

# 'Don't drag me into this'

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GROWING UP SOUTH SUDANESE IN VICTORIA

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AFTER THE 2016 MOOMBA 'RIOT'



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Images in this report have been supplied by the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

*'There are times we belong here, and there are times that we don't. And ... we don't want to belong here only when we're doing positive things. We want to belong here no matter what.'*

– Participant 3, Focus Group 2

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## Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the first phase of an ongoing research project titled *Intergenerational Perspectives on the Criminalization of Young People from the South Sudanese Community in Victoria (2017–19)*. The study is a collaboration between the Victoria-based not-for-profit Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and researchers from both the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre (MMIC) at Monash University and the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. The research was funded through an Industry Collaboration Grant provided by the Faculty of Arts at Monash University (AUD\$15,000) with supplementary funding (AUD\$5,000) and in-kind support provided by CMY. Ethical approval was secured from Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee (10680) and the University of Melbourne's Humanities Law & Social Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee (1750714.1).

The report explores young South Sudanese Australians' perceptions of how they have been impacted by ongoing media coverage of 'Apex' and 'African gangs' since the 2016 Moomba 'riot'. The study was prompted by concerns about a noticeable increase in racialised crime reporting that became an enduring fixture of the local media in Victoria following the disorder at Moomba and the subsequent suggestion by some journalists and politicians that there is an 'African gang' presence in Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> Community leaders, senior police officers, progressive journalists and academics have repeatedly voiced their concern about these narratives, yet rarely have the voices of the young people from the South Sudanese community themselves featured prominently in this discussion. Accordingly, the aim of phase 1 of this research was to amplify the voices of young South Sudanese Australians who have been the subject of much of this media coverage.

### Method

Between November 2017 and April 2018, the research team conducted six focus groups with 28 young South Sudanese Australians between the ages of 15 and 23.<sup>2</sup> The majority of participants (n=25) were young women because, for the reasons discussed in this report, young men were difficult to recruit. Recruitment took place primarily via CMY's networks which consisted of schools, youth groups and after-school clubs (see 'About the Study' for further detail).

The focus group discussions were peer-facilitated by Nyayoud Jice and Barry Berih who received training and support from the Chief Investigators. The 'discussion guide' prompted participants to reflect on a range of issues, including:

- The nature of the media's coverage of the 2016 Moomba 'riot' and participants' perceptions of the Victorian public's attitudes towards young South Sudanese Australians
- The impact of this media coverage on the South Sudanese community
- Whether participants felt a sense of belonging in Victoria
- What it is like to grow up South Sudanese in Victoria today.

At the end of the focus groups, participants were also asked about what messages they wished to convey to government officials, police and their parents.

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<sup>1</sup> We provide a detailed analysis of this media coverage in the 'Introduction' to this report.

<sup>2</sup> The targeted age range was actually 15–21; however, we later learned that one of the participants was actually 23. We decided to include the data from this focus group in our final analysis because the majority of the participants fell within the intended age range. By contrast, we omitted a one-to-one interview with a man aged in his mid-20s that was conducted by one of our peer facilitators following an unsuccessful attempt at hosting a focus group at a local sports club.

## **Summary of Findings**

Focus group participants perceived the media's coverage of the alleged 'riot' at the 2016 Moomba festival to be heavily racialised. They felt that this had a significant and detrimental impact on their lives, the lives of other young South Sudanese Australians, and the wider South Sudanese and African communities in Victoria. Participants blamed opportunistic journalists for perpetuating harmful and inaccurate narratives about 'Apex', and repeatedly emphasised that youth crime is not a 'South Sudanese' or 'African' problem. Accordingly, they expressed that young South Sudanese Australians should not be held responsible for the problematic actions and behaviours of a handful of individuals.

Multiple participants in this research described how, as a consequence of this media coverage, young South Sudanese Australians have been subject to increased racial abuse in public settings. Their perception was that this media coverage served to embolden people with pre-existing racist and xenophobic beliefs while simultaneously exacerbating the institutionalised racism that young South Sudanese Australians experience on a daily basis. Examples described by participants in the aftermath of the 2016 Moomba Festival included: hate crimes experienced by participants and their siblings on public transport and in public spaces, racial profiling by the police, increased surveillance at school from teachers, and increased scrutiny by parents and elders from the South Sudanese community.

Participants suggested that these behaviours have collectively contributed to a heightened sense of exclusion, isolation and powerlessness among young South Sudanese Australians. They also voiced concerns about how these negative stereotypes were impacting their ability to make the most of 'amazing' opportunities that exist in Victoria. Many participants were clearly frustrated because they felt that these media narratives and the stigma they generate were blocking their ability to achieve their educational and professional goals. Other participants voiced concern about how this dynamic would impact their younger siblings, particularly in relation to their ability to identify, and be accepted, as Australians. The drive and resilience of our participants helped them to cope with this stigma but its emotional impact has been significant. Particularly concerning was that these experiences have led some of our focus group participants to question whether they are welcome in Australia.

## **Recommendations**

Our research indicates that the celebration of ethnic and racial diversity in Melbourne is not experienced equally by all members of the community. The stigma and racism experienced by South Sudanese Australians in Victoria is by no means a new phenomenon; however, participants repeatedly emphasised that the media's sustained coverage of the Moomba 'riot', Apex and 'African gangs' has amplified this problem by keeping them in the public and political spotlight. The following recommendations have been formulated in relation to our findings with input from our partners at CMY.

### **General**

- 1 Policymakers, police, academics and journalists should work to ensure that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities have meaningful opportunities to contribute to debates, discussions, decision-making processes and consultations that will directly affect them.

### **Media**

- 2 Journalists, editors and producers should acknowledge and adhere to the recommendations for ethical crime reporting formulated by the Police Accountability Project in December 2017.<sup>3</sup> These recommendations expand upon the standards developed in the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Journalist Code of Ethics, which stipulates that journalists should 'not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.policeaccountability.org.au/commentary/reporting-crime-and-race-a-short-guide-for-journalists/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.meaa.org/meaa-code-of-ethics/>

- 3 The Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), in cooperation with broadcasting industry groups, should proactively educate culturally and linguistically diverse communities about how they can lodge a complaint about journalism that breaches these ethical standards.<sup>5</sup>
- 4 Social media has provided a valuable medium for challenging harmful stereotypes about South Sudanese criminality; however, this can have the unintended consequence of directing further unwanted attention at young people from this community. To minimise this risk, future social media campaigns should be developed in consultation with young people from this community as this will ensure that they have an opportunity to influence the messaging and raise any concerns.

## ***Policing***

- 5 The Executive Command of Victoria Police must acknowledge that concerns persist among young South Sudanese Australians about police harassment and racial profiling. As such, there is a need for independent evaluation to assess the adequacy of training that Victoria Police officers receive which is aimed at preventing these problems. Concerns raised by participants about the alleged targeting of groups of young South Sudanese men by officers in public places also suggest the need for research that explores the situational dynamics of police interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- 6 Community outreach, education and legal advocacy services such as those provided by the Police Accountability Project represent important resources for young people who are at an elevated risk of experiencing police harassment or racial profiling as a consequence of their race or ethnicity. The Victorian State Government should increase funding for such services and ensure that they are accessible to residents throughout the state.

## ***Third-party reporting and bystander anti-racism***

- 7 Third-party reporting and bystander anti-racism can help to reduce the impact of racial harassment and abuse for victims. The Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission should undertake a review of its existing resources and reporting mechanisms in order to assess their effectiveness, visibility and accessibility. A review is timely given that initiatives such as 'Report Racism' were developed prior to the 2016 Moomba 'riot'.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Belonging***

- 8 Local governments should work in partnership with a range of organisations and young people to develop place-based community initiatives that help to strengthen a sense of belonging and connectedness at the neighbourhood level. These initiatives should be inclusive and target all young Australians, not only those of South Sudanese background.

## ***Opportunities***

- 9 Organisations like CMY should continue to provide youth leadership training to young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This training should include a media engagement component as this will help to ensure that young people are equipped with the necessary skills to speak with the media about sensitive issues such as crime and racism.
- 10 The Victorian Government should ensure that existing youth employment programmes targeting African-background young people are adequately funded, resourced, evaluated and, where found to be successful, scaled-up.

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<sup>5</sup> The Police Accountability Project (2017) provides a list of available avenues for submitting a complaint as part of its 'Recommendations'. These include emailing the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the MEAA, the Australian Press Council, various broadcasting industry groups, and ACMA.

<sup>6</sup> See Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission (2013).

## Research

- 11 There is scope to conduct a follow-up study that specifically examines how South Sudanese Australian teenage boys and young men have been impacted by the media narratives and political dynamics discussed in this report. With assistance from contracted youth leaders from the community, participants for such a study could be more easily recruited via churches, recreational programmes, public transport, voluntary activities, sports programmes and youth-led community organisations.
- 12 Researchers should also endeavour to account for how parents and guardians of Sudanese heritage have been impacted by the media narratives and political rhetoric outlined in this report. Documenting their experiences and concerns is important for better understanding the wider social consequences of these dynamics and may help to promote more productive intergenerational dialogues and responses to issues of mutual concern.
- 13 The Victorian Department of Education should commission an independent academic study of racism and surveillance in schools. Further research is essential for developing comprehensive, evidence-based tools and resources that address what appears to be a complex problem. Such research should also look to identify examples of 'best practice' in Victoria and other jurisdictions in relation to educating teachers and school administrators about racism.

## Background

The South Sudanese community is currently the largest migrant population of refugee background in Australia. With a population of over 30,000 people, the majority reside in Greater Melbourne (Robinson, 2013). The South Sudanese have been settling in Australia since the mid-1990s, with arrival years for this ethnically diverse community peaking between 2004 and 2005 (Jakubowicz, 2010). Due to the decades-long conflict in their homeland, the majority arrived from countries of first asylum including Egypt and Kenya. Having survived extended periods of displacement, insecurity and deprivation, during the initial settlement period, new arrivals were faced with having to adapt to a culture that utilised legal, social and language structures that are entirely foreign. For migrants in Australia, the challenges involved in the early years of settlement are well documented and, for many, ongoing (see, for example, Cassity & Gow, 2005; Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Fozdar & Hartley, 2013; Khawaja et al., 2008; Milner & Khawaja, 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2010). This has prompted questions about the adequacy and appropriateness of settlement services and education provision for young people (Maher, 2018). Changes in family functioning that manifest as intergenerational conflict and the complexity of negotiating an African Australian identity have also been identified as challenges facing this community (Deng, 2017).

Discrimination has been, and remains, one of the most significant issues for South Sudanese Australians (Losoncz, 2011; Losoncz, 2017; Abur & Spaaij, 2016; and Baak, 2018). Recently, the Scanlon Foundation's 2016 *Australians Today* report found that African migrant groups report experiencing discrimination more than any other group in Australia and that the 'highest level of discrimination, at 77%, is reported by the South Sudanese' (Markus, 2016: 60).<sup>7</sup> This discrimination manifests in various ways and has been identified as a significant barrier to employment and cultural integration (Losoncz, 2017; Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012; Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009; Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2007).<sup>8</sup> Relatedly, an ongoing study conducted by researchers at Monash and Deakin universities comparing socially exclusive attitudes found that feelings of warmth towards African people are likely to be significantly weaker than for white Australians. The same study also found that feelings of anger are likely to be significantly stronger towards African people than white Australians.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that these prejudicial attitudes towards African Australians have been influenced, at least in part, by the media representations of these groups circa 2007 and more recently, following the 2016 Moomba 'riot'. On both occasions, the South Sudanese community was the primary focus of this negative attention.

### **Media representations of South Sudanese criminality**

In 2007, following the murder of a young South Sudanese man Liep Gony, the South Sudanese community was publicly criticised by the then Federal Minister of Immigration Kevin Andrews, who claimed that the South Sudanese had failed to integrate into Australian society (see Wright, 2007).<sup>10</sup> It was later revealed that Mr Gony was in fact murdered by two young white men but Andrews refused to apologise for his comments and the media reported the incident in such a way that young people from the South Sudanese community were depicted as the 'problem group' rather than a targeted population that had been victimised (Windle, 2008; Coventry et al., 2014). As Nolan et al. (2011: 668) concluded:

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<sup>7</sup> Since 2007, the Scanlon Foundation surveys have included questions related to discrimination based on skin colour. This particular survey was completed by 166 respondents identifying themselves as South Sudanese (Markus, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> In 2011, for example, the unemployment rate for South Sudanese-born Australians aged 15 and over was 28.6% compared to 5.6% of the total Australian population (see Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2014: 4).

<sup>9</sup> The project titled 'Understanding the context of racial and cultural exclusivism: A study of Melbourne neighborhoods' is funded by the Research Institute on Social Cohesion. Publications are forthcoming. For more information, please contact the Primary Chief Investigator Associate Professor Rebecca Wickes (Rebecca.Wickes@monash.edu).

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Andrews quoted in Wright (2007).

