

Submission by Multicultural Youth South Australia Inc (MYSA)

In response to the call for submissions by the Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism

May 2017

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Canberra ACT 2600

Email submission: multiculturalism.sen@aph.gov.au

About MYSA

Multicultural Youth South Australia Inc (MYSA) is the state representative advisory, advocacy and service delivery body for multicultural young people aged between 10 and 30 years, the only youth-specific multicultural agency in South Australia, and one of two leading youth-specific agencies in the country. MYSA is a multi-award winning youth service provider which is recognised locally and nationally for its leadership on youth issues.

MYSA has extensive experience in working with youth with high and complex needs from refugee, migrant and Aboriginal backgrounds, with a particular focus on those aged between 10 and 18 years and those experiencing multi-pronged disadvantage. Approximately 4000 young people access MYSA's services each year, including a significant proportion who experience barriers to social inclusion including racial discrimination, vilification and settlement service barriers.

This submission will address the following issues stipulated by the Select Committee with specific reference to the experiences of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds: (a) the adequacy and accessibility of settlement and social inclusion services and resources available to individuals and communities; (b) the views and experiences of people from culturally and linguistically diverse, and new and emerging communities; (c) the impact of discrimination, vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of 'race' colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief; and; (e) the impact of political leadership and media representation on the prevalence of vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of 'race', colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief.

About the young people we support

Young people from CALD backgrounds comprise approximately 30 percent of the youth population of South Australia, and of these, many are refugees or migrants, or the children of refugees or migrants. Young refugees are an important subgroup within the broader CALD population who have experienced certain conditions and circumstances that are known to increase the risk of vulnerability. All have been

forced to leave their countries, leaving behind family, friends, and belongings and many have endured additional losses and trauma.

The process of cultural transition and resettlement brings with it additional difficulties including missing family and friends left behind; homesickness, difficulty understanding Australian culture and systems; school adjustment problems, often in a context of disrupted education; few friends, lack of peer acceptance, lack of a supportive network, and low social participation. Many have also experienced major changes in their family roles, responsibilities, and expectations with migration. Young people in the early stages of resettlement, and those from cultures significantly different to that of Australia, are often disproportionately affected.

(b) The adequacy and accessibility of settlement and social inclusion services and resources available to individuals and communities

While federally funded specialist multicultural services are available under the current Settlement Services Program (previously the Settlement Grants Program), support is withdrawn after five years of arrival in Australia, after which children/youth are expected to have integrated into Australian society, and are on their own. However, the issues impacting young people's settlement experiences do not simply disappear after five years, and in fact can become more pronounced. Issues affecting young people include:

Family breakdown

Family breakdown as a result of intergenerational conflict, parental abuse, neglect, harsh child disciplinary practices and overcrowding is common. Although the physical discipline of children was practiced as a cultural standard prior to migration, acculturative and resettlement stress coupled with a range of other displacement related stressors is resulting in such discipline escalating into physical abuse which is severe enough to warrant intervention by child protection authorities.

Housing and homelessness

A number of young people are couch surfing or living rough on the streets, with reasons including family conflict and breakdown, violence and abuse and, to a lesser extent, overcrowding. Barriers to housing include a lack of knowledge of the housing system, processes and services, lack of intensive support for those with high and complex needs (behavioural and mental health issues), lack of independent living skills, landlords refusing to rent to young people, a lack of local rental history and references, and public housing shortage.

MYSA is aware of groups of transient young people who are squatting in abandoned properties (no electricity or water) across the northern and western suburbs. Issues include: group sex and sex with multiple partners in the same evening, underage sex, filming sex and posting it on social media and drug and alcohol abuse.

Unsafe sexual practices

Many young people who are being tested for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are testing positive.

Teenage pregnancy and early parenthood

There has been an increase in teenage pregnancy and early parenthood. Nearly all of these pregnancies and births are unplanned and occur outside of stable relationships. This issue is noted elsewhere in Australia. Some young women are being manipulated or forced to become pregnant by partners as a form of control and are then later abandoned and left to raise the children alone.

