

From Lived Experience to Policy:
**Insights from the
2025 Regional
Advisory Forum**

August 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

The Victorian Multicultural Commission acknowledges the First Peoples and traditional owners of the land we now call Victoria. We acknowledge the ongoing spiritual, cultural and material connection of all First Peoples to land, water, skies and resources. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

The Victorian Multicultural Commission supports continued steps towards reconciliation, and the right of First Peoples to participate in decision making that affects them.

Acknowledgements

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Image credit

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Chairperson's foreword

On behalf of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, I extend my sincere thanks to everyone who attended and contributed to the 2025 Regional Advisory Forum.

The strong presence of Regional Advisory Council members, community leaders, government representatives, departments and agencies, and VMC Commissioners demonstrates our shared commitment to driving real, lasting change. I particularly acknowledge the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, whose attendance and continued support underscores the importance of this work.

The insights shared at the forum are compelling; they highlight the complexity of issues and importance of community-informed and community-led solutions. The discussions also confirm that a strengthening of equity, trust and community cohesion cannot occur without the ongoing work to reduce structural barriers and discrimination, and towards inclusion.

I especially want to thank those RAC members who shared their lived experience and expertise in the forum discussions – as panel members, active workshop participants and as contributors to the forum's design and delivery.

The work of the VMC is guided by our legislative role for the independent voice of multicultural and multifaith communities in Victoria. As a trusted conduit between communities and government, the VMC works to ensure policies, programs and services embed the experiences and voices of multicultural Victorians. In this way, the VMC helps ensure that programs and services are more effective and can reach communities when they need them.

In recent years, the VMC supported Deakin University to produce the social research report on 'Mapping Social Services Provision for Diverse Communities'. The report highlighted the significant role of multicultural and faith-based service providers in the service delivery continuum. This forum – and the report that follows – is another milestone that supports continued efforts to improve service delivery, all of which aligns with the Victorian Government's broader multicultural strategies.

We will continue to elevate community voices to bring about much-needed change – within government, in strategy and policy, and throughout public life.

Now, the call is for action. This report presents a clear platform for government, service providers and communities to act together – to ensure all Victorians, regardless of background, have access to fair, inclusive and culturally safe systems.



Vivienne (Viv) Nguyen AM
Chairperson

Executive summary

The 2025 Regional Advisory Forum brought together more than 115 members from the Victorian Multicultural Commission's (VMC) eight Regional Advisory Councils to share on-the-ground insights and explore opportunities for cross-regional advocacy.

Held in Melbourne, the Regional Advisory Forum (RAF) focused on critical issues impacting multicultural communities across Victoria: racism, family violence, youth justice, employment, mental health, and housing.

The RAF is a statewide platform, where diverse communities and government stakeholders collaborate to identify systemic challenges and co-develop practical, community-informed solutions. Designed to elevate lived experience and grassroots expertise, the RAF aimed to generate actionable strategies to address structural barriers facing multicultural Victorians.

Participants shared powerful insights about exclusion and inequity across key sectors – including housing, employment, youth justice, mental health, family violence and public participation, more generally – where policies often fail to reflect the complex realities of diverse communities. Participants also shared insights on possible solutions, at local and systemic levels. The RAF found that multicultural communities across Victoria continue to face entrenched disadvantage, driven by systemic discrimination and structural inequities embedded in public services, institutions, and everyday systems.

RAF participants called for targeted, practical reforms that recognise how institutional biases, current economic realities, and social disconnection disproportionately impact culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians. Without change, trust in public institutions will continue to erode.

This report presents strategic priorities and policy recommendations, developed through a series of targeted community consultation workshops hosted by the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC). The report captures the lived experiences, systemic challenges and aspirations of multicultural communities across Victoria.

It is intended to inform and influence government departments, policymakers and service providers, committed to equitable and inclusive outcomes.

Three cross-cutting and aligned priorities emerged from the forum:

- Address systemic racism and discrimination across all sectors, including education, health, policing and employment.
- Create culturally safe services and systems that meet the needs of diverse communities through co-design and community leadership.
- Build an inclusive economy that enables equitable access to employment, training and entrepreneurship opportunities for multicultural communities.