*The combined coverage of issues around nation, violence and life in Sudan, and the dominance of such coverage in the time period analysed, created a particular set of discursive representations of Sudanese people that portrayed them as visibly different and as the outsider 'Other' in contrast to the normalised 'white' majority who are represented as belonging in Australian national space.*

(Nolan et al., 2011: 668)

The 2016 Moomba 'riot' once again brought South Sudanese Australians into the media and political spotlight. This was due to the visibility of the disorder itself which unfolded in Federation Square on the Saturday night of the Moomba Festival,<sup>11</sup> and, more importantly, the visibility of the individuals deemed to be primarily responsible for this disorder: young people of South Sudanese and Pacific Islander backgrounds (see Travers, 2016).<sup>12</sup> The images that circulated in the media the following morning captured the moment as police officers deployed capsicum spray to disperse a crowd of young people in Federation Square. In the days and weeks that followed, a dominant media narrative emerged that located responsibility for this disorder and a recent 'surge in crime rates' (Mills & Willingham, 2016) with the so-called Apex gang, the members of which were reported to be 'predominantly of South Sudanese descent' (Cowie, Houston & Mills, 2016).<sup>13</sup> The following excerpt from a story that was published on the front page of Australia's most widely read newspaper, the *Herald Sun*,<sup>14</sup> just two days after the Moomba 'riot' exemplifies this narrative:

*Two suspected members of the notorious Apex gang that was implicated in Saturday's wild Moomba riot were arrested yesterday. ... The pair, from Noble Park in Dandenong, were placed in the custody of detectives from Taskforce Tense and the Port Phillip [Criminal Investigative Unit], who are investigating car-jackings. A parallel inquiry is looking into the gang's involvement in the Moomba violence. In a belated get-tough statement yesterday, Premier Daniel Andrews vowed to smash youth gangs. But concerns have emerged that some police worry about stopping teens of African background on the streets for fear of racism complaints. Apex is believed to number about 200 members, from a mixture of backgrounds including Sudanese, Pacific Islander and Middle Eastern. ... A mounting number of car-jackings, aggravated burglaries, robberies and assaults have been linked to Apex members in the past year. (Dowling & Butler, 2016)*

In contextualising this narrative, it is important to emphasise that, in the two years prior to the 2016 Moomba 'riot', neither Apex nor South Sudanese Australians had been in the media spotlight. For example, a Newsbank search revealed that there was only one article published in the *Herald Sun* during the two-year period directly preceding the Moomba 'riot' that referenced the Apex gang by name and it did not include a reference to the race or ethnicity of its members (see Hurley, 2015). A separate Newsbank search further demonstrated that there was a significant increase in the number of articles published in Victoria's two major newspapers, the *Age* and the *Herald Sun*, that featured the words 'Sudanese' and 'gang' in the two years immediately following the Moomba 'riot' (n=130) compared to the two years leading up to it (n=4).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Chibnall (1977) identified visibility as a key determinant of newsworthiness.

<sup>12</sup> It was initially reported that the disorder was the result of an organised brawl between members of 'Apex' and a rival group, 'Islander 23', that escalated after police, heavily outnumbered, attempted to intervene (see Travers, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that the majority of journalists and media commentators have often used 'Sudanese', 'Sudanese-born' and 'South Sudanese' interchangeably.

<sup>14</sup> For newspaper circulation and readership figures circa 2016, see Mediaweek (2016).

<sup>15</sup> The search initially yielded 138 results but we omitted duplicates (n=8). Search parameters were as follows: publications – 'The Age/Sunday Age' and 'The Herald Sun/Sunday Herald Sun/Home Magazine'; search terms – 'Sudanese' and 'gang'; date ranges – 3/12/2016–3/12/2018 and 3/11/2014–3/11/2016. Of the four articles published during the two-year period immediately prior to the Moomba 'riot', only one focused on crime in Victoria (Hamblin & Naughtin, 2015).

Numerous articles and opinion pieces that mentioned 'Apex' and located responsibility for this crime wave with young South Sudanese Australians were published in the *Herald Sun* after the Moomba 'riot'.<sup>16</sup> This narrative also gained purchase with local TV news programmes, including Channel 9's *A Current Affair*, which aired an episode titled 'Inside Apex' in May 2017 (see Channel 9, 2017). Many of these stories and programmes were actively promoted on social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter. Articles and commentaries featuring similar, albeit in most cases subdued, versions of this narrative also initially appeared in Victoria's leading centre-left newspaper, *The Age*.<sup>17</sup> Within a matter of weeks, however, references to the race or ethnicity of the alleged perpetrators became less common in *The Age*<sup>18</sup> and journalists at the newspaper eventually started publishing articles and commentaries that challenged this narrative.<sup>19</sup>

## 'African gangs'

The media's coverage of Apex seemingly cooled in the spring of 2017, but South Sudanese Australians returned to the public spotlight in November. This appeared to be triggered by the publication of an article in the *Herald Sun* referencing crime statistics that had been requested from the Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) in Victoria by the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration, Federal Member of Parliament Jason Wood. Citing these statistics, the article stated:

*The number of violent burglaries committed by Sudanese-born thugs has soared almost 400 per cent since 2014, new crime statistics reveal. The independent crime data, requested by Liberal MP Jason Wood, shows the number of Sudanese-born criminals aged 10-18 who committed an aggravated burglary in Victoria surged from just 20 in 2014-15 to 98 in 2016-17. The data also shows the number of serious assaults committed by Sudanese-born youth jumped more than 55 per cent in the same period, from 39. The number of young Sudanese stealing cars more than doubled from 63 in 2014-15 to more than 150 in the year to June. ... This year, it was revealed that Sudanese made up 0.11 per cent of Victoria's population, but 4.8 per cent of aggravated burglary offenders. (Smethurst & Buttler, 2017)*

In the same article, Mr Wood is quoted as saying:

*With South Sudanese hugely over represented in violent crimes in Victoria, the protection of all those living in Melbourne and Australia must come first.*

(Wood quoted in Smethurst & Buttler, 2017)<sup>20</sup>

The following month, the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration published a report on migrant settlement outcomes titled *No One Teaches You to Become an Australian* (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2017). Part 7 of the report summarised the Committee's findings in relation to what it referred to as 'an increase in gang activity involving youth who were committing a number of violent crimes including aggravated burglary and assault as well as various drug offences, particularly in Victoria' (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2017: par. 7.2).

<sup>16</sup> See Argoon (2016); Bolt (2017); Butler (2016); Butler & Dowsley (2016); Butler & Hosking (2016); Dowling (2016); Dowsley (2016); Galloway (2016); Hosking (2016a; 2016b); Hosking & Hamblin (2016); Hurley (2015); Panahi (2016); Smethurst (2016); Thompson (2016a; 2016b; 2016c); Thompson & Butler, (2016).

<sup>17</sup> See: Cowie, Houston & Mills (2016); Mills & Houston (2016); Willingham (2016).

<sup>18</sup> For example: Butt & Lee (2016); but see Johnston (2017).

<sup>19</sup> For example: Bucci (2016); Cowie (2016).

<sup>20</sup> An alternative interpretation of CSA data on offences committed by Sudanese-born Victorians was published two months earlier in the *Age* (see Bucci & Butt, 2017). This article contextualised the finding that '[youths] born in Sudan are eight times more likely to be charged than those born in Australia' in relation to the facts that 'crime had dropped for the first time in six years, and that fewer youths were being arrested, but those who did come into contact with police were responsible for more offences' (Bucci & Butt, 2017). Citing Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police Andrew Crisp as a source, the article also emphasised the ethnic diversity of youth offenders in the state and that 'Australian-born offenders remain by far the most likely ethnicity accused of crime' (Bucci & Butt, 2017).

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the contents of this report, but two points are worth emphasising. First, paragraph 7.58 incorrectly states that Sudanese-born Australians make up 1.4 per cent of the population of alleged offenders in Victoria. The correct figure, as was later confirmed by the CSA, is only 1 per cent (see Crime Statistics Agency, 2018). Second, the word 'gang' is used 52 times in Part 7 alone (Joint Standing Committee on Migration, 2017: Part 7). This is despite the fact that, throughout 2017, Victoria Police had repeatedly emphasised that Victoria did not have a gang problem. Accordingly, in their dissenting report, two Labor members of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration expressed concern about how the issue of 'migrant youth crime' was represented in the original report:

*The report unfairly maligns Sudanese born youth in Victoria, with the evidence provided by the Victorian Crime Statistics Agency clearly showing that the vast majority of offenders in Victoria are Australian born. This report ignores the good work being undertaken by the Victorian Government, Victorian Police and service providers to support new migrants. (Vamvakinou & Neumann, 2018)*

Immediately following the publication of the report, Mr Wood was quoted in *The Australian* as saying, 'A lot of migrants have no understanding of the law. I was told by South Sudanese people that ... breaking into someone's house and stealing a car is not a big deal' (Wood quoted in Akerman, 2017). The publication of these comments was followed by a series of sensationalist articles in the *Herald Sun* reporting incidents allegedly perpetrated by young South Sudanese Australians. The journalists reporting these incidents explicitly emphasised the 'African appearance' of the perpetrators (Zervos & Hamblin, 2017) and described them as a 'gang' (@cassiezervos, 2017 December 20) as well as 'feral thugs' (Zervos, 2017; see also Kinniburgh & Simonis, 2018). In response to these incidents and the publication of the parliamentary report, federal politicians, including then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton, voiced their concerns about 'African gang violence' in the media. Most famously, Mr Dutton asserted during a radio interview that 'people are afraid to go out to restaurants in the night-time because they're followed home by these gangs' (see Kenny, 2018). These comments were immediately ridiculed on social media by members of the South Sudanese community in Victoria and challenged by Victorian state Labor politicians, Victoria Police Commissioner Graham Ashton, and members of the Victorian public.

In the weeks and months that followed, the media fervour subsided, yet the South Sudanese community remained a focal point for government action relating to youth justice and social cohesion in the lead-up to the November 2018 Victorian state election. For example, in January 2018, Victoria Police convened the African Australian Community Taskforce, comprising a number of representatives of African communities, as a consultative group for a one-year period (2018–19).<sup>21</sup> The Taskforce has met regularly with senior members of Victoria Police and an Implementation Plan has been formulated. The state opposition party has adopted crime as a key focal point of its campaign, drawing on the community's heightened fear of youth crime since the 2016 Moomba 'riot', with state Liberal leader Matthew Guy stating that the Liberal Party will address the issues that have not been dealt with to date (see 'Crime Facts in Victoria', n.d.).

<sup>21</sup> African members of the Taskforce include members of former refugee communities, mainly from the Horn of Africa.

## About the Study

During the two-year period following the 2016 Moomba 'riot', leaders from the South Sudanese Australian community in Victoria remained alert and deeply concerned about the way that they have been portrayed in the media and the effect this is having on the daily lives of African Australians. However, the voices of young South Sudanese Australians have been largely absent from these discussions, despite having such extreme political and media attention thrust upon them.

### ***Aim***

Part 1 of this study set out to examine how racialised narratives about Apex and 'African gangs' have impacted the lives of young South Sudanese Australians in Victoria since the 2016 Moomba 'riot'. Its aim was therefore to provide these young people with an opportunity to share how their lives have been impacted by the media's disproportionate, racialised coverage of Apex and 'African gangs' in the wake of the 2016 Moomba 'riot'.

### ***Methodology***

Semi-structured focus groups were chosen as the method to capture these data because this method enables participants to collectively reflect upon and interpret common lived experiences.<sup>22</sup> The discussions were guided by the following questions:

- 1 Do you recall the Moomba 'riots' of 2016? What's your view of what happened that night?<sup>23</sup>
- 2 What do you recall about the media coverage afterwards?
- 3 Do you think it caused any changes in perceptions of/attitudes towards South Sudanese young people? If so, what sort of changes have you noticed or experienced?
- 4 According to the media, there is an 'African gang' problem in Victoria – what's your view?
- 5 How did stories about the Apex gang, in particular, affect you in the aftermath of Moomba 2016?
- 6 How did these stories impact the wider South Sudanese community in Victoria?
- 7 How does the media tend to portray young people of African background, in your view? And South Sudanese young people specifically?
- 8 In your view, how are South Sudanese people generally perceived by the wider community?
- 9 What does 'belonging' mean to you?
- 10 Do you feel a sense of belonging here in Victoria? Can you tell us a bit more about that?
- 11 What sort of things make you feel like you belong here, as part of the community?
- 12 What's the hardest thing about growing up here, in Victoria? And what's the best thing?
- 13 If you had the opportunity to address a room full of government officials without fear of getting in trouble, what would you say to them about the issues we discussed here today?
- 14 What would you say to police?
- 15 What would you say to your parents?

<sup>22</sup> For a general discussion of the benefits of focus groups as a social research method, see Kitzinger (1994).

<sup>23</sup> We originally expected that some participants would have attended the Moomba Festival that night and witnessed the disorder. Only two of the focus group participants claimed to have been there that evening but the responses to this question offered valuable insight into how the event was understood and remembered by young people from the South Sudanese community in Victoria.

In recognition of the sensitive nature of these issues and the need to explore them in an empathetic and safe environment, the Chief Investigators trained two peer facilitators to lead the focus groups: Ms Nyayoud Jice, a proud young African woman of South Sudanese heritage; and Mr Barry Berih, who is Eritrean Australian – both of whom are of similar age to the participants.<sup>24</sup> Our peer facilitators had previously worked or volunteered for our research partner, CMY, which meant that they possessed relevant leadership and communication skills.

