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Whose Trauma Counts? Racism as an Enduring Trauma in the Lives of Criminalised Young People

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Abstract

Youth crime research is dominated by individualising, positivist frameworks that seek to identify personal risk factors associated with criminalisation. Within this literature trauma has increasingly been acknowledged, yet analysis remains largely confined to interpersonal and familial harms. While influential, such approaches render social, structural and discursive forms of adversity/trauma such as racism, poverty, policing and imprisonment largely invisible. This article draws on a PhD project that adopted a co-designed, narrative approach to conduct research with, rather than on, criminalised young people. Focusing on the narratives of 10 of the racialised participants, the article explores colonial constructions of race, and the violences they produce, as central, ongoing traumas in the lives of these research participants. Participants' accounts complicate dominant trauma framings, situating personal and familial harms within a wider landscape of racialised harm, structural inequality and state violence.

Keywords: Youth justice; youth crime; critical criminology; structural racism.

Introduction

This article draws on a broader PhD research project conducted in the settler-colonial context known as Australia, where the legacies and ongoing practices of colonisation shape the lives of many criminalised young people. Focusing on one of the study's dominant themes, it argues that racial violence must be understood as a core and enduring trauma in the lives of racialised criminalised young people.

Over decades, researchers have produced an extensive body of empirical research on youth crime, "criminals" and crime control. Whilst critical, decolonial and post-structural approaches have offered important challenges to dominant approaches, much of the empirical research has been shaped by positivist and individualising frameworks (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Deckert, 2016). Consequently, attention has often centred on assessing and/or categorising the various risk factors or traits believed to be associated with the child/youth "criminal," rather than examining the broader social, structural and political conditions that shape child/youth criminalisation.

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Within this body of positivist literature, a substantial number of studies have examined the prevalence of childhood trauma among criminalised populations, but almost invariably their focus is confined to interpersonal and domestic-sphere harms (see, for example, Dierkhising et al., 2013; Evans & Burton, 2013; Ford et al., 2008; Hurren et al., 2017; Malvaso et al., 2017; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007). A large subset of this positivist work employs the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) tool, often drawing on secondary data, to assess and quantify cumulative childhood "adversities" in criminalised populations (Baglivio et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2017; DeLisi & Beauregard, 2018; Fox et al., 2015; Jones & Pierce, 2021; Laajasalo et al., 2025; Leban & Delacruz, 2023; Malvaso et al., 2019; Snyder & Merritt, 2014; Wolff & Baglivio, 2017). Despite its influence on understandings of adversity in the lives of criminalised people, the ACEs framework is limited to a narrow set of household-based adversities: emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; neglect; domestic violence; parental separation; and household substance use, mental illness, or incarceration.

This growing body of positivist trauma research has helped shift understandings away from classical, rational actor-based framings, which construct all children/young people as possessing equal capacity to engage in or resist offending (Cunneen et al., 2015), and towards an understanding of criminalised children/young people as an often highly traumatised population. However, limiting assessment to micro, family-level experiences renders social, structural and discursive adversities, such as poverty, homelessness or racism, invisible. Consequently, adversity is individualised and decontextualised (Cunneen, 2015b; McCausland & Baldry, 2023): the structural forces that generate and maintain inequality, that often shape familial adversity and that can themselves be experienced as trauma, are ignored. By overlooking the social, structural and discursive contexts that influence behaviour, positivist approaches have been critiqued for producing racist, ableist, classist and liberal understandings of youth crime that frame some groups as more inherently deviant than others (Alexander, 2018; Cunneen, 2020; Guerzoni & Walter, 2023; Henne & Troshynski, 2019; Shaw & Hannah-Moffat, 2013).

This body of work commonly draws on traditional, individualising understandings of trauma as arising from discrete catastrophic events (Williams et al., 2023), as reflected in the DSM-5-TR definition of traumatic exposure as involving "actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, p. 301). However, critical scholarship on racial trauma challenges event-based conceptions of trauma by highlighting the harms produced by chronic, structural and identity-based forms of violence (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2016; Williams et al., 2023). Through this lens, racism may be traumatic not only when experienced as a discrete injurious event, but also when it is cumulative, pervasive and/or enduring (Chou et al., 2012). Trauma can therefore emerge through sustained exposure to the racial violence that is embedded within social, political and institutional structures. Repeated experiences of racially motivated surveillance, othering, exclusion, discrimination, dehumanisation and institutional harm can expose individuals and communities to ongoing threats to their safety, dignity and sense of belonging and, like trauma, can produce lasting psychological, emotional and social injury (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2016; Williams et al., 2023). Racial trauma, as defined by Comas-Díaz (2016), thus "refers to the events of danger related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination, threats of harm and injury, and humiliating and shaming events, in addition to witnessing harm to other ethnoracial individuals because of real or perceived racism" (pp. 249-250).

Whilst well intentioned, by focusing solely on interpersonal and familial forms of harm, positivist trauma studies help reproduce a dominant, individualising carceral logic that positions "damaged" children and their "dysfunctional" families as both the source of crime and the primary targets of intervention (Guerzoni & Walter, 2023). Through this lens, it is the individual that requires intervention, treatment or control to remedy an assumed moral, cognitive or internal deficit, whilst the material realities of these children's lives, often shaped by extreme inequality, remain unchanged (McCausland & Baldry, 2023). As such, these approaches have been critiqued for legitimising a new wave of carceral interventions that, like "trauma-informed" or "therapeutic" child prisons,[1] are reframed in softer, more palatable language.