Based on these urgent priorities, the recommendations for immediate action by the Victorian Government and its funded agencies and services are to:

Mandate intercultural responsiveness and trauma-informed training across sectors

Require and embed high-quality, co-designed training for all frontline workers and decision-makers, including in government departments, agencies and service providers – especially in justice, policing, health, housing and education – to address bias, systemic racism and culturally unsafe practices.

Reform government engagement to prioritise respectful, sustained partnerships

Adopt clear and consistent protocols for working with multicultural communities to ensure ongoing, meaningful consultation and co-design across all levels of policy development and program delivery and evaluation – not just during crises.

Strengthen culturally responsive, community-led service models and practices

Shift funding, policy and program design and delivery to trusted, place-based organisations led by or working closely with multicultural communities – particularly in mental health, family violence, youth justice and housing. These models are more accessible, build trust, and reflect lived experience.

Addressing these issues is urgent. Without change, inequity will deepen and social trust will continue to decline. This report provides a strong foundation for action – grounded in community expertise and designed for systemic impact.



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Summary of key recommendations

This report outlines specific, actionable recommendations for the Victorian Government, departments and agencies, local government, and other institutions. These recommendations are grounded in lived experience and aim to address structural barriers faced by multicultural communities across Victoria.

Racism

- Strengthen anti-racism action in public institutions
- Invest in community-led anti-racism and intercultural initiatives
- Shift public narratives and include all communities

Employment

- Reform training and skills pathways to be more inclusive and responsive
- Improve access to employment through inclusive recruitment and workplace systems
- Support migrant entrepreneurship and community-led business models

Family violence

- Strengthen prevention through community leadership and culturally tailored approaches
- Reform service access for individuals and communities at heightened risk
- Improve system capability and cross-sector coordination

Housing

- Increase culturally appropriate and flexible housing supply
- Improve service access and navigation support
- Strengthen equity in home ownership and the rental market

Mental health

- Invest in a culturally responsive and representative mental health workforce
- Deliver community-led, place-based mental health access
- Embed multicultural voices in system design and accountability

Youth justice

- Invest in family-focused early intervention programs
- Build a representative, trauma-informed and community-embedded youth justice workforce
- Foster inclusion and accountability across systems and public narratives

For the full list of recommendations, see the 'key themes' sections that follow in this report.

Introduction and context

The 2025 Regional Advisory Forum, convened by the Victorian Multicultural Commission and held on 26 June, brought together over 100 participants including members of the Commission's eight Regional Advisory Councils and the Multicultural Youth Network, Victorian Government representatives, departments and agencies, VMC Commissioners, community leaders, service providers and VMC staff.

The second biennial Regional Advisory Forum (RAF) of its kind, its purpose was clear: to develop practical, community-informed and co-designed solutions to the structural challenges facing multicultural communities across Victoria.

The Regional Advisory Councils (RACs), first established in 2011, are a cornerstone of the VMC's legislated commitment to statewide community consultation through the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011*. RACs are the VMC's grassroots connections across Victoria, keeping VMC Commissioners informed about issues that matter to multicultural communities. Comprising leaders with both lived experience and professional expertise, RAC members play a vital role in bridging the gap between local communities and government, ensuring that policy and service delivery reflect real-world needs and voices.

As an independent voice for multicultural communities in Victoria, the VMC ensures these insights translate into meaningful policy engagement and government accountability.

This RAF was particularly significant given the growing complexity of issues affecting multicultural Victorians, including the current challenging economic realities, persisting service access barriers, and the cumulative impact of discrimination and structural inequity. Through the RAF, the VMC provides a community-driven platform for honest dialogue between communities and government decision-makers, aimed at driving culturally responsive reform. The forum focused on six priority themes identified by RACs as areas of critical concern: racism, employment, housing, family violence, mental health, and youth justice.



The RAF's most valuable contribution came through its concurrent themed sessions, which formed the backbone of the event. Each session began with a community-led panel sharing lived experiences, followed by responses from departmental and agency representatives, and concluded with structured workshops to develop concrete, practical solutions. This layered structure ensured a grounded, collaborative approach to identifying challenges and generating ideas for action.