In total, we conducted six focus groups with 28 participants at six locations in Victoria: Fitzroy, North Melbourne, Sunshine, Sydenham, Werribee and Tarneit.<sup>25</sup> The focus groups were organised and scheduled with assistance from CMY, through its existing network of schools and community-based youth groups.<sup>26</sup> Participants each received a movie voucher in exchange for their time. An explanatory statement was provided and explained to participants before each focus group session. Participants gave verbal consent at the beginning of the session indicating that they understood the research purpose and aims, that they could leave at any time without consequence, and for their voice (but not name) to be recorded.

After each focus group session, the audio recording was uploaded to a third-party transcription service via a secure network. The transcripts of each focus group were checked for accuracy and independently coded. Once all of the focus groups had been conducted, the transcripts were independently thematically analysed by multiple members of the research team. Common themes that emerged from this analysis were consolidated into a single list that informs the structure and narrative of this report. Earlier drafts of the report and its recommendations were peer-reviewed by two Victoria-based academics with expertise in criminology as well as a youth leader from the South Sudanese community who runs a voluntary organisation.

## ***Sample Characteristics***

The vast majority of the young people who agreed to participate in the focus groups were female (n=25) and most were at the lower end of the desired age range (15–21), with 17 participants stating that they were 16 years old. The majority of the participants were born and raised in Victoria and had completed or were in the process of completing their secondary education here. Although it is difficult to make qualitative generalisations about the sample, our impression is that the participants were ambitious, invested in both their individual futures and those of their communities, and highly cognisant of the issues being discussed. As such, none of our participants appeared to be 'at risk' of serious or life-course persistent offending.<sup>27</sup> We further recognise that, given the multiple ethnicities within the South Sudanese community, group identity is far from homogenous. However, participants were not asked to reveal which group they belong to and nor did this emerge as a significant theme in the focus groups.

## ***Limitations***

We originally approached this study with the intention of having equal gender representation but we struggled to recruit teenage boys and young men. We attribute this to research and consultation 'fatigue' (see Clark, 2008). This assessment was later confirmed via subsequent conversations with our partners at CMY, community members and youth workers. This realisation informed our decision to limit the number of focus groups to six. By implication, this should not be treated as a representative sample. Accordingly, the analysis presented in the 'Key Findings' and 'Discussion' sections is likely to be heavily skewed to reflect the perceptions and lived experiences of young women as opposed to young men.

<sup>24</sup> An important benefit of peer-led focus groups is that they remove the power differential between the researcher and participants (Murray, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> This was a convenience sample and we selected the schools based on CMY's recommendations. Such an approach was necessary as recruiting participants for focus groups, especially young people, is difficult and time consuming (Gibbs, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> In hindsight, a more effective strategy for recruiting focus group participants might have involved contracting a community member who works with young people to act as a gatekeeper and identify young people via churches, recreational programmes, public transport, voluntary activities, sports programmes and youth-led community organisations.

<sup>27</sup> For a study of pathways into offending for young South Sudanese Australians, see Shepherd, Newton & Farquharson (2017).

We feel that it is important to acknowledge this because much of the media coverage discussed in the following section is, at least implicitly, gendered. This means that it primarily associated the threats purportedly posed by Apex and 'African gangs' with young South Sudanese Australian men rather than young South Sudanese Australian women. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that young South Sudanese Australian women were affected by the stigma they experienced as a consequence of these media narratives and, thus, they did not escape the spotlight.<sup>28</sup> Their participation in the focus groups also afforded us valuable insight into the perceptions and experiences of their siblings, male and female, as well as those of the wider South Sudanese Australian community.

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<sup>28</sup> We did come across one article published on the front page of the Herald Sun in September 2016 which claimed that 'Girls as young as 12 are being recruited by burgeoning all-female gangs, including a sister pack to the notorious Apex mob' (Deery, 2016).

## Key Findings

This section presents the key findings obtained from Part 1<sup>29</sup> of this study. These findings are organised into three thematic sections that collectively speak to racism as the overarching problem identified by all of our participants as a defining feature of their lives since the 2016 Moomba 'riot'. Their lived experiences are a testament to the idea that racism involves more than prejudicial, offensive or abusive interactions that target persons of a particular racial or ethnic group. Rather, they illustrate that 'racism can also take the form of excluding people from accessing services (directly or indirectly), employment, education or sporting activities' (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

Accordingly, the persistence of racism in what is widely considered to be a progressive multicultural society cannot be reduced to the actions or beliefs of a small minority of individuals. Instead, it must be understood as 'a tool to gain and maintain power' that is 'inextricably linked with socio-economic factors, and frequently reflects underlying inequalities in a society' (Ibid). As already noted, the racism experienced by members of Australia's South Sudanese communities predates the 2016 Moomba Festival but our research suggests that the portrayal of this event by the local media made things significantly worse for our participants.

As we discuss in Part 1, the overwhelming majority of our participants blamed the media for creating and perpetuating harmful narratives about the Apex gang after Moomba. Part 2 then examines how this media coverage was seen to reinvigorate and normalise racialised myths about South Sudanese Australians in the wake of the Moomba 'riot'. Participants associated this climate with specific episodes of racial abuse, greater discrimination and pervasive surveillance. Part 3 then examines how these experiences have negatively impacted young South Sudanese Australians' sense of belonging in Victoria as well as their perceived ability to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities available to them. The impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing is also discussed.

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<sup>29</sup> As noted in the 'Executive Summary', the findings presented in this report form part of a two-part study. At the time of publication, Part 2 of the study is ongoing.

## Part 1: Moomba in the Media

There was a clear consensus among our participants that the scale and significance of the disorder that occurred at the 2016 Moomba Festival was heavily exaggerated. To this effect, one participant who was present at Federation Square that evening reflected:

*I was there on the night, it was more of, like, that there were too many instigators and it was just blown out of proportion from the way the media exploded the situation. And it started off as, like, from what I can tell, it started off as a joke. And then because the police took it as this is a group of Sudanese kids, it's about to go out of hand. They just instantly went to force and not, like, if it was a group of white kids, they would've handled the situation much differently to the way they did on the day. (Participant 2, Focus Group 1)*

According to this participant, it was the aggressiveness of the police that triggered the disorder rather than the behaviour of young people.<sup>30</sup> This sentiment was shared by other participants who were not present that evening but who subsequently learned about the Moomba 'riot' from the media. Again, the emphasis was on what they perceived to be an indiscriminate and heavy-handed police response:

*And it's also the way the police handled the situation. It's like they didn't think of the people standing around. They didn't think of others and how this would affect others. By just straight away going in there and saying, 'Okay, we're about to arrest everyone and pepper spray everyone', they didn't think about the victims in the situation. (Participant 3, Focus Group 1)*

A second participant who was in the vicinity that evening could not specifically recall who or what had triggered the disorder but provided the following account of how it unfolded:

*Like, it started small. I don't remember, like, where it started. Um, and it was, like, getting dark so we were, like, 'Oh, we'll just head home.' And out of nowhere you see people [laughs], all walking to the train station. Everyone's running. Um, and we were like, 'What's happening?' you know. Um, because it is dangerous and kids were jumping over cars, they're going into elevators just running. ... Um, so I'm like, 'Oh,' you know, 'it's, it's them.' Like, 'Who cares?' you know. Um, but I didn't 'cos I didn't see it on TV until, like, maybe two weeks later, but I hear people talking about it, uh, um, the news was talking, and blah-blah-blah about Sudo kids, and all that crap. (Participant 2, Focus Group 2)*

Participants suggested that the very presence of South Sudanese young people at the Moomba Festival that evening was enough to attract the media's interest 'because they notice black people more' (Participant 4, Focus Group 5). Accordingly, participants expressed frustration about the fact that young people from other ethnic backgrounds were present at Federation Square and took part in the disorder yet 'Africans' were ultimately blamed for it:

*There were other races there, but obviously, they only said African race. Like, there were Islanders and everyone else, but the only one they caught was ... Africans. (Participant 3, Focus Group 5)<sup>31</sup>*

<sup>30</sup> Independently shot video uploaded to YouTube by Melbourne-based radio station 3AW suggests that the disorder was seemingly ignited after approximately six police officers found themselves surrounded by a crowd of young people in Federation Square. At one point, some members of the crowd started chanting 'Fuck the police', prompting the police to deploy capsicum spray, which caused people to flee (see 3AWRadio, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> The same 3AWRadio (2016) video reveals that the crowd was ethnically diverse.

Another participant similarly described the media's coverage as 'extremely biased', yet suggested that this was consistent with earlier depictions of the African community in the Victorian media:

*From previous experiences and me looking into the media and looking into news articles and such about the African community, this problem has been going on for a while. But then this issue that has arised [sic] in 2016 has just ... blown up. Like, just blown up. (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)*

In this participant's view, the media's decision to centre its narrative on the involvement of African Australian youths was not a new development but rather signified an escalation of the inflammatory rhetoric that had been relatively subdued in the years leading up to the 2016 Moomba Festival.<sup>32</sup>

Other participants also perceived racism to be at the heart of the media's portrayal of the Moomba 'riot'. For example, one participant described how the images that appeared on the front page of the *Herald Sun* the following morning were evocative of police brutality during the civil rights movement in America:

*There was, um, there was an article. I'm not sure which paper had it, and there was a couple, like, spraying the pepper spray, um, on them. Um, the Herald Sun. And that photo to me, was like, it looked like something that you would've seen, like, back in the days when people were protesting for, um, segregation, and all these things in America. So, when I saw that I was, like, 'That's actually happening in my hometown, like, where I live, and not even far from where I live'.*  
(Participant 1, Focus Group 1)

One participant suggested that, as a consequence of this media coverage,

*Black people were made the talk of the town. ... Everything they did was, like ... just made bigger for that reason. (Participant 2, Focus Group 4)*

Another participant similarly described how 'everything changed' after Moomba:

*The hardest thing about growing up here would have to be, after the Moomba riots. Because everyone perceived ... the changes in people's attitudes towards us ... [Facilitator: How was it before...?] We thought it was alright. ... Everything was alright back then. ... So, there was no, like ... that stereotype was not there. ... And then as soon as that came, like, everything changed. For the worse.*  
(Participant 2, Focus Group 4)

Other participants agreed that this particular event, the 2016 Moomba Festival, marked a turning point in their lives. Unsurprisingly, our participants felt that the media's fixation on Apex in the months that followed served to amplify this climate of fear:

*If they didn't – if they didn't advertise this so-called group as Apex – The notorious Apex, and exploited them all over all these platforms of social media. They wouldn't be as big as they are right now. And they wouldn't be feared as they are right now. (Participant 3, Focus Group 1)*

<sup>32</sup> These portrayals were largely consistent with earlier media narratives about South Sudanese criminality in Australia (see Windle, 2008). See the 'Background' section of this report for an analysis of this escalation in racialised crime reporting following the Moomba 'riot'.

*You know, I personally feel like what the media did – it engendered fear. And when fear is engendered it leads to people – you know – fearing that South Sudanese people are criminals or South Sudanese people will target you. Know what I mean? ‘They will inherit your personal space. They will kind of – you know – violate your houses.’ And, you know, the media has really given us a bad reputation.*  
(Participant 2, Focus Group 1)

In response to these narratives, participants denied that there was a gang problem and accused the media of spreading what they believed to be false information:

*The media is full of a lot of [shit]. ... Everything that has been said about young African or South Sudanese people in general have [sic] been blown out of proportion. ‘Cos it ain’t true.* (Participant 4, Focus Group 1)

*Before all that thing on the media saying that, uh, Sudanese are in gangs, part of gangs, this and that, everything was fine. ... Everyone believed in what the media were saying even though some of the information they were saying were false.*  
(Participant 2, Focus Group 6)

Noting that this media attention was not a new phenomenon, participants recognised that other newly arrived migrant communities had previously been subjected to similar portrayals by the media:

*The Asians went through the same thing. The Greeks went through the same thing. So, um, it just keeps on moving to the different groups.*  
(Participant 2, Focus Group 2)

*You shouldn’t sit back and say, ‘All the rest of them, the people went through it like, in the past.’ They shouldn’t sit back and say, ‘Okay, we copped it. Now it’s their turn to cop it.’ It should stop then, like right then. Like, they know how it feels. They’ve been through it.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 4)

However, participants believed that, unlike other migrant communities, their physical appearance and the perception of South Sudan as a ‘war-torn’ country has made South Sudanese Australians a particularly attractive target for opportunistic journalists seeking to capitalise on this culturally entrenched narrative that links migrants with criminality. One participant put it bluntly:

*It’s because we’re seen as big black people. That we’re intimidating, in a way.*  
(Participant 3, Focus Group 1)

Participants presented two different explanations for why they felt the media had actively worked to promote and embellish these narratives. The first explanation centred on the idea that the media was simply pushing this story because it is newsworthy, and therefore financially advantageous:

*I feel like people are so obsessed over the idea that there’s a, there’s a youth gang, so obviously they’re gonna. ... And there’s nothing...And it sells. So whatever sells, you have to keep pushing it.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

*And the media, it’s all about finances for them. It’s all about money. It’s not really about. ... It’s all propaganda. Whatever. They say whatever comes. Like, whatever comes to their table, the media, like, like blow it up. That’s how they make money. That’s how they make a living.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

The second explanation that emerged from our analysis of the focus group data centred on what participants considered to be the ignorance of the media and the wider Victorian public when it came to 'African culture'. Specifically, multiple participants described how 'hanging out' in groups is an important part of African culture and suggested that this attracted negative attention from the media after Moomba insofar as the appearance of a group of young South Sudanese Australians seemed to fit with the racialised 'gang' narrative. To this effect, one of the participants stated:

*Like, I'm not trying to sound rude in any way, they [white Australians] never really had a culture where people are together as a group, you know, like, back home you see people in a group. You never see a sister or a brother walking alone. It's always with a group. You know what I mean? And to them, it's something new. So, instead of having to invest time and seeing it in a positive way, they choose to see it in a negative way. Not because they can't understand that, but they [the media] want people to be scared. They're trying to engender fear. (Participant 3, Focus Group 3)*

*And most of time people within this gang of Apex, I don't ... probably – I haven't gone into detail about it because I don't know much about it but from what I know, it's not really a gang. It's just ... a bunch of mates hanging out and they just get a wrong view because of the colour of their skin. Like, just to be honest. Frank. (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)*

From the perspective of participants, the media's coverage of Moomba and Apex had been extremely damaging for young South Sudanese Australians. Voicing this frustration, one participant called upon elements of the media to apologise for what they believed to be its role in promoting these harmful stereotypes:

*I feel like we deserve an apology from the media, especially Channel Seven. We deserve the biggest apology. ... [The] Herald Sun, we deserve an apology from the media. Like, 'cos within the past two years they gave us hell. They have destroyed us a lot. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)<sup>33</sup>*

The following section of this report describes how the media's portrayal of 'African gangs' established a climate permissive in relation to racial abuse and discrimination.