Further, much of this literature adopts "silencing methods" (Deckert, 2016) by drawing from secondary data (through assessment documents, child protection databases, court reports, etc.) and bypassing direct engagement with criminalised people altogether or, when engaging directly, doing so through rigid pre-determined surveys that set parameters for what can be counted as trauma or adversity. These methods see the voices of those with lived and embodied knowledge marginalised and, at times, excluded altogether, enabling often middle-class, white, non-criminalised researchers to speak *for* criminalised populations and maintain control over the discourse on the drivers of, and often solutions to, child/youth crime (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Deckert, 2016). The confinement and relegation of criminalised children and young people to the margins thus occur not only in physical spaces, like child prisons and the resource-starved communities they are often born into (McCausland & Baldry, 2023), but also within knowledge-generating activities like criminological research (Deckert, 2016). This could be seen as a form of epistemic injustice, whereby criminalised children/young people are not recognised as credible knowers of their own lives (Fricker, 2007).

Building upon the significant contributions of Australian critical criminology scholarship (see, for example, Anthony, 2018; Baldry & Cunneen, 2014; Baldry et al., 2015; Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Davis, 2019; McCausland & Baldry, 2023; Porter & Cunneen, 2020 etc.), this article challenges the dominance of silencing and individualising approaches to empirical youth justice research through a participatory approach that prioritised researching *with*, rather than *on*, criminalised young people (Ahmed et al., 2021; Turner, 2021). Using co-design principles and a novel, narrative interviewing tool, the project sought to provide a platform for participants to speak outside the rigid categories allowed for by positivist studies and to exercise agency over the direction of the research.

By employing co-design methods, this study enabled participants to determine the foci of each interview and, through this, participants offered stories of trauma and adversity that disrupt the dominant framings shaping this field. For example, while stories of family-based violence did feature for some, they were contextualised within a broader landscape of harm shaped by a violent and unequal society (Hearn et al., 2022). Participants' narratives illuminated the dominant discourses and practices of race, class, gender and deviance, alongside policing practices and imprisonment as core traumas/adversities in their lives. This article, however, focuses solely on colonial constructions of race, and the violences they produce, as a central and enduring trauma/adversity for 10 of the 11 racialised participants. Throughout this article, we use the term racialised to reflect an understanding of race as a social construct and a "process of othering" (Omi & Winant 2018) produced through unequal power relations, rather than a biological truth (p.483).

Method

This article draws from a broader PhD research project involving 39 narrative-based interviews with 16 criminalised young people. All interviews were conducted by the primary author. In this paper, "I" and "my" refer to the first authors positionality and fieldwork practices, while "we" and "our" reflect the shared authorship of this article. At the time of interviewing, seven participants were detained in an Australian child prison, and nine were living in the community in an Australian city. Given the relatively small population of criminalised young people in the study location, further demographic information, including age and cohort status, is not reported to protect confidentiality. Of the 16 participants in the broader project, 11 occupied subjectivities that colonial discourses of race have racialised. These participants, identified in Table 1, form the focus of this article, however, references to data from interviews with other participants are also drawn on where relevant to racialisation.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Cultural Identity
Angela	Female	Australian born, Filipino/Maltese ancestry
Jordan	Male	Aboriginal
Shyanne	Female	Aboriginal
Jax	Non-binary	Aboriginal, Māori, Greek and Chinese
Tyson	Male	Aboriginal
Dev	Male	Identifies culturally as "Muslim"
Michael	Male	Australian born, South Sudanese ancestry
Rose	Female	Aboriginal
Kyle	Male	Aboriginal
Gus	Male	Torres Strait Islander and Papua New Guinean
Trey	Male	Aboriginal

Co-Design and Narrative Interviewing

As a white Anglo-Celtic, middle-class woman with no lived experience of criminalisation, and someone inherently implicated in ongoing colonial relations, I was cognisant of the power dynamics shaping the research process and the limitations of my own perspective. As detailed in depth in Cunningham et al. (2026), to minimise the silencing often associated with conventional criminological research, the project employed co-design practices throughout the entire research process, from the initial design through to the co-production of a public exhibition. Narrative-based interviews were chosen for data collection as the approach emphasises flexibility, meeting diverse communication needs, and placing participants "at the heart" of the research (Anderson

& Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 631). The central research question – "What can we learn from the lived experiences, narratives and everyday lives of criminalised children and young people?" – was intentionally broad, allowing participants to shape the research direction. Each young person participated in multiple interviews (up to five), and, with informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

To further enhance participant agency, the research employed a novel participatory interviewing tool co-designed with people with lived/living experience of criminalisation. The tool comprised 54 visual prompt cards covering an expansive range of topics, including individual experiences (e.g., family, mental health, disability, substance use), experiences of systems (e.g., school, workers, being in care), themes explored in critical, structural and decolonising approaches (e.g., where I grew up, cops, racism, what needs to change), themes around subjectivity (e.g., the side of me that people don't see) and strengths (e.g., goals and dreams, the things I'm good at). The cards also included wild cards, allowing participants to introduce any topics they felt were missed. Table 2 details these prompts.