The event's design allowed for an honest, solutions-focused dialogue between community and government. In particular, the presence of departmental and agency representatives in the concurrent sessions enabled a shared exploration of policy and program gaps – laying the foundation for more targeted and culturally responsive reforms.

Participant insights, feedback and contributions – captured during the concurrent sessions and through afternoon report back session – directly informed the recommendations in this report.

The following section presents issues identified, and actions proposed, by forum participants across the six core themes. Each of the broader themes and more specific topics explored reflect the lived realities of multicultural communities in Victoria and outline tangible pathways toward fairer outcomes.



Summary of themes and insights

Racism

Overview

Racism – whether interpersonal, institutional or systemic – continues to harm multicultural communities across Victoria. Racism impacts how people access (or are prevented from accessing) employment, education, housing, justice and other services and opportunities.

It also deepens trauma, creates exclusion and reinforces inequity. Forum participants called for urgent action, recognising that racism is not just about isolated incidents, but embedded in structures that require coordinated, cross-sectoral responses.

‘We get in the door, but then we don’t progress. The systems aren’t built for us – they’re built for those who already belong.’
– Forum participant

What we heard from communities

Key themes from community voices:

- **Persisting structural racism.** Participants described deeply entrenched racism in recruitment, education, justice and service systems. There continues to be a lack of representation in leadership, and culturally unsafe environments across sectors.
- **Subtle and overt forms.** Everyday racism includes microaggressions, language-based discrimination, and culturally inappropriate expectations. These often go unchallenged and wear people down.
- **Intergenerational trauma.** Racism triggers past trauma, especially for people from refugee backgrounds, amplifying harm across generations.

- **Silence and stigma.** Many communities internalise racism or avoid reporting due to fear of reprisal, visa insecurity or cultural norms that discourage disclosure.
- **Racism between communities.** While white/non-white racism and exclusion was central, participants also acknowledged prejudice within and between multicultural communities.
- **Antisemitism and Islamophobia.** Alarming reports include armed guards at Jewish schools and the exclusion and sidelining of Muslim and pro-Palestinian voices – highlighting the need for nuanced, community-specific responses.
- **Culturally unsafe policing.** Participants also raised concerns about racial profiling, biased treatment by police, and a lack of accountability when racism occurs in the justice system. Participants reported feeling unsafe engaging with police, particularly in regional areas, and called for greater transparency, cultural safety and independent oversight.

What we heard from Government

Lauren Matthews, Director of Programs at the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC), reinforced that both interpersonal and structural racism are ongoing and well-documented in research. Lauren highlighted the importance of structural change – particularly in employment and education – and acknowledged that communities need culturally safe and accessible pathways to report racism. She affirmed that *community-led approaches, upstander education, and cross-cultural connection* are evidence-based strategies to reduce racism. Her reflection concluded with urgency: ‘*Action is what really matters now.*’

Options for action and recommendations

Participants called for shared responsibility. Individuals, communities, institutions and governments must all act to dismantle racism, not just talk about it.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen anti-racism action in public institutions

For the Victorian Government, Victoria Police, the Victorian Public Sector Commission and public service leaders to:

- Mandate anti-racism action plans across government agencies, with accountability and reporting mechanisms
- Ensure culturally safe policing by embedding anti-racism training, independent complaint pathways, and multicultural community engagement across Victoria Police and justice institutions
- Conduct a system-wide review of recruitment and promotion practices to address bias and tokenism
- Expand cultural safety and trauma-informed training, especially in education, health and justice.

Recommendation 2: Invest in community-led anti-racism and intercultural initiatives

For state and local governments, VEOHRC and funding bodies to:

- Fund and embed programs in trusted local spaces (e.g. community centres, neighbourhood houses, faith networks), including intercultural training at schools.
- Support community trainers and cultural leaders to deliver education, resilience-building and reporting support
- Resource cultural responsiveness training co-designed with community, not just about community.

Recommendation 3: Shift public narratives and include all communities

For government, media regulators and civic leaders to:

- Launch a public campaign led by diverse voices to counter misinformation and foster and celebrate inclusion
- Address all forms of racism in media coverage and online spaces, including antisemitism, Islamophobia and racial profiling
- Ensure anti-racism strategies recognise intra-community racism and are inclusive of all groups, especially those less visible.