Young parents lacking parenting skills

Young parents, particularly teenage parents, often lack the skills to adequately care for their children, with harmful parenting practices being passed down to the new generation of young parents. In some cases this is resulting in child abuse including violence, neglect and emotional abuse (e.g., physically and emotionally abusing children, not preparing nutritious meals, not dressing children appropriately for the weather, leaving them unattended and living in households that are not clean). The long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect are well documented.

Youth justice issues

While most young people involved in offending and other problem behaviour commit crimes against property, there is increasing involvement in crimes against the person, for example, assault, partner violence, statutory rape and rape, and crimes involving weapons.

Young people typically have poor knowledge of Australian law in relation to crime and the youth justice system. Most young refugees do not know that convictions can have serious ramifications for their lives and futures because they are excluded from culturally distributed forms of knowledge that Australian-born peers take for granted. For example, MYSA is aware of one young person who was charged with aggravated assault. When he appeared in court, he brought a fully packed suitcase because he assumed he was going to prison.

Many parents/caregivers feel they have no control over their children and that the police do not consult with them about their children.

Many young people who engage in offending behaviour also have mental health problems, and those with mental health problems often keep reoffending. This is significant because most do not receive timely or culturally appropriate mental health support, placing them at risk of offending and reoffending.

Youth “gangs”

Young people – both males and females – are forming youth “gangs”. Most of those involved are homeless and many are carrying weapons (knives) including young women.

Intimate partner violence

A number of young women are affected by intimate partner violence and are not reporting the abuse or seeking help. Even when they do seek help, they are at increased risk of having their needs neglected by the police and violence intervention services due to cultural barriers.

Alcohol and drug abuse

Alcohol abuse and addiction is very common among young males in particular.

Disengagement from education and employment

This is generally as result of family breakdown, homelessness and peer pressure.

Despite their increased risk of vulnerability, most young people in the post 5-year settlement period are not being picked up mainstream services due to barriers to participation at both the individual and service delivery level.

Individual barriers include a lack of knowledge about services; a cultural mismatch between the services offered and the young people needing to access them; general distrust of services; stigma associated with needing and seeking help; and various practical difficulties associated with attending services such as frequent residential mobility and difficulties with transport and finances. Where services are provided with assistance from same-culture professionals, young people may also be concerned about confidentiality, particularly if they belong to small and emerging refugee communities.

Service-related barriers include a system-wide lack of cultural awareness and competence, coupled with a general lack of cross-cultural training and support. This not only prevents access to services but seriously affects the quality of services that are received. Young people continue to experience service gaps and complexity and a bureaucratised, fragmented and uncoordinated service delivery system that is too often unresponsive to their needs.

(a) the views and experiences of people from culturally and linguistically diverse, and new and emerging communities; (c) the impact of discrimination, vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of 'race' colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief; and; (e) the impact of political leadership and media representation on the prevalence of vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of 'race', colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief.

Young people have consistently identified racism, discrimination and social exclusion as issues experienced in daily life, particularly in schools, the workplace and in public settings, for example on public transport. Regardless of whether the racism and discrimination is experienced individually or institutionally, the impact on self-esteem, confidence and a sense of belonging remains the same. There is serious concern that social exclusion and limited access to life opportunities based on racism and discrimination may lead less resilient young people to internalise negative stereotypes and generalisations and even accept and fulfil them.

In MYSA's experience, perceived social exclusion can place young people at risk of falling in with the 'wrong crowd' in an attempt to find belonging and acceptance. Racism and discrimination have been

found to limit young people's life opportunities in a range of areas, for example, finding employment, accessing services and securing private rental accommodation. Racism and discrimination is pervasive in the South Australian labour market, with many young people being refused employment at places where jobs were routinely given to their Australian-born peers. Physical and other characteristics are often the basis for job refusal, including wearing the wrong clothes (e.g., hijab), bearing the wrong name (e.g., Mohammed), having the wrong hairstyle (braids, dreadlocks), or speaking the wrong language (foreign accent).

This submission will separate the response to these issues in terms of the experiences of young people from: (a) African backgrounds and; (b) Middle Eastern backgrounds.

(a) Experiences of African young people and the impact of racism, political leadership and media representations.

