

# Asian-Australian experiences of discrimination

ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

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## Introduction and overview

Racism, discrimination, and unfair treatment based on a person's ethnicity can have large negative effects on victims. This includes on their physical/mental health, their economic circumstances, and their social and emotional wellbeing. In addition, discrimination in labour market in particular can have large negative effects on the economy more broadly, as the talents and ideas within a society are not used to their fullest.

In recent decades, Australia's migrant profile has shifted towards Asia, with India and China in particular now providing a large and growing source of migrants to Australia. While there are many first, second and third generation migrants to Australia from Asia who are navigating the Australian labour market in a very successful way, there are still many barriers faced by Asian-Australians. These barriers occur when people are trying to enter the labour market for the first time, as well as when they try and take on more senior leadership positions.

In the August 2019 ANUpoll, the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods and the Social Research Centre asked a representative sample of more than two-and-a-half thousand Australian adults on their experiences of discrimination, their beliefs in the level of discrimination that currently occurs within Australian society and workplaces, and their support for particular policy interventions. This paper provides a summary of the main findings as they relate to Asian-Australians. More details on the data collection method are provided at the end of this document, with the full dataset to be released through the Australian Data Archive in October.

## Who identifies as Asian-Australian

We asked a very simple question to identify a person's ethnicity, beginning with – 'Do you identify as Asian-Australian?' In total (and using population weights), 14.7 per cent of Australian adults are estimated to identify as Asian-Australian. Of those who did identify as Asian-Australia, 30.5 per cent were born in Australia compared to 75.9 per cent of those who did not identify as Asian-Australian. While the gender mix was very similar, Asian-Australians in the 'Life in Australia'<sup>TM</sup> panel were younger on average than the rest of the sample – 37.4 years compared to 50.2 years.

## Discrimination experienced by Asian Australians

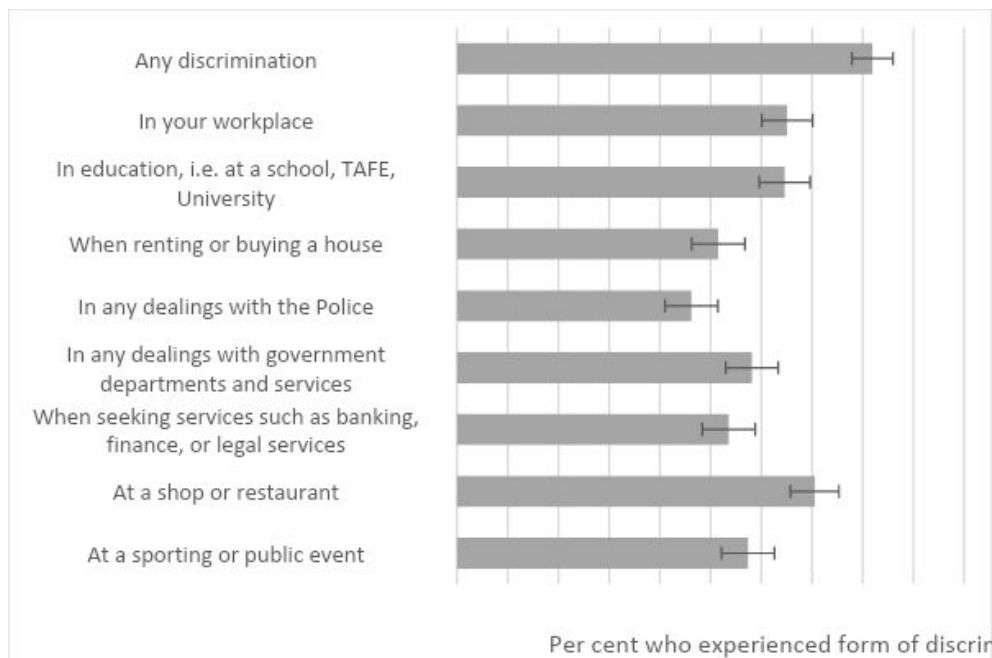
We asked respondents: 'How often have **you** experienced discrimination in Australia because of your **own ethnic origin** in the following situations?', with eight situations given. Figure 1 shows that 81.9 per cent of Asian-Australians experienced any form of discrimination, which was the highest amongst all the self-identified ethnic groups in the sample.<sup>1</sup> The most common situation where discrimination was reported by

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<sup>1</sup> The other groups included were; Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians; Anglo-Australians; European-Australians; African-Australians; Middle-Eastern Australians; Latin-American Australians; and Pacific-Islander Australians; with a further created category of 'No stated identity.'

