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Countering Islamophobia in the Victorian population

Kevin Dunn¹, Rachel Sharples¹, Fethi Mansouri², Yin Paradies², Matteo Vergani², Craig McGarty¹ and Amanuel Elias²

¹Western Sydney University

²Deakin University

Executive Summary

Islamophobia underpins extremist verbal and physical attacks on Muslim communities. It has become widespread in Australian society, and normalised in everyday settings such as in mainstream media. There is general agreement among Australian researchers and community representatives that the concept of Islamophobia is a useful tool for understanding and developing ways to challenge anti-Islam attitudes. However, despite it becoming widespread, Islamophobia should not be treated as a singular problem as it takes many different forms (see Peucker and Smith 2019), which require targeted responses. This brief provides contemporary empirical insights into the extent of Islamophobia in Victoria, and how it is manifest, in order to help develop policy responses.

In November 2019, we undertook an online representative survey of 4019 Victorians to examine Islamophobia in Australia. We asked questions about respondents' attitudes towards cultural diversity, racial equality and privilege; trust and fairness; Muslims and Islam; and other ethno-cultural groups in Australian society; their experiences of racism and discrimination; their contact with Muslims and knowledge of Islam; their trust of institutions; political affiliation; and support for extreme politics (e.g., violence, non-democratic governance). To our knowledge, this was the largest representative survey undertaken in Victoria with the purpose of measuring Victorians' perceptions of and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam.

Based on respondents' answers, we used latent class analysis to reveal groups in the Victorian population. Latent class analysis is an advanced statistical method that identifies related sets of responses in a dataset that may be hidden even from trained observers (Hagenaars and McCutcheon 2002; Uebersax 1993; Heinen 1996).

Five groups were identified:

1. Islamophobic with supremacist ideology¹ (9%) and clear intentions to take related actions;
2. Islamophobic with assimilationist views² (23%) that perceive a cultural hierarchy into which Australian Muslims can fit if they adapt their 'cultural ways';
3. Undecided (17%), unpredictable in relation to Islamophobia and needing further research to determine their attitudes and how to avoid triggering Islamophobia;
4. Progressive with concerns about Islam (32%), generally assured about cultural diversity but some level of concern about Islam and Muslims; and
5. Progressive (19%), very positive about Muslims and Islam and a clear political position on cultural diversity that is critical of assimilationist thinking.

We examined the demographic and attitudinal attributes of these groups in order to identify motivations and drivers of Islamophobia. We asked community organisations in Victoria that work in the broad areas of diversity and multiculturalism, and with a particular emphasis on Muslim and non-Muslim relations, to reality-test this five-group segmentation. The groupings made sense on the ground and provide a strong pathway for program and policy design.

CRIS Issues Papers identify what an issue is about; why it's of strategic importance; who or what has the power and resources to act on an issue; where current policy can be improved; concrete proposals for action; potential impacts of proposed policy changes, and related areas that need further research and exploration.

Some Issues Papers also contain appendices with useful resources or additional information or data on a particular issue.

¹See Appendix A

²See Appendix A

Key findings and proposed strategy

- Islamophobia is currently widespread in Victoria, with a prevalence that is inconsistent with the generally positive attitudes that Victorians have towards diversity. This is a serious matter of public importance and requires urgent policy attention.
- Islamophobia manifests in different ways, and to different degrees, across the Victorian population. We therefore propose that countering Islamophobia should involve varied approaches, stakeholders and narratives.
- We have segmented Victorians into five groups (see above) in regard to Islamophobia. Only one of the five groups (about 20%) completely rejects Islamophobic attitudes. Four other groups reveal different depths of Islamophobia, ranging from those with progressive views but concerns about Muslims to those with far-right views.
- A sensible public policy approach is to consider what strategies best prevent Victorians from being in the more problematic groups, and which encourage them to reject Islamophobic views.
- Understanding the different forms of Islamophobia is important to undertake effective counter-Islamophobic interventions. Our data indicate that approximately half of those with some Islamophobic attitudes are not associated with assimilationist and supremacist ideology, and systematic changes to popular discourses (government and media) should have decisive effects upon those Victorians.
- Approximately one in ten Victorians have consistently held negative views about Muslims and Islam. In addition to holding assimilationist and supremacist views, they are more likely than the other groups to indicate support for an organisation that resorts to violence. This group also have stronger levels of distrust of public institutions than do other Victorians. The appropriate policy focus on this minority group of Victorians may be containment and proscription, to make it more difficult for them to make Islamophobic statements or vilify Victorian Muslims, rally for anti-Muslim politics and inflame issues. They ought to be understood as a threat to good public order.