Table 2

Visual Prompt Card Topics

Goals and dreams	Who I really am	Things I worry about
Love	Cops	Court
Being locked up	Culture	The things I do to get by
My future	Getting out of lock up	Working/job
Things that make me angry	Religion/faith/spirituality	Drugs and drink
Being in care	Social media	Covid
Relationships	Gender	Sexuality
Hard things	Family	Hobbies
Mates/friends	Where I live	School/education
Support people	Challenges	A typical day in my life
The area I grew up in	Places I feel safe	Workers
Things that make me sad	My strengths/things I'm good at	What needs to change in the world
The people I feel safe/happy with	My first time getting in trouble with the cops	The side of me that people don't see
Things that don't feel fair	Being in trouble with the law	Childhood
Racism	Disability	Health
The things that make me happy	How I spent my time this past week	The things that are important to me
What's going well for me	Mental health	Money
Wild card	Wild card	Wild card

Visual prompt cards included text and a corresponding image, and were read aloud, providing information through multi-sensory modes to support comprehension, particularly for people with conditions like dyslexia (Rahul & Ponniah, 2021; Rappolt-Schlichtmann et al., 2018) and autism (Den Brok & Sterkenburg, 2015; Meadan et al., 2011). The tool was introduced to participants prior to their decision to participate in the research and again at the first interview. Interviews began with the participant sorting the cards into "yes," "no" and "maybe" piles, depending upon their interest in, or comfort with, the topic. Cards placed in the "no" and "maybe" piles were then removed from the table, and the participant was advised that they could choose any topic at any time, but that these cards would not be raised again by the researcher. Next, the "yes" cards were spread across the table and the participant was asked to choose the card that felt most important, interesting or comfortable to start with. The researcher then opened the conversation by asking "How come you chose that card, what made it jump out to you?" Once a conversation about a particular card came to a natural close, the participant was invited to select the next card for discussion. This enabled each interview to be co-designed in real time, rather than relying on researcher-initiated questions or a pre-prepared agenda, giving participants control over the direction of the conversation and the terms on which they participated. For a deeper discussion of the design, and visual representation of the tool, see Cunningham et al. (2026).

The project received ethics approval from Flinders University (project number 4922).

Theoretical Framework and Analysis

The research was informed by an understanding of race in Australia as a historically produced colonial discourse, shaped through interlocking regimes of knowledge and power. Thus, the analysis acknowledges the extensive body of work by Indigenous scholars who have long exposed and resisted the racialising logics of the settler-colonial state (McKinnon, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2004, 2006; Walter, 2016; Watego, 2021). Dominant constructions of race in Australia are rooted in Enlightenment-era efforts to establish scientific legitimacy for a race hierarchy. Under a veneer of objectivity, scientific racism positioned whiteness as the normative human standard, constructing other racialised groups as inherently inferior and governable (Oksala, 2013). These logics underpinned British colonisation of, and genocidal violence in, so-called Australia and, as elimination through extermination failed, became embedded within Australia's legal, political, and educational institutions, producing enduring practices of surveillance, control and confinement directed at Aboriginal communities (Blagg & Anthony, 2019; Cunneen, 2011; McKinnon, 2020). It is these epistemologies that continue to shape "race" relations in colonial Australia today (Moreton-Robinson, 2006).

The following section of this article turns to an analysis of one of the core findings of the PhD research, examining racism as a central and enduring trauma for 10 of the 11 racialised participants. The section traces how colonial discourses of race shaped participants' everyday lives, their subjectivities and sense of safety, their experiences of systems and of criminalisation.

Findings: Racism as an Enduring Trauma/Adversity

Within this study, 10 of the 11 racialised participants chose the racism card and shared stories illustrating how dominant discourses of race exposed them to violence, adversity and trauma. For many, this occurred from early childhood through to the time of interviewing. Whilst this article draws solely on the narratives of racialised participants, dominant discourses of race do not only inflict harm through the marginalisation of those constructed as "other," but also through the ways they naturalise, invisibilise and privilege whiteness (Jiwani, 2006). Demonstrating this invisibility, for example, none of the non-racialised participants (n = 5) selected the "racism" card for discussion, with one remarking that racism was, to him, "funny." All were unable to identify their ethnicity with any specificity, instead simply describing themselves as "white", "Australian" or "maybe German?" – responses that often ended with a tonal inflection, indicating a degree of uncertainty and suggesting these participants were unaccustomed to thinking of themselves as racialised. Thus, whilst they, like the other participants, experienced intersecting hardships and oppressions, the violence of racism was not one.

Racism in the School and Community

Michael, Jax and Angela selected the "racism" card as a high priority and shared stories illuminating pervasive racial violence, through exclusion, othering, physical harm and racial profiling, and the wounds these experiences etched into their sense of safety, self and their place in the world.

Michael, for example, explained that he "experienced a lot of racism growing up," beginning in his first few days of primary school when his peers attacked him with racial slurs, calling him "black monkey", "black dog" and asserting that, despite being Australian-born, he did not "belong here." At just 4 years old, Michael's peers imposed on him a racial hierarchy that positioned him as other, lesser, even subhuman, illustrating the enduring dominance of widely disproven Enlightenment-based discourses of race. As Majavu (2018, p. 191) asserts, in colonial Australia, "the humanness of Africans is denied" through a multitude of overt, subtle and routine violences, including "simianisation" – the dehumanisation of racialised subjects by casting them as animals – as experienced by Michael, as well as "everyday racism," the "perpetual refugee trope" and the over-criminalisation of African boys and men.