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<sup>33</sup> These were the only media outlets that were specifically mentioned during the focus groups.

## Part 2: Racism

Participants felt that the media's coverage of the Moomba 'riot' and Apex intensified the racial abuse and discrimination experienced by young South Sudanese Australians. One participant explained: 'Now we're seen negatively by the community, worse than we were before' (Participant 3, Focus Group 1). Another participant provided the following description of what they considered to be the pervasive, 'straightforward racism' experienced by South Sudanese Australians since the Moomba 'riot':

*Like, it's coming at you. One way or another way or...all avenues. It's coming through everything.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

Another participant from the same focus group similarly reflected:

*Every time [my male siblings] were walking outside or something, they would be called an Apex, or like, they would be named like, they were discriminated, and like, racism overtook like, it become more like, high key than it was before.* (Participant 3, Focus Group 3)

Participants attributed this to the saturation of stories about Apex and 'African gangs' in the media and felt that this had rendered overt forms of racism directed at South Sudanese Australians more socially acceptable. As one participant explained:

*The media gave other people the power to kind of abuse that what so-called Apex. And that has kind of – you know – hyped them up. It's hyped them up and you know just gave them the confidence to make assumptions.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 1)

From this participant's perspective, the media coverage played a role in validating and arguably normalising pre-existing racist stereotypes about South Sudanese Australians among some segments of the Victorian public.

Other participants described how they had encountered similar racism through their engagement with social media platforms such as Facebook. They specifically cited the 'Comments' sections of news stories relating to Apex that were posted by conventional media outlets such as Channel Seven as places where they were likely to encounter upsetting racist and xenophobic views:

*And then when I go into a comments section on Facebook, for example, like and it's, like, all of a sudden all of these people, who had problems with, African youth, Sudanese people, they just emerged out of nowhere and it just seemed like the whole wider community were on the same page. There was not a single person, like on our side trying to defend and say, 'Okay, it's not all of them there.' It's just everyone agreeing, 'Oh, send them back.' Um, 'These dogs, deport them,' and all these things. So, the comments really hurt me more than when I saw the photos, so that's what I can remember from the media coverage of Moomba. It was pretty awful.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

Perhaps most troubling, participants recognised that this particular manifestation of racial abuse extended beyond those stories that focused on Moomba, Apex or 'African gangs':

*Yeah. It's like, what the media, like, tells is, it's bad but like what's worse is the comments you read on the Facebook posts. And there was this one, this news report or article of a magazine of this beautiful African Sudanese, South Sudanese, and she was displayed on the cover of David Jones and their store. And the way she was just exploited and just dragged because she was Sudanese and dark skinned and she couldn't fit the description that David Jones portrayed, she didn't like – it was just. It was disrespectful to see people just discriminate her just because she's South Sudanese and that she could, even though she didn't like be involved in Apex. And it was just, it was just disrespectful. And the long-term damage it does to the person you're dragging, like, you could be the bully you won't understand but if you're the victim, it's just, it's too much. (Participant 3, Focus Group 1)<sup>34</sup>*

The effect was such that any news story about a South Sudanese Australian that was publicly posted on social media seemingly had the potential to attract racist comments. Participants described how it was difficult to avoid these comments which served as a constant reminder that some segments of the vocal Australian public were fundamentally intolerant of the presence of South Sudanese communities in Australia.

## **Stigma and labelling**

A pervasive sense of being stigmatised and labelled because of their race and perceived association with criminality was shared by young people participating in the research. They talked about how this has affected them, both as individuals and a community. One participant explained, 'they made not just the gang, they made all black people look bad' (Participant 1, Focus Group 4). Responding to the question, 'What is the hardest thing about growing up here, in Victoria?', another participant echoed this sentiment in responding, 'being automatically, um, put down. Being automatically, um, labelled' (Participant 3, Focus Group 2). Other participants commented on the unfairness of being misrepresented by media images and monitoring, which tends to distort mundane and ordinary age-related behavior of young people:<sup>35</sup>

*Since that night they basically are trying to say that all us Sudanese are like, that, like, we're all thugs. We all steal. We all fight and everything, and that's not what it is. (Participant 2, Focus Group 6)*

*Yeah, it's just been blown out of proportion. And the media has extended it to the extent where instead of young people coming together, um, yeah, hanging around doing fun stuff, and, you know, mucking up a little, um, the media has made it a big deal and, like, overextended it. And it shouldn't have been done that way because now young people don't know. (Participant 3 Focus Group 1)*

The responses of some participants indicate that this stigma has negatively affected their perceptions of social cohesion in Australian society. To this effect, one participant explained:

*Not all Australians are racist but there's that one per cent that make it so hard to see the good in everyone else. (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)*

<sup>34</sup> See Clarke (2017).

<sup>35</sup> See Clarke (2017).

Other participants described how they had to find internal strength to stop caring about the racism and prove to the wider community that they are different from the labels that have been applied to them:

*At some point you just get over it [racism], and you just let them think what they want to think, um, because you know better, and you know your situa-, like the situation you're in. Um, and by you, like, by you feeding them then, like, it will just keep growing. Um, and I think you just ha – like you have to stop it. Like, you, they're not gonna stop unless you tell them to or like, unless you, like make a change from yourself by not, like, letting them, like, giving them what they want. (Participant 2, Focus Group 2)*

The racism experienced by the young people was thus felt both at the broad level of community and media stereotyping – from tabloid headlines to social media – and at the individual level of interpersonal interactions in their everyday lives.

## **At school**

Multiple participants discussed classroom and schoolyard experiences of racialised bullying, emphasising that these have been amplified in the 'post-Moomba' climate.<sup>36</sup> Many of the interactions described by participants were said to have occurred at school. One participant described how other students had started to 'joke about us being in gangs at school' (Participant 2, Focus Group 6), while another discussed how this had affected her younger sister in primary school:

*Like, my little sister, she's only, like, 10. And she cops it at school. And she's 10. And I'm like, she shouldn't. ... She was born here. I'm, like, she shouldn't even have to deal with this. (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)*

Participants suggested that teachers and school administrators had failed to deal with the problem of racist bullying and that this had put South Sudanese students at greater risk of getting into trouble if they decided to confront or challenge this bullying behaviour directly. As one participant reflected:

*When you try to take action – like if you ask someone to help you, like one of the teachers or something, they don't take action. But when you do it yourself, you end up being in trouble. (Participant 4, Focus Group 5)*

Rather than being viewed as allies or guardians, teachers and school administrators were thus seen by some participants as contributing to this harmful dynamic. Participants discussed two other ways in which they felt teachers were reinforcing damaging racial stereotypes. The first took the form of what has been termed 'micro-aggressions', defined as 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color' (Sue et al., 2007: 271). For example, multiple participants described interactions whereby teachers had acted in a patronising manner towards South Sudanese students:

*Yeah, and every time we're like finishing a page or something they always ask, um, always say, 'Do you understand --- Do you understand?' [laughs]. We're nodding, 'Yes,' and they're always coming to help us. Like, we don't need help every time you come. No, we understand that we are scum. (Participant 3, Focus Group 6)*

<sup>36</sup> These findings are consistent with those of Baak (2018) whose research was based on interviews with young South Sudanese Australians in Years 6–8.

*I experienced this back in high school, particularly, um, around, um, Year 11 and 12 when, you finally get to choose your own subjects. And you're, like, 'Yay'. And teachers will basically try to push you to do a certain, a certain subject, or take a certain path. So, basically, they were pushing you to do [a Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning]. And to me, that's kinda, like, I felt like I was being treated differently then, 'cos even though, um, if, if the same kid from a different culture, or a different country, he's struggling, they won't tell them, 'Oh, um, do this course. It's easier for you. Like, take, take the easy way out.' They would push them and, like, get them help, and all that, and support them. It it's, like, an African person, we're always pushed to just do a certain thing. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

Participants felt that this differential treatment is problematic because it visibly reinforces and validates the idea that South Sudanese students are inherently less capable than their non-South Sudanese peers. To this effect, another participant reflected, 'when you say you don't need help they don't accept that' (Participant 2, Focus Group 6). Subtler forms of micro-aggression might also be inferred from participants' descriptions of their teachers' attempts to deal with issues of race or ethnicity in the classroom:

*I get really offended in class when, like ... I hate this so much, when in class when your teacher's telling a story and says, 'African' or 'black'. ... Straight away it's like they look at you. (Participant 4, Focus Group 5)*

*And, like, there's time where it's, like, she was born here and I think they were doing an activity, and they gave her an underdeveloped country. And then - 'cos she was black, and she was like, she was like, 'Why am I being given like, a country that's not developed where I've never, like, I wasn't even born there?'. ... And, like, all the white kids got developed countries and the kids that weren't white got undeveloped countries. So, it's just, like, already, they have to deal with that at such a young age, where they shouldn't have to. (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)*

The teachers' motivations cannot be inferred from these recollections but, from the participants' standpoint, they nevertheless had the effect of reinforcing the idea that South Sudanese students are different from their peers. A similar example was also provided by an older participant enrolled at a university in Victoria:

*I'm studying. ... My teacher's always saying, 'Oh, um...', like every time we speak about something negative or like a certain group, going through, like, struggles she'll say, 'Oh, did you guys go through the same struggle? Did you guys do some struggle? What's your story?' And like, 'Can you relate to this? Can you tell us your experience?' And I'm like, 'What?' ... And then once, um, and then one time I told her, 'Why are you always, um, asking me all these questions?' you know? We've never been to, well I've never been through a lot of these struggles that you mention, but you always point to this.' And then if I don't answer, like, you try to push it out. Like, 'What's up?', you know? And she goes, 'Well because we don't know a lot about you, and we need to,' ... Sorry, like, 'We need to learn about your people.' And I'm like, 'I don't know anything about you guys, so does that mean I can ask you questions out of nowhere about ... you know?' She's like, 'No, yada-yada-yada. 'cos you're the first South Sudanese student in our...', no, 'You're the only South Sudanese, let's say African student, in the classroom, so we always like, you have to represent them. (Participant 2, Focus Group 2)*

This example illustrates that even apparently well-intentioned efforts by educators to draw attention to what they perceive to be the lived experience of their South Sudanese Australian students may inadvertently serve to reinforce perceptions of difference.

The second way in which teachers and school administrators might be argued to reinforce harmful stereotypes about young South Sudanese students is by proactively monitoring and policing their behaviour outside the classroom. Specifically, participants described how the media's reporting of the Apex phenomenon prompted teachers to perceive groups of 'African' students as a risk and to police them accordingly. As a consequence, our school-aged participants felt that they had been subjected to increased surveillance and disciplinary action from teachers:

*Some schools have bans ... have banned students hanging in a number of three on especially, um, South Sudanese students.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

*Aw once ... last year there was a massive. ... We just – as black people – we like to unite. ... We just like to gather together. ... Once, yeah it was once, we were all standing up and, yeah, we were just in a certain area and then we were just all, you know, standing up doing whatever we were doing. ... And, yeah, we were just like in a massive group talking, chatting, you know. ... And a couple of teachers that are, you know, creeping, and like I noticed that. But they're trying to be slick. I'm like, what are they doing, you know? But, yeah, they were just, like, yeah you know, 'Is everyone alright?'. Like, we're fine, what do you want? But like, obviously the, like, my friends, the group or whatever, they obviously picked it up because they thought, aw, if it was white people, you know, they wouldn't do that.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 4)

*In the schools they even didn't allow us to stay ... [in groups of] two or more because apparently it's intimidating to others and to teachers or something. ... Every time we're, like, in groups or we're walking], the teachers are always like, 'Oh, what's going on guys?' And, if we're in a group or something and then there's like white people here and black people here, all the teachers come.*

(Participant 3, Focus Group 6)

These quotes are suggestive of differential treatment experienced by young South Sudanese Australians at school and participants felt that this was symptomatic of an overarching racialised dynamic whereby

*Young [South Sudanese] people obviously were not allowed to walk in groups.*

(Participant 3, Focus Group 2)<sup>37</sup>

## ***In public***

Participants reflected on a post-Moomba climate in which open expressions of racism and bigotry were seen to be expressed more openly and frequently. Participants thus described how 'Apex' emerged as a label that was used to locate responsibility for criminal activity with any young people with darker skin:

<sup>37</sup> It appears, however, that grievances of this nature predate the Moomba 'riot'. For example, Johnston (2017) notes that the Victorian Department of Education has investigated allegations of racial discrimination since 2010 but we were unable to locate a report of its findings.

