

Right-Wing Extremism and COVID-19 in Australia

On 24 February 2020 the ASIO Chief made this grave warning: “In Australia, the extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing.” All Together Now believes this threat is even more serious now due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Having endured large-scale bushfires and floods in late 2019 and early 2020, Australia quickly found itself in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among this misfortune, racial equity organisation All Together Now continued its work of investigating right-wing extremist activities to better inform its trainees on how to prevent more young people from becoming involved.

Alarming behaviours on alternative social media platforms

Over recent months, All Together Now's team has identified alarming online behaviours of immediate concern, including:

- anti-Asian racism and anti-Semitism;
- circulation of conspiracy theories with racist undertones;
- messages expressing hope that COVID-19 will spread within different countries or communities to reduce particular minority groups; and
- anti-government narratives, actively undermining the efforts of the Australian government to implement measures (for example, physical distancing) to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in the country.

All Together Now has observed these behaviours on both mainstream platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter) and alternative social media platforms (such as Gab, Telegram and MeWe). Whereas alternative platforms have lower usage rates, they are being used more consistently by right-wing extremists seeking to evade detection while maintaining activity to keep their members engaged.

This is concerning because alternative platforms are less moderated and scrutinised (or not at all), when compared with mainstream platforms. They are less likely to take down false information or seek to comply with human rights conventions.

Generally, right-wing extremists in Australia use social media platforms to recruit young people. They build a sense of community by focusing on anti-democratic, xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist values and activities.

The increased use of alternative platforms by right-wing extremists makes it more difficult to implement measures designed to dissuade people at risk from engaging with right-wing extremism, such as alternative narratives, counter-narratives and take-downs.

It is vital that Australia creates the social conditions that prevent young people from joining extremist groups, while also building the resilience of individuals and communities to withstand such divisive behaviours.

Trends signalling a need for urgent action

"In this age of isolation, we need to be aware of how far-right actors will attempt to exploit this unprecedented situation — and we need to be prepared for the fact that it may very well work."

Annie Kelly, [Who Goes Alt-Right in a Lockdown?](#), *New York Times*, 7 April 2020

All Together Now has observed several concerning trends since physical distancing measures were introduced in March 2020. Some of these existed before COVID-19, while some are newer iterations based on previous tactics.

Young people searching for belonging

It is widely accepted that young people join right-wing extremist groups because they are searching for something to belong to. The recent physical distancing measures, coupled with increased unemployment, has seen many young people feel disconnected from friends, family and society at large. This social isolation can also lead to increased incidences of loneliness and depression.

There is a danger that growing social isolation, loneliness and depression will create more opportunities for right-wing extremists to recruit young people online: they can offer a sense of belonging, a place to feel valued and respected, and connection with other members of the group.

Increased incidences of racism

There have been many incidences of interpersonal racism in recent weeks. All Together Now believes that this is a manifestation of underlying racist attitudes and systemic forms of racism in Australian society.

Racist behaviour is harmful for its targets. During COVID-19, these have largely been people who are – or appear to be – of Asian descent. Targets who experience racism are more likely to experience anxiety and depression and other negative health effects. It is possible that fears about COVID-19 will continue to increase racist behaviour, particularly if anti-Asian sentiment is normalised by media commentators, politicians, and other public leaders. This could embolden right-wing extremists in making them feel that perpetuating racism, or calling for further violence towards Asian-Australians, are legitimate actions.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of consistent anti-racism messaging in the community to counter such racism. In part, this is due to no federal funding being allocated for a national anti-racism campaign since 2015.

All Together Now has also observed an increase of anti-Asian and anti-Semitic hate speech within right-wing extremist groups online, specifically blaming Asians for starting COVID-19 and Jews for manipulating it. Right-wing groups at the most extreme end of the spectrum have been advocating for the spread of the disease as a form of genocide among certain groups and in certain countries. Their use of current affairs as a means to energise – and potentially mobilise – their compatriots is alarming. It points to an immediate need for action.

Conspiracy theories around COVID-19

Right-wing extremists have discussed plans to use COVID-19 as a bio-weapon in the USA. All Together Now has also observed discussions between right-wing extremists overseas about the possibility of infecting first responders through coughing, spitting or otherwise infecting via droplets left on door handles. Whether or not infection actually takes place is less relevant than the fact that this act is designed to create fear in the general public. The ease of implementing such an incident makes it a possibility, especially as physical distancing measures are slowly lifted across Australia.

Further, conspiratorial rumours have been circulating that Australia's lockdown and physical distancing measures are the acts of a tyrannical government rather than health and safety measures. Heightening distrust of the government's response further serves to position national socialism and/or the formation of whites-only enclaves or communities as potential ways forward, as people increasingly search for somebody to blame for unemployment and/or feelings of isolation and loneliness.