Angela, an Australian-born Filipina-Maltese young person, shared similar reflections on the violences of racialisation in primary school contexts, recalling:

> Since very young I was getting picked on for being the darkest in the class, these two freckles on my forehead – just getting picked on for everything. Anything that's different. How thick my hair was. Anything. It just [pause] ain't easy. There was this one time, it was a bunch of year seven boys. He was like 'Go back to your own country' and stuff like this. We weren't doing anything wrong, we were just kids … It got really bad … They were putting my friend's face into bird shit.

For Angela, these experiences left her feeling "so out of place" and "like the black sheep." Angela described experiencing racism "wherever" she goes – recounting that recently, while waiting for the bus, she was verbally abused, called a "bat eating cunt" and blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic.

In these narrations, we can see dominant discourses of race shaping constructions of who or what constitutes a "real" Australian through the exclusion of racialised people (Majavu, 2018). Despite being born in Australia, both Angela and Michael were overtly told that they do not belong here and should return to some imagined country of origin. As Majavu (2018, p. 195) explains, since the earliest stages of colonisation, "Australia" has, ironically, been conceptualised "as a geographically white space" – a discursive landscape in which Indigenous, black, brown and Asian bodies are rendered "hyper-visible," unfamiliar and foreign.

Michael too reflected on his experiences of racial violence within the broader community. When discussing the "The area I grew up in" card, Michael explained: "It was good, 'cause I was always around my family, my cousins. A lot of my people out there," before pausing and adding "but also, a lot of dangerous white people." Michael explained that once, as a young child walking to school, a neighbour looked directly at Michael and his siblings before letting his dog attack them. In a similar vein, Michael explained:

> I got hit by a car once, and they just drove off. I looked, I saw the car coming. It was so far, it was far, far away and I thought 'Nah, I'm gonna walk'… So, I crossed the road and the guy just sped up, boom, drove off [pause]. And I know he saw me. He hit me with his car and drove off.

Michael reflected that, even at such a young age, he held a deep knowing that these things happened "[b]ecause I'm black. Yep. 100%."

This is the violence of colonial discourses of race: a violence that operates not only through discrete events, but through everyday processes of exclusion, othering and dehumanisation. Consistent with scholarship on racial trauma (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2016; Chou et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2023), these accounts suggest that racial violence became traumatic not only through discrete incidents, but through its cumulative, pervasive and enduring nature. Over time, like traumatic experiences (Herman, 2015), such incidents eroded these children's sense of safety, self and trust in the world. Yet such chronic, systemic, discursive and structural forms of violence, and the trauma they generate, remain largely outside dominant positivist understandings of trauma in criminalised populations.

Racial Gaslighting

For several racialised participants, the violence of dominant discourses of race was also felt through silencing practices and racial gaslighting: "the political, social, economic and cultural" processes that normalise a Eurocentric worldview, deny the lived realities of racialised subjects and pathologise those who resist (Davis & Ernst 2019, p. 761).

Racial gaslighting produces subjectification effects, shaping how we come to understand ourselves through dominant discourses (Foucault 1975/1979). This was evident in the accounts of several racialised participants. For example, when first meeting with participants I would ask if there was anything I should know to help them feel comfortable during the interview process. Michael, Kyle, Tyson, Gus and Trey all responded that I should know that they had "anger issues." Michael, in particular, asserted that while he would "never hurt a woman" and I had nothing to fear, I needed to know that *he* had anger issues. Later I asked Michael when he first began to think of himself in this way. Michael explained that, despite reporting his experiences of relentless racial violence to the school, his peers "never got in trouble" and the abuse didn't stop, until he took matters into his own hands. When his younger siblings started school, Michael felt a responsibility to protect them from the violence he had endured, physically fighting anyone who racially taunted him or his siblings. Michael was later expelled from that school for retaliating against unaddressed racial violence with physical violence. It was around this time that Michael recalls first identifying as the "angry kid." As Majavu (2018, p. 192) asserts, in colonial Australia, "everyday racism is both everywhere and nowhere, consisting largely of silences and the careful failure to notice social interactions that are shaped by the logic of whiteness."

Like Michael, Tyson reflected upon using physical violence in response to racism, explaining that "I don't know what else to do." Angela also remarked, "the only resolution I found was just hitting them, because otherwise they don't stop and sometimes people, I feel, need to get hit to stop. It was crazy … It's a big responsibility to be on me though."

For Michael, the racial violence from his peers and the silencing and racial gaslighting he experienced from the school have shaped his sense of self, the world and his place within it in significant ways. As he explained, these experiences:

> … I believe, caused all *my* anger problems. It just made me [pause] not trust anyone, except my family ... I just developed a hard spot … And that's why my first instinct is to fight, because that's what I did growing up and that's how the racism stopped, 'cause then people would be like 'if you say something to this kid, he's gonna fight you.'

Brown (2018) argues that dominant racial discourses shape how white society interprets, and seeks to regulate and control, the pain of racialised people. Michael's experience shows these discourses at work even in early childhood. Despite being just a child, the cultural "script of black masculinity" (Motimele, 2021, p. 61) spoke for him, constructing him as dangerous, even in primary school (Todd et al., 2016). Michael was first subjected to verbal and physical violence from peers, neighbours, and strangers and then epistemic violence in the reframing of his use of self-defence as evidence of his violent nature (Brown, 2018, p. 56), a discourse that he, like several participants, came to internalise.