*I feel like this Apex thing gives people so much permission to commit crimes but YET to blame black people because we're darker skin and they just think like every black people [are] like criminals. And they be like, 'Ah, let's go rob a bank and blame black people. Let's go do this and put Apex on the name. Let's go do this and blame Apex ... it's giving them too much permission.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 1)

All of our participants voiced frustration about their perception that their mere visible presence in public sometimes prompted negative reactions from others. This dynamic is described below by two of our participants:

*Young people were unable to walk out the door. Young African people. Young South Sudanese were unable to walk out of the door. Because every time they walk out of the door we'd be getting called Apex. You'd be going to a restaurant with your friends, looking all Gucci, and people will stop by they cars and be like, 'Aye. You're an Apex gang, go back home, where you came from,' like, all these labels come along. All these words. All disrespect was like thrown towards people. And that shouldn't have been done. So, the way it should be handled next time is not by bringing it up in the first place BUT, like, treat people right.*

(Participant 4, Focus Group 1)

*If, like, you're seen just standing, like, in the bus stop, um, you know, you came from work, or, like, you came from uni, they'll think you're, like, up to some shifty stuff.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 2)

The dynamic was particularly apparent to participants when they gathered in groups in public places, especially teenage boys and young men due to their physical appearance:

*My two older brothers ... sadly, they're copping it the most. So, they, they understand very much what's going on, and, and like how, how it's affecting them actually hurts me very much. 'Cos they, they are more likely to be labelled and to be, um, judged more than I am, 'cos as you see mostly in the news it's always the, the younger males who are always getting in trouble. And like, our boys, like you can see they, they have a, like, they're tall. Like, you cannot tell them apart sometimes.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

However, another participant's comments indicated that the perception that young South Sudanese Australians are criminals affects not only young men, but also young women:

*Like, young people are being called Apex on the streets, young people are, um, being followed around in supermarkets. Like, there are lots of things that have been hard, like ... for our African community and our South Sudanese life, and more specifically the South Sudanese community. It doesn't matter if you're a boy, a girl, it don't matter.* (Participant 3, Focus Group 1)

From this perspective, the ethnic and racial identity of South Sudanese Australians appears to supersede other aspects of their identity such as gender which, in the case of young women, is associated with a reduced risk of offending compared to young men.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> It is well established by criminological research that gender is one of the strongest correlates of crime (see Steffensmeier & Allen, 1996; Moffitt et al., 2001; Piquero et al., 2005).

Unfortunately, our focus group data do not provide us with scope to explore the differential impacts of these labels for young women and young men, but the overall effect was such that it became:

*Hard for teenagers that are in, like in a group of friends to go in a mall, or in any store, because that, like other people would see them as some sort of threat.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 4)

This suggests that the stigma associated with Moomba and Apex was, at least in some respects, gender-blind. Relatedly, participants provided multiple examples of how they had been subject to increased levels of surveillance within and exclusion from shops as a consequence of their physical appearance:

*Every time I go to, like, a store or something they always, like, have all their eyes on my, like, if I'm gonna steal something ... stop following me around Coles.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 6)

*Uh, there's been a change in policies in a lot of shops now. ... You're not allowed ... You're not allowed [to] carry your bags in and stuff. ... You have to leave your bags at the front. Um, yeah, and like uh, like if you go to a lot of 7-Elevens around here, the guy was always like keep questioning you. And last time me and my mate were at the back. We were getting sandwiches and sort of stuff, and the guy started yelling at us and rushing us and we were like, okay ... We not doing anything ... we left our bags.*

*Well, we did get kicked out of a shop once ... when I was with my two black mates and a white one. We got kicked out, and then like she kicked us, the black ones out, but the white one stayed so ... I don't know ... we were laughing but. ... It was just, 'okay'.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 4)

A similar example was described by one of our peer facilitators who had experienced this type of discrimination:

*I certainly had, um, when I was walking with my cousin some shop guy, he, um, looks so frightened he just saw us and just, and then he ran into his shop and we were, like, what the hell? But um, yeah, it was, it was funny ... it wasn't funny, but it was ... I was, like, are you afraid of two females? And you're a man. Like, are you crippled with – with fear? It didn't make sense to me but I guess that is the impact of, um, the media coverage and stuff.* (Facilitator, Focus Group 4)

Similar to the responses of other participants, this quote reveals how the participants saw their perceived race and ethnicity as having a greater bearing on their treatment by members of the public than other aspects of their identity, such as gender.

Ultimately, participants acknowledged that the public's fear of young South Sudanese Australians is only partially a product of the media's racialised coverage of the Moomba 'riot' and Apex. They also saw this as a product of what they believed to be the public's cultural ignorance when it came to the social dynamics of different South Sudanese communities. As one participant stated:

*When we head out together, they think that we're gonna do something bad, but where there's actually we're just here, like, just they are our brothers and sisters. But we're not even doing anything. This is our culture. Our culture is to stay together. You know? But them, they think that they're kind of like gang towards*

*stuff. That we're gonna cause trouble for this thing. But ... that's why they're trying, they're trying to, like, separate our culture and then trying to get to their culture. ... This is not good.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 3)

From this participant's perspective, cultural ignorance is a product of white Victorians' fear of diversity and unwillingness to engage with multiculturalism as a two-way process.

## **On public transport**

Participants recounted two examples of how the vilification of young South Sudanese Australians has given rise to racial abuse in public settings. Both of these incidents occurred on public transport. With the first incident, one of our participants described how she was assaulted and verbally abused on a tram:

*When I hop on the tram. I have – I've experienced people spit at me. I've experienced people yell, 'Go back to where you came from!' You know, I've had people give me [dirty looks], and, you know, just because this is South Sudanese thing.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 1)

The second incident involved an encounter between one of our participants, her younger sister, and an older woman on the bus:

*Yeah, also one time ... I caught the bus ... I touched on, and this lady ... was sitting down and then she decides to attack my sister. Like, the stuff she said to my sister. I was sitting there, I looked at her like, 'Um, excuse me?' ... You know my sister plays music and stuff. So, she goes to my sister like, 'Your music is too loud.' And my sister responded back, you know, and she started recording my sister. And I was like, 'Um, excuse me. Why are you recording my sister?' And then she started recording me and started swearing at me like, oh, this thing is on me! I got so pissed off ... I was sore about [it], [that] no one actually stood up for me, but this girl is actually saying racist stuff at me. Me personally, I've never experienced anything like this in my life. And for, like, an older woman to tell me this thing, I was shook. 'Cos she was telling my sister, 'Oh, you should respect yourself or I'm going to report you to your school.' Um, 'Your school will say that you're being disrespectful because I'm the older and you should respect me.' I said, 'Look.' And she tells my sister like, 'Go back to school' and all this dumb shit. And I was just there, like, 'Oh my God.' I got so shocked. I thought, I told her, like, 'Look. You can't talk to my sister like that. Who do you think you are?'*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 1)

These incidents are important to acknowledge because they highlight the vulnerability of young South Sudanese Australians to racial abuse. Participants viewed such abuse as a direct consequence of the aforementioned stereotypes and permissive climate created by the media's racialised crime reporting. In the remainder of this section, we examine how these attitudes have played out in the everyday lives of South Sudanese young people, through increased harassment from police and the public, and increased surveillance from family, police and business owners.

## ***Police harassment***

Participants described how, in the aftermath of Moomba, they felt racial profiling by Victoria Police had intensified with the effect that police encroachment on young people's freedom of movement was unrestrained.<sup>39</sup> They expressed anger, disbelief and dismay at this police discrimination, while humour was also often used to dismiss or deride such abuse. But this sense of humour did not disguise the hurt and humiliation they felt when being publicly belittled, or the powerlessness that these events caused:

*Even like when we go out, to say like, to the city. Like, I went out last week and we were getting off the trains and the police was like, 'No, you can't get off.' Just to – just to the black people. And it was like everyone else on the train, but they didn't let us get off. And they said just go back, and just, yeah.*

(Participant 5, Focus Group 6)

*So, it's just, like, there's this thing where it's, like, automatically, 'They're black, they're just gonna cause problems.' ... 'We need to watch out for them.' ... And sometimes they're not doing anything, like, 'Come on guys, can you just start going home?' ... They're like, 'You guys are causing problems.' And it's like, 'Um, get out of my ... I'm gonna go home when I want to go home' ... Who made them a parent? So, they did it all the time.*(Participant 2, Focus Group 5)

Participants were acutely aware of the discriminatory surveillance and control of South Sudanese young people's movements in public and at events. They described unnecessary, inappropriate and intimidating responses to their presence in public or at events, including the use of mounted and air police. Participants described unprecedented levels of harassment, intimidation and control of young people's public and social lives, as evident from the following comments:

*There's this difference. So, [the] rec[reation] centre they had this basketball tournament. ... But it was, like, obviously, with white people there – the people at the rec centre. And there was a lot of kids, a lot of white kids. We did not see a single police. But then when it came to the, when it came to, um.* (Participant 4)

Participant 3: *The tournament.*

Participant 2: *The Sudanese one.*

Participant 4: *The tournament, there was police everywhere.*

Participant 3: *Yeah 10.*

Participant 4: *There was like 12 of them.*

Participant 3: *Even horses.*

Participant 2: *Guys on horses, waiting.*

Participant 4: *Yeah. And we went to Macca's and stuff.*

<sup>39</sup> Participants recognised that racial profiling by Victoria Police is a longstanding issue that predates this particular incident. Prominent cases of racial profiling by Victoria Police include the 2013 Federal Court race discrimination case led by Flemington and Kensington Community Legal Centre. This was known as the Haile-Michael case, in which Victoria Police settled out of court to avoid a trial over claims of racially profiling young African Australians in the Flemington area of Melbourne. It was the first time a race discrimination case reached the Federal Court of Australia. In 2014, officers at Sunshine Police Station in the western suburbs of Melbourne were sacked and others faced disciplinary action over the production of stubby holders bearing a racist cartoon and language that was derogatory towards African Australians (see Donnelly, 2014).

Participant 2: *Weren't there helicopters?*

Participant 3: *Yeah.*

Participant 4: *Yeah, uh-huh.*

Participant 2: *Yeah, yeah.*

Participant 4: *[laughs] Uh-huh, yeah.*

Participant 3: *And they went to Macca's. Like, people want Macca's and pictures and stuff, yeah. There was police in literally every corner and like every street watching you.*

Participant 2: *No, but then they would like escort people out, like, as if you guys are caught inside.*

(Focus Group 5)

Participants saw police as exercising power in a way that prevented any challenge or questioning of their authority and status, which suggests that they are aware of a sense of agency over their own lives and of their rights as Australian citizens, specifically to question authority and the misuse of authority. They identified institutional power and the misuse of that power.

*And to add on to that as well, I kinda feel like, you know, these people, you're a police officer right? Like, you're to do your job, but you can't. ... People have been raised differently. You can't change their mindset. Like, if they've been taught to hate, uh, you know, or taught to be racist or, to just take someone different from them, regardless of their working field, they're still gonna have that. And I kind of feel like they have, they'll have this mentality of where because I'm a police officer I have the power. But and they're like, 'Because I'm white and I'm privileged, I'm not gonna be told I'm in the wrong.' So they kind of use that power, do you know what I mean? Hmm. (Participant 3, Focus Group 3)*

Along with identifying what they perceived to be abuses of power by police, participants also described Victoria Police's failure in its duty of care towards them as citizens and residents of Victoria. The following quotes reveal that these young people clearly perceive police language as selective and designed to convey discriminatory images of young African Australians. They also show that young people understand the power police have to influence community opinion.

*The Victoria Police, I'll just go at them because this [is] the result of the way they communicate, like, 'African', 'Sudanese', every, like, our community, they just portray us as such negative people and then the wider community looks at the Victoria Police for protection. And then the people that they're seeing as good, as the Victoria Police see as good, the wider community sees as, sees as good. So, what do you think? They're portraying us as bad. The wider community thinks, thinks we're bad. (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)*

Police attention towards African Australians also helps to maintain the disproportionate media focus on their lives, which in turn reinforces negative community attitudes towards them and both emphasises and exaggerates the idea that South Sudanese Australians pose a risk to the safety and wellbeing of Victorians.

*Cops coming into a situation that includes black people creates attention and that um, like, brings the media's attention more. So that means, okay, there's cops around. There's something happening with these groups of – you know – gangs. How they call it. And that creates a bigger problem than it is.*

(Participant 4, Focus Group 1)

This lack of trust in the police has had serious long-term implications for the relationship between the South Sudanese Australian community and police (see Markus, 2016). It conflicts with the ideals of community-based policing and undermines and undervalues feelings of safety and belonging for these young people as Australian citizens.