No federal support to prevent right-wing extremism

Since the federal government's Building Community Resilience grants program was defunded in 2015, All Together Now has struggled to find any federal funding support for community-focused preventative programs countering violent extremism (CVE). Combined with an over-emphasis on Islamic extremism and under-emphasis on right-wing extremism in historical federal CVE funding priorities, right-wing extremists have largely escaped the spotlight.

Immediate policy steps in the COVID-19 response

All Together Now believes the coming weeks present an opportunity to reunite communities across Australia and take preventative action to limit the growth of right-wing extremist activity.

We recommend three intersecting preventative actions the federal government can and should take right now to prevent the growth of right-wing extremism during COVID-19 and the subsequent economic downturn.

1. Provide immediate support for a national anti-racism campaign

We must ensure that people are reminded of their rights and responsibilities under existing racial discrimination and hate speech laws. This prevents racist rhetoric from flourishing and encourages people to speak up when they witness racism.

All Together Now believes such a campaign would be most effective if it encapsulates all sectors of society (small business, all levels of government, the arts, sports, civil society organisations and individuals). Given this is an extremely large audience for such messaging, and given the economic downturn, this might be successfully implemented immediately by an organising body charged with uniting and promoting effective anti-racism work that is already underway.

As part of this work, leaders should be encouraged to talk to those within their influence about the importance of solidarity with all members of the Australian community. As a counterpoint, all individuals with a high level of community visibility (particularly politicians and social commentators), must not scapegoat immigration generally, or communities specifically.

Importantly, Australians need to be reminded that there are a number of places where targets and witnesses can make complaints about racism. For example, businesses share the responsibility and burden of taking action when racism occurs on their property – 36% of the racist incidents reported in a recent COVID-19 racism survey occurred in supermarkets, stores and shopping centres. It remains the government's responsibility to educate the public about their rights and responsibilities in relation to racism.

2. Provide immediate support for community-focused countering violent extremism programs

It is vital that community-focused CVE action to limit the growth of right-wing extremism is supported by the federal government. All Together Now has observed over the past eight years that right-wing extremist groups transcend state (and national) borders, yet behaviours are often subject to state-based laws and policing. We believe that localised action is required in each state, supported by a national strategy and funding for community-focused activities that prevent the growth of right-wing extremism.

All Together Now urges the federal government to unite with state governments in supporting such community-focused initiatives, especially those that focus on groups who feel disenfranchised and may be at risk of recruitment by right-wing extremists during COVID-19 and the economic downturn. Working in the community to prevent the recruitment of young people is one of the most efficacious and cost-effective ways to counter the rising threat of right-wing extremism over the long-term.

3. Debunk hateful conspiracy theories

Given that the circulation of anti-democratic, xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, ableist and other harmful conspiracy theories by right-wing extremists is a potent recruitment tool, it is vital that all media and social media publishers act swiftly to limit the spread of hateful conspiracy theories.

Additionally, credible actors must seek to debunk harmful conspiracy theories on COVID-19. We note that RMIT ABC Fact Check has been publishing facts about COVID-19 that serve to debunk some mistruths at the core of many racist memes and conspiracy theories. This work is commended and should continue.

However, it is important to add that not everybody consumes the ABC and other reputable media sources. Australia is missing an independent fact-checking organisation that offers a publicly-available, widely supported and publicised databank that people can freely access to determine the validity of, for example, memes and conspiracy theories. Information must be updated daily to inform the public, using science (and social science) as the basis for all fact checks. These should also cover political statements and social commentary where possible.

Full Fact, an independent fact-checking charity in the UK and Factcheck, a similar project in the USA, provide regular country-specific fact checks. These serve as best-practice examples of a service that is needed in Australia. This might be further supplemented through the provision of critical analysis training.

All Together Now's immediate priorities

All Together Now is an organisation that imagines and delivers evidence-based projects that advance racial equity. We are working on activities to increase social inclusion so right-wing extremists cannot thrive in the current environment. This work is based on eight years of experience in this field, as well as the wealth of local and international academic research available.

All Together Now is currently:

- Monitoring right-wing extremist group behaviour and activity.
- Training frontline workers who work with young people (this has been moved to an online learning environment due to physical distancing measures).
- Monitoring the mainstream media for racist social commentary. Additional attention is being paid to racist commentary around COVID-19.
- Circulating facts relating to racism and COVID-19 via our social media channels.

All Together Now is seeking funding from all Australian jurisdictions so that the findings and benefits of this work can be shared more broadly across Australia.

All Together Now is currently working on a social impact evaluation and cost-benefit analysis of its Community Action for Preventing Extremism project, which covers activities from the last 18 months. Results will be available in the second half of 2020. ●

All Together Now is a racial equity organisation that seeks to educate Australians about racism. We are community driven, we utilise partnered approaches and our work is intersectional. For more information please see <https://alltogethernow.org.au>.