Jax, a descendant of the Stolen Generations, for example, demonstrates how dominant discourses of race, and constructions of Aboriginality as inherently violent, have shaped their understandings of themself and their family:

> That's just the way my family is, they're really prone to violence. That's what everyone says about the [LAST-NAMES], that we're prone to violence. That we're born that way, from the get-go. That we come out of our mums throwing hands…We don't even need trauma to be the way we are. We just come out that way.

Dominant discourses of Aboriginality have fed Jax an understanding of themselves and their family as violent, such that they attribute this violence to some inherent biological deficit, obscuring the relentless, intergenerational, colonial violence Jax's family continues to endure. This leaves Jax contemplating the inevitability of their own violence, fearful that they will turn out to be "a bad person." Here we can see how dominant discourses of race are violent both in the ways that they obscure violences of a systemic, structural and discursive nature, and feed racialised young people distorted, damage-centred self-narratives.

Davis and Ernst (2019) argue that racial gaslighting remains a key mechanism through which contemporary discourses of race are exercised and, given how deeply embedded these practices are in social life, their influence on a research project like this, driven by a white researcher, is unsurprising. Whilst the participants whose narratives are discussed above seemed eager for a space to share their experiences of racism, for others, speaking about racism was a difficult task, likely exacerbated by my whiteness and the power dynamics it signalled. Gus and Tyson, for example, appeared to engage in a kind of vetting process: beginning with safer, less contentious topics, then gradually and subtly alluding to experiences of racism, and observing my response, before eventually selecting the "racism" card.

Tyson seemed to allude to racism in our conversation about the "things that don't feel fair" card. Whilst discussing this, his body language visibly changed; I noticed him look away and begin fidgeting before proceeding to say: "We don't really get treated right." Conscious of not leading Tyson, I responded with: "Do you mean you personally or …?" Tyson paused and looked me up and down: "Nah, I don't know" he said, whilst rapidly tapping the table. Recognising his discomfort, I asked if he'd like to revisit this topic later and, if so, what he'd like to discuss next. Tyson didn't respond verbally, but hovered his hand over the "racism" card. The conversation unfolded as follows:

> Interviewer: The racism card? Is that something you want to talk about?
> Tyson: Like what?
> Interviewer: Do you think that racism exists in Australia?
> Tyson: Yes. Course it does.
> Interviewer: Yeah? Is that what you were talking about, about being treated differently, or was that about something else?
> Tyson: Yeah [pause]. Most, most of the kids that I know, say they'll buy something and then some people, because they see you [an Aboriginal child] with something good, they don't like it – so they always think that you steal, and like ring the cops on you … Some people just think they're better than us [Aboriginal people].

Similarly for Gus, who spoke openly on all other chosen topics, the discussion of racism seemed important, but particularly difficult:

> Interviewer: Which card do you want to talk about next?
> Gus: Racism.
> Interviewer: Have you experienced racism throughout your life?
> Gus: Oh, yeah! From cops, people I went to school with when I was younger…
> Interviewer: Do you remember the first time you experienced racism?
> Gus: Um ... [pause] yeah [looks down].
> Interviewer: Is it something you can talk about?
> Gus: [silence].
> Interviewer: I imagine that's probably a pretty painful thing ...
> Gus: Yeah, I dunno [looks down].
> Interviewer: If you don't want to talk about it, we can skip this one.
> Gus: Yeah, I'm not really sure. It's tough. Yeah … I don't know how to explain it, but yeah, it's, it's a hard topic.

> Interviewer: That's a really difficult thing to talk about, I think, particularly sitting across from a white lady ...
> Gus: Haha, yeah.
> Interviewer: It's maybe not the easiest space to talk about racism.
> Gus: Haha, yeah.

Here, in response to my suggestion, Gus indicated that my whiteness, a subjectivity that has fundamentally shaped my positionality, inhibits his ability to share painful stories of racism. In so doing, Gus pointed towards the epistemic violences produced by dominant discourses of race that have, so routinely since invasion, denied, silenced and gaslit the voices of Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson, 2006). It is a violence that, as Eddo-Lodge (2018, p. 9) articulates, is exercised through the "emotional disconnect," "the bewilderment," "the defensiveness" and/or the "indignation" that often characterise white responses to disclosures of racism. It is a violence that silences, that compromises safety and that requires racialised people "to prioritise white feelings," even in the sharing of their hurt (Eddo-Lodge, 2018, p. 9). It is a violence that sees young people like Gus censoring themselves in the presence of people like me.

By denying, minimising or reframing experiences of racism, racial gaslighting left these children carrying both the violence of racism and the burden of making sense of it. Trauma here was produced not only by racist encounters themselves, but in the repeated messaging that those experiences were insignificant, imagined, deserved or unworthy of response. Again, like traumatic events, these experiences produced cumulative wounds that shaped identity, undermined trust and altered these children's relationship to the social world. As a practice of power, racial gaslighting is reproduced in much mainstream criminological research which disregards racism despite it being recognised as a core and enduring hardship for many racialised people living in Eurocentric contexts (Comas-Díaz, 2016).