Employment

Overview

Despite migrants being essential to Australia's economy – owning one-third of all small businesses¹ – many multicultural communities remain locked out of stable, meaningful employment. From skills recognition to language barriers and racial bias in recruitment, RAF participants shared how systemic gaps, and ineffective policies continue to undermine the employment potential of diverse communities. RAF participants called for practical reforms, local partnerships, and stronger government action to embed equity and access across the employment system.

'I've worked twice as hard to get half as far – and half as paid – as others. That's the cost of being a migrant in the workforce.'
– Forum participant

What we heard from communities

Key themes from community voices:

- **Systemic barriers to opportunity:** Visa and sponsorship complexity, unrecognised overseas qualifications, and discriminatory hiring practices keep many migrants underemployed or out of work entirely.
- **Training gaps and access:** English language test costs, limited availability of out-of-hours training, and under-resourced language education programs create significant obstacles. Community members also called out the racism built into assessment systems and the lack of multicultural trainers.

- **Disconnect between training and jobs:** Participants highlighted that 'training alone isn't enough' – employment pathways must be embedded in upskilling programs. Volunteering, for example, rarely leads to paid roles.
- **Entrepreneurship by necessity:** Many migrants turn to small business not by choice, but because of exclusion from formal employment. Barriers include access to startup capital, business literacy, and culturally safe support.
- **Regional disadvantages:** Limited job options, transport, and culturally appropriate services in regional Victoria compound disadvantage for migrants outside metropolitan areas.

What we heard from Government

The Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR) representative acknowledged both the systemic barriers raised and the strength of multicultural communities. Ylva Carosone, Executive Director of Small Business Victoria and Migration at DJSIR, reinforced the value of locally-led, community-designed solutions and encouraged better use of existing government programs, such as Learn Local². Ylva also recognised that the high rates of small business ownership among migrants often reflect necessity rather than opportunity – and stressed that more must be done to make employment services and opportunities accessible, culturally responsive and visible.

1 CGU Migrant Small Business Report 2017, Analysis & Policy Observatory website, accessed 24 July 2025.

2 <https://www.vic.gov.au/learnlocal>

Options for action and recommendations

Improving employment outcomes for multicultural communities requires targeted reform. Actions must address structural barriers, promote inclusive hiring, and fund community-informed training, mentoring and business support.

Recommendation 1: Reform training and skills pathways

For the Department of Education, DJSIR, Adult, Community and Further Education Board to:

- Fund accessible, after-hours training programs with wraparound supports like childcare and transport
- Provide financial subsidies for key skills areas, such as licensing, ticketing, and English proficiency tests
- Deliver skills recognition and assessments in community languages and train more multicultural educators
- Bring training to trusted local spaces (e.g. religious centres, neighbourhood houses).

Recommendation 2: Improve access to employment through inclusive systems

For DJSIR, the Victorian Public Sector Commission and Jobs Victoria to:

- Mandate cultural responsiveness training for employers and employment service providers
- Strengthen community-informed employment programs (e.g. within Jobs Victoria) to bridge the training-to-work gap
- Expand culturally safe mentoring programs, connecting migrants to employers and industries
- Ensure government employment services embed trauma-informed and regional equity practices.

Recommendation 3: Support migrant entrepreneurship and community-led business models

For Small Business Victoria, LaunchVic and Local Government to:

- Fund start-up grants and culturally appropriate accelerator programs tailored to migrants and women
- Develop and distribute in-language business resources where multicultural communities gather
- Strengthen local government roles in employing, mentoring and partnering with migrant-owned businesses
- Encourage corporate partnerships to support small business incubation and regional employment.

Family Violence

Overview

Family violence continues to deeply affect multicultural communities in Victoria, with language barriers, visa insecurity, cultural stigma, and systemic gaps compounding risk and limiting access to support. Victims face isolation, shame, and fear of community judgment, often while navigating services that are not culturally or linguistically safe. RAF participants called for stronger government leadership to support prevention and early intervention, while placing lived experience and community leadership at the centre of policy and service design.