Asian-Australians was 'At a shop or restaurant' followed by 'In your workplace' or 'In education.' Discrimination was not evenly spread across Asian-Australians, with those who identify as LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup>, those who are relatively young (under 25), and those born overseas all experiencing higher rates of discrimination.

Figure 1 Situations where Asian-Australians experienced discrimination<sup>3</sup>



### Reactions to discrimination

One of the effects of discrimination (actual or predicted) is the way in which those who are exposed to it change their behaviour. While these changes may minimise exposure to discrimination, they can have other negative consequences, either on a person's physical or mental health or on future outcomes. For those who were currently employed, we asked: 'Has discrimination, or the fear of discrimination, based on your ethnic origin changed how you act in the workplace?' More than half of the Asian-Australian respondents answered yes to this question which, apart from Middle-Eastern Australians, was the highest amongst the ethnic groups specifically identified in the sample.

Of those who took an action, we also asked about the specific type of action that they took. As shown in Figure 2, the most common action taken amongst Asian-Australians was 'Been less outspoken at work', which was reported by 21.7 per cent of Asian-Australians. Relatively young Asian-Australians (under 35) were more likely to have taken an action at work, as were those born overseas. There were also some area-level differences with those

<sup>2</sup> This term refers to a person who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, intersex, asexual, or other terms (such as pansexual).

<sup>3</sup> For this and subsequent figures, the 'whiskers' around the estimates provide the 95% confidence interval



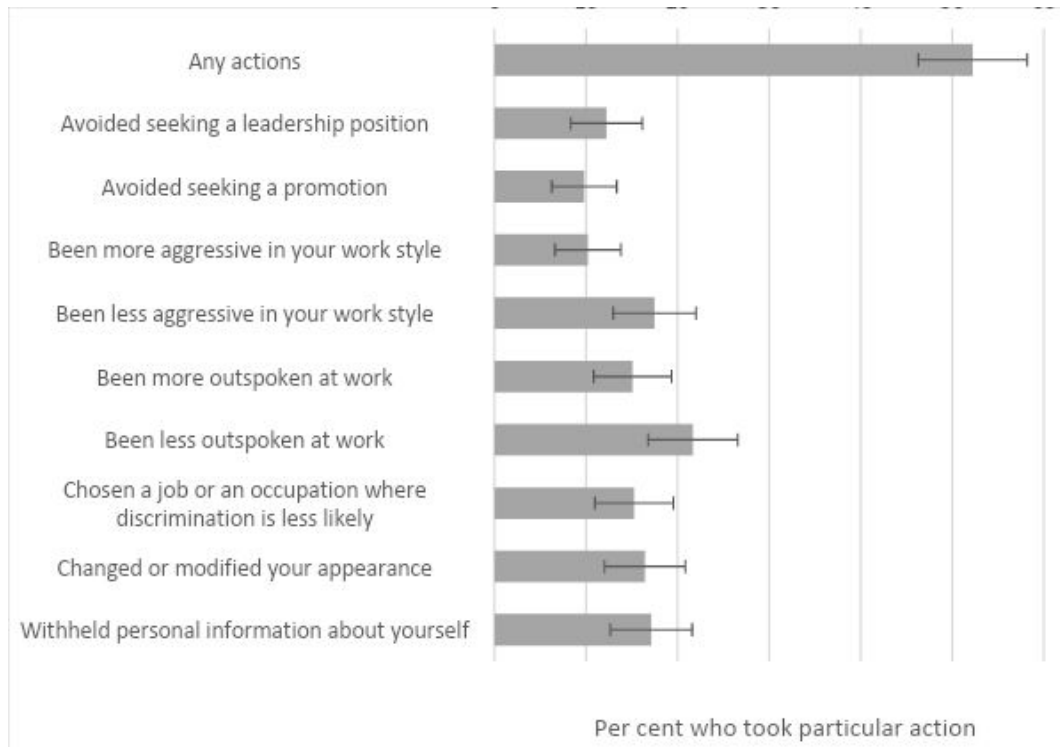
who lived in neighbourhoods in the middle part of the socioeconomic distribution and those who lived outside of capital cities more likely to have taken actions.



[asianaustralianleadership.com.au](http://asianaustralianleadership.com.au)



Figure 2 Actions taken at work because of discrimination or the fear of discrimination – Asian-Australians who were currently employed.