1. Why is it an issue of strategic importance?

In this study, we conceptualise Islamophobia as a form of racism that negatively targets expressions of Muslimness and Islam (All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims 2018). Our view is that Islamophobia draws on the core characteristics of racism, in terms of mechanisms, processes and outcomes (Dunn et al. 2007; Fredrickson 2002; Allen 2010). We examine Islamophobia through established measures of social distancing (e.g., respondents disagree with “I would accept living near a mosque”), perceived threat (e.g., respondents agree with “Muslims pose a threat to Australian society”) and perceptions of belonging and identity (e.g., respondents disagree with “Islam is compatible with western society”). While Islamophobia may be championed by racial supremacists (as shown in work by Peucker and Smith 2019), research shows that it has burgeoned well beyond that group, and is now prevalent in a cross-section of western societies, as well as being normalised in areas of mainstream media (All Together Now and UTS 2017; One Path Network 2017) and in political discourse (Briskman 2015; Soutphommasane 2018). Islamophobia continues to be prevalent in the wider community, which can have long-lasting impacts on Muslim communities and the broader social cohesion of society in the long-term.

Our report shows high levels of Islamophobic attitudes are prevalent in Victorian society. It is a legitimate and a critical priority focus for community relations. Too many Muslim Australians are exposed to the negative impacts of racism as a consequence of Islamophobia. Islamophobia also undermines harmonious community relations; it can give rise to deleterious public division; can be used to support extremist politics; and can give rise to public disorder.

This Issues Paper demonstrates that there is a significant level of social distance (Hasan 2018), if not antipathy, towards Muslims and Islam in Victoria (see Table 1):

- 14.8% of respondents disagreed that Muslims are the same as other citizens.
- 21.7% agreed that Muslims do not fit into Australian society.
- One in three (29.4%) of the respondents agreed that Islam is compatible with western society and 31.9% disagreed that it is compatible.
- About a fifth of the respondents said they would boycott the purchasing of halal products (18.4%).
- 53.8% stated they thought Muslim immigration into Australia was ‘About right’, while 37.3% stated it was ‘Too high’ or ‘Much too high’.
- One in five (22.1%) agreed that Muslims pose a threat to Australian society.
- 19.1% of respondents agreed that Muslims should be targeted more than others at airports and stations, but only 12.5% agreed that counter-terrorism policies should focus exclusively on Muslims.
- One in five respondents hold negative views towards Muslims and Islam.
- Just under a half of the respondents would accept living near a mosque (48.4%).
- One-third (33.7%) agreed that women should not

be allowed to wear the hijab in Australia, this rose to 48.9% when asked about wearing the niqab or burqa.

The data also indicate that many Victorians have limited exposure to Muslims, with 39% stating they had no exposure to Muslims and 30.7% stating they know fewer than five Muslims. About a quarter (24.3%) stated they had never met or interacted with Muslims while a little less than a quarter stated they interacted with Muslims weekly (23.0%) and monthly (23.5%). Over half (58.4%) of respondents indicated they knew ‘a little’ about the Muslim religion and practices, while 15.3% stated they knew ‘nothing at all’.

2. Who or what has the power or resources to act?

Government agencies and organisations have the capacity, or should be resourced, to intervene to challenge Islamophobia. Responsibility for safely intervening with organised racist groups should largely sit with state agencies, such as Victoria Police and ASIO.

Victorians who are undecided, or have some concerns about Muslims and Islam, need to be persuaded toward more-progressive positions. In this context, community members who are undecided about their attitudes to Muslims should be targeted through community initiatives that are instigated by **local government** and community sector organisations.