‘You don’t understand my conditions here.’
– **International student, after being directed to services they couldn’t access**

What we heard from communities

Key family violence challenges raised included:

- **Barriers to access and support:** Language limitations, cultural stigma, and visa insecurity prevent timely disclosure and access to services. Many victims fear judgment, isolation or homelessness after reporting abuse – especially if they are on temporary visas or lack community support.
- **Misunderstanding of family violence:** Many communities are unaware that non-physical abuse – including financial control, elder abuse and coercive behaviour – constitutes family violence. There is also a lack of culturally relevant, in-language information.

- **Faith, culture and patriarchal norms:** Religious and cultural structures strongly shape attitudes, with some faith-based organisations reinforcing silence or discouraging help-seeking. Community leaders can either enable or obstruct access to support.
- **Service gaps and system navigation:** Participants described poor experiences with police and support services, limited cultural responsiveness of services, and difficulties understanding how to report abuse. This is worsened by inadequate interpreter access in many languages.
- **Regional disadvantage:** Rural and regional communities face serious shortages in housing, legal help, and support services. Small-town stigma and lack of anonymity often deter people from seeking help.
- **Lack of community inclusion in design:** Participants stressed that services often fail to reflect lived experience or community realities. There is an urgent need to co-design programs with community and faith leaders, victim-survivors, and frontline multicultural workers.

What we heard from Government

Amber Griffiths, Acting Deputy Secretary at Family Safety Victoria, acknowledged that while Victoria has made progress, mainstream services still fall short of meeting the needs of multicultural communities. Amber emphasised the need for culturally responsive staff, tailored interventions, and better place-based delivery. The importance of prevention – especially among men – was strongly acknowledged, as was the need for better support for temporary visa holders and those in regional areas. A statewide behaviour change program reaching over 35,000 participants was noted³, but gaps in coverage and cultural appropriateness remain a key concern.

3 Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates, 5 June 2025.

Options for action and recommendations

To reduce harm and improve outcomes, family violence responses must be community-led, prevention-focused, and culturally responsive – starting from the grassroots and reinforced by government systems.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen prevention through community leadership

For the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), Respect Victoria and Local Government to:

- Fund culturally tailored prevention programs that are co-designed with community and faith leaders and delivered by local, grass-roots community-embedded organisations
- Support early intervention and community education using trusted settings (e.g. faith spaces, cultural groups, schools)
- Train and fund culturally matched facilitators for behaviour change and community-led outreach programs.

Recommendation 2: Reform service access for individuals and communities at increased risk

For the DFFH, Homes Victoria and Victoria Police to:

- Provide safe housing options and specialist services for victims on temporary visas and international students
- Expand availability of trained interpreters in priority languages and improve access to services in rural and regional Victoria
- Integrate elder abuse prevention and awareness into family violence service design.

Recommendation 3: Improve system capability and coordination

For Family Safety Victoria, Victoria Police, Department of Justice and Community Safety, and community-based education providers to:

- Mandate intercultural and trauma-informed training across frontline services, health, police, and courts
- Establish clear protocols for engaging multicultural communities in service design and policy development
- Create a multilingual, regularly updated digital hub for services, rights and referral pathways for victim-survivors and support networks.

Housing

Overview

Safe, secure and affordable housing is fundamental to wellbeing, yet many multicultural Victorians face persistent barriers to accessing it. RAF participants shared how language gaps, discriminatory practices, rental unaffordability, and culturally inappropriate housing design intersect to exclude migrant communities – especially those experiencing family violence, mental health issues or visa insecurities. In both metropolitan and regional areas, existing policies and services are failing to reflect community needs. There is a clear call for more inclusive, accessible and culturally-responsive housing strategies.

What we heard from communities

Key housing challenges raised included:

- **Discrimination and access barriers:** Multicultural renters reported being routinely overlooked, asked for unlawful rent advances, or denied leases due to lack of rental history or unfamiliarity with systems. Real estate agents and landlords often show bias, with little recourse or cultural understanding.
- **Culturally inappropriate housing options:** Mainstream housing design does not accommodate multigenerational or communal living arrangements common in migrant communities. Existing planning laws limit flexible solutions like granny flats or home extensions.
- **Service fragmentation and lack of support:** Navigating housing, welfare and family violence services involves repeating information across disconnected systems.

