EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**PREVALENCE AND PATTERNS OF RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT: A focus on Chinese and Asian communities.**

(From a quantitative report by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, February 2021)

## DISCRIMINATION PRE COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic reached Aotearoa New Zealand, race discrimination was established as a wide-reaching issue: four in ten respondents (40%) said that they experienced some form of discrimination in Aotearoa in the six months before COVID, and the incidence was higher (around five in ten) among Tangata Whenua[[1]](#footnote-1) and those of Chinese, Asian[[2]](#footnote-2), or Pacific ethnicity.

**Online negative comments aimed at people like them** was the most common type of discrimination experienced, followed by **negative experiences on the street or in a public place**.

**Ethnicity / race-based discrimination** was the most prevalent reason given for the discrimination experienced pre-COVID-19.

## DISCRIMINATION FROM THE START OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Four in ten respondents (39%) said they have experienced discrimination since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak**.** Nearly eight in ten (78%) of those who experienced any discrimination from the start of the outbreak had experienced discrimination pre-COVID-19.

**Online negative comments or abuse targeting people like them** was the most prevalent discrimination situation (of sixteen types measured), followed by feeling **others glaring / staring on the street** and **the general public avoiding some respondents more than others and physically distancing from them more than others**.

Separating out discrimination that could be definitively attributed to COVID-related racism is inherently challenging. But based on respondents’ self-reported experiences and perceptions, over half (54%) of those who experienced any discrimination said this was related to an increase in prejudice during the COVID-19 outbreak. In terms of the total sample, one in five overall (21%) said that they have experienced discrimination that was related to an increase in prejudice during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Tangata Whenua and ethnic Chinese respondents appear particularly vulnerable to experiences of discrimination, being more likely than others to say they have experienced this since the start of the outbreak (55% and 54% respectively) and consistently more likely than others to report that their experiences were COVID-related (30% for Tangata Whenua and 40% for Chinese respondents).

Younger respondents (particularly those in the 18 to 34 year age group) were more likely than older respondents to report discrimination during COVID. They may have spent more time out in public during lockdown than older people and they were also more affected by work-related or family role related issues than older people were. There may also be generational differences in how racism is felt, understood and reported.

Disabled respondents were also particularly vulnerable to experiencing discrimination: 55% reported this during COVID-19 (compared with 35% of non-disabled respondents), and they were more likely than non-disabled respondents to consider that their discrimination experiences during COVID-19 were COVID-related (36% compared with 17% of non-disabled respondents).

## GENERAL BEHAVIOUR CHANGES

Generally, around two in three respondents (65%) said they make an effort to avoid experiencing discrimination in their daily life. This was consistent across the different ethnicities.

Anecdotes indicated that some people changed their behaviours to avoid risking discrimination during COVID-19. Hence all respondents were asked whether they undertook seven specific actions during COVID-19 and whether that action was because of concerns about discrimination.

Three behaviours were common, with around four in ten respondents saying they did each of the following at least partly due to discrimination concerns. These were:

* **Keeping distance from others deliberately when out in public,**
* **Choosing to stay home**
* **Reducing outings and social activities**.

While not widespread, two actions were more likely than others to be taken due to discrimination-related considerations: **making more of an effort to be friendly to others** and **staying away from people of other ethnic groups more than their own.**

## WHETHER DISCRIMINATION HAS INCREASED DURING COVID

Nearly one in five respondents (18%) who experienced discrimination situations during the COVID outbreak said they have experienced more discrimination since the start of the outbreak, despite many saying they have been going out less. The most common response given was that the level of discrimination personally experienced was the same during COVID as before it (38% said this).

Chinese respondents were more than twice as likely as others to say they have experienced more discrimination since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak than before (37% cf. 18% of the total who experienced discrimination), with only 5% saying they have experienced less.

## EXPERIENCES OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY

In total, 16% of all respondents said they knew of, or had witnessed friends and/or family experiencing some form of COVID-related discrimination.

Tangata Whenua were most likely to say they knew of friends/family being discriminated against due to COVID (26% acknowledgment), with higher incidence also among Chinese respondents (24%) and Asian respondents (21%) compared with New Zealand European respondents (14%).

### **HOW PEOPLE RESPOND TO COVID-SPECIFIC RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA**

#### **RESPONSE TO COVID-SPECIFIC DISCRIMINATION**

When asked how they responded to COVID-specific discrimination, over four in ten respondents said that **they ignored it and did nothing at the time**. Doing nothing was more common among those of Chinese or Asian ethnicity (half of whom ignored it). Some said that they wanted to confront the person at the time but did not.

The most common more active response was to **talk to a friend or family member,** with one in four handling the situation in this way. People of Asian ethnicity were more likely than others to talk to a friend or family member.

**Staying at home and not going out as much** was a common response, particularly by Tangata Whenua.

**Making some type of active response at the time** **of the incident** was also common. One in five said they **answered back**, while one in seven said they **made a joke or used humour**. Both of these responses were more common among Māori than those of Chinese or Asian ethnicities.

**More formal courses of action**, such as reporting incidents to the police, the local embassy or the Human Rights Commission were the least common responses to discrimination experiences. Fewer than one in twenty of those who experienced some form of discrimination since the start of COVID-19 took such actions.

### **IMPACTS ON PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA**

COVID-related discrimination (that is, experiences perceived to have happened because of discrimination relating to the COVID-19 outbreak) has had a direct impact on the mental wellbeing of some respondents who have experienced discrimination, and to a lesser extent on their sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand.