These community initiatives could include stories and representations that demonstrate the ordinary hopes (family, education and work) and civic participation (volunteering and donating, perhaps in drought- and bushfire-related local charity work or homelessness) of Muslims to encourage greater acceptance and understanding and dispel racist viewpoints. These initiatives will work best if they leverage the strongly held universalist position³ on the rights of Muslim Australians as citizens. The profiling of celebrity (Australian Muslim) journeys, such as Muslim sports or media stars, will allow non-Muslim Victorians to develop local affiliation and human association. **Sports and community groups** will need government resourcing to undertake these initiatives in a way that is informed, strategic and monitored. A better and more sensible public discourse in **politics and media** about Islam and Muslims will also be very effective to counter Islamophobia. This requires political restraint and guidance, and better media practice, which together would substantially contain the spread of Islamophobia.

A key and often forgotten group for anti-racism policy and action are **progressives**, those people that accept and advocate for diversity and belonging – they provide a key platform for promoting social cohesion within the community. Public policy and political messaging should challenge views of cultural supremacism and privilege. Anti-racist progressives are key influencers, whose work could be accelerated through their networks and other capacities.

³See Appendix A

3. Where can current policy be improved?

It is timely to contemplate government-led initiatives that bring together research and community insights, and that share examples of good practice and intervention. The consultations and report of the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018) shows what could be done in a co-ordinated way in Victoria. A whole-of-government and community campaign, to counter Islamophobia, is required. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019 (2020: 31-3,134-43) also concluded that a whole of government approach to building social cohesion was required to address widespread Islamophobia.

4. Proposals: what further action is needed and by whom?

We propose that different types of action should be taken for each of the five groups we have identified based on attitudes towards Islam.

Community and government stakeholders were asked to provide feedback on the five groups that we identified to understand Islamophobia. This approach to understanding was endorsed because it provided justification for a multi-pronged approach to countering Islamophobia and would lend itself to building coalitions for intervention directed at the different groups identified. Our analysis of the approach needed for each of these five groups follows.

1. The **'Islamophobic'** group (9%) have a consistent and strong anti-Muslim/Islam stance. Members of this group have a consciousness and intentionality that is revealed in their attitude profile of blatant supremacism and hostility. This is a minority group for whom it would be difficult to change hearts and minds, and they should more likely be a focus of containment and proscription. Messaging from public authorities that construct members of this group as deviant threats to good public order will help contain this threat. It would be reasonable to assert that engaging with members of this group is dangerous and risky to reputation and safety. The key is to make it more difficult for them to make Islamophobic statements, to vilify Victorian Muslims, rally anti-Muslim politics and inflame issues. Responsibility for safely intervening with organised members of this group would largely sit with state agencies (law, policing, security).
2. The **'Islamophobic with assimilationist tendencies'** group (23%) have a disposition towards Muslims that is very close to the Islamophobic group described above. However, the ideological underpinning of this group is assimilationism and a perception that there is a cultural hierarchy into which Australian Muslims can fit if they adapt their "cultural ways". This is a priority group for maintaining social cohesion and public order. Local action and pre-preparation for disputes (e.g. place-based initiatives to assuage debates about mosques) will limit the extent to which members of this group rally to the intentional politics of

Islamophobes. Together, the two groups are a formidable minority that can be rallied to cause public disturbance. Members of this group are more likely to be Christian, and if people of faith can connect their visions and values, then this will assuage the effect of assimilationist ideology. Interfaith events, statements and representations will provide an opportunity for religious rivalries to be assuaged. Buy-in and advocacy from key influencers (organisations and individuals) will also have reach and impact (social media, storytelling) with this group.