### Perceptions of discrimination

Any policy responses to the high level of discrimination experienced by Asian-Australians (and other groups) will require support from the broader public. We therefore asked all respondents regardless of their own background 'Do you think people from the following backgrounds experience discrimination based on their ethnic origin?' 81.6 per cent of the total sample agreed with this statement, which was an almost identical per cent of respondents as the per cent of Asian-Australians who themselves said that they experienced discrimination mentioned earlier (81.9 per cent).

The percentage of the sample who thought Asian-Australians experienced discrimination was not significantly different from the percentage who thought Indigenous Australians experienced discrimination (84.4 per cent), but slightly lower than the per cent who thought African-Australians or Middle-Eastern Australians did (86.4 per cent and 86.6 per cent respectively).

There were some interesting and statistically significant differences across the population in who thought Asian-Australians experienced discrimination. A key finding was that Asian-Australians are less likely to think that Asian-Australians experience discrimination (78.9 per cent) than the rest of the Australian population think Asian-Australians experience discrimination (82.2 per cent). It should be noted though, that Asian-Australians are less likely to think all other groups in Australia (apart from Anglo-Australians) experience discrimination.

Females, the relatively young (under 35), those with a degree, those who live outside a disadvantaged area, and those who live outside a capital city are all more likely to think that Asian-Australians experience discrimination when analysed using a regression model.

While there are some differences by who a person said they would vote for, support for the view that Asian-Australians experience discrimination is not an overly partisan issue. Labor and Greens voters were more likely to agree (87.7 per cent and 88.2 per cent respectively), however more than three-quarters of those who said they would vote coalition (76.2 per cent) agreed that Asian-Australians experience discrimination.

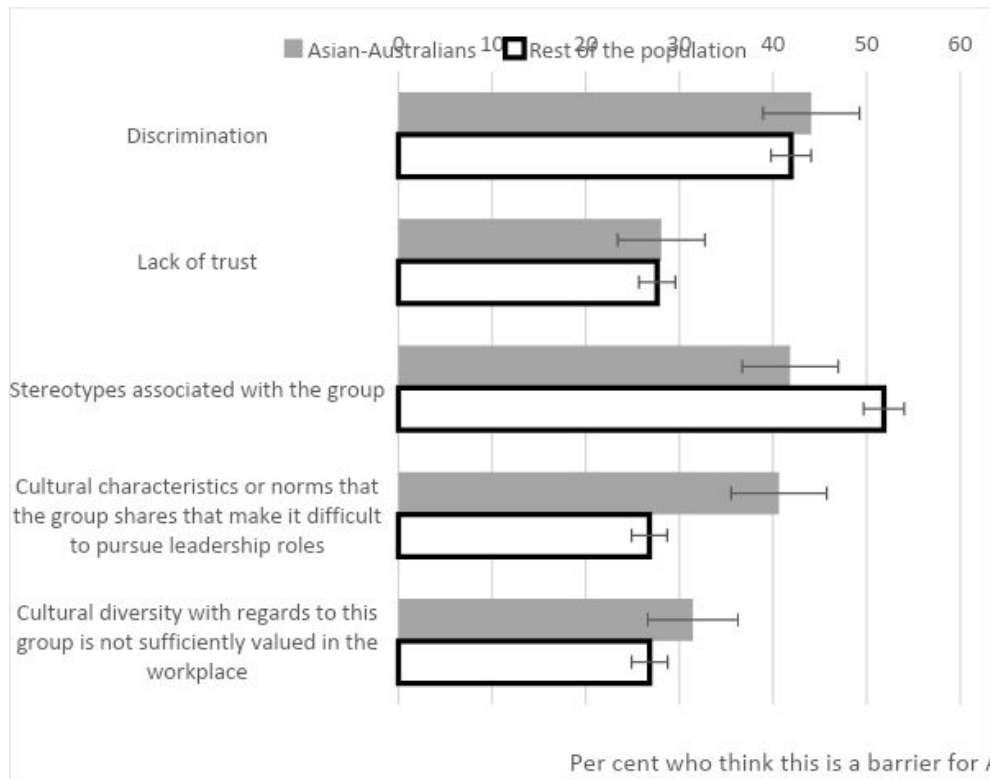
We were also interested in whether there was a view that Asian-Australians (and other groups) receive preferential treatment in the labour market, and when seeking promotion in particular. We split the sample into two, and asked half the sample 'Do you think people from the following backgrounds **do not have to work as hard** as others to win a promotion?' and the other half 'Do you think people from the following backgrounds **have to work harder** than others to win a promotion?'. When asked about favourable treatment, 29.3 per cent of that half of the sample thought that Asian-Australians did not have to work as hard, the lowest for all the groups asked. The highest was 42.0 per cent who thought Indigenous Australians did not have to work as hard and 38.4 per cent who thought Anglo-Australians did not have to work as hard as others.