Institutions of Racial Violence: Policing and Prisons

Racial violence also shaped participants' experiences of criminalisation. For example, Angela recounts an encounter in which a "white" police officer told Angela's (also white) biological mother that he has "an Asian adopted daughter at home" who "sometimes acts up too." In her account, Angela astutely named the harmful stereotyping, the othering of Angela within her own family, and the power dynamics that so routinely shape interactions between the police and those policed: "He said that in front of my mum and my mum didn't say anything, because he's a cop. She just sat there because he's a cop, there's nothing you can really do." Unlike her mother, however, Angela "got mad" and challenged these harmful constructions. She reflected:

> I was like 'What do you mean act up? Why are you stereotyping my culture, my background, for being problematic and acting up?' So many things just went through my head I was just like, 'Nah, not it. You don't culturally just pinpoint children if they're white.'

In calling out this officer's overt racial stereotyping, Angela actively resists this positioning – yet still her agency is constrained in this context, with the officer likely attributing her resistance to racist assumptions as further evidence of her race-based deviance (Davis & Ernst, 2019).

Angela's story represents more than the actions of a single police officer; it highlights the dominant discourses of race that pervade policing. These discourses are entangled with the countless positivist studies linking certain "races" with crime, positioning heightened levels of racialised surveillance as a necessary and logical response to the "evidence base" – driving and normalising the persistent over-policing of racialised people today (Centre Against Racial Profiling, 2026; Cunneen, 2020; Guerzoni & Walter, 2023; Porter & Cunneen, 2020).

The racialised participants in this study were acutely aware of this phenomenon. Gus, for example, reflected on his sense that "Cops see young black youth just walking, they just pull them over, try to red flag them for anything… Ninety percent of the time it's just because of the clothes you wear and your skin colour." For Gus, this understanding of racial profiling is not theoretical, it is lived: "You see it happening to other people, and then it happens to yourself a couple of times. You kind of just find it out yourself, it just keeps happening."

But, as Gus explained, any feelings of anger in response to these practices are not only invalidated but punished: "We get in more trouble. If I get angry, they bash us." More than anger though, these experiences leave Gus feeling "scared" and "nervous" every time he sees police: "Even if I'm doing nothing wrong, I'd just run off, did whatever I could, change where I was walking." Through his narrations, it becomes clear that Gus, like Michael, Kyle, Tyson, Jax and Trey, holds a deep knowing that, within the colonial, carceral society, he has been constructed as inherently more deviant than others. As he said, "They wouldn't do it to a white kid."

In this context, Trey, Tyson, Kyle and Jax – all Aboriginal young people – recounted a sense of being monitored by police from a young age. Jax, for example, explained: "Growing up in the houses I did, you get really, really used to [a specialist tactical police unit] booting down your door." During Jax's childhood, whether they were sleeping, watching cartoons or having birthday parties, "house raids were a normal thing" – an experience of childhood also shared by Kyle and Tyson.

Due to the omnipresence of police in their childhood, Jax explained, "after a while" these raids "didn't faze" them anymore: "I would just walk out of the room with my hands up, so they knew I didn't have anything, and just stand up against the wall because I knew they were gonna search me." From a young age, to reduce the risk of physical violence from the state, Jax, like many victim/survivors of trauma (Herman 2015), learnt to perform compliance. Jax first remembered being brutally searched at just 10 years old:

> My dad's wallet dropped out of his pocket and I thought 'that's his property'… I went to grab it, I got shoved up against the wall, I could barely breathe and then dad got arrested for resistance of arrest, because he broke free … to come to me, because I was crying.

Jax noted that "violence with cops is so true. I've seen so many of my family get bashed," and describes their "most worst experience" of police violence – an incident that, again, occurred when they were about 10:

> I was really sick one day and I was sleeping in my dad's room and my cousin just jumps into bed with me … and that's when I hear a big BOOF. I knew what it was straightaway. I knew the cops were coming in to get [cousin], so I just latched on to him.

Here we see police presence bleeding into the most intimate, vulnerable and mundane aspects of Jax's life and, in this case, violently ripping a sick child from sleep into a terrifying reality. Jax continued:

> And [the police] lifted up the blanket and there was a gun in my face. Like a big arse fucking gun. I couldn't see it at first, because it's got a big arse, bright torch attached to it. They turned the light on, there was just a big ass fucking gun in my face. And I just started crying straight … and he had his hand on the trigger. It was very scary. That's when three cops proceeded to grab my cousin and one ripped me … off of him. I was crying so badly.

The situation escalated further when Jax's Dad saw what was happening and "he just came for me, picked me up and slung a cop up against the wall, and was like, 'don't touch my fucking daughter'."[2] Jax was then "snatched" out of their "dad's hands and two cops dropped him on the floor and said that was 'assault towards an officer,'" then "slammed" him "onto the ground" and dragged him outside, all in front of Jax and their siblings. Jax recalled, "It was like some George Floyd shit. He could not breathe," but "I was so used to it at that point, I was just sitting there, waiting for it all to be over." Particularly poignant is Jax's description of finding their younger brother, with his body wedged between the curtain and the window:

> … watching my dad being bashed on the ground out the front, screaming 'Dad, dad' and he's looking back at me with tears in his eyes. I saw my little brother and he reminded me of myself – just so tiny, so helpless, no idea what the fuck is going on, why these random people are in the house or why there's blood or why someone's crying.