3. The **'Undecided'** group (17%) are unpredictable in relation to Islamophobia, and ought to be a focus of more research so that we can better determine their attitudes and help predict and avoid the triggering of Islamophobia. Like the previous group, anything that confronts assimilationist assumptions will prove effective. Education that de-centres stereotypes and re-humanises Muslims will also build resilience to potential influence of Islamophobia in this group. Stories and representations that demonstrate the ordinary hopes (family, education and work) and civic participation (volunteering, donating) of Muslims would have positive effects by leveraging the strongly universalist position on rights in this group. Also, the profiling of celebrity (Australian Muslim) journeys, such as Muslim sports or media stars, will allow members of this group to find local affiliation and human association. Work at the level of locality (sports and community groups), and in schools, will have enduring benefit and virtue, and the latter can be an effective means to reach parents.
4. The **'Progressive with concerns about Islam'** group (32%) are generally assured about cultural diversity in Victoria but have some level of concern about Islam. This are a group where there can be optimism about the prospects of assuaging their anxieties. The residues of assimilationist thinking need to be exorcised from this group. They are a group open to influence and will likely attend local initiatives such as mosque open days and other interfaith events. However, the quickest wins with this group will be achieved through a better and more sensible public discourse about Islam and Muslims to alleviate concerns or misconceptions that they have picked up from Islamophobics.
5. The **'Progressives'** (19%) are very positive about Muslims and Islam in Australia, and they have a clear political position on cultural diversity that is critical of assimilationist thinking. This group is a strong counterforce against the discourses of the Islamophobic group. They are a somewhat neglected group in terms of policy action, and could be better utilised for anti-racism work. Policy, and political messaging, could better enhance and legitimise the challenge that members of this group present to cultural supremacism and privilege. Progressives are key influencers whose work could be accelerated through their networks and other capacities.

5. What are the impacts of a change in policy?

Action using these findings will negate the harmful impacts of Islamophobia. Discrimination includes impaired access to goods and services like education, housing, transport and employment. Those who experience such discrimination are more likely to suffer mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (Paradies 2006). Systemic infringement of opportunity are inconsistent with a healthy society – it produces more-guarded and less-engaged citizens, and is a threat to social cohesion, economic productivity and good public order (Paradies et al. 2009). Discrimination in the workplace leads to absenteeism and attrition, public realm Islamophobia creates immobility and unnecessary diversions (Itaoui 2016), and racism in housing has invidious social consequences, such as unequal access to amenity, and segregation (Galster 1990; McDonald et al 2016)).

6. Related areas that need further research and exploration

To address Islamophobia in the Victorian community, we recommend further research in the following three areas:

1. Qualitative research to identify the disruptors that could successfully prevent the Undecided group from moving towards the Islamophobic groups. The concern is that this substantive group of undecideds may be recruited to Islamophobic action. As yet, it is unclear what some of the triggers might be for this group, and a better understanding of motivations and drivers would assist in developing interventions that direct this group towards progressive standpoints rather than Islamophobic ones.
2. Qualitative research on the mechanisms and discourses that can shift the Islamophobic category into the “Islamophobic with assimilation” category. Typical anti-racist assumptions would be to challenge the supremacism-based hostility as well as challenging assimilationist thinking. Assimilationist thinking might facilitate a shift from supremacism, by leveraging the universalist perspectives that sit within assimilationism – in which there would acceptance of Muslims’ human rights and citizenship. This group would still be exposed to the assumptions of cultural hierarchy, but this may be preferable to a white supremacist outlook. The value of this approach would need to be evaluated.
3. Consultations with Progressive groups on how they can be better enabled to counter Islamophobia themselves. This group are too often ignored as they hold attitudes and support behaviours that are not a threat to good public order. But they are an invaluable resource for anti-racist action, and this has been under-utilised. Consultation that examines capacities, limits, resourcing and structural support is recommended.