When asked about unfavourable treatment, 46.8 per cent of the sample thought that Asian-Australians had to work harder than others to win promotion. This is lower than for all other groups apart from Anglo-Australians and European-Australians. On balance, it would appear that the general population do not think that having an Asian-Australian identity is an important component of promotion success, either positively or negatively.

Like the 'glass ceiling' with regards to gender discrimination, the 'bamboo ceiling' refers to barriers in the labour market with regards to promotion to very senior leadership positions, rather than at more junior or middle-levels. From our sample, 42.7 per cent thought that Asian-Australians were somewhat or greatly under-represented in leadership positions. 50.5 per cent of Asian-Australian respondents thought Asian-Australians were under-represented in leadership positions. This is significantly and substantially higher than the rest of the population (41.4 per cent).

In the 2019 Asialink Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop Lecture, Chancellor of the ANU Gareth Evans identified five potential barriers to leadership positions for Asian-Australians. We asked respondents to the ANUpoll whether they thought those barriers existed for Asian-Australians (as well as other groups). Figure 3 gives the per cent of Asian-Australians and the per cent of the rest of the population who think those barriers exist. For Asian-Australians, the three reasons that received the highest (and similar) support were Discrimination (44.1 per cent), Stereotypes associated with the group (41.8 per cent), and Cultural characteristics or norms that the group shares... (40.6 per cent). Interestingly, a higher per cent of the rest of the population (51.9 per cent) think stereotypes are a barrier, whereas a lower percentage (26.8 per cent) think cultural characteristics are.

Figure 3 Perceived barriers in achieving leadership positions, by Asian-Australian identification



