



Submission to

the inquiry into support for children and young people who have been directly or indirectly exposed to trauma associated with migration to Australia due to humanitarian crises

The Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Western Australia Parliament

Perth, WA

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Dear Hon. Mrs R.M.J. Clarke,

Chair

I appreciate the opportunity provided by *the Joint Standing Committee on the Commissioner for Children and Young People* to contribute to the inquiry aimed at improving the lives and prospects of children and young people who have experienced trauma due to forced migration.

My submission primarily responds to the fourth area of the inquiry, namely *strategies the State Government could consider to mitigate the risk of adverse impacts of migration-related trauma in children and young people*.

I study the impact of traumatic stress on learning and well-being. In the last six years, I have been investigating the educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes of African heritage Australian youth with refugee experiences.

Young people living on the fringes of society, such as young Australians of African heritage, face an increased risk of enduring trauma that profoundly impacts their ability to trust others.

In this submission, I shed light on the double trauma of displacement and racism experienced by this group and make two interrelated recommendations, emphasising the importance of embedding trauma-responsive practices and nurturing trust in trauma-impacted young people.

The double trauma of displacement and racism

African heritage children and young people with refugee experiences encounter what I call the double trauma of displacement and racism.

The traumatic stress associated with displacement is commonly referred to as refugee trauma. Being both Black and a refugee poses a significant risk factor. I interviewed more than 70 African heritage youth from refugee backgrounds through two extensive studies. The vast majority encountered racial stigma and discrimination across diverse public spaces and institutions. Additionally, over half of them revealed experiencing the adverse effects of intergenerational trauma.¹

Refugee trauma

Forced displacement is characterised by *loss and violence*. Refugees leave their homes in immense distress and arrive in host countries with considerable material losses and emotional scars. Refugee trauma refers to the psychological wound resulting from forced displacement and exposure to war,

¹ Molla, T. (2024). *African heritage Australian youth: Forced displacement, educational attainment, and integration outcomes*. Routledge. Molla, T. (2023). Racial Othering and Relational Wellbeing: African Refugee Youth in Australia. *Social Sciences*, 3(12), 609. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110609>

abuse and torture. According to the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma,² about 25% of refugees have been physically tortured or subjected to severe psychological abuse prior to their arrival in Australia.

Trauma-impacted parents can also pass the wounds of trauma to their children through stories that recount painful experiences and events. After repeatedly listening to trauma stories of loss, grief, shame and humiliation, children of traumatised refugees might start unconsciously reliving their parents' experiences. Not only does the fear of the parent become the fear of the child, but also the stories that children hear from their parents and families shape their worldviews and mediate how they carry themselves through life.

The young participants in my study, who shared accounts of trauma relayed by their parents and family members, were significantly impacted by the received narratives. It is evident in their accounts that *received trauma stories* influence their perceptions of self and others, complicating their acculturation process.

Racial trauma

Racism pervades the experiences of African-heritage Australian youth at every juncture. In my study, accounts of young African heritage people from refugee backgrounds in Australia shed light on the pervasive and distressing nature of the chronic racial stress they endure.

Persistent exposure to racial prejudice and discrimination causes racial trauma which manifests as chronic stress. This overwhelms ordinary coping mechanisms and leads to depression, fear, feelings of alienation and hyperarousal. In other words, individuals endure physical, social and psychological injury because of repeated exposure to racial discrimination and microaggressions.³

As the 'African gang' narrative takes root in public discourse, the weight of racial stress becomes increasingly burdensome. The fear of being treated with less respect, ignored or discriminated against because of one's perceived racial identity places a significant psychological burden on individuals. The awareness of belonging to a group that is negatively viewed and unfairly judged can result in feelings of anxiety, alienation and shame.

Recommendation 1

Embed trauma-responsive practices. Trauma-responsive practices create safe interactional environments—*nonjudgmental spaces* of respect and trustful interactions that provide security and predictability. Trauma-responsive practitioners are trained to notice sensitive circumstances and navigate those situations with heightened thoughtfulness and care.

² FASSTT [Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma]. (2018). *Never turning away*. Retrieved from https://fasstt.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FASSTT_BOOKLET_2017_A4_FA_web.pdf

³ Duncan, A. D. (2024). *Black students matter*. Oxford University Press.

Trauma-responsive practitioners (e.g. teachers and police officers) are attuned to emotional cues of trauma (verbal and non-verbal signals of trauma), avoid triggers that may push individuals beyond their window of tolerance, and provide clear and predictable communication. They shift their thinking from 'What's wrong with you' to 'What happened to you'—they reassure trauma-impacted youth: 'You're safe with me.'

Trauma diminishes trust

Trust is the glue that makes understanding and cooperation possible. Trust is the silent assurance that empowers us to cross a busy street when the pedestrian light turns green, confidently place our orders in a restaurant, attend meetings with defined agendas, engage in contractual agreements, willingly adhere to the directives of law enforcement agencies, or step onto an aeroplane for that eagerly anticipated vacation.

Nevertheless, not everyone finds it easy to place trust in others. For instance, trauma affects trust by erasing a sense of safety and security. The slightest hint of danger triggers anxiety in traumatised young people.

Individuals whose formative years are characterised by physical and emotional abuse could be robbed of the ability to trust others both at home and in public. Young people who experienced abuse and violence perpetrated by figures of authority in the past may often find themselves in a dysregulated state when engaging with teachers or law enforcement officers. Without trust, traumatised young people find it challenging to engage in learning processes and social interactions.

Even worse, trauma-impacted young people carry 'pain-based behaviours' that show up in disrespectful, defiant or shut-down ways.⁴ However, it is critical to realise that those disruptive behaviours often start as 'frustrated attempts to communicate distress and as misguided attempts to survive'.⁵ In other words, adapting a heightened sense of alertness and distrust as a coping mechanism is not often wilful – traumatised youth have a limited capacity for emotional self-regulation.

Recommendation 2

Nurture trust in trauma-impacted young people. Nurturing trust in trauma-impacted young people means instilling confidence during interactions through respectful engagement and transparent communication. Inspiring trust necessitates being attuned to the daily experiences of racialised and trauma-impacted young people.

Trust serves as a critical buffer against further distress and alienation for young individuals who are grappling with the compounded challenges of trauma and racial discrimination. For example, by

⁴ Desautels, L. L. (2020). *Connections over compliance: Rewiring our perceptions of discipline*. Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing.

⁵ Van Der Kolk, B. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin Press. (p.354)



cultivating trust, schools can create spaces where students feel valued, respected and supported, empowering them to engage more fully in educational and social activities.

Likewise, young people who have endured past mistreatment at the hands of authority figures can find that interactions with law enforcement instigate fear, increase vigilance, and elicit a profound sense of mistrust. Trustful policing engagement creates safe environments where interactions are characterised by tactfulness and mutual respect. It prevents re-traumatisation, promotes effective communication and addresses disparities in policing outcomes.

Professional learning opportunities (such as [this one](#)) can be instrumental in providing teachers and other practitioners with the latest knowledge and skills to establish safe and trustful interactional environments.

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