## **Parental supervision**

Participants blamed these media narratives for increasing parental concern and anxiety in the South Sudanese community over their children's behaviour outside the home. One participant explained:

*Our parents are impacted by it. Because, like, they fear us going out because they think that we're going to start doing things, all that.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 6)

These concerns were seen by participants to cause some parents to become less trusting of their children:

*And the parents were all, like, very well aware of what the crimes are... what the kids are doing now. They're very suspicious. It's created, like, more conflict between, like, the older generation and the younger generation. Which shouldn't be the issue. But it's like saying, 'This is happening so we need to work together in a way to, like, find out what is the issue and how we can fix it.'*

(Participant 3, Focus Group 2)

A number of participants described how, as a result of these concerns, some parents had implemented increasingly strict regimes designed to control their children's behaviour and reduce opportunities for them to get into trouble:

*It woke up, like, our parents as well. 'Cos, I feel like, before the whole incident happened, kids were basically lying to their parents and saying, 'Oh, we're going to the movies with my friends,' or 'I'm going here, I'm going there.' So, parents had no idea what their kids were getting up to in the outside world. Um, and for the media it's kind of like, now our parents are more cautious of what their kids are doing and who they're hanging with, and what time they [stay] out [until]. 'Cos now they're worried, um, 'cos their child might get in trouble next. ... Parents are always, like, trying to track down kids and, um, be extra careful of who they hang with, and where, especially, like, what areas they hang in. ... But at the same time, like, um, even though parents are more aware now, it's kind of like, for the younger kids, it's like, now there's no more trust. And now they're being labelled as this, so now they are, like, our parents, or their parents now think, 'Okay, since you're always out, oh you're doing this. So, you, this is what, this is what you were getting up to.' So, not it's like ... it's created, like, a little issue within our own community.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

*Yeah. Like my siblings now, yeah? ... They're not allowed to take public transport because my mum is, like, 'I don't want a reason for it to be, like, 'Oh, the black kids were in the bus and they cause trouble.'* (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)

*And they have to keep time, like, what time they left, what time they go home.*  
(Participant 2, Focus Group 2)

Many participants expressed frustration that their parents seemingly did not trust them to do the right thing if left to their own accord. When asked about what message they would like to convey to their parents, one participant stated:

*Don't worry 'bout me. I'm not like them other kids they see on the streets doing all that gang stuff and, yep.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 6)

It was apparent from our focus groups, however, that the intent of these parental actions cannot be reduced to crime prevention or controlling young people's behaviour alone. Rather, they were also intended to serve as a measure of self-protection whereby it was hoped that increased parental supervision would reduce the risk that children would end up in places or situations in which they were vulnerable to either racist victimisation or false accusations of misbehaviour:

*I think fathers are more, like, strict about it, because um, they think that ... They just ... They're scared of anyone going out.* (Participant 3, Focus Group 6)

*In my experience, um, like, my parents tell me to be cautious around whitepeople, because um, I don't know, they like ... they could do anything and, like, get away with it.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 6)

The concerns of parents and frustrations of young people suggest that there is a need for further intergenerational dialogue about these issues within the South Sudanese community (see also Deng, 2017). Ultimately, however, we do not wish to overstate the significance of any intergenerational tensions described by our participants, most of whom were very appreciative of their parents' efforts to provide them with a better life. As one participant explained,

*We're grateful for the little things that you do.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)

## Part 3: Belonging and Opportunity

Our research highlighted a number of challenges facing young South Sudanese Australians coalescing around the issues of belonging and opportunity. As Losoncz (2017) has previously argued, for South Sudanese Australians these two issues are closely related.

### ***Belonging***

Belonging implies feeling 'at home' and being emotionally attached to one's place of residence and community (Yuval-Davis, 2006; 2011). For South Sudanese Australian youth, belonging can be formed through health and wellbeing (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010), positive education experiences (Cassity & Gow, 2005), and multicultural friendship networks (Colins, Reid & Fabiansson, 2011). Identity forming through place-making has also been described as significant in influencing the wellbeing of young South Sudanese (Samson & Gifford, 2010).

Towards the end of each focus group session, participants were asked to discuss what makes them feel like they belong in Victoria and the challenges they face growing up here. One participant described Victoria as 'home' in contrast to the instability and dislocation of the refugee experience. It was a place of positive experience, stability and opportunity:

*Victoria's actually one of the longest places ... I've actually stayed in one spot, so to me, this is home. I'm not going anywhere. So, it's the best thing. It's the best feeling... getting to meet all these amazing people from different backgrounds, and from different cultures. And also, having a say.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

However, most participants described barriers to feeling at home, belonging and being accepted as part of Australian society. These barriers included their visibility as black Africans, and what they perceived to be Australia's lack of understanding and knowledge of the diversity of African cultures in Australia. One participant reflected:

*They see someone ... with a darker complexion, and all of a sudden it's 'South Sudanese' ... And I sit back and I'm like ... 'Not every black person you see is from South Sudan.' Africa is a big [continent]. South Sudan itself has got, like, a number of different cultures, and, like, shades as well. So, you can't just be, like, pointing fingers and saying, 'Oh, this is South Sudanese people'. So, basically now it's kind of hard to hide that you're South Sudanese. You cannot blend in.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

Participants felt that many Australians had little appreciation of the differences between the (various) African and Australian cultures. In their view, any behaviour is interpreted through the lens of dominant Australian culture, especially family functioning. As such, participants stated that the prevalence of strict parenting practices, common in many South Sudanese communities (see Deng, 2017), has not helped to counteract the media's portrayal of young South Sudanese Australians as lacking parental supervision and positive role models:

*They made us look like our parents don't raise us. It looks like we have no home training at all. It looks like we're just a bunch of ... kids who ... basically do not respect their parents, don't respect the law. And like, what people don't understand is, like, we come from the most strictest households. And they don't understand that. And what the media's showing people, they're showing us like we're out of control, but to be honest, it's the complete opposite because some*

*of these kids, like, if they were to see their parents walk past they wouldn't act a certain way I guess 'cos people are always profiling them, and always labelling them. So, they might as well behave a certain way, not that I condone it.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

*They just think that we're gonna make it a lot worse because we come from a war-torn, so-called war-torn countries ... probably some of these countries are not war-torn, they just believe so. And it's just, it's just the clash of different cultures, to be honest. It's not really a crime. It's just a clash of different cultures and they don't understand that. They just think it's crime when it's just a clash.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

Experiences of discrimination based on appearance meant that participants felt that, in order to belong, they must comply, adapt or 'fit in' with 'white' Australian culture. As one participant explained:

*It's just straight up, it's the white way or the highway. That's what I honestly believe.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

Participants therefore expressed cynical attitudes about the lived reality of multiculturalism in Australia and felt that this country's institutions discriminate against those who are not:

*Like, Australia has this term, we're a 'multiculture', but they're not in reality. In reality, if you're not white, you're beneath us. They just use the term 'multiculture' so it makes them look good. And when they do it, they take the good out of Sudanese culture – when they're doing well: 'You know what? They Sudanese Australian.' But as soon as someone does one thing bad, 'Ugh, sorry, you're African. You don't belong here.'* (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)

*Say, for example ... if someone made it into, like, to the [National Basketball Association], or something ... or that taxi driver that saved somebody's life ... the way they would describe them will be, like, 'Young [Australian]' ... it would be, like, 'South Sudanese Australian'. Yeah. And then all of a sudden when it's something bad, 'Oh, the young African migrant refugee from a South Sudanese background,' or the thug, or the hoodlums. It will be all of these words. All of a sudden we're not Australian anymore.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

*And you know one thing I kind of feel with – if a South Sudanese person – also does something good, 'Oh the hero of Australia ... Oh the hero of Australia!' But then as soon as something bad – they're more quick to show the negative sides of things more than the positive side of things. That's it, yeah.*

(Participant 2, Focus Group 1)

Within this discriminatory system, participants felt that the label 'Australian' was used to describe positive qualities and positive contributions to society. In the case of immigrants, the implication is that, by being successful or doing good things, they are exhibiting 'Australianness'. Conversely, participants felt that blame for doing something bad was rarely associated with Australian culture, policies, institutions or systemic barriers to social inclusion. Instead, it was attributed to the 'Africanness' of perpetrators. In other words, blame is located in their *perceived inability* to adapt, rather than their alleged wrongdoing being framed as a consequence of their efforts to belong being blocked by cultural, structural, political and systemic barriers.

For the young people whose voices are captured here, their desire to belong speaks to their need to feel safe, secure and accepted as Australians.

*There are times we belong here, and there are times that we don't. And it's just, we don't want to not belong here, and we don't want to belong here only when we're doing positive things. We want to belong here no matter what.*

(Participant 3, Focus Group 2)

Participants broadly described 'belonging' as being accepted, while also being able to retain a sense of one's identity and culture – and not having to compromise that identity to fit in – within a multicultural society. When asked 'What sort of things make you feel like you belong here, as part of the community?', participants stated:

*Being accepted for who we are.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 2)

*To me, belonging means, like, acceptance. So, the day Australia accepts South Sudanese people for who we are is the day that I will feel like I belong in Australia.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 2)

*To be part of something.* (Participant 3, Focus Group 6)

*To be accepted.* (Participant 4, Focus Group 6)

*To be comfortable where you are.* (Participant 5, Focus Group 6)

*To be like an equal in your place.* (Participant 7, Focus Group 6)

*To feel safe in your community.* (Participant 8, Focus Group 6)

*To not be judged.* (Participant 10, Focus Group 6)

*Like fitting in to a certain group, like, like, you're wanted there, and not, like, isolated.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 4)

*Yeah, being yourself comes down to belonging.* (Participant 1, Focus Group 4)

*Not, like, having to change yourself to feel wanted.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 4)

*Being offered the jobs that everybody, like, has. Like, being treated as equals.*

*That's the word. Yeah. Um, living your own cultural identity, and, like, saying, 'Yes, that this is me, this is who I am. And you can't do anything about it. I ain't gonna change myself because of you.' Yeah, that's what it means to me.*

(Participant 2, Focus Group 2)

Most participants expressed that they had felt a greater sense of belonging prior to the Moomba 'riot' but due to the media's coverage of this event and the stigma created by this coverage, they no longer felt accepted. Asked, 'Do you feel a sense of belonging here in Victoria?', participants responded:

*Not really, no ... Um, because, like, every time I go out all I hear is basically, 'You don't belong here. Go back to Africa.' And that's why basically, but before all that thing on the media saying that, uh, Sudanese are in gangs, part of gangs, this and that, everything was fine.* (Participant 2, Focus Group 6)

*Hmm. To be honest, for the last two years, I haven't, I have not felt like I belong here, especially within Victoria 'cos of all this nonsense going on. So why, like, why would you feel like you belong in a place that's always making me feel like an outcast? Like, 'You don't belong here.' Like ... they're always saying that you should be sent back to your country for something that you haven't done. So, they're basically judging me off of my appearance and what other people have done. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

*To be honest, I don't feel I belong. Because we're, like. ... My community's being viewed as bad people, you know. So, you can't feel belonging when your community is in a bad situation. And ... and, yeah. Just like that you can't feel belonging at all. (Participant 2, Focus Group 3)*

By contrast, one participant emphasised that they had not felt a sense of belonging prior to the Moomba 'riot':

*I don't feel belonging. But I don't really feel as though, like, I'm attached. Because I know this has been going on for many years ... There's no, like, it's not, like, something new. And it's just been more subtle back then. Now it's just more. ... Before it was more passive aggressive, let's just say that, but now it's more aggressive, more aggressive. (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)*

As previously discussed, racism was seen to as the cause of this problem:

*'Cos you can look fancy, you could look classic, everything, you name it. You could even have the highest degree in, like, university but yet they will name you as the lowest thing ever. Just because of your skin colour, your skin tone, your everything in general. (Participant 1, Focus Group 1)*

In their struggle for acceptance, participants identified their own community as a source of belonging. One participant explained:

*What makes me feel like I belong, part of the community is my South Sudanese community. And the way we respond to these negative things that are always thrown at us ... I feel like [a youth club] especially, and the way we, handled the whole situation. How we, we as young African women, especially, we saw a problem within our community and we tried to resolve the issue ... and a lot of people within our community, especially elderlies ... they're straight up with us. They see that we're trying to make a change and we're trying to actually contribute to this white Australia. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

Other participants described how they experienced a sense of belonging by participating in community events that brought South Sudanese Australians together to celebrate their cultures. They found strength and resilience by participating in these events which also allowed them to connect with their elders, who encouraged them to make a positive contribution to Australian society.

By contrast, one participant suggested that the post-Moomba climate had impacted upon their siblings' connections with the South Sudanese community:

*I don't think my, my brothers especially, I don't think they feel a sense of belonging ... with the South Sudanese community ... now they feel like, okay, they can't be walking around in a group 'cos they're gonna get attacked. So that means they have to go outside their own community to blend in, and go hang with, like, a different, um, culture, or someone from a different just so they won't be a target, as much. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

This suggests that some young men from the South Sudanese community have actively attempted to dissociate themselves from their community as a means of avoiding negative stereotypes and finding a place in society that engenders less conflict and tension for them, a place that perhaps allows them to develop a hybrid identity which in turn decreases the level of negative public attention upon them.