Jax then went on to reflect upon the time, when they were about 12, when their aunty was pinned to the ground during a violent arrest and one officer muttered to them "That's going to be you one day. All of your family are like this, you're gonna be like this too." After sharing this, Jax looked down at their hands and, with a sad tone, asserted that "Just because we have had bad things happen to us, doesn't mean that we're bad people." Dominant discourses of Aboriginality, as Jax demonstrates, are not simply descriptive but material in their effects (Hearn et al., 2022). Even within such a powerful discursive climate, though, in Jax's assertion that their family are "not bad people," we can see Jax resisting the construction of Aboriginality, and their family, as inherently deviant.

Similarly, Tyson explained that "cops just hate… certain groups. And the cops always, when something happens, look at me and when they always blame me for stuff, makes you feel like you wanna go and do it, you know?" Here we can see how heightened police surveillance produces discursive practices which constrain the modes of existence and self-understanding most available to young people like Tyson, such that fulfilling these expectations can seem like the only pathway of resistance. However, Tyson also provided insights into the sense of resignation and powerlessness such practices of power can produce. Like Gus, when asked about the impacts of this, Tyson seemed more defeated than anything else: "Nah. I don't know what to do, I just, yeah [pauses, looks down] don't know what to do."

Michael provided similar reflections on the racial violence exercised through and by the police, explaining that, since leaving school, police remain the main source of overt racism in his life. He described being called "a black dog," being beaten and being racially profiled: "I got arrested for something I didn't do once, because someone that looks like me, same description … just a black man, so I got arrested for something I didn't do." For Michael, profiling by police has felt relentless since he was around 12 years old:

> Right since the start, they knew who I am before I even got arrested. They had photos of me walking around before I'd ever been arrested. Knew my street name, everything, just because of the people I associated myself with. While I was young, my older cousins already had criminal records, so me hanging with them made me a target by the police.

As an Australian-born South Sudanese male, Michael was constructed by the cultural meanings ascribed to black masculinity as violent, dangerous and, as will be demonstrated, gang-affiliated (Majavu, 2018; Motimele, 2021). As Cunneen (2020, p. 524) explains, over the past decade, "sections of the media and conservative politicians have promoted an association between African youth gangs and violent crime," creating, in the eyes of the public, a "racialized connection between being African and being criminal." It is a discourse that constructs Australian African young people as "synonymous with crime, deviance and … social problems … as the repository for the Australian fear of crime" (Majavu 2018, p. 194).

Michael demonstrates a keen awareness of the "anti-black stereotypes" that are skilfully deployed to construct him as deviant, to "justify the racist violence that is intermittently meted out" by the carceral system (Majavu 2018, p. 194). In responding to my query about whether he would ever report the police brutality he has endured, he explained:

> How can I get justice? I'm labelled as a gang member. I'm labelled a person that doesn't do anything but hurt people, so the justice I'm gonna get is the people telling me 'What can we do for you? You're just a gang member, you've been locked up, you've been in trouble with the police.

These are discourses Michael sees as setting a path "for black people to fail, 100%." It is a path that many of his cousins and friends have been led onto, and now his younger brother too who, despite not being involved in crime, is actively experiencing police surveillance. Through his narrations, we can see dominant discourses of race at play which simultaneously construct Michael as violent whilst exposing him to, and legitimising, racial violence perpetrated against him. These are practices of control that, for Michael, first showed themselves in the primary school context, in the neighbourhood and then, as he graduated to a criminalisable age, in the formal carceral system. These institutional bases serve to perpetuate, normalise and invisibilise racial violence (Davis & Ernst, 2019; Majavu, 2018). However, Michael, like all young people in this study, is not simply a passive victim of these practices of power. In naming the racially motivated injustices he has endured, and challenging these constructions, these participants exercise resistance.

Kyle, an Aboriginal young person, shared similar reflections on the powerlessness he feels at being targeted by police who "have always been around." Kyle has very early memories of "it being, you know, 9pm and police just booting down the door." The omnipresence of police in his life, according to Kyle, came down to both "racism" and the racialised hypervisibility of his surname: "because my last name is real known to the police so, I guess, they treat you sort of differently. They go 'well, if his dad is like this, then why isn't he?'"

Kyle noted that, before he was born and as a young child, his dad was pursued by "a special operation," targeting a supposed Aboriginal gang, or, in Kyle's words, "the Aboriginal, you know, the little group of them." Here Kyle skilfully resists perpetuating a link between groups of Aboriginal boys and gang affiliation. These "gang"-specific police operations, Kyle explained:

> … used to deal with Dad when he was younger, and so now it's following on to us. They've set up a whole task force just for the Aboriginal boys … and we've been named as a big gang, that's not really a gang.

Like others, Kyle communicated a sense of defeat and powerlessness in the face of such deeply embedded racism: "You can never stop the police, you know what I mean?"

Kyle went on to wrestle with the label of "gang member" that has been imposed upon him and, in his dance between resistance and resignation, outlines the complex and often conflicting ways that dominant discourses influence subjectivity:

> We've tried telling them it's not a gang, it's just a group. They started that 'It's a gang' thing. It was just a group of us boys that just hang around. Yeah, we get into a bit of trouble but then they started saying it's a gang so then we thought, 'Oh well, we've been named as something, we might as well take that name and keep it.'

