that the racism they experience is one of the main causes of fights.
- Refugee youth look mainly to their teachers and to the police for reducing the racism they experience and for making their environment in school and in public places safer.
- Experiences of discrimination impact negatively on the mental and environmental health of refugee youth.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Racism is the major form of discrimination experienced by refugee youth during early settlement in Australia.
- Racism is well documented to have strong detrimental effects on the life chances of refugee youth including negative impacts on their physical and mental health.
- Combating racism is one of the major challenges of resettlement policy and practice.
- Eliminating racism requires strong positive leadership, affirmative action policies and zero tolerance strategies. Eliminating racism is key for promoting successful settlement outcomes for refugee youth. ■■

## ABOUT THE STUDY

The Good Starts Study is a five year study following a group of 120 refugee young people, to identify the social determinants of wellbeing and to inform policy and practice about how to support good settlement outcomes for refugee youth. The study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to gather information about settlement and wellbeing. The young people in the study were born in Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Liberia, Uganda, Burundi, Iran, Iraq, Burma, Croatia and Bosnia. They were between 11 to 19 years of age when they entered the study and had recently arrived in Australia. For more information see: [www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee\\_youth.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html)

### References

1. Refugee Health Research Centre. (2007). Demographics for Broadsheets #1 - #5. Retrieved from [http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee\\_youth.html#broadsheets](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html#broadsheets)
2. Krieger, N. et al. (2005). Experiences of discrimination: Validity and reliability of a self-report measure for population research on racism and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 61(7), 1576-1596.
3. Gifford, S. et al. (2007). Meaning or Measurement? Researching the social contexts of health and settlement among newly arrived refugee youth in Melbourne, Australia. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 3(3), 414-440.
4. Link, B. & Phelan, J. (2001). Conceptualizing Stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363-385.
5. Paradies, Y. (2006). A systematic review of empirical research on self-reported racism and health. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, 888-901.
6. Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. (2007). More than tolerance Embracing diversity for health: Discrimination affecting migrant and refugee communities in Victoria, its health consequences, community attitudes and solutions. Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.
7. Good Starts Arts. For more information see: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/projects.html#arts>



The Good Starts Study is funded by VicHealth



The Refugee Health Research Centre – A Partnership between LaTrobe University and Foundation House. For more information about the Centre visit [www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/)