### **Opportunities as 'little doors'**

Belonging also manifests through opportunities, both economic and social or cultural (Losoncz, 2017). Employment is not only a pathway out of poverty and insecurity, but also provides opportunities to interact with other Australians and learn more about Australian culture and society. This leads to an increased sense of integration and inclusion. In 2011, the unemployment rate in the South Sudanese population was six times higher than the national average (Losoncz, 2017).

Participants saw migration to Australia as an opportunity to improve their lives, and – as a testament to and proof of their collective ability, talent and commitment – they viewed individual success stories as achievements of the South Sudanese community as a whole:

*We came here to, like, achieve our best potential ... we see little boys, like, going out into the [National Basketball Association]. And all that. And then we're getting lawyers, we're getting doctors, we're getting all these people.*

(Participant 2, Focus Group 2)

Despite these success stories, participants felt that they had to work harder than others to access opportunities and constantly prove themselves, particularly in the wake of negative media representations. The perception of opportunities being blocked in this way created frustration, suspicion, disappointment, concern for siblings and feelings of being judged and labelled.

*I think the hardest part [of growing up in Victoria] is having to prove that you're more than your colour. (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)*

*I feel like in some cases you do have to try harder than you should. ... Some of the fake, you know, you know, 'everyone welcome, everyone's welcome', but as soon as you enter the camera all switching over to you, you know.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 4)

Participant 4: *I think the media has, um, given us a big bad name. And it is so hard for, like, half of us to achieve our goals because we put that in the circle where they see us as, like, some sort of, like ... you know, like, I don't know. So, sort of like this.*

Facilitator 1: *The black sheep of the...*

Participant 4: *Yeah, like ... You know what I mean.*

Facilitator 1: *Community. Yeah.*

Participant 4: *It's really affecting me in general even though, like, I'm not a male. But it's affecting me because if I want to do something like I want to change some sorts of things I can't do that because they will think, 'Oh, every South Sudanese people are bad people.' And ... I'm so disappointed because ... I'm, like, scared for my younger siblings, my brothers, my cousins, anybody that I know 'cos of this Moomba, so-called, Moomba Festival that's ... went out of rage. And I don't like it to be honest and it's really pissing me off because, like, I don't like it.*

(Focus Group 1)

Blocked and limited opportunities were also seen by some participants as a reason behind the antisocial behaviour of some young South Sudanese people:

*I think they're rebelling because of the opportunities they were not given. ... Like, you're pushing African people in the corner. What do you think they're gonna do? ... Limited jobs. Young people are getting no job opportunities. ... I'm not saying they committed crimes. I'm just saying they get limited opportunities.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

*We're not all of us, like – in the wrong. And the ones that are in the wrong – you guys are giving them a pathway to continue what they are doing.*

(Participant 3, Focus Group 1)

One participant described her frustration at the fact that opportunities are conditional, offered only through the framework of hardship and pity – because of her earlier life experience – rather than because of her abilities, current life and potential.

*Yeah, opportunities, especially I don't know, if you're in school ... if you were to get a nominee for a scholarship or something, you would have to state or give a little story of where you came from and your hardship. And when you give that away, to them, and then they would, like, analyse and be, like, aw, you know this person has been in this kind of situation, why don't we help them there.*

(Participant 2, Focus Group 4)

Participants acknowledged that, prior to the Moomba 'riot', employment opportunities were also limited; but in its wake there emerged a shared sense of being deliberately excluded from the job market.

*[After Moomba] young people ... were unable to get jobs ... Like, before they weren't able to get jobs but then now it has increased to a new extent.*

(Participant 3, Focus Group 3)

*Young people are getting no job opportunities. ... These opportunities can open up so much doors for them. And their families. And they could be in different, better situations. Then they wouldn't have to be called 'disadvantaged' every single time. They're coming to any organisation applying for a job.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

*Say, for example, I want to apply for a job and I mention my background and I'm like all South Sudanese. You know that kind of might be like, 'Oh, she's South Sudanese. What if maybe she's got a criminal record or maybe she's – what if she's related with the what-so-called Apex Gang?' You know the media really did give us*

*a bad name and the media has the power to do that because they could legit over-exaggerate and if anything happens – for example, there has been evidence where, you know, because of the media people have accused that, ‘Oh!’ And assume, made assumptions that: ‘Oh the person that committed this crime is South Sudanese.’ So the media gave other people the power to kind of abuse that what so-called Apex. And that has kind of, you know, hyped them up. It’s hyped them up and, you know, just gave them the confidence to make assumptions. And that stops the rest of us from achieving our goals and trying to be somewhere.*

(Participant 2, Focus Group 1)

*A friend of mine ... she applied [for a job] at Macca’s ... she applied at the same Macca’s as this friend of mine. She was white and but my other friend, she’s not ... she’s not dark-skinned, she’s light-skinned or whatever but she is still African ... but she applied at the same time as this white friend of mine, and ... she [the white friend] got an interview faster than she did. I don’t know why, like, like, Macca’s don’t even see. I don’t [know] maybe, I don’t know maybe with the name, I don’t know what it is but she just didn’t get it. And then it wasn’t just one white friend of mine ... two of them applied at the same time ... And they ended up getting an interview. Whilst my other friend didn’t, and so she had to wait a couple of months, and then from there she didn’t get it, I don’t know ... they were both poor in experience. (Participant 1, Focus Group 4)*

Young people also talked about feeling excluded and discouraged by assumptions that had the effect of ignoring and undermining their potential, which further alienated them from any sense of belonging in Australian society. Participants expressed particular concern for their younger siblings – the next generation of South Sudanese growing up in Australia – throughout the focus group sessions.

*They act like they give opportunities, but they’re, like, little doors. And then they think those little doors are opportunities when it’s a bunch of nonsense just to cover up the real truth of what is really going on in the opportunities. When they actually don’t give them opportunities. And if they do give them an opportunity, that opportunity is really disregarded and not really considered,... anything, to be honest. They just sharing a light. And that light is dimmed.*

(Participant 1, Focus Group 3)

This description of opportunities as ‘little doors’ powerfully evokes the sense that young South Sudanese people feel they are not being given genuine opportunities at all; rather, opportunities are experienced as limited, provisional, inequitable and unfair.

*They just want to ... divide us, in a way, because they just want us to integrate in their way of life without giving us opportunity of integrating the way we live our lives back home and we want to bring it here and have the notion of saying, ‘Go back home if you don’t like it here.’ Well, we came here for a better life, so we deserve the opportunity to hang out with our family and friends the way we like. Like, there’s nothing actually wrong with that. Like, and you call it a free country. Come on, like, seriously. (Participant 1, Focus Group 3)*

*We're just ... trying to make a living. Because we haven't [been] given [the] opportunity to take care of ourselves. And then ... when you try to get some to provide a service ... you have to find a way to get it. (Participant 2, Focus Group 3)*

*But, like, they keep pushing you down. But then they're trying to make it look like, 'Nah, I'm supporting you.' (Participant 3, Focus Group 3)*

*And especially, like, when it came towards standard Year 12 studies, and we all wanted to apply for, like, um, uni courses and stuff, we were just told to do, like, go apply for VCAL, and, and, and, none of the universities, or, like, institutes and stuff. Only to do, like, childcare. Stuff like that. And I was one of the victims. I felt like, I, I fell for their games. Like, they talked me into it. They told me it was gonna be hard, I was gonna struggle, and all these things. So, um, when I finished high school, I, I ended up doing a course that I didn't like 'cos my teachers basically pushed me and forced me to, to do it. And within the first three months of doing the course that, apparently I would've been good at, I wasn't enjoying it and I didn't like it. And then after that, like, I had to drop my course halfway through, and I didn't know how to reapply for a course, and, and I spoke to a few workers who actually helped me into getting into a course that I actually wanted to do and that I have interest in. And now, like, I've been out of school for, like, a few years, and, like, our siblings, my younger siblings, are struggling with that at the moment as well. So, it's ... yeah. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

Among the participants, the desire to protect younger brothers and sisters was a strong theme, which was also accompanied by a sense of powerlessness – unable to effect more positive outcomes for the next generation – as long as discriminatory and exclusionary practices persist.

## **Powerlessness and the emotional impact**

The range of ways in which young South Sudanese people have felt excluded within the Australian community have created a sense of powerlessness among some participants, but also a sense of wanting to fight back against racism and discrimination but not having any structure or mechanism for redress. This frustration has been accentuated by a feeling of being blamed for reacting to their experience, rather than being recognised as victims of racism and discrimination, as the following comments suggest:

*Participant 3: And I think it's become, like, um, we can't sue them, and there's no African people working in the system, as well. And there's no African lawyers who are willing to, like.*

*Participant 1: See that's why we need to, like, um, fight back.*

*Participant 3: Stories and yeah. Get money and restore the community.*

*Participant 2: It also means that you have to accept who we are and what we and it's, like, stop listening to the media, and get to know us personally.*

*(Focus Group 2)*

*I can't say shit back in my turn. 'Cos if I say something, 'Ugh. She's the angry black woman!' If I say something, 'Ugh. This girl's running out at me. She's Apex!' (Participant 1, Focus Group 1)*

*This kid I work with, I was talking to him. Me and him were just having a debate. And then he was like ... 'just because you're black, wait, just because you're black it doesn't mean you can use your colour as a way to get what you want and get away with things.' And I was like, 'What?'. So, people have this mentality that if you're black, you just, you, you always cry. No, but that's just it. People think you cry, like, you cry about everything because you're black, so you always get things, you know, 'cos you're black. (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)*

As well as describing their frustration at this sense of powerlessness, participants talked about the emotional impact of negative media attention – and the subsequent assumptions made about South Sudanese people – as deeply wounding to their self-esteem and emotional wellbeing:

*For me, personally, like, it, it has affected my self-esteem. 'Cos now that I see, like, a bunch of, like, Sudanese kids walking, I always worry for myself as well. I'm like, 'Okay, they seem to be, like, walking in a group.' Like, I feel for them. They're somehow gonna get, um, they're gonna get pointed out. They're gonna get in trouble somehow. Or I always wonder, 'Okay, are they up to no good?' Or 'What are they doing? Why are they in such a large group? Why are they drawing attention to themselves?' I always ... try not to draw so much attention to myself when I'm in public 'cos I, I, I'm always thinking people are gonna think, 'Oh, I'm part of Apex' or I've done something. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

Young people also talked about feeling neglected in school, blamed for the behaviour of others, self-conscious in public in terms of how they might be identified and stereotyped, and sick of being seen as 'a problem'. This resultant situation was seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that it could shape young people's sense of themselves as unwanted and unworthy:

*Growing up, like, if you keep telling someone, 'Oh, you always start problems', it's gonna make, they're gonna automatically, like, believe it themselves. And then they're just gonna keep doing it. (Participant 4, Focus Group 5)*

*Like, if that's how you see me, I might as well be that, like, why am I gonna be good all the time? (Participant 2, Focus Group 5)*

*And also ... when I apply for a lot of jobs, especially this year, I was jobseeking a lot. And then ... I never get, like, called back, or anything, and I always assume, 'Okay, it's 'cos maybe they might've recognised my name. From 'cos, [in the media] the articles they write, they, they put, like, the kids' full names on it, and I'm not sure they're allowed to do that. So, I'm, like, 'Okay, they, they might recognise my name. It sounds like a Sudanese name. Should I change my name and use a different name on my résumé or something?' So it's, like, affected me in, on so many levels. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

According to the focus group discussions, young South Sudanese Australians are worried about being perceived as gang members or criminals and finding themselves the recipients of unwanted media attention.