Victims often lack help to complete applications or secure stable housing options.

- **Regional and affordability pressures:** Multicultural families are often pushed into overcrowded, unsafe housing in low-cost areas, severing vital community ties. Others face employer-directed relocations or are priced out of city centres entirely.

‘The colour of your skin still matters when you’re trying to get a house.’
– Forum participant

- **Systemic inequity in home ownership:** High deposit requirements and schemes favouring investors over first-home buyers exacerbate inequality. Migrants willing to build equity through shared models or rent-to-buy pathways are rarely supported.

What we heard from Government

Homes Victoria acknowledged the scale and urgency of Victoria’s housing crisis, with over 65,000 people on public housing waitlists⁴ and more than 100,000 people assisted by homelessness services annually⁵. The representative stressed the importance of culturally informed reforms and noted progress in some areas, such as portable bond loans and reforms allowing granny flats without planning permits. However, the speaker also acknowledged that the system remains fragmented, particularly for victim-survivors and those navigating complex needs. The need for inclusive planning laws, better data collection, and place-based support was clearly recognised.

‘You can’t do anything else if you don’t have a home.’ – Government representative

4 <https://chp.org.au/article/social-housing-waitlist-increases-again-now-topping-65000/>

5 Based on 2021-22 AIHW data used by the Council to Homeless Persons.

Options for action and recommendations

Meeting the housing needs of multicultural Victorians requires reforming policy settings, designing culturally appropriate options, and embedding access and equity in service delivery.

Recommendation 1: Increase culturally responsive and flexible housing supply

For Homes Victoria, Department of Transport and Planning, and Local Government to:

- Reform planning laws to allow for cost-effective cohabitation options, such as granny flats, home extensions or other multigenerational home designs
- Expand culturally appropriate housing models in metropolitan and regional areas
- Incentivise local builders and councils to engage with migrant communities and deliver and approve housing that meets cultural and intergenerational needs.

Recommendation 2: Improve service access and navigation support

For the DFFH, Homes Victoria and Victoria Police to:

- Fund place-based, multilingual tenancy support services to assist with rental applications, systems navigation and tenancy rights education
- Develop a single access point (digital or in-person) for housing-related services – especially for those affected by family violence, mental health or visa issues
- Strengthen interpreter availability and training for housing providers and support staff.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen equity in home ownership and rental market

For the State Revenue Office, Treasury, and Homes Victoria to:

- Expand access to rent-to-buy and shared deposit schemes under the First Home Owner⁶ framework
- Pilot shared ownership and cooperative housing models designed with multicultural communities
- Deliver cultural responsiveness training to real estate agents and property managers, supported by government and peak bodies.

6 <https://www.sro.vic.gov.au/first-home-owner>

Mental Health

Overview

Multicultural communities across Victoria are experiencing rising mental health challenges, compounded by housing insecurity, financial hardship, racism and intergenerational trauma. Despite the presence of government strategies and mental health programs, services often fail to reflect diverse realities, linguistic needs, or lived experiences of migrant and refugee communities. RAF participants emphasised that real impact requires comprehensively embedding cultural responsiveness into policy, workforce development, service design and community outreach – especially in regional and under-resourced areas.

‘We don’t lack recommendations – it’s about whether we have the will to implement them. We need to remove the structural barriers that exist and decolonise the system.’
– Forum participant

What we heard from communities

Key mental health challenges raised by forum participants included:

- **Systemic and cultural barriers:** Many services are not designed with migrant experiences in mind. Stigma, intergenerational pressure and cultural perceptions of ‘weakness’ prevent help-seeking, particularly among youth, men and elders.

- **Lack of cultural safety in services:** Mental health practitioners often lack the cultural understanding to engage effectively. Clinicians may misdiagnose or default to medication when unable to read distress signals in culturally relevant ways.
- **Inaccessible and fragmented services:** Services operate during business hours, assume English language proficiency, and are not co-located or integrated with other supports. Regional communities face long wait times and travel barriers.
- **Volunteer burnout and workforce gaps:** Community leaders are often relied upon to ‘fill the gap’ in mental health response, without compensation or training. This leads to burnout, traumatisation and undermines sustainability.
- **Missed opportunities for prevention and early intervention:** Programs are often crisis-focused. Preventive approaches – such as sport, arts, cooking and wellbeing hubs – are underutilised pathways to healing.

