

FACT SHEET ONE

THE MISCONCEPTION THAT RACISM IS ONLY ABOUT INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS AND BELIEFS



What's the misconception?

Many people mistakenly believe that racism only involves individual actions and beliefs.

This is known as interpersonal racism. This includes slurs, harassment, exclusion, or intimidation inflicted based on [race](#). This misconception makes us see racism as isolated, overt acts committed by “bad” or ill-informed people.

What's the reality?

Racism includes all the barriers that prevent people from living in dignity because of how they have been [racialised](#). Systemic racism is upheld by the institutions, structures and ways-of-thinking we encounter every day. It shows up in limited access to housing, healthcare, employment and education – systems that impact people’s ability to build lives where they can support themselves and their families. These barriers often lead to poorer outcomes for people who experience racism and in turn, reinforce harmful stereotypes based on race. Systemic racism is what often gives license to interpersonal racism. While racism between people causes harm, it stems from and is sustained by this systemic inequality.

Interpersonal vs. Systemic Racism

Interpersonal Racism:

- Physically harming, threatening or harassing someone because of their race.
- Using slurs and insults or telling derogatory jokes based on someone’s race or ethnicity.

- Racial microaggressions that undermine the worth and lived experience of people affected by racism. For example, the question “Where are you really from?” implies that people who experience racism are foreign-born and that they don’t belong.
- A colleague giving a person of colour an Anglicised nickname without their consent.

Systemic Racism:

- Doctors misdiagnosing or delaying treatment for First Nations peoples and other communities that experience racism due to a lack of understanding their specific needs.
- Racial profiling of First Nations people within the justice system, contributing to over-imprisonment.
- Overlooking employees from non-European backgrounds for senior roles, leading to their underrepresentation in leadership.

Why is this misconception harmful?

It misrepresents racism: Understanding racism as something that only exists between people frames it as an individual rather than a systemic issue.

It limits solutions: Focusing on individual action means that the bigger picture is often ignored. System-wide actions and reform are needed to start addressing the impacts of racism.

It hides systemic responsibility: Focusing on individual instances of racism masks the role of institutions like schools, hospitals, and governments in upholding racism, and can limit their accountability.



How can we challenge this misconception?

- Improve our racial literacy and encourage others to do so. Learn how racism is propagated by decision-makers in systems like education, healthcare and justice.
- Take collective action to push for change. Demand that institutions – within and beyond your sphere of influence – understand and implement any changes needed.