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Table 1. Attitudes Towards Muslims and Islam Victorians in 2019 (%)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I would accept living near a mosque	16.5	31.9	25.3	14.9	11.3
Muslims are the same as other citizens	23.1	42.1	20.1	9.8	5
Muslims do not fit into Australian society	7.7	14	28.1	31.4	18.7
Muslims pose a threat to Australian society	8.2	13.9	29.3	28.7	20
Do you agree with the practice of targeting Muslims more than others at airports and stations	6.4	12.7	26.9	29.7	24.3
Counter-terrorism policies in Australia should focus exclusively on Muslims	3.9	7.6	21.2	37.8	29.5
I would feel very comfortable speaking with a Muslim	31.3	41.5	19.4	5	2.8
I would boycott the purchasing of halal products	7.9	10.5	26.6	29.1	25.9
Women should not be allowed to wear head coverings like the hijab in Australia	16.5	17.2	25.8	22.4	18.1
Women should not be allowed to wear face coverings like the niqab and burqa in Australia	25.2	23.7	22.7	15.2	13.2
Islam is compatible with western society	7.9	21.5	38.8	20.4	11.5
I am worried that our rights and freedom are threatened by Muslims in Australia	11.3	20.8	27.7	24.2	16
I worry about terrorism in Australia	22.9	40.2	21.2	10.5	5.2
Compared to myself Muslims have a lot less power and influence	4.9	15.7	46.8	24	8.7
Most Muslims are interested in integrating into Australian society	11.9	36.5	33.2	11.6	6.8

Source: Dunn et al. 2020

Appendix A: Definitions

Term	Definition
Supremacist ideology	A belief that a particular group of people identified by their shared race, ethnicity, sex, gender or religion, is superior to other groups and should therefore dominate those groups.
Assimilationist	Refers to a person who believes in racial or cultural homogenisation, in this case Muslims would need to fit into Australian society by adapting their “cultural ways” to what are asserted as mainstream Australian values.
Universalist position	Refers to the notion that human rights are universal and should be applied to everyone, in this case that citizenship is a right accessible to everyone.

About the Authors

Professor Kevin Dunn is a Professor in Human Geography and Urban Studies. His areas of research include: immigration and settlement; Islam in Australia; the geographies of racism; and local government and multiculturalism.

Dr Rachel Sharples is a researcher in the Challenging Racism Project (CRP) in the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University. Rachel's research interests are broadly around refugee and migrant community dynamics, the constructs of ethnic and cultural identity, and spaces of solidarity and resistance.

Professor Fethi Mansouri is the founding Director (2015-) of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. He is an Alfred Deakin Professor with a research chair in migration and intercultural relations (2008-) and has held since 2013 the UNESCO Chair in comparative research on 'Cultural Diversity and Social Justice'.

Professor Yin Paradies is an Aboriginal-Asian-Anglo man of the Wakaya people from the Gulf of Carpentaria. He is Professor of Race Relations at Deakin University, where he conducts research on racism and anti-racism as well as teaching and researching Indigenous knowledges and decoloniality. Yin is a climate, social, cultural and ecological activist who is committed to understanding and interrupting the devastating impacts of modern societies on planetary life.

Dr Matteo Vergani Dr Matteo Vergani is Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Senior Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. Matteo's main area of expertise is the study of political violence and hate, with a main focus on the empirical evaluation of prevention and reduction programs in Australia and South East Asia. Matteo is leading a research agenda on the relationships between different forms of hate, including terrorism, hate crime and hate speech.

Professor Craig McGarty is a social and political psychologist whose main work is on intergroup relations especially social identity, collective action, group-based emotions and stereotype formation.

Dr Amanuel Elias is a Research Fellow at Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship & Globalisation, Deakin University. His research focuses on race relations, ethnic inequalities, the economics of discrimination, and cultural diversity.

About CRIS

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) is a research and program based think tank consortium of eight Australian and international academic, community and industry partners - Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, Resilience Research Centre—Dalhousie University (Canada), Australian Multicultural Foundation, Centre for Multicultural Youth, RAND Australia and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (UK). CRIS exists to deliver research, programs and inform policies that advance and enrich our local, national and international community cohesion and resilience. CRIS works on issues including, social polarisation and disengagement from the public sphere, the rise of social exclusivist identities based on ethnicity, religion or culture, the influence of global conflicts and tensions on local environments and actors and the social harms created when grievances and alienation translate into violent action against specific groups or society at large. CRIS activities include learning and capacity-building opportunities for positive community and policy interventions.



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Mark Duckworth
Jo Birkett

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Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood VIC 3125
Australia

Contact

info@crisconsortium.org
ph: 03 9244 5823
Website: crisconsortium.org