What we heard from Government

Monica Kelly, Executive Director of Prevention, Policy and First People at the Department of Health (DH), acknowledged persistent inequities in service access, especially for multicultural and regional communities. While Victoria has strong mental health infrastructure on paper⁷, implementation does not yet match the needs of diverse communities. Leaders also highlighted the importance of moving from ‘programs and policies’ to long-term collaboration with communities. The power of lived experience, stories, and community-led practice in informing good policy was also recognised. Monica also stressed the importance of multicultural workforce representation and the urgent need for better data to drive inclusive reforms.

⁷ <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health>

Options for action and recommendations

Equity in mental health care for multicultural communities requires systemic reform, with workforce investment, grassroots partnership, accessible design, and lived experience at the centre.

Recommendation 1: Invest in a culturally-responsive and representative mental health workforce

For DH (Mental Health and Wellbeing Division) to:

- Recruit and train bicultural community members as paid Multicultural Cultural Support Officers to bridge service access and reduce stigma
- Mandate comprehensive training in trauma-informed and culturally responsive care across all mental health professions, including general practitioners and allied health workers, to address cultural competency gaps
- Provide funding and support for mental health training (e.g., mental health first aid, peer support) specifically for volunteers and community leaders.

Recommendation 2: Deliver community-led, place-based mental health access

For Local Public Health Units⁸, Councils and Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals⁹ to:

- Fund initiatives delivered in trusted spaces – women’s groups, schools, spiritual centres, sporting clubs – that embed mental health support in everyday life
- Co-design services with lived experience, using accessible language and destigmatising approaches (e.g. arts, food, vocational training)
- Support digital inclusion but retain face-to-face options to ensure connection and equity across language and literacy levels.

Recommendation 3: Embed multicultural voices in system design and accountability

For DH, Safer Care Victoria and the VMC to:

- Incorporate culturally responsive indicators and community-led evaluation in all program planning and review
- Establish a standing multicultural expert panel or advisory group to provide an ongoing, formal feedback mechanism for major mental health system reforms.
- Use VMC’s Regional Advisory Councils and local multicultural networks for shaping service design and policy, and for providing feedback on implementation.

⁸ <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/local-public-health-units>.

⁹ <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-services/mental-health-and-wellbeing-locals>.

Youth Justice

Overview

Certain groups of multicultural young people are overrepresented in Victoria's youth justice system¹⁰. RAF participants were clear: the system is not working for these communities. RAF participants shared experiences of structural exclusion, stigma, intergenerational trauma and identity conflict, compounded by racial profiling and negative media narratives. Community, government and sector leaders all called for a shift toward trauma-informed, culturally safe, and youth-centred approaches. A shared message emerged: real change requires community leadership, family engagement, and long-term investment in prevention.

'You're caught between two worlds – never really belonging in either. That loneliness can lead you down a path that isn't right for you.'

– Forum participant

What we heard from communities

Key challenges for multicultural youth include:

- **Cultural identity conflict and trauma:** Young people feel torn between cultural expectations at home and peer norms in wider Australian society. This conflict can create disconnection from both, especially when layered with refugee trauma or intergenerational stress.
- **Family breakdown and parenting gaps:** Parents often lack the tools or language to support children growing up in a different cultural context. Short settlement support and stigma around help-seeking leave many families isolated.
- **Lack of culturally safe spaces and mentorship:** Participants described a need for youth spaces that are inclusive, non-judgmental and accessible after hours. Role models with shared lived experience are essential in breaking cycles and building trust.
- **Service gaps and missed early intervention:** Schools, services and local networks often fail to act early enough. Youth can fall through the cracks before risk behaviours are addressed.
- **Stigma, stereotyping, and over-policing:** Multicultural young people are frequently profiled by police and misrepresented in media. Some are labelled as 'gangs' simply for congregating in public.

'If those boys were white, no one would have thought they were a gang. They were just hanging out.' – Forum participant

¹⁰ Department of Justice and Community Safety, Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030 - Delivering culturally appropriate interventions and supports to address the overrepresentation of cultural groups in Youth Justice.