They feel exhausted by having to justify and explain themselves, by the pressure of somehow representing all South Sudanese people. And they feel worn down by the experience of being treated with suspicion:

*Like, it's not a place I want my younger brothers to grow up. Being known as criminal members when they are just – like, this is the time where they just adapt to new things and pick up new things. I [don't] want them to be known as criminal members. (Participant 3, Focus Group 1)*

*Even, like, when I walk into shops and, like, they look at me funny. And then I feel some type of way. I, I just walk out. I'm like, 'You know what? I don't need this, and I don't want to cause any attention to myself,' ... The next day I could be waking up to my photo all over, like, on the news saying I'm part of Apex, and I supported something, or I've done something 'cos nowadays you never know. So, it's kinda like, it brought me to, like, it brings me down a lot. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

This experience – of not being recognised or respected – is particularly emotionally taxing when these young people are working hard to do good things and make a positive contribution in the community:

*Not being seen and, like, showing my hard work in, like, school and stuff. Like, why am I not being shown? (Participant 3, Focus Group 5)*

*It's people not understanding my needs as a young African woman, as an individual, people not understanding my struggle. People always assuming they know my story. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

*I give back to the community and I'm also trying to change South Sudanese people – you know – by having, by being a member of the youth and, you know, giving back to the community. Running programs to stop stereotype and because of the media I am viewed as a criminal. (Participant 3, Focus Group 1)*

*I had a work placement that involved some police. And, like, when I was doing work placement there, you know, the police [were] just like, 'Tell your point of view.' But I – but hate fact that they kept asking me, just because I'm from South Sudan ... the fact that I'm South Sudanese. They're like, 'Oh it's South Sudanese. Oh, can you tell me something about the Apex story? Oh! How old are these kids? Can you tell me why this is happening? Oh, I heard that [having] ... one parent at home. This is why the kids are getting in trouble and stuff. And I'm just there like, 'Look. Look. I don't know about Apex. I don't wanna know about Apex. I'm my own person and don't drag me into this thing. (Participant 1, Focus Group 1)*

Feeling worn down, bullied, stereotyped and constantly devalued can take a severe toll on young people's social and emotional wellbeing. Despite this toll, and the emotional work required to withstand it, a strong resilience nevertheless shone through many of the young people's words and voices. As one participant explained:

*They think of us as, like, the weaker prey. So, it's, like, they're trying so hard to beat us down in every possible way they could. So, at the end of the day it's all, like, it's all ... depends how you handle it mentally. (Participant 1, Focus Group 2)*

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to amplify the voices of South Sudanese Australian young people who endured the sustained wave of negative media coverage of Apex and 'African gangs' that emerged following the 2016 Moomba 'riot'. Twenty-eight young people of South Sudanese heritage reflected on how these narratives have impacted their lives. The young people's comments and perspectives were focused on three broad areas:

- 1) the role of the media;
- 2) the experience and effects of racism, at both the institutional and interpersonal level; and
- 3) how this racism undermines a sense of belonging, limits opportunities to succeed and erodes emotional wellbeing.

### **The media and misrepresentation**

It is not surprising that many young South Sudanese people blame mainstream media reporting and misrepresentation for increased levels of public, political and police attention directed towards their community. Since Moomba 2016, when what was seen as 'extremely biased' (Participant 1, Focus Group 3) media coverage seemed to inflame and exaggerate public perceptions of South Sudanese youth as a 'problem' group, young people in the study perceived that the actions of a small number of individuals involved in crime, violence and antisocial behaviour has led to the labelling of the whole community, but young people in particular. Historically, different immigrant groups in Victoria have reported similar experiences of racist stereotyping and ostracism; however, participants in this study were adamant that this neither excuses such practices, nor makes such treatment just or fair. The young people we spoke to talked about the strong sense of community in most African cultures, and conveyed that socialising in groups is an important part of everyday life in these communities. However, since the media has begun labelling such groups as 'gangs', some participants expressed unease about spending time with their peer group because of perceptions and comments about 'gang' activity and increased public suspicion and surveillance.

### **The everyday impact of racism**

At the individual level, racism has negative psychological and, in some cases, physiological consequences for those who experience it (Clark et al., 1999; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). These effects can be especially pronounced for young people who experience racism and discrimination in their formative years. Specifically, research shows that young people who are subject to racism often experience higher levels of what psychologists describe as 'internalising symptoms' such as diminished self-esteem and self-confidence, which can negatively affect their academic performance and long-term economic prospects (Harris-Britt et al., 2007). In certain cultural circumstances, racism may also trigger problematic 'externalising symptoms' among adolescent youths such as reduced self-control, anger and aggression which are linked to substance abuse, behavioural problems and an increased risk of offending (Caldwell et al., 2004; Gibbons et al., 2012; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Trześniewski et al., 2006). As discussed in this report, participants from our focus groups described both internalising and externalising symptoms as a result of what they perceived as racism, discrimination and surveillance.

Many of the young participants described school as the place where they had experienced discriminatory and unfair treatment based on their race and racial stereotypes. Frequent comments were made about classroom and playground interactions with both teachers and students that involved such racism. Commonly shared experiences included teachers treating them as incapable students or downplaying their academic potential, and schools failing to take action in cases of racist bullying yet being quick to discipline young South Sudanese people if they retaliated to such bullying. Several schools have reportedly banned students from hanging out in large groups, but participants felt that this was only policed for some groups. This kind of differential treatment gave rise to the sense that a

different set of rules apply to young South Sudanese people in Victoria. This made it even harder for these young people to blend in with other students, to feel like they belong, at a time in their lives when they are developing a sense of who they are and where they fit in – their self-identity and their place in the world. They felt that their differences were constantly being reinforced, both to themselves and to other students.

As well as at school, participants perceived that overt forms of racism had become more socially acceptable in public spaces since media portrayals of South Sudanese young people as a 'threat to society' had taken hold in the public mind. Specifically, they believed that the media has validated pre-existing racist stereotypes, which has given licence to the public expression of such views. Young people reported being harassed and targeted on public transport, for instance. Almost all participants described an incident of verbal abuse in an open space, and some had also been victims of physical abuse. Similarly, they also reported increased surveillance, such as having to leave school bags at the door or counter of shops, or people on public transport filming them 'just in case' they did something wrong. Many read and were impacted by the social media comments attached to news stories – such as that South Sudanese people should be deported or imprisoned – which served as a constant reminder of the hostility, bias and intolerance directed towards their community.

One of the key discussion points was the treatment of African communities by the police. Many felt over-policed by the heightened attention and presence of police at community events, such as a specialised South Sudanese basketball tournament, or by police – with ranks dominated by white males – telling them to go home from the city or trying to stop them getting off the train. Perhaps most significantly, it was not only the police and members of the public who seemed to observe their behaviour more closely, but also the participants' parents. Many parents believed the media portrayal of young people's behaviour – the representation of South Sudanese young people as 'the problem' – and while participants were not surprised, given the consistent reporting of 'out of control youths', they were offended by their parents' lack of trust in them, and parents not knowing whether or not their children were likely to be involved in such violence. Many parents had spoken with their children about their behaviour in public and had made changes to their routine, such as driving their children to after-school activities. The purpose of these actions appears two-fold: to prevent their children from doing the wrong thing; and to protect their children from abuse, hostility and harassment within the wider community.

In the face of these stressors, participants exhibited tremendous resilience and there was no evident risk of these strains manifesting as harmful or antisocial behaviour in the immediate future. In the long term, however, there is reason for concern as xenophobic attitudes and hate crime are known to undermine social cohesion and community resilience (see Benier, 2017) and this can in turn increase certain risk factors associated with juvenile offending and reduce the presence of key protective factors at the school, community, peer and family levels (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008). To this effect, multiple participants expressed their concern about how their younger siblings would cope with these pressures.

## ***Belonging and the sense of false opportunities***

Participants all spoke about the consequences of the prolific negative media and political attention for their sense of belonging in Victoria, and how this had limited their access to opportunities, both economic and social. While some were happy to be living in Victoria, all agreed that there were times when they did not feel welcome in their suburbs. For some, this had been consistent during their childhood and adolescent years, while others had noted that this had changed since the events and aftermath of Moomba 2016. Participants were frustrated by the broader community's lack of understanding of the diversity of African cultures and communities, which were often described in singular terms – as if 'African' comprised one homogenous culture – and many expressed anger at being told to 'go home' when they were born in Australia.

There was a sense among our participants that 'two sets of rules' exist for young people growing up in Victoria and that this was largely dependent on an individual's ethnic and racial background. As one participant explained, 'it's the white way or the highway' (Participant 1, Focus Group 3). These young

people saw Victoria's so-called multiculturalism as not really applying to them – that their differences were accentuated more than others – and they disliked being treated like outcasts. There was a strong view that opportunities supposedly available to young South Sudanese people are frequently blocked at the individual, community and institutional level. All participants agreed that belonging requires an acceptance of diversity by all members of society, but many felt that they would have to change their identity to feel that they really belonged. Some, for example, talked about changing their name on their résumé to a less 'African' sounding name. Some had tried to distance themselves from the South Sudanese community but, as they still did not feel a strong sense of belonging to Australian society more broadly, this left them feeling even more isolated. Conversely, other young people, in response to feeling excluded, had associated more with the South Sudanese community as a protective measure, highlighting the tension between needing to feel part of their own community and wanting to belong within the community at large. The sense of being blocked and frequently thwarted in their efforts to succeed and be accepted made young people feel powerless, both for themselves and for their younger sisters and brothers.

Our participants spoke about the emotional impact of feeling unable to protect themselves or their loved ones from negative media, public and political attention. They often mentioned feeling neglected, in that they were not considered to be worthy of inclusion in Australian society. They reported feeling hurt and unfairly maligned by media representations of the Moomba 'riots', Apex and 'African gangs', in that they have been singled out as a community and blamed for the actions of a small minority of individuals who happen to share their background. The perception that other racial groups are not singled out in the same way has seemingly led some young South Sudanese people to internalise the negative labels applied to them by others. Some young people questioned why they should do the right thing when people assumed and expected the worst of them. Overall, participants consistently spoke of the emotional toll of these experiences, of feeling worn down and drained, and how this can have a lasting impact on a young person's identity, self-esteem and wellbeing.

## Recommendations

Our research indicates that the celebration of ethnic and racial diversity in Melbourne is not experienced equally by all members of the community. The stigma and racism experienced by South Sudanese Australians in Victoria is by no means a new phenomenon; however, participants repeatedly emphasised that the media's sustained coverage of the Moomba 'riot', Apex and 'African gangs' has amplified this problem by keeping them in the public and political spotlight. The following recommendations have been formulated in relation to our findings with input from our partners at CMY.

### General

- 1 Policymakers, police, academics and journalists should work to ensure that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities have meaningful opportunities to contribute to debates, discussions, decision-making processes and consultations that will directly affect them.

### Media

- 2 Journalists, editors and producers should acknowledge and adhere to the recommendations for ethical crime reporting formulated by the Police Accountability Project in December 2017.<sup>40</sup> These recommendations expand upon the standards developed in the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) Journalist Code of Ethics, which stipulates that journalists should 'not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability'.<sup>41</sup>
- 3 The Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), in cooperation with broadcasting industry groups, should proactively educate culturally and linguistically diverse communities about how they can lodge a complaint about journalism that breaches these ethical standards.<sup>42</sup>
- 4 Social media has provided a valuable medium for challenging harmful stereotypes about South Sudanese criminality; however, this can have the unintended consequence of directing further unwanted attention at young people from this community. To minimise this risk, future social media campaigns should be developed in consultation with young people from this community as this will ensure that they have an opportunity to influence the messaging and raise any concerns.

### Policing

- 5 The Executive Command of Victoria Police must acknowledge that concerns persist among young South Sudanese Australians about police harassment and racial profiling. As such, there is a need for independent evaluation to assess the adequacy of training that Victoria Police officers receive which is aimed at preventing these problems. Concerns raised by participants about the alleged targeting of groups of young South Sudanese men by officers in public places also suggest the need for research that explores the situational dynamics of police interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- 6 Community outreach, education and legal advocacy services such as those provided by the Police Accountability Project represent important resources for young people who are at an elevated risk of experiencing police harassment or racial profiling as a consequence of their race or ethnicity. The Victorian State Government should increase funding for such services and ensure that they are accessible to residents throughout the state.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.policeaccountability.org.au/commentary/reporting-crime-and-race-a-short-guide-for-journalists/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.meaa.org/meaa-code-of-ethics/>

<sup>42</sup> The Police Accountability Project (2017) provides a list of available avenues for submitting a complaint as part of its 'Recommendations'. These include emailing the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the MEAA, the Australian Press Council, various broadcasting industry groups, and ACMA.

## **Third-party reporting and bystander anti-racism**

- 7 Third-party reporting and bystander anti-racism can help to reduce the impact of racial harassment and abuse for victims. The Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission should undertake a review of its existing resources and reporting mechanisms in order to assess their effectiveness, visibility and accessibility. A review is timely given that initiatives such as 'Report Racism' were developed prior to the 2016 Moomba 'riot'.<sup>43</sup>

## **Belonging**

- 8 Local governments should work in partnership with a range of organisations and young people to develop place-based community initiatives that help to strengthen a sense of belonging and connectedness at the neighbourhood level. These initiatives should be inclusive and target all young Australians, not only those of South Sudanese background.

## **Opportunities**

- 9 Organisations like CMY should continue to provide youth leadership training to young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This training should include a media engagement component as this will help to ensure that young people are equipped with the necessary skills to speak with the media about sensitive issues such as crime and racism.
- 10 The Victorian Government should ensure that existing youth employment programmes targeting African-background young people are adequately funded, resourced, evaluated and, where found to be successful, scaled-up.

## **Research**

- 11 There is scope to conduct a follow-up study that specifically examines how South Sudanese Australian teenage boys and young men have been impacted by the media narratives and political dynamics discussed in this report. With assistance from contracted youth leaders from the community, participants for such a study could be more easily recruited via churches, recreational programmes, public transport, voluntary activities, sports programmes and youth-led community organisations.
- 12 Researchers should also endeavour to account for how parents and guardians of Sudanese heritage have been impacted by the media narratives and political rhetoric outlined in this report. Documenting their experiences and concerns is important for better understanding the wider social consequences of these dynamics and may help to promote more productive intergenerational dialogues and responses to issues of mutual concern.
- 13 The Victorian Department of Education should commission an independent academic study of racism and surveillance in schools. Further research is essential for developing comprehensive, evidence-based tools and resources that address what appears to be a complex problem. Such research should also look to identify examples of 'best practice' in Victoria and other jurisdictions in relation to educating teachers and school administrators about racism.

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<sup>43</sup> See Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission (2013).

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