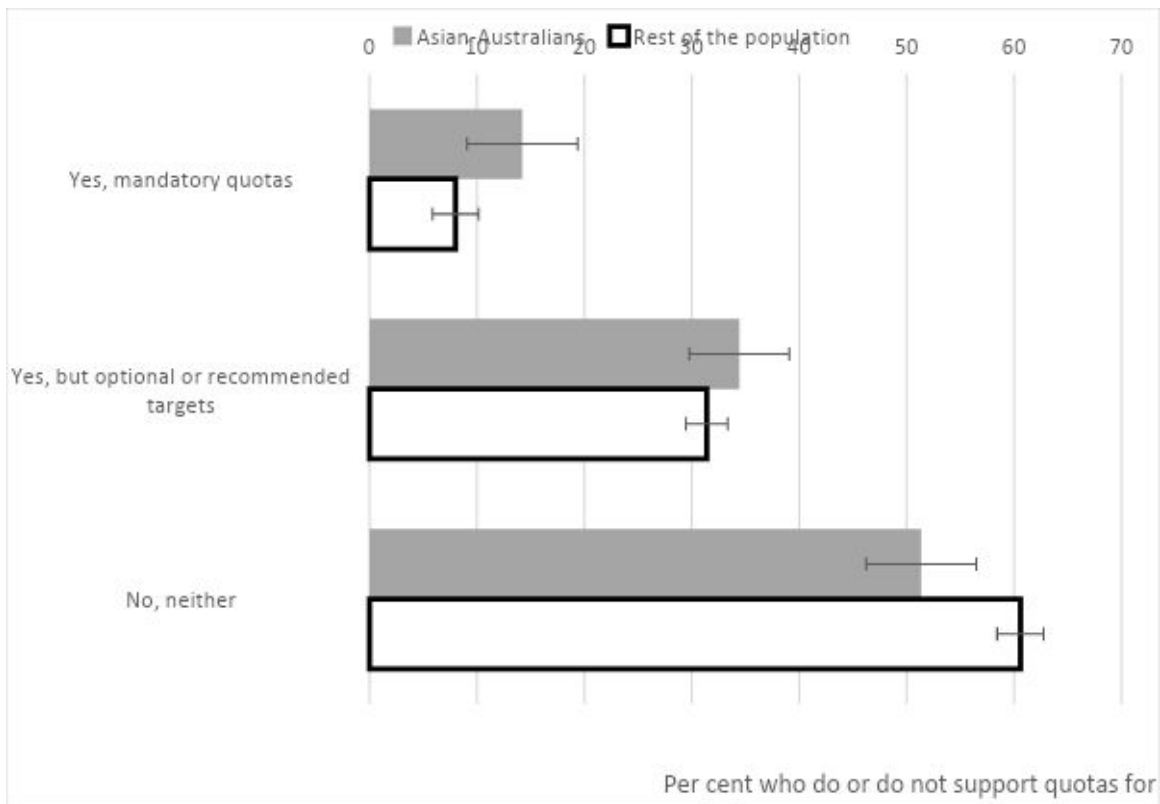
### Policy responses to discrimination

While there is a general consensus that discrimination exists for minority-groups in Australia and that it is a barrier to positive employment outcomes, there is less consensus for what the policy response ought to be. Or, even whether there should be a policy response at all. The first question we asked on policy issues was ‘Which of the following best describes your view on how much is being done to reduce discrimination in Australia among the following groups, would you say...?’ With regards to Asian-Australians, 6.9 per cent of the total sample thought that too much was being done, 61.6 per cent thought the right amount was being done, and 31.5 per cent thought not enough was being done. There was a slightly (but significantly) higher proportion of Asian-Australians who thought that not enough was being done (39.3 per cent), but there is still less than majority support amongst the Asian-Australian population for doing more on discrimination.

The last set of substantive questions on ANUpoll related to specific policy interventions. We started by telling respondents that ‘We are interested in your opinions on specific types of workplace policies, and your thoughts and feelings about workplace environments more broadly. These questions are purely hypothetical and there are no right or wrong answers.’ One question, which we asked of one-quarter of the sample was ‘Do you think there should be quotas or targets for Asian-Australians in Australian workplaces?’

For the Asian-Australian population, 14.2 per cent support mandatory quotas and 34.4 per cent support optional or recommended targets. These figures are both higher than the level of support from the rest of the population, with 8.0 per cent and 31.4 per cent supporting mandatory and optional/recommended targets respectively (for Asian-Australians). While the small sample sizes mean that these differences aren't statistically significant at the 5 per cent level of significance, when we look at the per cent of the population who did not think any quotas or targets should be set (51.4 per cent for Asian-Australians and 60.6 per cent for the rest of the population) the difference is statistically significant. That is, there is less than majority support for quotas or targets for Asian-Australians from Asian-Australians, and even less support from the rest of the population.

Figure 4 Support for quotas for Asian-Australians in Australian workplaces, by Asian-Australian identification



### Concluding comments

The data presented in this paper summarised a large data collection on a representative sample of the Australian population (outlined below) with regards to discrimination experienced by Asian-Australians. The data suggests that Asian-Australians experience high rates of discrimination, that the general population believes this to be the case, and that at least some of this discrimination relates to gaining leadership positions. There is not, however, large support for policy interventions related to discrimination experienced by Asian-Australians. It is hoped that the data summarised in this paper and to be released through the Australian Data Archive will help support such a policy debate.



## About the poll

ANUpoll is conducted for The Australian National University (ANU) by the Social Research Centre, an ANU Enterprise business. The poll surveys a national random sample of the adult population (predominantly using the 'Life in Australia'<sup>TM</sup> panel). In this poll, 1,972 people were interviewed on the 'Life in Australia'<sup>TM</sup> panel between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2019. Among individuals who received the survey (ie remaining members of the 'Life in Australia' panel), a completion rate of 76.5 per cent was achieved. Taking into account the recruitment rate to the panel, the cumulative response rate is calculated as 8.3 per cent.

In addition to the survey respondents from the 'Life in Australia'<sup>TM</sup> panel, this ANUpoll included a boosted sample of 575 individuals who identified as an Asian-Australian. This additional sample was achieved using a single opt-in 'research only' online panel. Invitations were sent to n=30,170 panellists inviting them to take part in the survey. This equates to a completion rate of 1.9%. The samples have been combined for a total sample of 2,547 respondents (of which 765 identified as Asian-Australian) and weighted to represent the national population.

The poll is conducted via the Internet (92 per cent of respondents) and phone (8 per cent of respondents). The use of this mixed-mode frame is to ensure coverage of households without Internet access. The poll's margin of error is approximately  $\pm 2.5$  per cent. The survey will be made available in October through the Australian Data Archive.