What we heard from government and industry leaders

Government and community sector leaders underscored that there is not a youth crime crisis, but a persistent problem of overrepresentation. Culturally and linguistically diverse young people are overrepresented in youth justice and make up 39 per cent of young people in youth justice, with notable populations of young people from African and Pasifika backgrounds¹¹. These young people are often failed by multiple systems before entering youth justice. The sector's message was unified: prevention must start earlier, solutions must be co-designed with community, and lived experience must inform mentoring and policy.

Leaders also noted that the current infrastructure exists but isn't working effectively – often due to program fragmentation, limited take-up and poor cultural fit. Leaders called for honest conversations about stigma, media distortion and system accountability. Mentorship, early intervention in schools, and family-focused programs were all highlighted as critical levers for change.

'The data tells us what we already know – this is about belonging, aspiration and being seen.' – Industry leader



¹¹ Department of Education (Vic), Youth Justice – Additional Support for Young People.

Options for action and recommendations

Recommendation 1: Invest in family-focused early intervention programs

For the Department of Education, DJCS and DFFH to:

- Expand culturally responsive, in-language parenting workshops that reflect migrant family realities
- Extend settlement support with stronger focus on intergenerational understanding and family cohesion
- Fund school-based and community outreach programs that build positive identity and address issues before crisis.

Recommendation 2: Build a representative, trauma-informed and community-embedded youth justice workforce

For DJCS, Centre for Multicultural Youth and DH to:

- Scale-up lived experience mentorship programs for at-risk youth, co-designed with communities
- Employ bicultural youth justice workers and case managers in both metro and regional areas
- Require ongoing, trauma-informed and anti-racism training for police, corrections staff and youth justice professionals.

Recommendation 3: Foster inclusion and accountability across systems and public narratives

For DJCS, Victoria Police, Department of Premier and Cabinet and VMC to:

- Create a youth justice think tank with multicultural youth, sector experts and government to co-design and evaluate reforms
- Establish trusted oversight and complaints mechanisms for over-policing and system discrimination
- Fund and support community-led media and digital storytelling that highlights positive youth pathways and resilience.

Conclusion

The 2025 RAF brought to the forefront the lived realities of multicultural communities across Victoria, highlighting systemic barriers in racism, employment, family violence, housing, mental health and youth justice.

Across all themes, participants called for urgent, structural reform – not more pilots or token consultation, but long-term, community-informed and community-led action, including by funding the relevant community organisations directly.

Throughout the forum, forum participants emphasised that multicultural Victorians are not asking for special treatment – they are asking for equity, dignity and inclusion. Multicultural Victorians need and want systems that recognise the complexity of their respective lives, services that are culturally responsive, and policies that work with their communities.

The message from both community and sector leaders was clear: Victoria must invest in prevention and early intervention, culturally safe services, stronger coordination, and facilitate community-led solutions.

Future VMC and RAC roles

The VMC and its RACs will continue to serve as the vital link between communities and government. While, we have no direct mandate to implement the reforms identified in this report, as the state's peak multicultural body, the VMC will continue to play a critical role in:

- Presenting the insights and recommendations of this report to relevant departments and agencies;
- Supporting departments to engage with communities and develop responsive actions where requested;
- Providing place-based advice through the RACs to ensure policy is grounded in local realities;
- Promoting continued dialogue and community feedback to monitor progress and highlight gaps.

A call to act

The report now calls on the Victorian Government, along with its relevant departments and agencies, to prioritise action. We urge them to:

- Embed cultural responsiveness in the design and delivery of all government-funded programs and services
- Provide sustainable, long-term investment in community-led solutions – beyond short-term project-based funding
- Break down silos and prioritise coordinated, place-based collaborative responses.

Government must partner meaningfully with multicultural communities – not just to consult, but to co-design.

Trust must be rebuilt through action, transparency, and shared accountability.

Communities must be supported as the leaders, innovators and change-makers they already are.


The VMC stands ready to support this work – to connect government with lived experience, to advocate for inclusive reform, and to ensure that multicultural communities are central to Victoria's shared future.





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