* Nearly one in two (46%) of those who experienced COVID-related discrimination reported a negative **mental wellbeing impact,** compared with 9% reporting a positive impact (the latter possibly due to how others responded or supported them at the time), as per the wording of the question in the survey.The level of negative impact was consistent across respondents of Chinese, Asian and Tangata whenua ethnicities and was higher than average among essential workers and disabled respondents.
* The impact on respondents’ **sense of belonging** tended to be either negative (four in ten reporting a negative impact) or neutral (one in two reporting no change in their sense of belonging). Patterns across ethnicities were similar.

Generally, the COVID-19 outbreak has affected some respondents’ perceptions of personal safety. Around one in five respondents agreed that they have **felt self-conscious in public** due to worries about how others might perceive them, or that they have been **concerned about their safety due to the blaming of certain groups** and/or that they **worried about how their children and/or other family members might be treated**.

Those affected to a greater extent than the average included respondents of Chinese ethnicity (between four and five in ten agreeing with each), those of Asian ethnicity (one in three agreeing with each) and Tangata Whenua (one in four agreeing with each).

Personal concern about the **level of discrimination in Aotearoa** compared with before the COVID-19 outbreak has increased for one in four respondents (while remaining unchanged for just over one in two). Respondents of Chinese ethnicity and Tangata Whenua were more likely than others to feel increased levels of personal concern.

### **SUPPORTING THOSE WHO ARE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST**

When asked how they could be supported through such discriminatory situations, respondents who experienced personal discrimination during COVID talked about the value of connecting with others (community groups, family and friends), talking to people about their experiences (face-to-face or virtually), and reaching out to ask for professional help. Respondents also stressed the importance of practising self-care and repeated the national COVID-19 campaign message of being kind to others.

### **ATTITUDES TOWARD CERTAIN ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT**

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS CERTAIN ETHNIC GROUPS**

Over four in ten people felt thatthere has been more **discrimination against certain ethnic groups during the outbreak** than before. This view was most strongly held by Chinese respondents (both New Zealand and overseas born) and Tangata Whenua than others.

Generally, respondents did not believe that **Chinese people in Aotearoa are at least partly to blame for the COVID-19 outbreak** (two in three disagreeing, but a small proportion agreeing). There was acknowledgment, however, that **the responses of some governments will make life more difficult for Chinese people and Asian people**. This view was more strongly held by Chinese respondents than others.

The majority were aware of the **racist remarks that President Trump has made about COVID-19**, and most were opposed to such views. News media stories about **some groups of people being discriminated against due to COVID-19** were not widely known, but those aware were typically opposed to such discrimination.

### **ATTITUDINAL CHANGES TOWARD DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE**

When asked about how their **attitudes toward key groups have changed** since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the vast majority indicated that there has been little change in their attitudes towards **Pacific people, Māori, New Zealand Europeans** and **Asian people (not including Chinese).** Among those whose attitudes have changed, more positiveattitudes slightly outweighed more negative ones.

Views of **Chinese people in New Zealand** were also largely unchanged, with three in four respondents reporting no change. Among the remaining one in four, however, more positive attitudes were balanced by more negative attitudes.

Attitudes towards **people returning to Aotearoa from overseas during the COVID-19 outbreak,** however, were much less positive, with one in three people saying their attitudes towards such people have become more negative. This finding suggests the importance of monitoring the potential backlash as New Zealanders continue to return home from overseas in the coming months and any negative attitudes driven by racism.

**ATTITUDES TOWARD INITIATIVES DURING COVID**  
There was high awareness of iwi-organised regional checkpoints during COVID lockdown, which were the subject of some complaints to the Human Rights Commission. Views from Tangata Whenua respondents toward these were generally supportive, but more mixed among other respondents.

When respondents were asked about their attitudes relating to the government’s funding initiatives for certain groups to help communities during COVID, this was less well known than iwi-led checkpoints. Those who were aware of funding initiatives showed reasonably strong support for them.

## CONCLUSION

This study indicates that discrimination at a high level has been pervasive during COVID, and at least as widespread as pre-COVID (noting differences in specific questions). Since the start of the outbreak, online abuse has been the biggest issue (as it was pre-COVID), with focus on specific ethnicities, due at least in part to online media and news stories about the souce of the outbreak.

Three key respondent groups have been particularly affected by discrimination during the COVID-19 outbreak and may be particularly vulnerable for the foreseeable future: Tangata Whenua, people of Chinese ethnicity (both those born in Aotearoa and those born overseas), and people of Asian descent. Younger people and disabled people also felt vulnerable to discrimination.

The main public messages to date have communicated that racism is not a joke and to be kind to others. There was some recall of the ‘Racism is No Joke’ campaign developed by the Commission and the Office of Ethnic Communities, with Tangata Whenua and Asian respondents reporting the highest recall. There is opportunity to further the reach of this campaign to Chinese and Asian communities to demonstrate support and to the general public to eliminate the use of online racist jokes. Further work should be considered to address the extensive racism experienced by Tangata Whenua clearly demonstrated in this research.

1. Note: Respondents who described their ethnicity as Māori in the survey are referred to as Tangata Whenua throughout the report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the purpose of this research, findings relating to Chinese respondents were reported separately from findings relating to respondents with ancestries from other Asian countries such as India, Korea, Philippines, Japanese, other Southeast Asia, South Asia and/or Middle East/Southwest Asia [↑](#footnote-ref-2)