Michael similarly reflected on the racialised nature of gang construction when he talked about how the police "just put your name on the wall for all the crimes you've done, who you associate with and say 'Yeah, he's part of this gang'." This practice, Michael reflected, "It's just dumb" and racist – "If a group of white kids does it, it's a group. If a group of black kids does it, it's a gang."

The disproportionate targeting of racialised children and young people by police can be seen as systemic violence that produces, preserves and perpetuates social inequalities and marginalisation. Through the discursive process of gang construction, the police legitimise both their own institutional existence and, under the guise of community safety, the violence they so often wage against racialised people (Cunneen, 2020). Over time this dynamic no longer produces overt rage or sadness; instead, as Michael stated, "I'm used to it. Police do what they want to do. They abuse their power… I don't expect anything from cops. They just do what they want to do."

The participant experiences are reflected in Victoria Police's own stop-and-search data, which show that in Melbourne in 2024 the likelihood of being searched, compared with people perceived to be white, was 15 times higher for First Nations people and eight times higher for people perceived to be African (Centre Against Racial Profiling, 2026). These groups were also far more likely to be subjected to the use or threat of police force. Despite this intensified scrutiny, racialised groups who were stopped and searched were less likely than white people to be found in possession of illegal items. However, while the "vast majority" of racially targeted stops are "'unsuccessful' with no further action taken," increased police contact inevitably produces heightened arrest and incarceration rates (Cunneen, 2020, p. 526), contributing to the record-high imprisonment of First Nations people in Australia, who are, proportionally, one of the most incarcerated populations in the world (Brennan & Jash, 2026).

The over-representation of First Nations people in prisons is reflected in Jordan's account of his first time being detained in the state's child prison: "I knew everyone. They were all my cousins. They were all Aboriginal except two people." For Jordan, this was both "pretty hectic" and a source of safety: "It was scary at first but then when I knew who was in there, I was good. It made me feel safe." Gus similarly reflected upon this hyper-criminalisation, explaining that, within the prison setting, "most of the white kids, they've got control over nothing. Yeah, Nungas[3] got more control." In such an overtly coercive setting, Gus described having to navigate existing power structures in his quest for agency. For Gus, the consequences of the injustice of disproportionate policing included, paradoxically, a sense of power over his white peers in the confines of the prison; as he puts it, "You get to kick back more." When asked whether there is any other setting in which racialised people might feel "in control," Gus paused before responding "Nah, not really."

For those participants in custody, these conversations occurred within an institution that had recently been renamed in a local Aboriginal language. While well intentioned, given that the state's universities, hospitals and most schools have retained their colonial titles, the discursive practice of renaming can be seen as constituting symbolic violence. By positioning prisons, but not other societal institutions, as Aboriginal spaces, the colonial association between Aboriginality and criminality is kept alive (McKinnon 2020).

Within these accounts we can see that racial violence operates not only interpersonally, but through institutions that repeatedly position racialised children and young people as suspicious, dangerous and less deserving of protection. These experiences exposed participants to physical, psychological and emotional harm and generated fear and distress that extended beyond the event. Like traumatic events, the cumulative experience of moving through a world shaped by racial surveillance, criminalisation and exclusion left lasting wounds. Rather than signalling acceptance, the resignation seen across several of these accounts may reflect what Herman (2015) identifies as a core feature of trauma: a condition of powerlessness in which repeated encounters with violence erode agency and the sense that the source of violence can be challenged or held accountable.

Conclusion

The narratives shared here illuminate that, for racialised participants, racial violence was pervasive and enduring, profoundly shaping their sense of self, safety, the world and their place within it. These discourses produced physical, epistemic, systemic and structural harms, simultaneously constructing these children/young people as both at risk and a risk. Racial violence was not an isolated or exceptional experience but, rather, was exercised through and across the social, institutional, structural and discursive layers of the colonial society. These narratives demonstrate that the carceral system itself is a site of ongoing and entrenched racialised violence – a violence produced not by gaps in the system or a few bad apples, but by design (McKinnon 2020). This article draws on critical trauma studies (Carter, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2016; Chou et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2023) to argue that racism can become traumatic both when experienced as a discrete catastrophic event, as conceptualised in traditional schools of thought, and when enacted more subtly through the routine and cumulative processes of racialisation, including othering, discrimination, surveillance and encounters with colonial institutions.

Despite this, racial violence remains largely sidelined within criminological and psychological literatures dominated by individualised, empiricist conceptions of harm. By disregarding dispersed, discursive and socially embedded forms of violence (Hearn et al., 2022), these approaches silence racialised knowledges and reassert Eurocentric epistemologies as truth. This article has argued that such approaches are not merely inadequate, but, in their individualising, silencing methods, are themselves forms of racial gaslighting and epistemic injustice.

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[1] Throughout this article, we use the term child/youth prison to reflect the view that these institutions function as prisons for children, rather than the less punitive connotations of terms such as youth detention, training centre or secure care facility (National Network of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, 2024).
[2] At the time of interviewing, Jax identified as non-binary. However, they requested that gendered language describing their childhood experiences be retained, as it reflected how they were understood, and experienced life, during this time.
[3] Nunga is an Aboriginal vernacular term used to refer to Aboriginal people in what is now known as South Australia.

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