Public discourse surrounding young African refugees are highly influenced by political and media representations that perpetuate the stereotyping and stigmatisation of African youths as 'violent', and their supposed 'failure to settle effectively'. This is particularly the case for young African men who have been frequently represented as 'thugs' in the media. For example, the widely reported 'Apex' gang in Melbourne, responsible for a string of carjackings, home invasions and jewellery store robberies, was frequently reported in the media as a predominantly South Sudanese youth gang, and used by politicians as evidence of the need to 'crack down' on migrant crime gangs. For example, Peter Dutton, Minister for Immigration, earlier this year stated that a parliamentary committee is looking at lowering the deportation age from 18 to 16 years for refugee and migrant young people who commit serious crimes.¹ Despite the common belief that African youths were the main offenders, Victorian Police have recently given evidence during a parliamentary inquiry into migrant settlement outcomes stating that the Apex gang was never predominantly African and instead is comprised mainly of Australians.²

Such political and media representations, and subsequent public discourse, significantly impacts the day to day lives of young African refugees. Many experience frequent street level racism including challenges from members of the public about their right to be in Australia.

An important source of settlement stress for young African refugees concerns poor youth-police relations. This issue was examined by MYSA in 2007 through commissioned research following concerns about young refugee's use of public space within Adelaide city. The research found that racism and discrimination is a particular issue for young refugees in Adelaide. Half of all participants reported that they regularly faced racism from a range of sources including peers, teachers, the police, security guards and other authority figures, shop assistants and managers, as well as the general public.

A source of particular frustration concerns the disciplinary practices young people say police use to restrict their access to and presence in public places, particularly the Central Business District (CBD) of Adelaide. They often report being subject to disproportionate police surveillance and interference while visiting the CBD, for example, being stopped, questioned, asked to produce personal identification (ID), or moved on from a particular area – simply for being street present. Police often seem to be unaware that gathering in groups is a cultural practice for this group, and would instead perceive it as concerning

¹ Gleeson, A (2017), 'Peter Dutton warns: Young criminal migrants could be deported to tackle growing issue of youth gangs', <<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/peter-dutton-warns-young-criminal-migrants-could-be-deported-to-tackle-growing-issue-of-youth-gangs/news-story/ae1fd26631b07ef1204c4760e25a1edb>>.

² Farnsworth, S (2017), 'Apex crime gang declared a 'non-entity' by Victoria Police', <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-12/victoria-police-declare-apex-crime-gang-non-entity/8440312>.

or threatening in and of itself. Many young people find that police impose a racial double standard in their policing of public space, allowing mainstream Australians, but not Africans, to gather in groups. As such, police are widely regarded as racist by young African refugees, and this has led to distress, confusion, and frustration because although young people often feel powerless, particularly when they are the victims of street racism, they recognise that the police have the authority and a duty to intervene.

(b) Experiences of Middle Eastern young people and the impact of racism, political leadership and media representations.

Discrimination towards Middle Eastern refugees has become increasingly problematic in recent years, largely driven by negative media portrayals of Muslims and the current national and international political climate. Afghan, Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian young people often report racist attitudes and behaviour directed toward those of Middle Eastern appearance, particularly those who could easily be identified with Islam, for example girls wearing the hijab. Young people often attribute their experiences to the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. and many experience street racism, usually involving racial slurs including accusations of them being terrorists or members of the extremist group ISIS.

Young Middle Eastern women in particular are often made to feel uncomfortable in public if they are wearing the hijab, regardless of whether they are subjected to verbal insults, accusations of terrorist links or just prolonged staring.

Young people from Middle Eastern backgrounds are also particularly subject to racism and discrimination as a result of political discourses around coming to Australia illegally as 'boat people'. Accusations of being 'terrorists' and also 'queue jumpers' suggest that they are undeserving of their place in Australian society, and this unsurprisingly has a major impact on young people's ability to successfully settle in Australia. Racism has a major impact on adolescent wellbeing, affecting self-esteem and confidence, psychological and physical safety, and trust in others, with young people at risk of internalising their experiences of racism, seeing themselves as rejected by society and believing that perhaps they should "just go home".

MYSA welcomes this inquiry and appreciates the opportunity to provide comment.

Authorised Contact:

Ms Tamara Stewart-Jones
CEO
Multicultural Youth South Australia Inc